



CHAPTER 4

Exploring the influence of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners: Teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

This chapter explores the perspectives of teachers from inclusive schools regarding the effect of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners. Vygotsky's social constructivism theory, which guides this study, emphasises that learning does not solely occur within the individual but in social interactions with other people as well. The study employed a qualitative research methodology to enable 15 teachers from inclusive schools to express the effects of diversity in language on learners' performance. These teachers were purposely selected from three inclusive schools in Ngaka Modiri Molema Education District in the North-West Province, South Africa. The interpretive paradigm was

CHAPTER 4

used as a lens of the study. Data were generated through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the researchers suggested pseudonyms for the participants. The study used thematic content analysis to identify the themes. The findings indicate that teachers do not have the translation expertise to accommodate learners in diverse classrooms, and learners fail to comprehend and understand the mode of instruction. Therefore the recommendation is that code-switching by teachers should be formalised. In addition, the Department of Basic Education should consider availing translation services in schools and continuously train teachers to embrace linguistic diversity.

Keywords: *Academic performance, Diversity, Linguistic diversity, Inclusive education, Full-service schools*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the perspectives of South African teachers from inclusive schools regarding the effects of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners. South Africa is a multilingual society owing to the migration of people from different countries and from one province to another in search of social and economic opportunities. The South African language policy that was enacted in 1994 gave official prominence to 11 languages, including English, Afrikaans, and nine Bantu languages (Posel & Zeller, 2016). The South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996 stipulates: “All official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equally” (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In addition, section 29 (2) of the Bill of Rights stipulates: “Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or

languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable.” (Republic of South Africa, 1996.) In South Africa, the use of the 11 official languages is captured in the Constitution as a way of “Recognising the historically diminished use and status of indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate and advance the use of these languages.” (Republic of South Africa, 1996.) However, only English and Afrikaans are the official languages of instruction in schools, while African languages are marginalised as languages of instruction (Brenzinger, 2017; Mkhize & Balfour, 2017; Posel & Zeller, 2016). Moreso, even if these words were translated into policy by the Department of Education and the Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology, it has proven challenging to implement multilingual educational policies (Brenzinger, 2017; Mutasa, 2015). Bilchitz, Glaser, Konstant, Du Toit, Moshikaro & Mere (2016) also argued that “While the recognition of 11 official languages may be seen to be part of the compromises made to bring everyone together, in effect, English has become the lingua franca There are concrete claims that can be made for the other official languages, but *de facto* the state has essentially focused on the one common language, English.... full recognition of such a large number of official languages might be impractical.” As a result, the education system in South Africa officially recognises the use of the mother tongue in the Foundation Phase from Grades R to 3, but as learners transition to Grade 4, they receive instruction in English or Afrikaans. Hence this study seeks to explore the perspectives of teachers from inclusive schools regarding the effect of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners.

4.2 Problem Statement

Linguistic diversity is a cause for concern in schools across the globe. Linguistic diversity results from worldwide migration where families bring children of school-going age who should be accommodated in the receiving schools. This poses challenges for teachers who are confronted with learners from different linguistic backgrounds. These teachers are required to create linguistically responsive classrooms. The challenge lies in teachers striving to accommodate all learners and assessing these learners in their language. The language of teaching and learning (LOLT) binds teachers and often teaches toward stakes tests (Vetter & Fairbanks, 2014). In such cases, linguistic diversity is overlooked. Teachers still apply monolingual policies (Pulinx, Avermaet & Afirdag, 2017), which create problems in learners' academic achievement since learners do not understand the LOLT. In South Africa, the language policy is also silent about linguistic diversity.

4.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

4.3.1 Research aim

The current study explores the perspectives of teachers on the effects of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners in inclusive classrooms.

4.3.2 Research questions

- How do teachers perceive the effects of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners in an inclusive classroom?

- How do teachers respond to linguistic diversity in the classrooms?
- How does linguistic diversity affect learners' academic performance in linguistically diverse classrooms?

