IMPROVING QUALITY OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN ENGLISH AS A LANGUAGE OF LEARNING INSTRUCTION[1]

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Abstract

The issue of language of learning and instruction in communities with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, globally and in South Africa, is always shaped by socio-economical, political, ideological and hegemonic factors. The language of instruction and learning in South Africa is politically charged, not only because of colonial legacy, but more profoundly because of the apartheid legacy. This article reports on the results of the pedagogies of teachers teaching in English. The researcher found that most non-native English teachers use their native language pronunciation when teaching English, which results in mother tongue interference. On-native speakers end up transferring articulation habits of first language to second language. There is thus a need to improve quality in pedagogical practices in this diverse South African background since the language of instruction is different from the learners' first language for the majority of the population. The research in this article aims to investigate current pedagogic practices engaged by teachers from different cultural backgrounds when teaching English as a medium of instruction and how their practices affect learners in acquiring knowledge of the English language. The study uses an interpretive paradigm and in particular, adopts social constructivism to embed discussions. The study mainly implements a qualitative approach although the quantitative approach is used to quantify biographical data. The researcher found that two educational systems seem to exist in South African schools: some educators use English as a medium of instruction only, whereas others allow code switching. Education thus becomes a reproductive mechanism of social class differences.

Keywords: pedagogy, medium of instruction, constructivism, language proficiency, code switching

1.   INTRODUCTION

Education in the Republic of South Africa is rooted in the hegemony and ideology of English as the preferred medium of instruction, and language of communication. The issue of medium of instruction and learning is an enduring concern often associated with low academic standards in Africa. This is supported by Kyeyune (2003) who cites teachers and learners poor standard of English in Africa as a cause of concern which thus leads to unsatisfactory state of educational quality and performance.

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[1]This article is based on completed masters research study

In South Africa the Department of Education conducted two national systemic evaluations which established that English literacy in the country was below the required competence levels (South Africa, Department of Education, 2008).

Probyn (2010:249) argues that "Language and education is twin threads that run through the struggle against apartheid, intertwined, highly politicized and contested. Thus any discussion about language in education in South Africa should be placed in a historical- political context".

According to an observation made by (Du Plessis 2006)Historical legacies continue to dominate current policies and practices on the role and place of languages in the new democratic South Africa. Historically, the use of English and Afrikaans in South Africa was dominant and created an unequal relationship between Blacks and Whites, especially regarding the influence of early Christian settings and the subsequent dominance of the British, followed by the apartheid regime.

In this article the researcher wishes to investigate current pedagogic practices engaged by teachers from different cultural backgrounds when teaching English as a medium of instruction and how these practices affect learners in acquiring knowledge of the English language.

The research focuses on the medium of instruction in education, post-1994 South Africa. However, past policies contained in the Bantu Education Act of 1953 and the subsequent policy changes in English as a medium of instruction for indigenous South Africans that replaced mother tongue instruction will be discussed.

The study is framed by the following research questions:

- To what extent do teachers code switch from English as the medium of instruction to the learners' native language?
- Is the standard and quality of teaching English as a medium of instruction culturally relative?
- In what ways does English as the language of instruction affect the quality of education in multicultural settings?
- In what ways does theoretical knowledge of English impact on pedagogical practices of teachers?
- How does English proficiency of teachers impact on their classroom practice?

2.   CURRENT LANGUAGE PRACTICES IN SOUTH AFRICA

2.1   The schools' language policy of South Africa

The language policy of South Africa is enshrined in the Bill of Rights Section 5 of the constitution (RSA, 1996a: Section 30) and the South African (S) chools Act (SASA) (RSA, 1996 b). The constitution deals with the issue of language from varying angles. It is through the first democratic elections of 1994 that there was recognition of cultural diversity leading to the adoption and recognition of 11 official languages(.), The 11 official languages include Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiZulu, isiXhosa, SiSwati and Tshivenda.

The current South African constitution subscribes to a new language policy, which seeks to address past injustices brought about by apartheid policies.

