

## **The Disjuncture between Pedagogy and Practice of Mother Tongue Teaching in Early Childhood Development**

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**Abstract:** South Africans are entitled to education in the language of their choice, provided it is reasonably practicable. However, a number of South African learners are deprived of this right by lack of capacity from schools and educators as well as failure to implement policy by the officials. Mother tongue is of special significance to teachers in that their ideas are communicated to learners through the medium of language. Communication in the classroom is based on the meanings of thousands of words exchanged between teachers and learners and unless the teacher and the student understand each other, communication will be fruitless. However, it seems the majority of South African Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners who are qualified to teach in early childhood programmes have not been trained to teach in mother-tongue. This study is qualitative in nature and is embedded in social constructivism. Language is socially constructed and social constructivism is about social construction of meaning and is founded on Vygotsky's theory. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from ECD centres in the Lejweleputswa District of the Free State with a sample of 10 female of ECD practitioners with an average age of 30 and a teaching experience of 10 years. Five parents of these ECD learners also gave their opinion about mother tongue teaching. Data was analysed using multiple interpretations as advocated for by Gibbs. The purpose of this study was to come up with suggestions that will strengthen the use of mother tongue instruction in South African, so that, learners can benefit more from the education system. The findings of this study revealed that the majority of ECD practitioners are in favour mother-tongue teaching. However, lack of resources was a barrier. The other factor that came forward was that the majority of parents were in favour of English as a medium of instruction because of the perception that a learner who was fluent in English was in fact learned.

**Key words:** Disjuncture, mother-tongue, foundation phase, learning, pedagogy, parents

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In South Africa, the Department of Education's Language in Education Policy is based on the principle of the right of children to be educated in their mother tongue whilst having access to a global language such as English. Furthermore, the policy to make available mother tongue education for grades 1-6 opposes the popular notion amongst teachers and parents that English is the key to a better life and the sooner children are taught in English the better. Putting mother into perspective (Moyo, 2009) defines it as the first language that a child acquires and uses at home before attending school. Cook (2013) showed that mother tongue teaching is a sore point with South Africans, teachers and officials with two points of view prevailing. One camp believes that the key to resolving South Africa's education crisis is to radically improve education and training for teachers, specifically

language teachers whether they teach Afrikaans an indigenous South African language or English (Gibbs, 2008).

The second camp according to Melissa shares this view but also believes that African-language speaking children have to drop their mother tongue or home language too soon and learn in a language they do not understand. They therefore, struggle to learn concepts how to read and write and to learn English.

Since, South Africa is a multi-lingual society that has some unique linguistic problems because of its policy of apartheid there are tensions between its two official language groups, Afrikaans and English. On the other hand, there are linguistic tensions between the ethnic Europeans and the black majority, mostly in regard to language instruction in schools. This issue was the spark that ignited the tragic Soweto riots in 1976.

According to S. 29(2) of the Constitution Act 108 (Anonymous, 1996) South Africans are entitled to education in the language of their choice, provided it is reasonably practicable. However, a number of South African learners are deprived of this right by an apparent lack of capacity from schools and educators as well as their perceived failure to implement policy.

According to Anonymous (2012), Afri Forum Youth is campaigning for the promotion of multilingualism and mother tongue education in South Africa. They further state that, according to the South African Constitution, South Africa has 11 official languages and in reality only one of these languages is often implemented at the expense of the others.

This study was motivated by the emergence of the language hegemony that has become prevalent in South Africa where English is perceived to be the ultimate academic language. The researcher were compelled to undertake this study because of the on-going debates about the merits of mother-tongue instruction. Some educators argue that only those countries where the student's first language is the language of instruction are likely to achieve the goals of education for all (Benson and Kosonen, 2013; Yiakoumetti, 2012).

**Theoretical framework:** This study is qualitative in nature and is embedded in social constructivism. Language is socially constructed and is viewed as an experiential activity.

Bhushan also picks up a dangerous side-effect of banishing L1 from the English classroom which is the implication that somehow the learner's mother tongue is inferior or doesn't count, thus, discriminating against the learner's linguistic identity.

The theoretical framework for this study was drawn from the research theorists who write from a social constructivist perspective in particular, Lev Vygotsky and Albert Bandura.

Lev Vygotsky a Russian teacher and psychologist, first stated that people learn through their interactions and communications with others. Vygotsky examined how people's social environments influenced the learning process. He suggested that learning takes place through the interactions that students have with their peers, teachers and other experts. This study is qualitative in nature and is embedded in social constructivism. Language is socially constructed and is viewed as an experiential activity. Vygotsky argued that culture was the primary determining factor for knowledge construction. People learn through this cultural lens by interacting with

others and following the rules, skills and abilities shaped by their culture. Language is therefore, a useful tool for the transfer of culture.

