

## **“Do You All Understand?” “Yes Ma’am.” A South African primary school addresses Language and Communication Barriers**

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### **Abstract**

*South Africa has eleven official languages and the Language Policy in Education allows for the use of home languages throughout schooling where this is practicable. However, from Grade 4 onwards, township and rural primary schools use English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), even though the communities they serve use indigenous languages. This practice places many African children at a disadvantage as they are not fluent in English. Using the systems theory to understand how the school functions and a qualitative methodology, this study interrogated the challenges presented by the use of English as the preferred LoLT at Zungu Primary School<sup>1</sup>. The findings show that Zungu Primary has experienced poor learner participation in the learning process and has tried to address this challenge. There is also evidence that parents want English as LoLT and expect their children to become fluent in this language. This paper concludes that the demand for English as a LoLT results from a poor understanding of the complexities of language and literacy development which often results in language and communication barriers.*

*Key words: language of learning and teaching (LoLT), primary school, first/home language (L1), learner participation.*

### **Introduction**

South Africa has eleven official languages and the Language Policy in Education allows for children to be taught in their home language (L1) where this is practicable. From Grade R to Grade 3 the medium of instruction in all schools is the main language spoken in the local community. However, from Grade 4 onwards, township and rural primary schools switch and use English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), even though the communities they serve use indigenous languages. This practice continues right through high school although it places many African children at a disadvantage as they lack competence in English.

It is no wonder then that South African learners lag behind among their international counterparts in mastering literacy skills (Prinsloo, 2009). There could be several reasons why this is so, some of them being the mismatch between the LoLT and the children's home languages (L1) or that many of them still grow up in illiterate or semi-illiterate environments where English is foreign, or that access to resources remain unequal (Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000). Such is the legacy of apartheid and its policy of

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<sup>1</sup> Not its real name.

unequal development and it is proving difficult to address as these inequalities continue to affect the effectiveness of many schools.

In response to these and many other challenges faced by the system of education, the Department of Education (hereafter, DoE) has pronounced '*Education White Paper 6 - Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive education and training system*' (hereafter, EWP6) (DoE, 2001). Through this statement, the government has committed to providing quality education to all learners to enable them to realize their full potential. EWP 6 acknowledges that learning needs could arise from a range of factors, including inapt language or languages of learning and teaching as well as unsuitable and poor support services (DoE, 2001). As such, the current language policy allows learners to learn in their home language (L1) throughout their school career (Howie, Venter, & van Staden, 2008) as a measure to remove language and communication barriers.

## What is the role of language in learning?

The initial value of language lies in that it is a medium through which the child communicates with those in her environment. Therefore, it needs to be developed such that it becomes internalized, is used to organize the learners' thinking and assumes an internal mental role (Vygotsky, 1978). In typical primary school classrooms, for example, there are several dialogues going on between learners and between learners and educators. This, argues Conteh (2003), points to the fact that "learning is strongly socially situated in specific contexts and develops from and within the relationships between teachers and learners whilst also suggesting that language – predominantly talk – is an important element of these contexts and relationships" (p. 4). Clarifying the importance of language further, particularly talk, as the primary tool for learning, Conteh (2003) states that "not only do children need to *learn to talk*, they also need to *talk to learn* and this is true across the whole curriculum" (p. 7).

However, the reality for many African children is that they only come into contact with English at school (Nel & Theron, 2008). As a result, the majority of Grade 4s whose L1 is not English but who use it as LoLT struggle to participate meaningfully in the learning process. Clarence-Fincham, 2000 argues that this is due to the fact that such children have a vocabulary of nearly 800 words yet they require much more in order to participate actively in the learning process. In addition, the workload is heavier than in the Foundation Phase (Grade 1-Grade 3) and expectations are higher, which challenge their language proficiency in the Intermediate Phase (Grade 4-Grade 7) (Nel & Theron, 2008). It is therefore, not surprising that many children who shift from L1 to English as LoLT in Grade 4 tend to perform poorly in the long term than those who continue learning in L1.

This is due to the fact that such children are no longer performing at what Clarence-Fincham (2000) refers to as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) but are expected to be able to use the language for thinking and learning, to formulate ideas and deal with abstract ideas in order to tackle complex academic tasks or what is referred to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Clarence-Fincham, 2000). All this, undoubtedly, inhibits their participation in the learning process and exacerbates their disadvantage.