2.2   Language position in Education

English as the medium of instruction in South Africa is a second language to most learners as only 9.6% of the population are native speakers of the language. Myburg, Poggenpol and Van Rensberg assert that: "Effective learning can only take place if the teacher and learners have a common understanding of the concepts of what the teacher is teaching (Myburg et al 2004:577). If learners cannot communicate in the language of instruction it poses challenges to the learners. It can be inferred that such a situation largely accounts for school ineffectiveness and low academic achievement of learners in Africa.

The medium of instruction is an enabling tool which facilitates transfer of learnt content across different contexts, thereby enabling the learner to construct a new view of the world (Kyeyune 2003; Qorro 2006).This study therefore views formal language as a catalyst in learning since it mediates between the learner and content in the classroom; failure to reach sufficient language proficiency levels affects the whole learning process.

Du Plessis (2006) suggests that where the knowledge of the rule system of one language (L1) may interfere with acquisition of the rule system of another language (L2), it could result in challenges for teachers to help learners to organize experiences and thoughts in a language which they rarely speak to communicate with one another.

Furthermore, where a second language is used as a medium of instruction by a teacher who is a second language speaker of the language there are issues that are paramount to a successful learning environment. These issues include: the ability to use the four language skills, knowledge of language use and culture, and an understanding of how second languages are learned (Dippenaar and Peyper 2011, as cited by Hugo and Niemaan (2010:60).

The issues cited above are indicative of the need to revisit education dispensation and pedagogical practices in order to improve the quality of education in South Africa. Pedagogical practices should be reviewed as challenges faced by learners as a result of the quality of pedagogical practices.

2.3   Pedagogic practices

Pedagogy in this research is defined as the skill or art of orchestrating classroom learning. According to (Bernstein, 2003: 198) "in any pedagogical relationship the transmitter has to learn to be a transmitter and the acquirer has to learn to be an acquirer'".

The transmitter or teacher in this case has to have the knowledge of the fundamental concepts and principles of his/ her subject area. The teacher should possess the ability to teach a particular subject so that learners understand. Consequently, teachers have to be proficient in English. The teachers' pedagogic practices should pave the way for children to acquire knowledge.

3.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The study's theoretical framework draws on social constructivist perspectives. In particular, Chomsky's (1978, 1986) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories are instrumental in explaining the complex interacting factors that come into play when acquiring a language.

The study by Chomsky (1968) imply that humans have an innate structure known as (LAD) or Language Acquisition Device, which enables humans to acquire language easily. The theorist further observes that all humans have a special mental mechanism, which enables them to learn a language; therefore, language development follows the same pattern as biological developments.

The innate language structure acts as a framework for all natural human languages to be learnt because it contains language universals, the structures and sound common to all human languages and dialects. The language acquisition device encodes the major principles of any language and the subsequent grammatical structure. Children cannot possibly learn language through imitation only, since spoken language is irregular (Chomsky 1978).

According to (Turuk, 2008) Chomsky contends that the ability to adopt a language is a comprehensive process that integrates innate and external elements, which the language acquisition device enables to take place. Chomsky justifies his theory by maintaining that language is not a set of habits, but governed rules that the mind processes into language through the language acquisition device. Chomsky also asserts that children use the language acquisition device to systematically discover rules of a language system within a short space of time since the device is genetically equipped to make language acquisition possible.

The study also draws on the works of Vygotsky, who views language as a social concept which can be developed through social interactions. This theory has bearing on the constructivist learning theory, which also explains that children acquire knowledge by engaging in social experiences. This theory places emphasis on the social nature of language learning where the child's environment is significant to language acquisition. Vygotsky's central concern is the influence between thought and language. The theory is referred to as the social cultural theory because it views language as social communication. The theory also promotes development of language and cognition simultaneously (Vygotsky, 1978).

According to Vygotsky's theory social interaction mediates learning. Mediation is instrumental to Vygotsky's theory because socio-cultural theory refers to the part played by people in the learner's environment, that is, people such as parents, teachers and peers, who enhance their learning by selecting and shaping the learner's knowledge. In language acquisition, the socio-cultural theory implies that language and cognition develop alongside each other. Hence children build new concepts by interacting with significant others who either provide them with positive or negative feedback (cf. Vygotsky, 1978).

