

CAUSES OF POOR PERFORMANCE OF LEARNERS IN ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN LERIBE

T.P. LETOMPA

Abstract

This article reports the findings and results of the Masters study on the causes of poor performance of learners in English in primary schools in Leribe district. A literature study was conducted to explore and to identify the causes of poor performance of learners in English in the literature. The findings of the study were collected by means of in-depth individual interviews the manifestation of the causes of poor performance of learners in English was investigated from the participants. Based on interpretive theory employing qualitative research approach, data collected and analysed from the individual interviews were analysed as emerging and themes. The findings of the study repudiate the argument that existence of the Education policy inevitably leads to sound improvement of learners in English in primary schools and consequently quality education improved.

Keywords: Poor performance, Causes, School learner's performance, Qualitative Research

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most central activities in all countries is to have their citizens educated for the purpose of nation building and self-development. This study investigated the causes of poor performance in English in primary schools in Leribe district. English is one of the most important languages which are being spoken globally. Poor performance of learners believed to be affected is based on the attitude of educators and the attitude of learners. English is the medium of instruction for all school subjects except Sesotho as a subject from the primary school to the university. It is a compulsory school subject that must be passed by learners in the primary schools. The poor performance of learners in English at Primary School Leaving Examination has been explained as a major cause of the decline in academic achievement and the standard of education of learners. Poor performance of English might be caused by the weakness in English, the medium of instruction which may have negative consequences on their overall academic achievement. Primary education is recognised globally as the major venue for promoting mass literacy and consequently, rapid national development. Among the causes responsible for learners' poor performance as identified by Probyn (2005:85) includes poor knowledge of the subjects, ignorance of acceptable sentence patterns and lack of educators' exposure to modern methods of teaching.

This study was conducted in the Leribe district of Lesotho. Leribe is one of the ten districts of the country and is situated in the lowlands and North part of Lesotho. It is located between Butha-Buthe and Berea district. This study focused on the causes of poor performance of learners in English in primary schools in Leribe district. The research takes place in primary schools in Leribe district.

2. INTERPRETIVE THEORY

The study used interpretive research methodology which incorporates several techniques for data collection and data analysis. Interpretive theory is the whole family of approaches to participant observational research which include ethnography, qualitative and case study (Miller 2003:15). Interpretive theory allows the researcher to look at the social and cultural salience of English to reveal contextual features in logical settings since the local context helps us to understand particular social conditions which make communication possible and it allows for ongoing flexibility in the data collection and analysis drawing from whatever fields prove productive for research (Miller 2003:15). Interpretive regards people as agents of creation of meaning in their settings and these meanings are valuable and useful for research (Janse Van Rensburg 2001:16). Interpretive theory focuses on people's subjective experience on how people contrast the social world by sharing meanings and how they interact with or relate to each other. This research involves an understanding of the action taken by school principal on improving the learners' English performance in schools.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature study examines the causes of poor performance of learners in English. Poor teacher knowledge of the subject contributes to the effectiveness of teaching English effectively in the classroom. The Majority of teachers do not possess competence of the subject to teach learners. They must possess the knowledge and skills needed to achieve the set learning outcomes (Kimberly 2009:109). Teacher effectiveness is impeded if the teacher is unfamiliar with the body of knowledge taught and the teacher effectiveness is subjected to specific learning outcomes. Teaching of English requires continuous reflection and decision making before, during and after classroom instructions (Long 2002:95).

Schools with inadequate teaching materials perform badly in English in the classrooms. The factors contributing towards the poor performance of learners in English are lack of resources and poor facilities in most primary schools. Ralenala (2003:95) posits that thousands of schools still have poor physical infrastructure and many are dilapidated, dangerous and unfit for human habitation. The unavailability of resources hinders the smooth teaching and learning in the classrooms. The absence of resources will make educators take a longer time to complete the syllabus. Educators who are frustrated due to lack of support materials and facilities tend to give vent to their anger on learners.

The absence of simple classroom management measures can transform even the best classroom into centres of chaos. When the proper classroom management is not implemented, teachers lose valuable instructional time. They spend their time repeating directions, addressing behaviour problems or carrying out trivial tasks (Hovland 2008:4). Poor classroom management can contribute to high stress and burnout in schools and greatly decreases teacher effectiveness in instruction. Poor classroom management in English class hinders learners' performance because the teachers have not provided an atmosphere conducive to learning. Poor behaviour of learners directly affects their ability to learn English language (Marzon, Marzon and Pickering 2003:205).

