

Teachers' and Learners' Experiences of Learners' Writing in English First Additional Language

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n27p467

Abstract

A central concern of education internationally and in South Africa is to develop children's literacy skills. In many parts of the world, the need to become fluent in a second language is essential for gaining meaningful access to education, labour market and broader social functioning. In spite of these efforts, the problem still continues. However, the level of English language proficiency is far from satisfactory and these goals are unattainable to others. The issue is more complex in South Africa as learners are immersed in a second language (L2) curriculum. South Africa is a prime example of a country facing the dilemma of how to effectively equip the majority of its population with a second language, in this case English. Second language acquisition is an entire sub-discipline of applied linguistics. There is however, insufficient literature that looks into writing experiences of isiXhosa and Afrikaans background learners in English First Additional Language (EFAL). Hence, this study investigates the teachers' and learners' experiences of learners' writing in English First Additional Language. Moreover, the possible causes of EFAL writing difficulties and teacher practices for teaching writing were examined. The theoretical and conceptual framework for the study is provided by studies on constructivist theories, sociocultural theories. These theories were adopted from studies by Abongdia (2013); Foncha (2013); Wodak (2001); Van Dijk (2001); Leach and Scott (2000). In exploring these issues, a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis was adopted. This data is analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Keywords: Writing, home language, English First Additional Languages, English Second Language, Medium of Instruction, language proficiency, isiXhosa/Afrikaans background learners.

1. Introduction/Background

In many parts of the world, the need to become fluent in a second language is essential for gaining meaningful access to education, the labour market and broader social functioning. Moreover, the central goal of English education around the globe is to develop writing and communicative abilities of English Second Language (ESL) learners so that they might better navigate higher education (Parsons and Beauchamp, 2012). On the other hand, the goal of others is to provide content-area and language knowledge simultaneously (e.g. content-based instruction) so that they might be able to convey and interpret a message via written or spoken modalities to another person (Mckay, 2011). However, the level of English language proficiency is far from satisfactory and these goals are unattainable to others.

A brief description of language use in South Africa is necessary in order to give a broader picture of how the present study was conceived. South Africa is an example of a developing country in which a majority of the population speaks indigenous languages as their home language. English is mostly used in urban areas, especially in city centres for economic purposes. This kind of situation is influenced by the fact that many businesses are still owned by white people who are either English or Afrikaans speakers. But for people living in the rural areas, exposure to English is limited because the majority of people communicate with each other in local languages.

In the context of this study, teachers and learners reside in Eastern Cape Province, East London in the Coloured area, township and rural areas where communication occurs mostly in isiXhosa and Afrikaans. East London is surrounded by villages, farm areas, and townships with informal settlements and vast rural areas. The schools where the research is conducted are also located in isiXhosa and Afrikaans-speaking communities, and teachers and learners are exposed to English mostly in the classroom environment. However, some of those who live in the Coloured area are exposed in both English and Afrikaans.

In view of the above, it is also necessary to take a glimpse on the background of where one of the researchers is teaching. Mpiti is a Multigrade teacher in a historically disadvantaged and poorly resourced school. A community in which

English is not used and learners have no exposure to print media and technology and most of the learners have never been to the libraries. They have very few or no books and magazines within their homes. As a result, some of these learners enter schools having little or no previous knowledge of English because they live with illiterate grandparents who have never attended school before. Due to insufficient exposure to English and support from home, these learners struggle to grasp the content of subjects taught through the English medium, and this adversely affects their academic performance (McKay and Chick, 2001; Heugh, 2003).

Moreover, parents cannot check their children's exercise books, or help them with their homework because they are illiterate. Some who have older siblings with illiterate parents are assisted by them. When they start schooling, it takes a longer time for some to adapt to this learning environment and some of these learners start school older. They do not have sufficient time in the classroom, to acquire a threshold level of English language proficiency which allows them to engage effectively with learning in English. In the light of the above brief background, the aim of this study is to compare the perspective of teachers' and learners' experiences of Grade 6 learners' writing in English First Additional Language (FAL) by isiXhosa and Afrikaans first language speakers to see if common problems arise and how they could be managed.

In view of the above, it is worth looking at the findings of 2011, 2012 and 2013 Annual National Assessment (ANA) results of English FAL paper written by Grade 6 learners. The national average performance in English FAL by Grade 6 learners was 36% and in 2013 it was 46%. Looking back to 2011, results were dismal; Grade 6 learners' national average performance was 28% and 30% of learners achieved above 35% in English FAL. In terms of CAPS, at least a 50% mark is required for adequate and higher achievement in English. These findings revealed that South African school children in grade 4 - 6 and 9 do not understand simple English and are significantly inadequate in writing meaningful, correctly punctuated sentences.

