

The Perceptions of English First Additional Language Teachers on Grade 10 Learners' Academic Performance at A Township Secondary School in Gauteng Province

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of teachers' English First Additional Language on learners' academic performance. The qualitative approach was used to elicit responses from the 4 sampled teachers. The participants were purposefully sampled from a secondary school in Soshanguve. The researchers collected data using semi structured interviews. The data was analysed by means of frequency tables and direct quotes from the interview were provided. The findings of the study revealed that different factors such as lack of exposure to English Language, Language proficiency, the use of mother tongue, lack of in-service training among teachers resulted in the poor academic performance of Grade 10 learners. The researchers recommend that more attention needs to be paid in teacher education to prepare future teachers to attend to the development of the academic language of learners in schools. Teachers must be taught how to invest in scholarly thinking for reflective practice because learners' academic success hinges on their ability to engage with academic texts across disciplines.

Keywords: Academic performance, training, English First Additional Language, language proficiency. Mother tongue.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2011, stipulates that learners should be exposed to English at an earlier stage by introducing the language as a fourth subject in Grades R to 3. The focus is on developing learners' ability to understand and speak the language (BICS). They must also apply the literacy skills that they have already learnt in their Home Language (CAPS, 2011). Nel and Muller (2010) found that shifting from mother-tongue instruction (in the first two to three years of schooling) to English as LOLT compounds the problem of language confusion as the learners have not yet mastered reading in their mother tongue, much less in English. CAPS stipulates that learners should be proficient in their First Additional Language with regard to both interpersonal and cognitive academic skills, by the time they enter grade 10.

English language proficiency is essential for South African students who are expected to complete tasks in English and in other subjects (Madoda et al., 2015). Madoda (2015) define language proficiency as learners' communication of information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of social studies. A study was conducted and focused on the relationship between English language proficiency and academic success

in certain subjects in the curriculum. Aina et al. (2013) focused on the relationship between students' English language proficiency and their academic performance in science and technical education. The study revealed that English language proficiency is a strong predictor of academic success (Madoda, 2015). The results also showed a strong correlation between language of instruction and academic achievement in content subjects. Another study was conducted on the relationship between language proficiency and Science achievement due to the expected greater extent to which a lack of foundational skills would negatively impact learner achievement in a language-based subject (Prinsloo et al., 2018). The study focused on language as part of obtaining scientific literacy as well as language as the "symbolic representation of culture" within the science context (Prinsloo et al., 2018). The findings showed a link with the perception that in South Africa, reinforced by its language history, English proficiency is necessary to become successful. It is likely that English will continue to be the dominant language in Science education, but this poses a formidable task for second-language learners who must master the Western discourse, the Science discourse, the Science content, and the English discourse while learning in English (Rogers et al., 2018).

Misbah (2017) highlights that teachers perceive the teaching of second language to learners who are not exposed to the atmosphere of the target language as challenging. Most of them do not use the language in their daily life and often encounter the use of target language only in school and within the classroom of the target language". Learners are not familiar with general words of English and feel shy to use the English words, since their exposure to the English language is inadequate in the school and limited to one book (textbook). Jalaluddin et al. (2008) concur with Misbah (2017) that teaching English as the second language is indeed a great task for the teachers.

Pal et al. (2016) support that ineffective classroom communication occurs when learners and teachers are not at the same level of understanding, which thus, hinders the messages to be conveyed by the teachers in classroom activities. Ado Ama (2022) asserts that students only make an effort to speak proper English in the classroom when they are under supervision. After the class, they drop their books and wait for the next class. They don't study pronunciation, they don't study essay writing, and they don't make an effort to learn new words. When learners make mistakes and are corrected, they often say "It is not my language after all." This greatly affects their ability to learn English. Another study conducted based on the relationship between Mathematics and English language proficiency by Maluleke (2019) emphasised the importance of improving the English language proficiency in order to meet the academic demands of Mathematics such as unique words, phrases, and abbreviations necessary for speaking, reading, and writing (Rogers et al., 2018). They further point out that language proficiency is used as a vehicle to learn Mathematics. Thus, language serves as a medium through which mathematical ideas are expressed and shared. Language has been purported to be an influential factor, especially literacy challenges, which are reflected in the poor reading achievement of South African learners in both the Annual National Assessments (ANA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2011.