4.4 Literature review

4.4.1 Linguistic Diversity in inclusive schools

Linguistic diversity currently is a worldwide phenomenon (Nyanga, 2013). It is a reality and continues to be a reality in many schools, where learners bring with them a rich background of multiple languages (Chetty, 2018). Norris (2019) is of the view that an inclusive learning environment does not have participation or access barriers. However, language proves to remain a barrier. Teachers are vital in ensuring an inclusive teaching and learning environment (Norris, 2019) where all learners feel welcome and appreciated. Linguistic diversity contributes to some challenges within the education fraternity, notably in curriculum development, teaching materials, assessments, and lesson delivery (Gorter & Cenoz, 2017).

Language is critical in education, especially in the teaching and learning processes, since it enables educational messages by teachers to be conveyed to learners and vice versa (Possi & Milinga, 2017). As a meaning-making device, language is necessary for learners to confirm the accumulation of knowledge and to make the cognitive thought processes available to the teacher who is responsible for lesson delivery and assessment (Reierstam & Hellstén, 2021). The South African Schools Act 84

CHAPTER 4

of 1996 regulates the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) during lesson delivery within South African classrooms. However, the South African education system recognises the mother tongue as a LOLT from Grades R to 3 only. This suggests that all school subjects except languages are delivered in either English or Afrikaans from Grade 4, based on the school's decision regarding LOLT. In most schools, English is used as the LOLT; therefore lesson delivery is facilitated in English and assessments are also required to be crafted and written in English. UNESCO (2016) posits that learners should ideally be taught in a language they know and can comprehend. Yet, as much as 40% of the global population is not taught using the language they know and can understand (UNESCO,2016).

4.4.2 The effects of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners

Globally, sub-Saharan Africa and Asian regions have a high prevalence rate of linguistic diversity (UNESCO, 2016). However, teachers in the regions mentioned above are often compelled to offer lessons in English, which is not the first language of learners and teachers who are residing in townships. Thus, lesson delivery can be challenging, especially when teaching learners who are unfamiliar with the LOLT (Mthiyane, 2016). Save the Children (2009) observes that education failure for many children in inclusive schools results from a language the children are not familiar with in lesson delivery. Owen-Smith (2012) maintains that the inability to use one's home language at school is believed to hamper a learner's capability of performing to the best of his or her ability which eventually results in underperformance. The

South African multilingual policies were mainly considered to endorse the use of African languages in schools and to eventually assist in improving learner performances. However, most South African schools still use English as the LOLT. Ball (2010) points out that the LOLT accounted for more than 50% of the dropout rate in 26 countries among learners who are not first-language speakers of LOLT. Mosha (2014) reported that if the learner experiences challenges regarding the LOLT, there is a risk of learning hindrances. This suggests that there may be ineffective communication between the teacher and the learner. Thus the learning hindrances may eventually affect the academic performance of the learner.

4.4.3 Teaching strategies used in linguistically diverse classrooms

To teach content competently in an inclusive learning environment and a multilingual classroom, every teacher should make an effort to ascertain that the learning activity is beneficial for all learners. Being a teacher in a diverse classroom should imply that the teacher understands the critical role played by language in the learning process. Teachers who respond to linguistic diversity view learners' multilingualism as a valuable source that can be used to promote learners' abilities in learning and assessments within inclusive classrooms (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). García and Hesson (2015) believe that practices that are monolingual within the classrooms contribute to substandard academic performance, unlike where multiculturalism is viewed as a key source in the learning activity. Facilitating a lesson without considering the learner's home language knowledge can reduce the learning

CHAPTER 4

outcomes and learners' opportunities to learn during lesson delivery (Alisaari, Heikkola, Commins & Acquah, 2019).

However, it is imperative to note that it is impractical for teachers to teach 11 different languages in the classroom. The above view is congruent with section 29(2) of the Constitution, which indicates that "every learner has the right to receive a basic education in the language of his or her choice, where this is reasonably practicable" (Republic of South Africa, Constitution Act 108 of 1996). Using learners' first language in the lesson delivery enhances the use of interactive and effective teaching methods (Save the Children, 2009), which are led by learners themselves (Nyaga, 2013), and do allow learners to comprehend the subject matter better. This may eventually lead to better academic achievement during assessments. Reierstam and Hellstén (2021) argue that assessment is the most critical facet in the learning process since the assessment outputs influence further opportunities in the learners' lives and future careers, and may also increase students' enthusiasm to do better. In a study conducted in Kenya, teachers responded to linguistic diversity by using code-switching, translating, and interpreting during their lesson delivery (Nyaga, 2013). One study conducted in South Africa reported that teachers used code-switching and transliteration to accommodate learners in the teaching of Life Sciences subjects (Motloun, Mavuru & McNaught, 2021).