Hence, the minister of education, Mrs Motshekga said that it is worrying precisely because the critical skills of literacy and numeracy are fundamental to further education and achievement in the world for both education and work and many of these learners lack proper foundation in literacy. Hence, they struggle to progress in the system and into post-school education and training. In spite of the above situation, the government aspires to elevate pass rates on literacy tests from the current average of 35- 40% to a minimum of 60% in 2014.

It is worth mentioning that the above description indicates a problem and this has been a concern to the education department, language educators and researchers. Thus, several studies have been carried out to find solutions to this problem but the problem still exists. It is therefore necessary to investigate this problem and find the remedial procedures that can elevate the learners' level of skills of writing English FAL proficiently. In the context of this study, it is important to prepare all the learners for the future by providing them with quality education.

2. Aim of the Paper

The paper sets out to investigate the experiences of teachers and learners in writing English FAL. It further aims to explore the causes of the difficulties and how to address the problem.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Theoretically, the paper examines the notion of writing and writing proficiency. Researchers on writing have observed that many second language learners face a lot of difficulties in writing. Choudhury (2001), in working with English language students at a private university in Bangladesh noted that even after 12 years of English education, students could not communicate effectively and were failing to develop an acceptable level of English proficiency. Others in their comparison of English test grades and Secondary School Certificate English grades at the high school level, remarked on "an alarming rate of failure of rural students in English" (Hamid and Baldauf, 2008, p.21). In the study of immigrants in the United States, Chiswick and Miller (2002) found a far higher return to an additional year of schooling among immigrants fluent in English. English language learners (ELL) require additional time to acclimate to school routines and expectations in the United States (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007). As much as ELL may be growing in numbers in America, their proficiency in spoken and/or written English is not yet developed enough to permit them to succeed in an English-language classroom setting without extra support (Batalova *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, studies carried out by Richmond *et al.* (2008) indicate that one in five adults in today's world – seven hundred and seventy four million men and women – have no access to written communication through literacy. According to Mahmoud (2005), Arabic-speaking students commit errors when they produce collocations in English, especially the English lexical combinations.

In favour of the above, the world is making progress in literacy but the challenges remain huge. There is a growing awareness of the need for people in education to constantly be developing and reviewing curricula in accordance with changing circumstances (Richmond *et al.*, 2008). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has established the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) framework which accelerates progress in making action on literacy more effective and taking it to scale to reach the large illiterate population (De Klerk, 2002). In spite of these efforts, the problem still exists. A study conducted by Moja (2000) revealed a decline in the quality of the education system in Nigeria, resulting in a negative effect on literacy development in primary school learners. The findings also revealed that low morale of teachers, the poor quality of teachers, and lack of adequate professional support for teachers in the system has a negative impact on literacy development. Hence, Olusoji (2012) stated that the common problem in learning English in Nigeria is that majority of the teachers who teach the language, are incompetent and apart from this, the teachers themselves are victims of incompetent teaching.

On the other hand, Okech (2005) conducted a case study of literacy education in Uganda. Findings revealed that there is a very poor performance in literacy at the sixth year of primary education. Implementing the primary curriculum by teachers who have difficulties of reading and writing English, the language of instruction is a big challenge in Uganda (Kagoda, 2012). Kagoda (2012) further stated that this implies teachers cannot express themselves and are not able to write current English for their pupils. Something therefore needs to be done to bring about improvement in literacy acquisition in primary schools as well as in adult literacy provision (Okech, 2005).

Another study conducted was by Pearce (2009) on the literacy challenge in eleven West African countries. The findings, drawn from recent statistics, indicated that in sixty five million young people and adults, more than 40% of the population are unable to read and write. Of these, forty million are women who are, on average, poorer and often from rural areas (Pearce, 2009). The findings also revealed that the low literacy level is determined by problems in the formal school system and a lack of learning opportunities. Moreover, the study revealed that there are not enough learners who are in school: fourteen million learners of primary school age are out of school in the eleven West African countries, more than half of them girls. The quality of education is also poor: the disastrous lack of trained teachers and literacy facilitators is a key factor (Pearce, 2009).

However the issue is more complex in South Africa as learners are immersed in a second language (L2) curriculum. South Africa is a prime example of a country facing the dilemma of how to most effectively equip the majority of its population with a second language, in this case English. The birth of democracy in South Africa in 1994 meant that many changes had to be implemented in various spheres (education, health, justice, etc.) of the government in order to redress the imbalances of the apartheid government. As a result, in 1996 the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa acknowledged the richness of language diversity in the country. It adopted a progressive constitution which gave official status to 11 languages (nine of which are African). This language policy promotes (but does not mandate) the use of African languages alongside English, encouraging schools to maintain the learners' home languages at the same time as they learn an additional language (Probyn *et al.*, 2002; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004).