According to ANA results (2014), low achievement was present in First Additional Language (FAL), where all assessed grades achieved below 50 percent. Notably, Grade nine learners' achievement (34%) showed no improvement. In Mathematics, Grade nine learners achieved an average of 11%, with only 3% of learners achieving a mark of 50% or more (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2014). Researchers argue that low proficiency in language has been compromising learning across the curriculum (Rogers et al., 2018). According to the South Africa's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2015, assessments results show that 61% of South African Grade 5 learners could not add and subtract whole numbers, have no understanding of multiplication by one digit numbers and cannot solve simple word problems, i.e. they cannot do basic Mathematics (Spaull, 2019). The South African grade 5 learners' TIMSS performance identified language as a significant contributory factor to such poor performance (Robertson, 2018; Reddy et al., 2016). This report clearly shows that language has a negative impact on learners' academic performance. Robertson and Graven (2019) argued that the use of English in a grade 4 class of First Language IsiXhosa students constrained the Mathematics teacher's efforts to encourage exploratory talk, with students making statements of mathematical 'fact' rather than providing reasons why. This restricted the students' opportunities for deepening their conceptual understandings of Mathematical ideas. Teachers are encouraged to have appropriate strategies that can be applied in the classrooms to assist learners who are not proficient in English language.

Misbah (2017) claims that learners perceive that the second language is difficult and impossible for them to learn as they are not proficient in English. Hence, this perception will influence the learning outcome. Feast (2002) cited in Madoda (2015) supports this argument that when students are deficient in the language of instruction, it follows that they would not perform well in various school subjects taught in the target language. Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) also claim that the learners' conceptualisations on their learning either facilitate or hinder their language learning activity. Majority of learners in the school under study do not perform well in content subjects as they are not proficient in using the English language. This causes a negative impact in their academic performance across content subjects. This is also supported by Arsad et al. (2014) who state that learners who have poor English language proficiency will have difficulty understanding the teacher and reading reference books and doing assignments in English. South African scholars believe that poor English language proficiency is the major cause of academic underperformance among the English First Additional learners (Madoda, 2015).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study wants to establish the impact of English First Additional Language on the academic performance of learners and provide suggestions on how to improve the academic performance of learners in content subjects, as they experience challenges and difficulty in grasping and understanding the content and concepts of subjects taught in English First Additional Language. This hinders progress to learners as they lack proficiency in the language and are unable to perform well in content subjects, such as Geography and Business Studies. Learners at the secondary school under study are Sepedi, Xitsonga and Setswana

Home Language learners, and they are taught through English as a medium of instruction. Researchers observe that some learners do not understand instructions given to them as they have limited vocabulary and are unfamiliar with phonics and their spelling is poor. This suggests that learning achievement invariably suffers where this move is not accompanied by strong English fluency. This observation is supported by Molteno Project (2000) which found that majority of learners whose Home Language is not the medium of instruction, continue to experience academic underachievement. Thus, large numbers of South African learners are failing grades repeatedly or are leaving school reportedly because of poor basic learning skills or inadequate language skills (Howie & Van Staden, 2008). Thus, there is still a need for more empirical evidence in the literature on this topic to establish perceptions of English First Additional Language teachers on grade 10 learners' academic performance at a township public secondary school in Soshanguve, in Tshwane West district, Gauteng province, South Africa.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of English First Additional Language teachers on grade 10 learners' academic performance at a township public secondary school in Soshanguve, in Tshwane West district, Gauteng province, South Africa.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study took place at a township public secondary school in Soshanguve in Tshwane West District, Gauteng province, South Africa. The perception of teachers on grade 10 learners' academic performance in this study is due to the limited English language proficiency and access outside the school. The school in the study is situated in Block M, Soshanguve. The school attracts learners from the surrounding "black townships" such as Soshanguve, Mabopane, Rankuwa and Winteveldt. The school is situated in a community which speaks three different home languages such as Sepedi, Setswana and Xitsonga which are taught at school as learners' home language and English as First Additional Language.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will contribute to the field of English First Additional Language learning both in terms of pedagogy and research. This study will also offer significant pedagogical implications for English First Additional Language teachers in South Africa to recognize the pedagogical value in addressing learners' academic performance on content subjects.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative approach which focuses on the perceptions of English First Additional Language teachers on grade 10 learners' academic performance. The researchers chose qualitative inquiry as the research design because it offers the participants with the complex phenomena to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge as well as opportunity to outline teachers' perceptions on English First Additional Language on learners' academic performance in grade 10.