Teaching by using numerous languages might be unrealistic for teachers inside the classroom. However, teachers can use the pedagogy that embraces classroom differences and uniqueness as a way of creating a learning environment that conforms to principles of inclusivity. This can be done by using the different

frames of reference, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse learners to make learning activities more relevant and effective (Gay, 2015). Teachers who do not make an effort to comply with inclusive teaching and learning often label learners on their lack of potential. Learners who experience language barriers are occasionally perceived by teachers as lacking potential in their intellectual capacities (Chetty, 2018). Unfortunately, these perceptions may negatively impact these learners' academic performance and achievements. As a result, such learners that are being labelled may fail to make progress in their academics and may develop low self-esteem, which may lead to dropping out of school or encourage them to be absent from school for more extended periods (Gay, 2015).

4.4.4 Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory

Vygotsky (1978) is of the view that cognitive development results from internalising the language. In his theory of sociocultural theory, language is viewed as a critical aspect of cognitive development because he firmly believes that language aids communication in social interactions. He further proposes that through social interactions and guided learning within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the cognitive development of children develops as they co-construct knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) supposes that the ZPD is an important construct in his theory that relates to the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve with the help and guidance of the teacher. Putting this theory into practice, it is suggested that to successfully teach a learner, the teacher must be in a position to identify the knowledge accumulation gap of the

CHAPTER 4

learner so that he or she can know when to intervene. Therefore, it may be beneficial for the teacher to know the learners' first language so that teaching and learning can take place effectively. To achieve this, a teacher should be skilled in mediating and scaffolding as a capable helper in the learning process (Kurt, 2020).

Vygotsky(1978) further maintained that language is a crucial point and basis of learning. He also claimed that language makes logic, reasoning, and reflective thinking possible. Therefore, in the classroom context, teachers are regarded as key facilitators of learning. The teacher's role is to facilitate learning in the educational context, and he or she may act as a mediator in learning in case the learners find themselves in the ZPD. Hence it may be beneficial for teachers to attempt to use various language mediation techniques in their daily teaching to the benefit of the learners.

4.5 Methodology

Since qualitative research is a field that cuts across study fields (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), this chapter adopted a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of teachers on the influence of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners in primary schools. In qualitative research, the main interest is the lived experiences of people under real-world conditions (Yin, 2016); hence this study was interested in lived experiences of primary school teachers who teach in linguistically diverse classrooms. The interpretive paradigm was used for this study as a lens that views reality as subjective (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Stakes (2020) argues that with Interpretivism observers define and redefine what they see and what they hear.

The researchers chose interpretivism to explore the teachers' perceptions of the influence of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners in inclusive schools. The critical case sampling procedure involves selecting important cases likely to yield the most information (Silverman, 2009). Critical case sampling was applied to select 15 primary school teachers teaching in linguistically diverse inclusive classrooms in the North-West Province. Data were generated through individual face-to-face interviews on their perceptions of the influence of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners. Strydom (2011) argues that during data analysis, the data collected would be reduced by selecting and identifying patterns and producing findings. The data collected using semi-structured interviews with the 15 primary school teachers were analysed through thematic data analysis using the following steps: data transcription, data organisation, data segmentation, data coding, and identifying the underlying themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Yin, 2016). The themes that emerged on teachers' perceptions of the effects of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners in inclusive schools are discussed in the findings section.