The negative attitude towards learning could result in learners performing poorly preventing them to obtain good result in English (Mullins 2005:365). The negative attitude of learners in English may lead to lack of success and may lead to decrease motivation of learners to learn English because of decreased input and interaction to unsuccessful attainment of English (Aguoru 2008:113). Educators of English do not perceive their work to be a profession in which they require skills to excel. The large number of educators lacks the commitment in carrying out their task and the failure of English came from uncertified educators who are allowed to teach English.

Lack of teacher exposure to modern methods of teaching English in the classrooms contributes to poor performance of learners. Educators do not employ various strategies when delivering instructions in the class and this affects the learning of learners in English. Jacobs, Gawe and Vakalise (2000:236) indicate that any method of teaching to succeed, the topic should be meaningful, all learners should be encouraged to participate, self-expression should be facilitated and learners' communication should be developed. When the educators plan a lesson in a learner-centred approach, thinking of ways to arouse learners' interest in English learning as well the use of different teaching and learning materials may be helpful.

Overcrowding in the classrooms may affect the performance of learners if a class is too large for the capacity of the classroom. When the class is too large, it becomes difficult for the educators to give immediate feedback as they are facing with piles of exercise books for marking. The educators may find it difficult to monitor learners' work and maintain high learners' attention rate. The educators were faced with various challenges which include maintaining discipline, marking assignments, tests, providing feedbacks on time, record keeping time in distributing of teaching materials in the classrooms, difficulty in managing group work and individual supervision (Morrow 2007:12). Overcrowding in classes impede free movement of the educators and learners in between desks and chairs, group work is not effective because of too many learners in one classroom. There was noise in the class because the educators cannot reach every learner in the class during English lesson.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

A qualitative research design was used to investigate the causes of poor performance of learners in English in primary schools. The qualitative research is flexible, unique and involves the participants throughout the investigation (De Vos 2001:80). This approach was achieved by analysing the participants' perceptions, attitudes, understanding, knowledge, values, feelings and experience about the poor performance of learners in understanding the causes of poor performance of learners in English.

4.2 Data Collection

Qualitative research employed ethnography, interviews and observation to collect data from the participants. Based on convenience and purposeful selection, the research sample consisted of two (2) primary schools principals, twelve (12) educators, twenty (20) learners and two (2) learning facilitators from the two primary schools. Data was collected by means of in-depth face-face interview with primary school learners, educators, principals and learning facilitators. The researcher negotiated permission to conduct the research from the principals and the senior Education office of the sample schools.

Before the actual data collection, the interview questions were pre-tested on selected samples. The purpose of the pilot study is the investigation of the feasibility of the planned study to bring possible deficiencies and the researcher realised that the questions were confusing. The procedures used in piloting the interview questions were identical to those used during the actual data collection. Individual face-face interviews were used for extracting and transmitting information from the interviewee to the interviewer (De Vos 2001:279). The interview questions were asked to identify problem areas in order to determine strategies to improve learners' performance in English (De Vos 2001:298). Interview schedules enable the participants to answer questions in the presence of the interviewer. The questions are put forward to the participants who in turn give answers (Neumann 2006:35). The interviews were conducted in English. An interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and provide information that a written word would conceal if conducted in a skilful manner. The following broad questions guided the interviews: What are the causes of poor performance of learners in English in primary schools? And what strategies do teachers use in improving the performance of learners in English? The interviewer asked follow-up questions where necessary. The researcher observed by watching learners in different instructional situations in terms of time management, space inside and outside the classrooms and school premises. The researcher observed the behaviour of the learners at school, during the teaching and after learning.

4.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing, emerging and iterative or non-linear process and takes place throughout the data collection process (Henning 2004:127). Data analysis consists of selecting, organising, reducing, describing and integrating data in order to elicit meaning from data in a systematic and comprehensive manner. Wellington (2000:134) suggested three stages in the analysis of qualitative data where data are collected, summarised, coded and sorted in to themes, clusters and categories. The purpose of data analysis is to reduce data to an intelligible and interpretable form so that the relations of the research problem can be studied, tested and conclusions drawn (De Vos, Strydom, Fouch and Delport 2002:223). Data was analysed on the basis of the responses given by respondents (Gay and Airasian 2006:117). Interview questions were generated continuously from the data and one concept was compared with another and each interview script was probed against alternative source of the same information. Data analysis of the results was collected from the two primary schools that highlight several causes influencing poor performance of learners in English from principals, educators, learners and learning facilitators.