Taylor, Muller and Vinjevoold (2003), citing Setati (2002) reiterate that English is like a foreign language to most people in disadvantaged communities because the opportunities to learn it are inadequate. Naturally, children who are not proficient in the LoLT would lag behind in mastering conceptual knowledge, a backwardness that is aggravated where the children's L1 "does not coincide with the language of the school" (Taylor et al, 2003, p. 71). Du Plessis and Louw (2008) provide some clarity on the matter, explaining that developing the proficiency to understand academic concepts in the LoLT and achieve at school takes between five and seven years. This means that learners would benefit from learning in their L1 or, in instances where they opt for a different LoLT, that schools support them by increasing exposure to the LoLT to help them develop appropriate proficiency levels in academic concepts.

Williams and Burden (1997), using the cognitive theory of learning, argue that all learners should be encouraged to become active participants in their learning, adding that learners' ability to think abstractly is dependent on "the development and use of language" (p. 10). At primary school level (Grade R to Grade 7), talk or language is said to be the most crucial element children need to engage in the learning process. This makes it critical, therefore, that at this level learners are provided with adequate opportunities to engage in collaborative talk with their peers and with their teachers in order to develop competence in the LoLT and to make sense of their learning (Conteh, 2003). It is also im-

portant that they are given appropriate support to develop language competence in the LoLT as this would encourage them to become active participants in their learning. Surely there are many strategies that can be used to support learners learning in L2/3 as they develop competence in the LoLT. One such strategy is the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach which views communicative proficiency as the objective of language teaching (Zeng, 2009), which again highlights the interdependence between communication and language.

Since language is such a critical resource in learning, changing to a new and foreign language in Grade 4 must surely have serious implications for classroom interactions and the learning process as a whole. Why then do schools continue to use English as LoLT if the language policy allows them to teach in indigenous languages? And why is this practice allowed to continue in spite of the DoE's (2001) acknowledgement that learning in a second or third language can cause barriers to learning and participation?

This study investigated what challenges, if any, are faced by Zungu Primary Schools as a result of the use of English as LoLT. As such, the research questions that this paper seeks to answer are:

- What challenges have resulted from the use of English as the LoLT at this school?
- How have these challenges been addressed?

## **The research context and process**

Zungu Primary is located on the border of a township and an informal settlement on the western outskirts of Durban. There is a lot of unemployment in the area. According to the school principal, only Black Africans live in this community and none of the learners use English as their L1. IsiZulu is the LoLT in the Foundation Phase (Grade R to Grade 3) and English is one of the subjects. However, from Grade 4 onwards, the practice at this school is to switch from L1 to English as LoLT. The Department of Education does not have an intervention program designed to support learners with limited English at this school. As a result, the school is forced to find ways to deal with any challenges emanating from this practice.

The study utilized the systems theory to understand how the school deals with its challenges. This theory emphasizes the interrelatedness of different systems and subsystems. As such, this study viewed Zungu Primary School as a subsystem of the education system and assumed that its success depends on the existence of a supportive relationship between it and the various components of the system, in this case neighboring schools and the District Office. Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas et al (2000) maintain that there are three interdependent systems that are constantly at play in the creation of a school that learns, namely, the community, the classroom and the school. They argue that the interaction of these systems has potential to "shape the priorities and needs of people at all levels. In any effort to foster schools that learn, changes will mark a difference only if they take place at all three levels" (Senge et al, 2000, p. 11)

A qualitative methodology was selected to describe social phenomena under study. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue that such a methodology enables the exploration of an identified problem in its context by attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. The study attempted to understand the school's situation from different angles. To this effect, the inquiry is divided into three phases. Using interviews as a research tool, the first phase explored what the challenges are and how this school addresses them to support learners to access the curriculum. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted, one with the principal and another one with two of the trained St Mary's Interactive Learning Experience (SMILE) facilitators who are also teachers at this school. In addition, we observed two SMILE sessions. The next phase will utilize interviews and observations to investigate learners' experiences of the program and the final phase will focus on the evaluation of the strategy selected.

The objectives of the study were to establish if there are challenges this school experiences or has experienced as a result of using English as LoLT, and how the challenges are/have been addressed. Specifically, it investigated whether Grade 4 learners experience any challenges as a result of learning in English and whether and how they are supported to gain access to the curriculum since their L1 and the LoLT are different. The research questions that this paper seeks to answer are:

- What challenges have been/are being experienced due to using English as the LoLT?
- How have these challenges been addressed?

## Findings and discussion

The findings showed that Zungu Primary is already aware that using English as the LoLT has negative consequences for learner participation in the learning process. It also emerged that this school has tried two strategies to support their learners in developing English competence.