As the study surfaces on two variables pedagogy and practice, the focus also, shifts to Albert Bandura's self-efficacy to marry the two self-efficacy is a model that has been adopted to enable positivity in psychology. It is an optimistic self-belief in our competence or chances of successfully accomplishing a task and producing a favourable outcome. This theory assists in responding to the questions that have always been there, since, the inception of the theory. How does a teacher's sense of efficacy affect their teaching can it, through its impact on teaching, affect student achievement gives a summary of Anita Woolfolk who is a longtime researcher on the subject of teacher efficacy, summarises practical implications of her findings.

Teachers who set high goals who persist who try another strategy when one approach is found wanting-in other words, teachers who have a high sense of efficacy and act on it-are more likely to have students who learn.

First, personal teaching efficacy, relates to a teacher's own feeling of confidence in regard to teaching abilities. When a teacher feels empowered enough in the language of learning and teaching this on its own aids the teacher to deliver and reach with intend all learners. But if the teacher's self-efficacy leaves much to be desired, the same will be said about the competence. The second, often called general teaching efficacy, "appears to reflect a general belief about the power of teaching to reach difficult children".

**The aim of the study:** The study is aimed at examining the pedagogic practice of foundation phase educators in response to the language policy demands.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Paradigm research:** This study was guided by an interpretive research paradigm that emphasizes on experience and interpretation. Interpretivists believe that reality is not objectively determined but is socially constructed (Husserl, 1965). The interpretative paradigm is concerned with interpreting and understanding human action. The goal of interpretative research is to reach an understanding of some phenomenon that is not yet well understood. Interpretative research assumes that the best way to understand such a phenomenon is by studying it in natural contexts such as classrooms. The underlying

assumption is that by placing people in social contexts there is greater opportunity to understand the perceptions they have of their own activities (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). The aim is to provide a rich description of the phenomenon and if possible to develop some explanation for it (Ellis, 1993). This perspective places primary emphasis on the process of understanding (Wessels, 2011).

**Data collection instruments:** Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from 10 ECD practitioners located at formal ECD Centres in the Lejweleputswa District of the Free State Province.

**Sampling:** Document analysis was also done in order to corroborate the justification of mother tongue teaching. This involved the analysis of language policy on instruction as well as policy documents outlining the assessment and learning outcomes.

**Ethical clearance:** Ethical clearance was sought from the free state Department of Education. For ethical reasons, none of the participants was referred to by name but only by geographical positioning and the level of operation or implementation. Pseudonyms were also used for the easy identification of participants.

**Data analysis:** Data was analysed both inductively and deductively using the Kantian and Cartesian reasoning. Not all themes in the study were derived from data collected by the use of questionnaires but some themes already existed from the researcher's practice and documents analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). However, a deductive approach was used to analyse data. This approach was preferred because it facilitated the use of a structure or a predetermined framework to analyse data (Burnard *et al.*, 2008). Essentially, we imposed our own structure on the data and then used this structure to analyse data.

Collected data was analysed by looking at what the respondents said in semi-structured interviews and transcribed as a text. What was revealed by document analysis was interpreted in relation to the responses they gave from interviews. Data also indicated the extent to which language as a medium of instruction influenced the pedagogic practice of educators.

Document analysis was used wherein policies, practices and procedures regarding mother tongue instruction in early childhood education were reviewed to determine the extent to which they influence the ECD practitioners, practice. Themes that emerged from data analysis are the following:

- Mother tongue as a preferred language of teaching and learning
- The cost of implementing mother tongue teaching
- The history of mother tongue teaching in South Africa
- The pedagogy of mother tongue in a South African context
- English as a language of choice by parents for teaching and learning purposes

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that the majority of ECD practitioners and parents were in favour of mother-tongue teaching whilst a lack of learning support material was found to be a barrier to mother tongue teaching.

The majority of the educators chose sesotho as their preferred language of instruction as opposed to English. Many educators attested to the fact that most parents found it easier to assist their children with their homework when using their mother-tongue.

Educational change in the 'new' South Africa, since, 1994 has been characterized by progressive policy shifts, particularly in the area of language. The 1996 constitution gives official status to eleven languages and explicitly promotes multilingualism. The policy also states that in the development of the African languages, languages should be viewed as resources rather than problems.

The Language In Education Policy (LIEP) of 1997 develops these tenets for education and has at its heart additive bilingualism approaches to the use of languages for learning and teaching 2. This is a profound and potentially empowering shift when seen in the light of our colonial and apartheid past where only English and Afrikaans speaking children had the privilege of mother tongue education throughout schooling and into tertiary education. This is a very different scenario to that experienced by African language speaking children who were forced into initial learning in mother tongue (for 3 or 4 years) followed by an abrupt switch to English. Teacher A SAID "we always attempt to teach our learners to speak English from grade one" while teacher B said our learners always struggle to understand when we teach them in English because it is new to them.