4.4 Reliability and Validity

The two measuring instruments applied could be regarded as reliable to the researcher to get essential data from interview and observation (Robson 2007:71). Reliability is concerned with questions in this study Reliability in qualitative research involves collecting data from different participants and make sure that the participants understand what is asked of them (Lankshear and Knobel 2004:235). Reliability is concerned with the clarity, stability, quality, consistency, adequacy and accuracy of the measuring interview questions. The Validity of both the instrument used lay in fact that both questionnaires had been standardised and the questions in the questionnaire portrayed real life situations, which was a positive attribute of content validity. The internal validity of qualitative design is the degree to which the interpretations and concepts have mutual meanings between the participants and the researcher (Schumaner and Mcmillan 2001:391). Therefore validity is one of the major strengths of qualitative research and he added that lengthy data collection period, using participants' language, conducting research in natural setting and disciplined subjective to increase internal validity in qualitative studies.

5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Care was taken to ensure the consent of the participants was voluntary and informed without any implied deprivation or penalty for refusal to participate (Strydom 2002:98). The participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of their disclosures were ensured at all times during the research (De Vos 2002:650).

Due respect should be rendered to the participants irrespective of their age or literacy level and the researcher should consider them as his/her co-researchers because their contribution is going to assist the researcher towards success of his/her study. The researcher obtained permission from the District Education in Leribe to conduct research at primary schools and the school principals. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and nobody was manipulated or forced to participate if they were not willing.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The presentations of findings were presented in the form of interview questions based on the causes of poor performance of learners in English in primary schools in Leribe district. The analysis of data was collected using interviews, observations and documents analysis. The researcher interviewed 36 participants in the primary schools. The purpose of the interviews was to get valuable insight into the perceptions of causes of poor performance of learners in English in Leribe. The following are discussed:

Feedback on causes of poor performance of learners in English

According to the majority of respondents there were lack of resources, high rate of absenteeism of learners and lack of commitment of teachers and learners to do their work. The use of poor methods of teaching and ineffective learning styles in the classrooms. They said the background of learners in the foundation of English is poor and ineffective school policy for implementing English as the medium of instructions in primary schools. They responded that lack of auto-visual materials and English study materials in the primary schools contribute to poor performance of learners in English.

Feedback on having English textbooks during the English lesson

Most of the respondents indicated that learners do not have enough English textbooks in the classroom. They also responded that learners share the textbooks during teaching of English in the class and they said that three learners share one textbook. The principals responded that there was shortage of English textbooks in the classes and the learners turned to share the textbooks while reading and doing class work in the classroom.

Feedback on using teaching aids during teaching English lesson

Eight respondents indicated that they use teaching aids in the class during teaching of English and they responded that teaching aids arouse the interest of learners during teaching and learning of English. They indicated that the use of teaching aids during English lesson facilitate better understanding among the learners.

The other respondents indicated that they did not use teaching aids effectively during English lesson there were lack of support teaching materials in schools.

Feedback on speaking English with other learners when playing during school hours

Most of the respondents indicated that they speak English with others when playing outside the classrooms while few respondents said that they did not speak English rather they speak their mother tongue. The Majority of the respondents were aware that English is used as the medium of instruction in the classrooms. They said that they were aware that during teaching and learning other subjects are taught in English except their mother tongue.

Feedback on difficulties are experienced by learners in learning English

The respondents indicated that learners have problems of understanding questions during tests, understanding given passages and difficult to express themselves in the correct tense. They said that learners were unable to express themselves in English and had difficulty making simple sentences. They were unable to read the drama English textbook by themselves.

Feedback on assisting educators in the teaching of English in schools

The majority of the respondents indicated that educators should be given in-service training in order to equip them with necessary skills and assist them to plan the English lessons before teaching English, as well as how to assess the learners in the proper teaching of English. They responded that they make sure that necessary learning materials were available in schools and they sit down together to review the work done by the educators in the class. The respondents indicated that they provide educators with knowledge, skills, attitudes and value of the subjects in order to master English in primary schools.

Feedback on visiting the schools for inspections

The respondents indicated that they always visit different schools for school inspections and they monitor teaching and learning in schools by regular visits at the schools and give support to educators where they don't understand other learning outcomes to clarify them. They suggested that good teaching should include learners how to learn, how to remember and how to control their own teaching and they encourage the educators to use teaching methods that will make learning learner-centred approach in the classrooms.

Feedback on supervising of the educators when teaching learners in the classrooms

Most of the respondents indicated that they supervise the educators when teaching in the classes and they check lesson plans of the educators daily before and learning begin in class. They responded that it is one of the roles of the school principals to carryout supervision of curriculum implementation and the policy of Education in their respective schools. This involves physical observation of educators' lesson progress and regular class supervision to promote curriculum goals.