PARTICIPANTS

The study used purposive sampling to enable the researchers to recruit participants who can provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation. The researchers used this sampling technique to sample four content teachers from thirty teachers in Grade 10 to participate in the study. The researchers used number cards in a box to select four teachers teaching content subjects in order to give equal opportunity for all participants to participate in the study. This means that four teachers who teach content subjects such as Geography, Life Science, Mathematical Literacy and Life Orientation since these learning areas are taught by one teacher.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND PROCESS

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with key information, it includes a number of questions, but the researchers had more freedom to modify the wording and order of questions, which is flexible to suit each teacher's level of understanding of the given question. The study used semi-structured interviews for the teachers. An interview guide was developed to ensure that all the aspects of the interview are exhausted. Open-ended interview questions appeared on the interview guide for teachers. The whole interview process was recorded and transcribed by the researchers verbatim to allow for accurate interpretation of the data provided by the respondents.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data because the researchers found it easy to group the responses according to the objectives and questions that were on the interview guide for teachers. Qualitative explanations were provided to explain the common ideas that were raised based on the perception of English First Additional Language teachers on grade 10 learners' academic performance.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of English FAL teachers on grade 10 learners' academic performance. The analysis and discussion of qualitative semi-structured interviews are presented according to the research questions of the study as indicated below:

1. What would you consider are some of the reasons for learners' poor academic performance?

This question is addressing reasons why learners are academically performing poorly. The teachers highlighted the following reasons for learners' academic performance.

Teacher 1: Lack of learner commitment, inadequate parental involvement. Some learners lack background knowledge; they can't relate to the content.

Poor foundation from their lower grades.

Teacher 2: Language barrier, incompetency of reading, classes not conducive to

learning (posters) to stimulate learners to learn.

Teacher 3: Lack of enthusiasm in learning, lack of parental involvement.

Teacher 4: Lack of understanding and interpreting what the questions wants. Reading with understanding and taking for granted a subject.

The findings above indicate that learners do not perform well academically due to lack of understanding, language barrier, lack of interest or commitment. Most compelling evidence supporting the findings of this study by Misbah (2017) indicates that learners are not familiar with general words of English and feel shy to use the English words, since their exposure to the English language is inadequate in the school and limited to one book (textbook). Under those circumstances, most of the learners fail as they are unable to relate to the content, understand and interpret the questions and also read with understanding. Response from two teachers shows that one of the reasons for poor performance is due to lack of parental support in most of the learners. Learners are also not fully educationally supported by their families. This is supported by Ai Zoubi (2018) who observed that students who are weak in English were those handicapped by their environment. Learners get less encouragement from their parents to practice speaking English at home. El- Omari (2016) and Hussain (2017) concur that learners demonstrate higher academic and behaviour levels, have higher aspirations, and display other positive school behaviours when parents are knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved. With this in mind, Parents are also unable to communicate with learners in English First Additional Language due to level of education that majority have. For this reason, Robertson (2020) states that not speaking the language of the classroom ‘frequently holds back a child’s learning, especially for those living in poverty.

2. English, used as the medium of instruction has an impact on the academic performance of learners. Do you agree/disagree? Please state why.