With this transition, the government also adopted a very progressive Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP, 1997), which devolves the decision on the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) to the individual schools (through the School Governing Bodies) (Probyn *et al.*, 2002; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004). Most schools, however, have not conformed to the proposals of LiEP, and have maintained the use of English as the LoLT from at least Grade 4 (Casale and Posel, 2011). The South African National Curriculum Statement (CAPS) (DoE, 2002) indicated that one should attain proficiency in the selected LoLT at a level fundamental for successful learning of the curriculum.

Moreover, the CAPS document also prescribed that the teaching of English as a subject should be introduced from Grade 1 in all schools (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Consequently, all schools should have some English being taught from the first grade, but for some schools English is also the language of instruction from Grade 1. Proponents of Mother Tongue (MT) education argue that a later transition to English is necessary given that children cannot understand the language of instruction (Brock-Utne, 2007; Banda 2000, 2009). Mallozzi and Malloy (2007) stress the importance of learning English as a second language for those South Africans who speak an African home language, as the English language dominates the workforce as well as school instruction. For these reasons, proponents of bilingual transitional models predict that not only will a later transition to English benefit a child's First Language proficiency, but it will also lead to better proficiency in English in the long run (Van Weijen *et al.*, 2009).

4. Methodology

This paper forms part of Mpiti's doctoral thesis where a qualitative methodology was used to analyse the teachers' and learners' experiences of learners' writing in English first additional language (FAL). Being a case study, the sample

consisted of Grade 6 learners in two Grade 6 classes in two primary schools purposively selected in the East London District in the Eastern Cape Province, in South Africa. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, observations and analysis of learners' writings (exercise books/tasks). The schools and participants were carefully chosen to reflect the general writing experiences of all the teachers and learners. Since we used the qualitative research design, we decided to use teachers and learners from the different linguistic backgrounds: isiXhosa and Afrikaans with the same socio-economic backgrounds to find out their writing experiences

5. Findings and Discussion

The finds revealed that the general language proficiency of isiXhosa background learners have a smaller vocabulary than Afrikaans background learners in EFAL. This was as a result of the fact that some of the Afrikaans background learners are exposed to English at home. However both isiXhosa and Afrikaans background learners encounter problems in English language learning. These problems included the four language skills, i.e. listening speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, isiXhosa and Afrikaans background learners keep committing errors in syntax, semantics, morphology, pronunciation and spelling. The reasons that lay behind these writing difficulties are many: English is not their mother tongue, the lack of the target language exposure, the learners' preference towards using home language in the classroom rather than English and the lack and weakness of input in their language teaching context. More importantly, was the fact that most of the teachers prefer to teach in their home languages. When asked why, they quickly answered that the learners do not understand English. This is a major concern as the learners are taught in their home languages, yet exams are written in English. This makes it very difficult for the learners to write and worst still they do not receive writing feedback on work done in their books. Hence, the language and writing development is lacking. Given that some of the teachers could hardly speak fluently without code-switching and or code-mixing when interviewed, the researchers are tempted to believe that the use of home language in classes was not just to assist the learners as some of the teachers claimed but rather because the teachers themselves are not competent in the language of teaching and learning. In this regard, the researchers are left with unanswered questions: How do you teach in a language you do not know? How do you assist the learners to develop in this language?

Nonetheless, learners' writing samples indicated that both group of learners face more difficulty in organization, capitalization, vocabulary and grammar, inadequate use of punctuation marks and inexplicitness or fuzziness. The impact is more serious than the other problems because the intended meaning is often misconceived. Even more important is the fact that these crucial problems arise from pedagogical reasons as mentioned earlier, but this does not mean that teachers alone can solve these problems nor can these problems be solved from outside the school system. Hence, we argue that it is a joint battle and every one: teachers, parents, education department and even the learners must take active roles towards the development of writing especially in an additional language as it is the case with English in these schools.

Moreover, their understanding of acquisition of literacy skills relied heavily on their home language as has been indicated above. Hence, the issue of pronunciation and learners' reliance on their mother tongue seem to be a problem that they experience. In both schools observing these learners, the researchers noticed that their pronunciation was problematic and it affected the way they wrote English words. Because they pronounced words incorrectly, this was evident in their writing. This resulted in them using isiXhosa and Afrikaans writing rules when writing English words. For example, the Department of Education states that English vowels are particularly challenging for African language speakers and this is made more difficult by the variety of ways in which these vowels are spelt (DoE, 2008c).