Feedback on reactions of the educators do towards poor performance of learners in English

The respondents indicated that educators encourage learners to attend the classes regularly and they said that they were not satisfied with the poor performance of learners in English. They responded that both principals and educators advising learners on learning and participation in independent study. All the respondents were complaining about the Ministry of Education and Training distributing textbooks in schools late.

Feedback on improving the performance of learners in English

Majority of the respondents indicated that both principals and educators should work co-operatively in order to solve the problem of poor performance of learners in English and encouraged to work as a team in their respective schools. They suggested that both educators and learners come school early as they monitor learners and help them with the work they did not understand in the previous lessons. There must be quarterly performance review of educators, evaluation of learners, class observation and teaching and learning in the classrooms. They responded that learners need motivation and encouragement from the adult and successful former students should be invited to give motivational speeches to the learners. The respondents said that Ministry of Education and Training should provide necessary resources like libraries in primary schools. Educators should use proper teaching methods and learning styles because learners have different learning abilities.

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of the research on which this article is based was to investigate the causes of poor performance in English in primary schools. The relevant literature was reviewed to establish whether the Ministry of Education and Training has effectively and improved the performance of learners in English. The researcher has found that high levels of absenteeism, late arrival for lessons, poor classroom management, lack of motivation and lack of commitment and perseverance were pervasive and common factors among both learners and educators and affect the teaching and learning of English in primary schools.

Teaching English in primary schools, educators are expected to possess full mastery of their subjects and the pedagogical skills of delivery in the classroom situations. Despite the depth and richness of collected data, this research qualitative study suffers from a limited ability to generalise the findings due to the small number of the participants. Positive findings could realise in a concerted fostering of self-efficacy through the improving of learners' performance in English. This could contribute to the improved well-being of all learners and to increased school effectiveness.

8. REFERENCES

Aguoro, D. (2008). Evolving a new taxonomy for English Language teaching in Nigeria: Lagos Paper in English studies. Volume 3, 1-13.

De Vos, A. S, Strydom, H., Fouch, C. B. And Delpont, C. S. L. (2002). Research at grass root. For social science and Human service professions. 2nd Edition. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

De Vos, A. S. (2001). Research at grass roots. 3rd Edition. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.

Gay, L. R and Airasian, P. (2003). Educational Research. Competencies for Analysis and applications. 7th Edition. Researcher, Methodology and Measurement. An International Handbook New York: Pergamou.

Henning, E. (2004). Finding your way in Qualitative Research. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publisher.

Jacob, M. Gawe, N. And Vakalise, N. (2000). Teaching-learning Dynamic, a participative Approach for OBE. 2nd Edition. Johannesburg: Heinemann.

Hovland, M. (2008). GRP to conquer classroom management. The New Teacher. Advocate, 18 (1), 4-5.

Janse Van Rensburg, E. (2001). An orientation to research: Rhodes environmental education units research methods. Course handout. Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

Kimberly, B. (2009). Characteristics of effective teachers. Edu books. USA. Retried July 6. 2001 from <http://www.edubooks.com/author/kaback/page10>.

Lankshear, C., and Knobel, M. (2004). Teacher Research Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Long, M. H. (2002). Focus on form in task-based language teaching. In R.D. Lambert & E. Shohamy (Eds.), *Language policy and pedagogy: Essay in honor of A. Ronald Walton* (pp.177-192). Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Marzon, R.J., Marzon, J. S. and Pickering, D. J. (2003). *Classroom Management that work: Research-Based Strategies for every teacher*. Alexandria, VA, ASCD.

McMillan, J.H. And Schumacher, S. (2001). *Research in Education. A Conceptual Introduction* United State: Longman.

Miller, J. (2003). *Audible Difference: ESL and Social identity in schools*. Clevedon: Multilingual matters.

Morrow, W. (2007). *Learning to teach in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Mullins, L.J. (2005). *Management and Organizational Behaviour*. 7th edition. London: Financial Times Prentice.

Neumann, W.L. (2006). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. United State of America: Ally & Bacon.

Ralenala, M. F. (2003). *Reading behaviour of the first-year physics at the University of the North*. Doctoral Thesis: RAU. Johannesburg.

Robson, C. (2007). *How to do research project: A guide for undergraduate students*. USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Probyn, M. (2005). *Language and the struggle to learn: The intersection of classroom realities, language policy and neo-colonial and globalisation in South African schools*. In: A. M. Y. Lin and P. W. Martin, eds. *Decolonisation, Globalisation: Language-in- Education Policy and Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual matters Ltd. pp. 153-172.

Wellington, J. (2002). *Educational Research: Contemporary Issues and Practical Approaches*. London: Continuum.