### The challenges caused by using English as LoLT

Research has shown that using English as LoLT in an environment where it is not widely spoken can cause barriers to learning, participation and development. Similarly, the principal and her staff acknowledge that the use of English as LoLT is problematic if the learners are not competent in that language.

*Learners were either reluctant or too self-conscious to volunteer information unless allowed to express themselves in their vernacular. Particularly, it became a problem when they wrote tests or examinations as they did not have adequate vocabulary to understand and answer questions.*  
(Ms Mthiyane, teacher)

This corroborates what other studies have said that teaching in English in an environment that does not foster mastery of the LoLT inhibits learner participation in the learning process.

What is of concern is that although the DoE is aware that many children whose L1 is neither English nor Afrikaans switch to these languages as LoLT from Grade 4, schools do not receive any support in improving the proficiency of learners in the LoLT. Neither do they receive guidance on addressing any barriers that result from this practice.

### The Community's response

The school was soon pushed to find a solution as a matter of urgency when parents made petitions. The principal recalls why and how the pressure mounted:

*When all schools were being opened to all races and those who could afford were taking their children to former White, Coloured and Indian schools, those parents whose children remained here started to put pressure on us to do something about the learners' level of English. I cannot remember how many parents knocked on my door wanting to know why their children were not becoming fluent in English. So we were under pressure to find ways to address this problem* (Ms Sunnyside, principal).

The demand for English proficiency in African children emanates from "perception and reality of English as language of power" (Hornberger & Vaish, 2009). In response to mounting parental pressure, this primary school started looking for help.

### The school's response

The school's first line of response to the challenge of poor learner participation was to consult the District Office (Department of Education) for assistance.

*We reported this challenge to subject advisors but they did not know what to do. Some told us to speak slowly and others suggested code switching.* (Ms Mthiyane)

The expectation was that the school should find ways to develop learner-centred lessons and create learning environments that are inclusive and which promote learner participation but there was no staff development to guide teachers or to give them necessary skills. In an attempt to create a welcoming learning environment and to reduce the negative impact of learning in an unfamiliar language, Zungu teachers heeded the suggestion of the officials and tried code switching as a strategy to improve mastery of the LoLT.

*We tried code switching to help improve learner participation and it helped (or so we thought). But when they wrote tests and examinations, they did not have adequate vocabulary to answer adequately, so we realized that they were not making real progress. (Ms Sibiya, teacher)*

Exactly what transpired in the classrooms we do not know but it is obvious that the effectiveness of code switching was limited to class discussions (BICS) but fell short in improving learners' CALP (Clarence-Fincham, 2000). As a result, learner performance in their academic tasks did not improve. Effectively, code switching was a short-term solution to a lasting problem; therefore, the school had to find something more effective and sustainable.

Literature differentiates between code switching and code mixing, the former referring to alternating languages over phrases and sentences whilst the latter involves switching individual words from one language to another as it often happens during early language acquisition (du Plessis & Louw, 2008, p. 55). They add that code switching has potential in the classroom if the participants have a certain level of language competence. This explains why this strategy was not effective at this school: the children were not at the level of competence where they could benefit from code-switching. It is also clear that the teachers did not have adequate understanding of how to utilize this strategy effectively.

When code-switching failed to deliver, a private high school which had developed an English acceleration program was approached. In 1991, the St Mary's Interactive Learning Experience (S.M.I.L.E.) materials were introduced at this school. S.M.I.L.E. sessions take place every Tuesday after school from 14.00 to 16.00. The teacher on duty explained the routine:

*We prepare the learner facilitators during break time before the afternoon session so that they all know what to do and how. Each learner facilitator works with six learners to ensure individual attention. (Ms Mthiyane)*

Each session has four activities, namely, poetry, drawing, puzzles and role-play. The materials are purchased from S.M.I.L.E. in the form of workbooks and teachers manual.

*The afternoon sessions focus on oral skills and during class time English teachers synthesize oral and writing skills. By the end of the year, the grade five learners have adequate grounding in English to participate in the learning process. Some make so much progress that they are capable of filling in for the SMILE Guys and Gals (learner facilitators) by the time they reach Grade 7 (Ms Mthiyane).*

Each year the parents of Grade 4 and Grade 5 learners purchase the workbooks that are used. These workbooks cover oral skills, writing, reading, and listening. The materials are of an interactive nature and are accompanied by a teacher's manual on how to reinforce skills learnt/ taught during SMILES afternoon sessions. Teachers believe that the benefits of using these materials make this school 'a school of choice' in this community.