The results of this study provide several implications for teaching. Teachers' pronunciation practice seems to influence learners' writing practices. In one of the classes observed, the teacher's pronunciation led to learners' writing difficulties. For an example word /*rugby*/ was mispronounced by the teacher as a result learners omitted letter /*g*/ when writing. Moreover, teachers' practices seemed to hinder learners' writing development; because writing in the isiXhosa class happened haphazardly. For example, for tests the teacher would randomly give learners words to write, regardless of whether they had been introduced to a particular word family or not. Moreover, this teacher seemed to have no plans as to how to develop emerging writers. She did not have a process map that indicated which sound was to be introduced first and which sound would follow.

In addition, the researchers noticed that learners who were struggling with English writing were not scaffolded enough. As pointed out in Horwitz *et al.* (1986), teachers need to help students learn to cope with foreign language and also need to try to make the learning context less stressful. Based on the results of this study, it is suggested that teachers also need to consider the learners writing difficulties in their classes. Regarding the writing skill, it was realised that some of the learners in both schools could not write even short sentences let alone short paragraphs. This could be

attributed to the method and style of teaching used by the teachers.

Another major cause was the lack of exposure as well as support from parents and siblings. Rashid and Gregory (1997) point to the importance of older siblings in school literacy development for bilingual children, teachers can use heritage students as tutors who can serve as mediators to the new language and the new culture for the non-heritage students.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigates the writing experiences of teachers and learners in two primary schools in the East London district in South Africa. The investigation revealed that emerging developing writers need a teacher who has a plan or has a process map on how to introduce learners to English writing rules. English FAL should be in classes where learners' writing development is monitored. Moreover, for isiXhosa background learners, their language has a transparent (or regular or shallow) orthography whereas English has an opaque (or irregular or deep) orthography. Learners bring this knowledge to learning to write in English, but they have to learn that the sound (or phoneme-grapheme) relationships are not exactly the same in English as in isiXhosa.

This therefore needs to be socialized into the rules of an opaque orthography of the language. Writing should not happen haphazardly in a content where the sounds made by letters change in different words. Brief grammar rules may be essential to help learners realize their errors resulting from over generalization and wrong analogy. Learners should be always encouraged to do a lot of writing exercises. In fact, ability to communicate cannot be fulfilled unless "the grammar" is there, in the competence of the writer. According to Chomsky (1986), grammar consists of various levels, which are ordered and interrelated. Teachers have to be realistic in their expectations. This is similar to sport. If basket ball players are given a ball to play netball on a netball court without proper training or a set of netball rules, definitely they will play and apply the rules of basket ball. This is the same with English writing; learners need to be taught the rules. Moreover writing is a productive skill. It is one of the most difficult and therefore frustrating 'subjects' to teach particularly in an ESL programme. Developing the necessary skills to improve learners' writing is entails hard work.

As can be seen from the analysis, the learners' performance difficulties are systematic and classifiable. This in turn, implies that both teachers and learners must see difficulties as the key to understand and solve accuracy problems in English writing courses. It is also the teachers' responsibility to adopt, modify or even develop remedial procedures that can elevate the learners' level and minimize their difficulties. Teachers should try to find the best method to deliver the lesson to their learners. Hence, teachers should regularly apply different methods that are suitable for the learners' needs, interests and abilities.

It is advisable that teachers should attend some training sessions in order to be aware of the latest development in the field. Taking in to consideration the educational and cultural backgrounds of the learners, teachers may devise more ways to tackle the identified problems in the best possible manner. To improve the teaching of writing, the English Language teachers should adopt the following activities for improving the competence of their Grade 6 learners in mastering the writing skills.

- Practice in writing skills is necessary.
- Training learners to provide feedback to their peers as feedback is essential and helps both the givers and the receivers. For example, teachers have to encourage the learners' to work together as much as possible, through group work and pair work.
- Making use of the approaches universally used to teach writing, e.g the process approach which is based on the research into the strategies writers apply when they compose a piece of writing. On the other hand the process-genre approach which has empirically been proved to be effective. It is built on the notion that learners writers may benefit from studying different types of written texts.
- Varying teaching and learning techniques and procedures to keep learners motivated to learn and to meet their different needs and learning preferences.
- Assigning tasks at different levels of difficulty to suit the learners' different abilities
- Language activities should be meaningful to learners and relate to their real lives.
- The integration between writing and other skills and sub- skills such as grammar and vocabulary is essential.

Monitoring learners' writing development is a very important issue raised by Dorn, *et al.* (as cited in DuBois *et al.*, 2007), Farrington-Flint *et al.* (2008), and Wilde (1992). However, the researchers recommend teachers should be properly trained and lessons properly planned in order not to get the learners confused. Given that English has an opaque (or irregular or deep) orthography, there is a great need to have teachers who understand the rules of the

language to teach it especially to FAL learners.

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