This question required teachers to elaborate on whether English, as used as a medium of instruction has an impact on the academic performance of learners or not. The interviewed teachers responded as follows:

Teacher 1: Agree. Our learners fail to understand questions. In most cases, they do have information but they can’t write their response in English. Some learners can’t read and comprehend, making it difficult to answer questions correctly. As educators, we always witness this when we are marking their assessment, others end up using both English and their home language.

Teacher 2: Agree. Most of the learners use their mother tongue to think before they respond.

Teacher 3: Disagree. Even though it’s not our mother tongue but it is used in our daily

lives compared to African languages. It is just our learners not showing interest in learning.

Teacher 4: Agree. Because students don't frequently communicate with each other using English, so they are not used to it and are not comfortable being taught using it as a medium of instruction.

Three of the teachers have agreed that learners lack vocabulary and are uncomfortable to express themselves using the language, which makes it difficult to respond to questions well during assessment as they do not understand them. Madoda (2015) concurs with the findings of this study by indicating that when learners are deficient in the language of instruction, they would not perform well in various school subjects taught in the target language. For the most part, it has also been proven by some researchers that having difficulties in grasping fully the contents and concepts of the various subjects across the curriculum taught in English language seems to be one of the most serious problems that learners face in various subjects (Madoda, 2015). Although one teacher's response disagreed that learners are just not showing interest in learning the language as used in their daily lives, some teachers claim that some of the learners translate to their mother tongue before they respond to questions asked. On the negative side, Mwakira (2021) found that when language of communication at home and school is mother tongue, then acquisition of English skills is inhibited and thus the performance of English is affected.

3. List some of the challenges that you consider hampers learners improving their skills in English (reading, writing and speaking)?

This question seeks teachers to determine challenges that prevent learners to improve their language skills. Challenges were stated as follows:

Teacher 1: Lack of confidence, not having a suitable environment to practice.

Teacher 2: Listening and speaking, reading, writing and presenting. Learners are unable to construct sentences and write good paragraphs.

Teacher 3: Lack of practice, not having confidence, not having motivation and support from parents and also not encouraging each other as friends.

Teacher 4: Speech, reading and writing with understanding.

The findings show that learners are unable to speak, read and write with understanding in English First Additional Language because they are unable to construct sentences and write good paragraphs. They also lack confidence, motivation and support, as well as suitable environment to practice more often. They are not encouraging each other to communicate as peers using the English inside and outside the classrooms. Krashen (1982) claims that Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to form a mental block that

prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. Given these points, Misbah (2017) in support of the findings of this study claims that limited English vocabulary can cause the learners to face difficulties in acquiring the four language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing as well as all non-verbal means of representation and expression that we use when communicating. Generally, speaking, language has been purported to be an influential factor, especially literacy challenges, such as reading and writing in this study, which are reflected in the poor reading achievement of South African learners in both the Annual National Assessments (ANA) results (2014) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2011. Above all, parents and teachers must encourage and also give learners situations in which they could practice speaking the language in order to get used to the target language and feel confident in using it.

4. What ratio of home language to English (code-switching) do you use when teaching? Please explain why?

This question emphasises the extent to which teachers use Home language/ code switch during teaching and learning.

Teacher 1: 90 % use of English because it is a medium of instruction, 10% used for home language, in order for them to understand.

Teacher 2: 70 % is used most of the time during teaching, and 30% is used for code switching so that learners understand the lesson.

Teacher 3: 80 % of the time, I speak in English and 20 % I explain in vernacular because some learners are slow in digesting what is said in English.

Teacher 4: 98% to 2%, because it allows one to be able to put a lot of emphasis on a point without being hindered by the language and only use English 2%, when pointing out terminologies in the subject.