4.5.1 Trustworthiness

Maree (2016) explains that assessing trustworthiness is the criterion of data analysis, findings, and conclusions. The chapter used four criteria of trustworthiness which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to explore the perspectives of teachers regarding the effect of linguistic diversity

CHAPTER 4

on the academic performance of learners. The study adopted a qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm to ensure credibility. The study also used Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory as its theoretical framework – a theory aligned with the research questions. The participants were further requested to verify the data gathered through interviews. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that transferability can be achieved by means of a peer review or debriefing the data. This current chapter benefited immensely from colleagues whose research interests are in multiculturalism. To ensure the dependability of this chapter, the researchers recorded and analysed the collected data. Lastly, the researchers kept records of the raw data from the individual interviews to ensure confirmability.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained. The researcher explained the nature of the study to the principals and school governing bodies, and the teachers provided a brief explanation of the study and indicated that the participants' rights to anonymity would be respected. Silverman (2021) emphasises that ethics is of paramount importance as it assists the researcher in protecting the self-esteem and well-being of the research participants and the public. To protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of the participants, the researchers considered the following ethical standards: permission, anonymity, confidentiality, and protection from harm. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity by assigning pseudonyms. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the research study at any time without negative consequences.

4.7 Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study concerning teachers' perceptions of the effects of linguistic diversity on the performance of learners academically within an inclusive school environment. During the analysis of data, four themes emerged after extensive interrogation of the data. The emerging themes include teachers' perceptions of linguistic diversity, instructional and assessment strategies used in LD classrooms, effects of linguistic diversity on academic performance, and strategies to enhance academic performance in LD classrooms. In reporting the findings, pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants.

4.7.1 Teachers' perceptions of linguistic diversity

Participants indicated that learners from linguistically diverse backgrounds are less familiar with English as the LOLT than learners who speak English as their first language. The following excerpt indicates the participants' views:

Most of the learners come from diverse backgrounds, and somehow understanding becomes very difficult because they are not familiar with English as it is not their mother tongue. – Lerato

In my class alone we have seven different languages spoken at home. This will affect teaching and learning because the learners interpret information differently and sometimes do not understand the instructions given by the teacher. – Tshepo

We feel that learners are failing because of using English as a language for teaching and learning. – Kenso

From the above, it is clear that teachers are showing concern regarding the use of English as the LOLT, as learners perform poorly because they are not English first-speakers. The participants' concern resonates with Save the Children (2009) and Mthiyane (2016), who confirmed that the academic performance of learners is inferior in inclusive schools as a result of using the language they are not acquainted with during lesson delivery.

4.8 Instructional and assessment strategies used in Linguistically Diverse classrooms

Participants narrated that they use English as the LOLT during the lesson delivery. They also confirmed that they provide oral translations even though this does not accommodate all language learners who speak in the classroom. The following excerpt indicates the participant's views:

When teaching linguistically diverse learners, I try to accommodate my learners by developing English language proficiency with strategies, such as providing the oral translation of tasks, even if it does not always address the diverse profile of all linguistically diverse learners in our school. – Phakamani

Two participants mentioned that they apply a variety of teaching strategies in their linguistically diverse classroom to accommodate the needs of learners that are diverse. The excerpts below indicate the participants' views:

I include multiple languages in the classroom... I make them feel welcome by selecting literature that uses several languages... I use pictures and audio footage to enhance learning – Zoleka

I make sure that I use pictures with words, and I allow them to do incidental readings. And I sometimes use code-switching for them to understand. – Kheitumetse

Other participants further indicated that they are at times compelled to code-switch from English to Setswana, which creates confusion for the learners who have been exposed to being taught in their home language from Grade R to 3. This results in learners performing poorly because they struggle to comprehend the content taught. The following excerpt indicates the participant's views:

I teach in a multilingual classroom... So I have to code-switch for learners to understand. – Dumisani.

Teachers confirmed that they use a variety of teaching strategies, such as pictures with words, oral translations, code-switching, and audio footage in diverse classrooms. The results resonate with Reierstam and Hellstén (2021), who affirm that learners use their home language during thought processes. Motloun, Mavuru, and McNaught (2021) also confirmed that transliteration and code-switching are effective teaching strategies in linguistically diverse classrooms. However, not all teachers apply these methods during lesson instruction.