Although Chomsky (1978) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories differ in their perceptions of language acquisition, they both write from social constructivist perspectives.

4.   THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The study takes place from an interpretive paradigm. As such, the research is based on social constructivism that is embedded in interpretivism and phenomenological studies, which has enabled the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of how and why things occur. A quantitative approach was used to collect biographical backgrounds of the participants (Armitage 2007; Denzin & Lincoln 2008; Creswell 2009).

Figure 4.1 shows the research design, including related paradigms, methodologies, sampling, and data sources and data collection instruments.
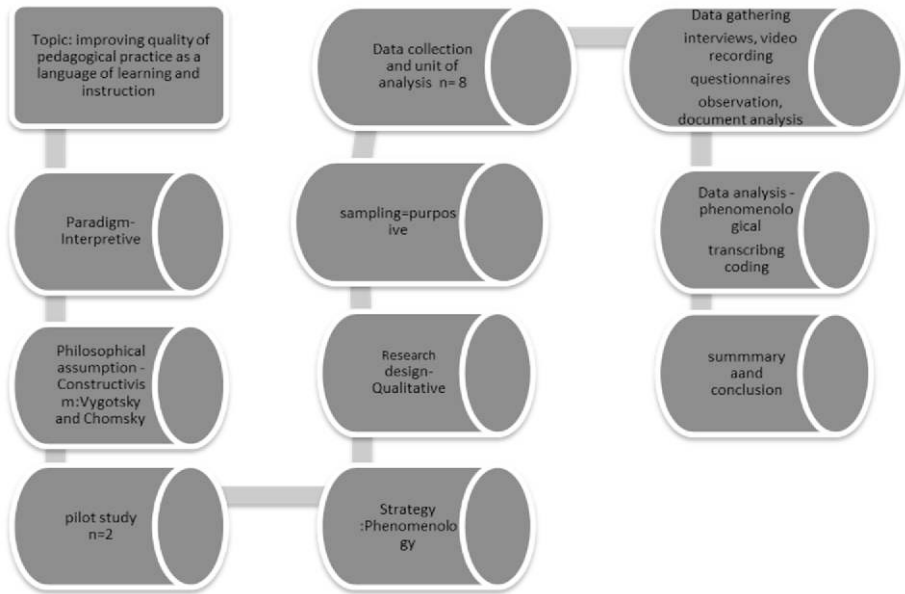
Figure 4.1: The research design

4.1 Population

The population of the study included four primary schools situated in the Mangaung area, Bloemfontein, South Africa, comprising two former model C schools and two schools located in townships

4.2 The sample

The sample comprised 8 Grade 2 educators and approximately 165 grade two learners. The reason for investigating populations from both the middle and working classes was to establish whether quality in education is comprehensive, based on Bernstein's notion of restricted and elaborated code. In terms of language, middle class children are exposed to elaborate and restricted codes, that is, the elaborate code is the language found at school that is more formal than the restricted code, which is a contextual language spoken by a certain community only (Bernstein 1971). Working class children are exposed to the restricted code only, whereas their middle class counterparts experience both language codes.

4.3 Data Collection

The research used the following four instruments for data collection: observation, the questionnaire, document analysis and the interview (Denzel and Lincoln 2008; Devo1998 and Creswell 2009).

The reason for four sources to collect quadrangular data was to add credibility to the research undertaken.

The data sources included foundation phase teachers, the constitution, legislation and policies on language, and a literature review on current pedagogical knowledge.

The study used the purposive sampling technique to provide the researcher with the opportunity to select participants conveniently. Data reduction and analysis in this study data were coded and analysed using open, axial coding (Devos 1998; Strass and Corbin 1990, as cited in Creswell 2007).

4.4   Research sites

The two former model C schools serve learners from both townships and suburbs. The other two township schools serve learners from poor, working class backgrounds.