The above responses show that teachers use 70 -90% of their time teaching in English and spend 2 – 30% to code switch to home language (mother tongue) in order for learners to understand the lesson. Recent research has shown that the use of code-switching by South African teachers that is grounded in the social circumstances in which it ‘constitutes a purposeful and productive teaching strategy’ Wildsmith-Cromarty (2019). The findings of this study concur with Balfour (2019) that code-switching is used for both management of the classroom and for explanatory purposes where the content is complex and concepts may not be immediately accessible to learners through English. In this case, teachers in the school under study codeswitch to mother tongue to facilitate understanding. However, Misbah et al. (2017) and Wildsmith-Cromarty et al. (2019) argue that the use of mother tongue in the classrooms affects English learning negatively because code-switching does not serve to build either the L1 or the L2, where there is exclusion of learners in diverse, multilingual

classrooms who do not share those languages. In reality, Learners mostly use their mother tongue in the classroom and cannot understand the instructions of teachers delivered in English (Akram et al., 2020). Therefore, the use of mother in the school under study may create a confusion and have a negative impact on learners' academic performance as it is offering Sepedi, Setswana and Xitsonga language which could not be spoken by all learners.

6. What are the strategies that can be used to harness/improve learners'

academic performance across the school curriculum using English First

Additional Language?

The above question seeks to provide strategies that can be used to improve learners' academic performance across content subject. Teachers responded as follows:

Teacher 1: Harness their interest, help them to have self- motivation and self confidence in themselves.

Teacher 2: Introduce reading clubs in which capable learners will assist those who are unable to read.

Teacher 3: Encourage learners in speaking more English, allow them to take part in public speaking, read more books or magazines, let them do role-plays.

Teacher 4: English as a subject has to take a huge importance in school.

Students have to be challenged more to read a lot of newspapers, books, etc. so that they are comfortable in reading the language.

Understanding what the words mean, students may need to be given dictionaries at school. Students must communicate and interact with each other using the language.

The findings of this study show that the strategies that can be used to improve learners' academic performance include introduction of reading clubs as some learners are unable to read, encouraging learners to read more books, magazines or newspapers at home. This is reflected in the poor reading achievement of South African learners in both the Annual National Assessments (ANA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2011. Another strategy mentioned is allowing learners to participate in public speaking and role plays. According to Abdul Gafoor and Remia (2013), children will be more confident in speaking and writing in the target language if they have a wide range of vocabulary. Hence, an enhanced vocabulary improves the learner's confidence and their motivation to practise and learn more about the language.

Instil interest in reading, encourage them to have self- motivation and self-confidence.

Hassim (2016) explains that learners who read books other than the textbooks perform better than learners who do not read additional books. Studies have shown that “students who read English newspapers / magazines report greater achievement of English language learning than students who do not (El-Omari, 2016). Goodson et al. (2009) indicate that parents, teachers and society should play a significant role and enhance the children’s vocabulary of the target language through support and exposure to the target language and also through meaningful reading.

CONCLUSION

The findings showed the challenges that hinder learners’ academic performance. Some of the challenges revealed include limited language proficiency, the use of mother tongue and lack of in-service training among teachers resulted in the poor academic performance of Grade 10 learners. Poor performance in English is as a result of students using their mother tongue during conversations inside and outside the classroom. The use of mother tongue led to learners’ inability to pronounce words, lack of confidence, and prevents interaction. It also hinders critical and creative thinking and as well as prevent fluency in speaking. Although, the use of mother tongue at school provide many challenges such as poor pronunciation or words and writing in English, lack of confidence and poor communication skills and affect English language learning, the researcher has observed that despite all these challenges stated above, the use of mother tongue can be used as a purposeful teaching strategy for expressional and understanding of concepts as well as explanatory purposes where the content is complex and concepts may not be immediately accessible to learners through English.

According to the teachers’ perceptions, majority of learners have not yet mastered the language skills such as reading, speaking and writing as they are still struggle to read; they do not pronounce the words correctly, they are unable to construct sentences and write good paragraphs. The study has revealed that most learners have poor language background, hence the difficulty in literacy challenge as they are unable to read for understanding and communicate using English. In conclusion, English First Additional language has negatively impacted the learners’ academic performance of grade 10 learners across content subjects due to a number of factors identified and discussed in this study.

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