4.9 Effects of linguistic diversity on academic performance

Most participants mentioned that students whose first language is not English perform poorly during formative and summative assessments. The poor performance stems from a lack of connection with the content taught in English. The following excerpts indicate the participants' views:

The performance of the learners is determined by how well they understand the medium of instruction. If the medium is English, and it is their second or third language, you find that their performance is weaker than learners who understand the medium of instruction. – Tshepo

A learner from a different language background poorly performs as it is not easy to comprehend a language that is not their mother tongue. – Boitumelo

In addition, other participants mentioned that learners lack confidence when participating in class during tasks. The lack of confidence affects their academic performance since they cannot express themselves fully in English. The following excerpts indicate the participants' views:

Learners from the same language group can interact well, however, learners from different language backgrounds find it difficult to connect in class... They often can't express themselves to a certain point. – Dumisani

Learners do not feel comfortable in the classroom and are afraid of expressing themselves... This affects their academic performance. – Kheitungetse

Moreover, other participants echoed that learners encounter communication challenges in class and become distressed, which may result in poor academic performance. The following excerpt indicates the participant's views:

Learners show frustration associated with the inability to communicate... As a result, they do not do well in class activities and tests. – Thabang

However, some participants confirmed that learners who are English first speakers perform well in academics since they understand the language of instruction. The following excerpts indicate the participants' views:

Learners who speak English at home perform very well. – Thandeka

Learners using their home language at school perform much better compared to others whose home language is not used at school. – Zoleka

From the above findings, it can be deduced that learners' performance is greatly affected by a lack of confidence in using English as LOLT, which frustrates them. These findings resonate with UNESCO (2016), which reported that 40% of learners globally experience barriers to learning because they are offered lessons and write assessments using LOLT which is not their home language. The findings also concur with Mosha (2014), who mentioned that linguistic challenges result in learning barriers. In addition, the lack of confidence displayed by learners supports Gay's (2015) views that the inability of learners to communicate using LOLT could result in low self-esteem, causing learners to

CHAPTER 4

drop out of school or encourage them to be absent from school for more extended periods.

4.10 Strategies to enhance academic performance in Linguistically Diverse classrooms

Participants mentioned that teachers could use different teaching methods, such as cooperative learning to enhance class participation and improve the academic performance of learners. The following excerpts indicate the participants' views:

I make sure that all learners are involved in group activities and they are also given a chance to participate. – Siphiwe

Learners of different languages sit at one desk so that they can both learn from each other. – Tari

Other participants mentioned that the curriculum should be adjusted to accommodate linguistically diverse learners, as highlighted below:

The policy on linguistic diversity can be amended; it can be suggested that all learners in schools be taught in their mother tongue... Formal and informal tasks can be written in the learners' language of choice. – Tinotenda

Teachers should acknowledge the use of additional language resources that will not only keep the learners challenged in the classroom but will also allow them to participate in class activities. – Phakamani

Consequently, other participants indicated the importance of involving different stakeholders to enhance academic

performance in linguistically diverse classrooms. The following excerpt indicates the participant's views:

All stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and the community, need to play their role in assisting the linguistically diverse learners. – Tshepo

From the above findings, the teachers recommend using interactive instructional methods, such as cooperative learning and group activities in linguistically diverse classrooms. The teachers further recommend curriculum amendment and the use of additional language resources. These findings resonate with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory that emphasises the role of the teacher as the mediator and facilitator of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, collaboration among stakeholders aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, which advocates for support from the parents, peers, and teachers in the learner's development.

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the perspectives of teachers from inclusive schools regarding the effects of linguistic diversity on the academic performance of learners. The findings indicate that teachers experience challenges in accommodating linguistically diverse learners as they are required to conform to LOLT, which is mostly English. The teachers confirm that even if they were to use code-switching, it is not systematic and does not accommodate the diverse needs of all learners. As much as teachers try to use multiple pedagogies, they believe they cannot fully meet the needs of all learners. Furthermore, it was found that learners from diverse language backgrounds find it difficult to connect to the

CHAPTER 4

content delivered in English, which affects their performance negatively. Hence it is recommended that continuous in-service workshops on learner diversity be conducted.

Moreover, various stakeholders, including the Department of Education, schools, and parents, should consider agreeing on using the mother tongue during instruction and assessments in linguistically diverse classrooms to allow learners to express themselves fully, as this can improve learners' performance. In addition to this, the Department of Basic Education should consider making translation services available in schools. However, generalisation of the findings is discouraged since this qualitative study was undertaken at selected primary schools in the North-West province. It is also suggested that further research be conducted with a focus on the possibility of developing curricula in African languages for primary schools starting from Grade R through to Grade 7.

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Chapter 4

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Chapter 5

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