4.5   Data gathering

Data was gathered by video recording participants as they were teaching and capturing information on an observation schedule. Other data was gathered through voice recordings of interviews.

All the interview notes and data were coded in order to identify themes. This enabled the researcher to review data with the same theme. Self-constructed questionnaires were distributed to establish biographical background.

5.   PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Most of the participating teachers were above 50 years of age with the rest below 40. This suggests that fewer teachers in the 41-50 age groups teach at the Foundation Phase level. Teaching experience is widely distributed, from the novice to those with over 30 years' experience.

Two groups of educators could be identified: previously disadvantaged black teachers, and white Afrikaans-speaking teachers. Evidence reveals that both groups may have had limited exposure to English as they received education in their mother tongue (Afrikaans) during primary schooling and later English and/or Afrikaans, in high school and at College. The 50-year age group appear to be products of the same curriculum; their training backgrounds and qualifications are similar. These teachers were trained in teachers' colleges and taught what to teach and how to teach. There are important differences, though, as the previously disadvantaged black teachers went through the Bantu education system. White teachers, the advantaged group, received good education and had all the resources to facilitate learning.

The aforementioned teachers were trained in Afrikaans and English medium colleges, whereas the rest received bilingual training in English and Afrikaans. About 88% of the teachers rated themselves fluent in English and only 12% rated themselves very fluent.

Most of the participating teachers were non-native speakers of English: 12.5% speak English, 37.5% Afrikaans, 12.5% Sesotho and 37.5% Tswana as a first language.

In the participating schools combined, the language distribution of learners was as follows: Afrikaans-speaking 4%, English 2%, Sesotho 35%, Setswana 37%, isiXhosa 2%, and isiZulu 3%.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Impact of English proficiency on teaching and learning

Lesson observations showed that most of the teachers did not use lesson plans. They relied mainly on textbooks. There was evidence of low levels in language proficiency by the teachers, which resulted in grammatical errors during lessons, mispronunciation and incorrect spelling. The teachers from the township schools exhibited the most language errors, whereas former Model C school teachers where most teachers seem to be Afrikaans, revealed traces of Afrikaans interference. Contrary to claims of proficiency in the English language, the teachers were not as fluent in English as they thought they were, judging from the interview responses and the practical lessons.

The findings confirm (Flesh's 2008) views that teachers seem to rate themselves as being proficient in a language on questionnaire responses, but in practice, lessons reveal teachers errors in speech and sometimes pronunciation as well.

The research results of this study seem to suggest that one has to be a native speaker of English in order to be able to teach learners fluently. Where the first language is not English, the speaker may subconsciously pronounce words with an accent that may result in wrong intonation, which learners may adopt that leads to wrong spelling. The findings from this research resonates with those of Neil and Muller (2010); their research revealed that teachers presented basic errors, which included grammatical errors, incorrect use of tense and spelling errors. They also found that teachers' limited language proficiency affected learners negatively.

Classroom observations and interviews suggest marked differences amongst learners' ability to comprehend the language of instruction. Teachers from the township public schools try to sustain usage of the medium of instruction (English), but face difficulties, because teachers do not get the desired responses from learners.

By contrast, former Model C school learners had less difficulty in responding to work given; when the teachers gave instructions the majority revealed the ability to respond to content. The former Model C school learners also speak better English and participate better in class; they seemingly have an advantage because of more exposure to English. The teachers can only communicate in English with the learners and the language policy of the school stipulates that English is the only language to be used. Model C schools maintain usage of this medium of instruction in all spheres of school life. Hence learners experience more exposure and more modelling opportunities that provide definite advantages to middle class learners.

However, because township schools use the home language of the school in all subjects except during English periods, they are not as fluent in English as their aforementioned counterparts.

6.2   Quality of pedagogical practices

Former Model C schools use English as a medium of instruction for all curriculum offerings except Afrikaans where it is the home language. By contrast, township schools use the mother tongue of the majority of the feeder community at the Foundation Phase level with English as a language subject. At higher levels, English is the medium of instruction, but code switching is allowed.