*Our learners gain a lot of confidence in the use of English. New parents always report that they have chosen this school because they want their children to learn English. As a result we do not have any problems getting them to pay for the workbook (Ms Sunnyside, principal).*

The availability of high school learners is appreciated because learners are more at ease when dealing with other learners. There are four facilitators to every 24 learners, each dealing with a different activity of the 'lesson'. The S.M.I.L.E. Guys and Gals (as they are called) take their task very seriously. They guide, encourage and assist their "charges" to complete the set tasks.

*In the allocated time of two hours the learners get to work with all four learner facilitators (**covering four activities**). If they (learner facilitators) get stuck, they always have the support of the educators in charge (Mrs Sibiya).*

All the Zungu teachers have received training in the use of S.M.I.L.E. materials but only six act as facilitators. The principal believes that the program has reached a sustainable phase.

*Any teacher can run with the program because they were all trained. All new members of staff go through SMILE training. Even our Grade 7s sometimes help out if the high school facilitators are unable to come (Mrs Sunnyside, head teacher).*

At the time of data collection, the S.M.I.L.E. partnership was between Zungu and Ndongeni High School as the S.M.I.L.E. concept encourages local schools to collaborate. Most learners from Zungu move on to this high school after Grade 7, which means that both schools stand to benefit from this S.M.I.L.E. partnership.



*When this program was adopted, we approached Ndongeni and their English teachers seemed excited about it. They agreed to prepare the high school learners for their “classes” as they realized that it would benefit them (English teachers) when our learners move on to high school. Unfortunately, their excitement did not last for long. (Ms Mthiyane, teacher).*

Although the partnership did not work at the teachers' level, Ndongeni learners are still committed to, and enthusiastic about, facilitating S.M.I.L.E. sessions.

*The learners are more than willing. Most of those we use are past pupils of this school who have benefited from this program. We only have a problem when the high school is writing exams, but the learner facilitators always inform us about exams or tests and we make alternative arrangements. (Mrs Sibiya, teacher).*

There is no material benefit for the high school learners; instead they have to give up one break and one afternoon every week except when they are writing examinations. We concluded that their continued involvement and commitment to this program could be because they are products of this system (ex-learners of Zungu) and they probably realize the value of the program in their own development and want to plough back.

## Conclusion

What emerges from the findings is that the success of this program depends on the consolidation that takes place in class in between S.M.I.L.E. sessions. This works because all teachers at this school have been trained and know how to reinforce whatever skills are taught in these sessions. Our observations of S.M.I.L.E. sessions showed that the children's L1 is not discredited, and we hope the same applies in formal lessons as this is in line with the principles of inclusive education. The next phase when we do classroom observations will show if this is so or not.

The use of older learners to teach younger ones seems to have a positive impact on the latter's development of receptive and expressive language which has been termed the Communicative Language Teaching approach. Learners at Zungu primary school are fortunate that their teachers share their cultural and language knowledge as this allows them (teachers) to use L1 as back-up when learners' knowledge of the LoLT fails. That way, the learners' L1 is not lost in pursuit of a new language, instead, the school and classroom culture cultivates the development of additive bilingualism.

The fact that high school teachers have not been trained in the use and value of SMILE may have contributed to their loss of interest in the whole program. For effective participation by both schools, it will be helpful if all participants receive the same training. That way, all the teachers will have the same understanding and appreciation of the intended outcomes.

The demand for English as a LoLT does not take into account teachers' competence to teach in English which is critical in the development of learners' proficiency in the LoLT. (The study did not investigate teachers' competence in English). On a positive side, it highlights the value of parental involvement in improving the quality of learners' learning experiences. Although parents do not attend school, their influence can be sensed and it is clear that they are a critical part of any school/classroom. When parents and schools work together, children tend to benefit academically as well as in other ways. The school's response acknowledges parents as partners in the education of their children and displays an understanding of learning as a social activity as evident in the value placed in peer tutoring.

EWP6 has not been enacted yet; therefore, schools are officially not expected to be practicing inclusive education unless they are part of a pilot. In terms of Zungu's responsiveness to learning needs, as evident in its concerns with maximizing learner participation in the cultures and curricula of their schools, it is undoubtedly ahead of the inclusive education reforms. The school could have asked the English language teachers to address the problem but instead, the whole school took responsibility to find a solution. This suggests that Zungu Primary is a learning school.

The next phase of this study will explore present and past learners' perceptions of the value of the S.M.I.L.E. program in supporting them learn and the final phase will be the evaluation of the SMILE materials.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the principal and staff of Zungu Primary School for their willingness to share with us their journey in learning.

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