The use of language understood by learners (mother tongue) has an impact on their cognitive psychology.

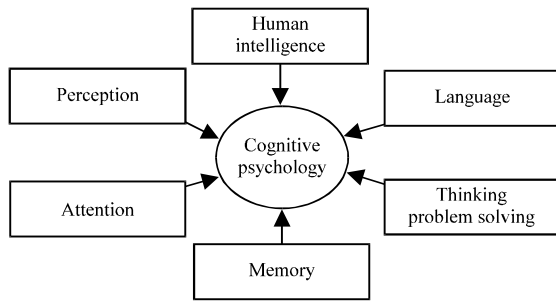


Fig. 1: Cognitive psychology

Their perception of ideas, content understanding and grasp improve. They also develop better in terms of explaining the concepts. Vygotsky attests to this by saying “Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when a child is interacting with people and environment. He refers to a meaningful interaction where a child is able to make sense of what he or she hears and says in the language they understand clearly. Figure 1 shows the benefits of mother tongue teaching in improving cognitive psychology.

As yet these policy shifts remain impressive only as printed words on study. There is little evidence of implementation strategies either at national or local level. The situation we had then and still face now is one where the majority of children are taught in what is in effect a Foreign language by teachers who themselves speak English badly. Poor teacher training and a chronic lack of resources have compounded this. Moreover, as in many other African countries, the ethos in society at large is one that continues to perpetuate the lofty status of the ex-colonial language as the legitimate language of literacy and a ‘culture of reading’ in the African languages is fragile and extremely limited.

Lack of resources also compounded the problem of mother tongue teaching, hence teacher C indicated. Lack of mother tongue content is the main reason for lack mother tongue teaching.

The potential cost of implementing mother-tongue teaching is often cited as a reason for not introducing it policy-makers claim that it is financially impractical in resource-constrained countries. Certainly in some countries where there are many language groups introducing early mother-tongue learning across the board may look economically challenging. But affordable approaches exist and the investment is fully justified by the impact on improving education-which itself offsets the costs.

It has also been noted that insufficient funds initially allocated to multi-lingual education programmes has led to failures. Funds should be identified in advance to support policies. For instance in malawi

insufficient resources were made available for a local language programme which led to an ineffectual roll-out.

## CONCLUSION

Many children in South Africa are learning very little in school, a reality that can be linked to teaching in a language that is Foreign to them and therefore, do not fully understand. It is a practice that leads to limited-or non-existent-learning and acquisition of knowledge and skills, alienating experiences and high drop-out and repetition rates (Mackenzie and Walker, 2012). To improve the quality of education, language policies need to take account of mother-tongue learning. Models of education which ignore the mother tongue in the early year can be unproductive ineffective and have a negative effect on children’s learning. Mother-tongue education-at least in early years-can enable teachers to teach and learners to learn more effectively.

According to the literature explored there are valid reasons to minimize the use of English as a medium of instruction in foundation phase and maximize the use of mother tongue.

It is recommended that ECD practitioners should avoid to insist on keeping English only as the medium to learn English even when students don’t understand what is being said. This may lead to discouragement and frustration of the learners. English shall be used as long as the students understand it well enough to get the message and insist on their using it as long as they can get their message across. Otherwise, allow first language use.

In the same breath, Chetty (2012) posits that teachers are unwilling to embrace new methodologies and the concern is more around credentials as opposed to gaining new knowledge in the increased interest in in-service programmes. Universities too played the neo-liberal game by awarding certificates without adequate re-training of teachers as the concern was more on marketization and massification. It is therefore, not strange that in recent literacy tests in this province it was found that the teacher knowledge was not much higher than learner knowledge in primary schools. The findings of this study are still embargoed through pressure by the teacher unions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the aim of the study which was to examine the pedagogic practice of foundation phase educators in response to the language policy demands this study recommends that all relevant stakeholders should make a more concerted effort towards the implementation of mother tongue teaching in ECD. Since, the history of mother-tongue education in South Africa makes language policy extremely complex and gave rise to baffling

reactions from parents it was incumbent upon teachers to initiate the implementation of language rights in schooling. There is still a widespread suspicion among parents, especially the poor that mother-tongue education will stifle their children's aspirations for a better life. SGBs still choose English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in more than half the schools in South Africa, although, English is the home language of only 7% of the population. Linguists have yet, to convince communities of the benefits of mother-tongue education and crucially, the resources to support it have yet to be developed beyond basic levels of literacy.

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