During lesson observation teachers mostly used the question-and -answer method as an interactive process; there was no group work or pupil-to-pupil interaction. The teachers appeared to be mostly concerned with their performance in teaching rather than learner comprehension.

Data suggests that teachers generally lack knowledge of pedagogy in teaching English as a language of learning and instruction, yet in colleges or teacher training institutions, pedagogy is supposedly part of the study curriculum. Pedagogy is not the same as method, but is associated with methods. Their teaching methods are geared towards a system of doing things. Despite lack of knowledge regarding teaching methods, respondents hold on to the perception that their teaching methods are working for them because the learners seem to understand.

Most teachers interviewed agreed that there is need to promote continuous development of teachers because of constantly changing policies in education and the fact that educationists seem to be running out of ideas with the current curriculum. Teachers neither have the ability nor sufficient experience in effective teaching practices. The inadequacies in the pedagogic practices of teachers need to be acknowledged. There is a need for supplementary training and refresher courses for all teachers.

6.3 Inferences from the generated themes

The themes, issues and patterns derived from the four instruments: questionnaires, observations, document analysis and interviews, were integrated and interpreted.

The data on lesson observation of teachers' pedagogic practices, data generated from questionnaires on teachers' biographic background coupled with data generated from interviews, suggest that teacher's pedagogical practices are not as effective as they should be. These practices do not promote the medium of instruction.

Quadrangular data did not always corroborate findings. For example, the language policies of the two public township schools indicate that teachers may code switch to aid comprehension, However, some teachers are not code switching, but are translating directly. There is a vast difference between translating and code switching. Although teachers allege that they follow school policies, this study reveals that they unknowingly confuse the two.

With regard to language proficiency, the majority of teachers made language errors. The teachers exhibited a lack of proficiency in the language of learning and instruction. This lack of proficiency in itself is a serious drawback because the language of instruction must be rightfully modelled in order that learners are able to adopt the correct standard in the language of learning and teaching.

Responses from interviews and questionnaires on biographic data suggest that teachers' experience, professional skills and background do affect their teaching practices.

7. CONCLUSION

The researcher concludes that there seems to be two educational systems in South Africa, comprising schools where teachers teach in English as a medium of instruction only; on the other hand there are schools that allow code switching as a means of translating English into the school's adopted home language, using gestures as an additional aid for comprehension. The aforementioned results in education being a reproductive mechanism of social class inequalities because learners are differentiated in terms of knowledge, opportunity and achievement.

Accordingly, past inequalities in education are reinforced or reproduced and tend to limit economic opportunities of learners from township schools, and some non-native speakers of English in the former Model C schools. This results in many learners' struggling at universities or colleges owing to language deficiencies, as there is likely to be no code switching at tertiary institutions, in the end, some learners fails to find a place in society owing to the English language barrier.

Most non-native English teachers use their native language pronunciation when teaching English as a medium of learning and instruction, yet verbal fluency and pronunciation is critical during the Foundation Phase. Some teachers transfer articulation habits of the first language to the second language, which conveys incorrect rules to learners. This is regarded as mother tongue interference.

The findings of the study suggest that learners, especially from township schools, find it difficult to learn in English as a medium of instruction, probably because of limited usage and lack of practice. Conversely, learners from former Model C schools seem to be at an advantage because they use English repetitively in all spheres of school life, in and out of the class, resulting in more exposure and thus a high level of fluency

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Ideally, the teacher has to be a good language model; hence effort should be focussed on improving teachers' approaches, rather than changing text books. The issue lies with how teachers are being trained, whether they know how to teach and what to teach in a discipline such as English. Indeed, there is need to improve the quality of pedagogical practices in English as a language of learning and teaching. This study suggests that it is the language of instruction that is the key to unlocking knowledge.

From this study it is clear that in order for teachers to improve the quality of pedagogical practices, there is a need for training and retraining of non-native English teachers; and how to teach non-native English learners in South Africa, a country with a total of 11 official languages.

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