

PREPARING AFRICAN LANGUAGE STUDENT TEACHERS FOR THE WORKPLACE IN SCHOOLS: A STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

There is considerable agreement that learning to teach African Languages (AL) is optimized when coursework learning is combined with quality practice learning experiences in schools. The importance of role of (AL) in teacher education programmes and in children's learning is of paramount importance. This study focuses on the use of the African Language (AL) as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and its impact on the language development of (AL) student teachers and AL learners. The main aim of this study was to explore the views of a group of student teachers on their practice learning experiences in a 'teaching school' (TS). Against the background of major theories in Home Language (HL) teaching and learning, this topic is contextualized within the South African education system. Through qualitative analysis of a dozen semi-structured interviews, this study identifies the issues that limit the ability of African Language Education (ALE) programmes to prepare student- teachers for teaching in South Africa. Based on the findings, a questionnaire was designed to determine the extent of the impact of student teachers' limited on African Language Proficiency (ALP). A comparison of teacher and learner written errors was made. The findings of the questionnaire responses are presented. Recommendations are made on how student teachers can improve their teaching approaches to ensure quality AL teacher input and AL learner performance. Qualitative questionnaires and (focus group) data were collected, involving all the student teachers in the programme. The responses to the questionnaire were analysed descriptively. The study was conducted at an urban campus of a South African university.

Keywords: *African language, home language, teaching schools, African language proficiency, African language education.*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to identify the issues that affect the ability of African Language Education programmes (ALPs) to prepare students for the workplace in South African schools. The quality of higher education is a significant factor in enhancing the capacity and development of an economy (Kirtley & Choudhury, 2016). The language of learning and teaching (LoLT) remains one of the most controversial issues in South African education. Three-and-a-half centuries of colonialism and apartheid have resulted in a language regime in which the valorisation of Afrikaans and English came at the expense of the indigenous African languages, which have been systematically excluded from the political landscape (Bangbose 2000). This societal exclusion is reflected in their marginalisation in education at both school and teacher development levels. Depriving children from using the Mother Tongue (MT) as their primary learning resource results in cultural alienation, a lack of self-confidence, and under-achievement (Braam & Nijssen, 2004). The precise issues in preparing African Language (AL) students for the workplace, and how to address those issues, are likely to vary according to several factors, including the level of educational development.

Aligning the languages of teacher training with the languages of schooling is nonetheless one of the most self-evident tasks for Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) in South Africa. MTBBE assumes that the schooling system is to be based not on a second or a third language, but on learners' mother tongues (Alexander 2006). At present most African-language speaking children experience a maximum of three years of mother tongue education (MTE), before the (on-paper) transition to English in Grade 4. It is well documented that the use of the Home Language (HL) continues de facto, as the transition to English as LoLT in the fourth year of schooling is premature in most African-language contexts. It is also widely recognised even within government circles that the use of the MT for learning for at least the first six Grades represents an essential, if insufficient, step-in ensuring literacy and numeracy development (Plüddemann et al. 2010).

2. Design

To lay a foundation for the empirical research, the following section reviews three sets of literature. First, four existing studies of African languages in education in South African universities are reviewed. Second, to provide an overview of issues in African languages in education, a well-established series of reviews of empirical research in African languages in education is used, with a particular focus on developing countries. Third, the concept of institutional isomorphism is outlined. The next three sections describe the objectives, research method, discussion, and conclusions respectively.

3. Objectives

The study makes three main objectives. First, it provides a rare examination of the ability of South African universities to prepare students for the workplace. A strength is the canvassing of the views of both faculty and practitioners. Second, not only is it the first study to focus on the important issue of the preparation of students for the workplace in South Africa, but its findings add to the general body of knowledge on African language education there, which previously was based on weak empirical foundations. In doing so, the study also adds to the body of knowledge about African language education in South Africa. Third, to develop a set of recommendations for improving the ability of African Language Education (ALE) in South Africa to prepare students for the workplace. These recommendations are likely to be of potential relevance to other developing countries

4. Research method

Reflecting an orientation towards quantitative research, questionnaires have been a very popular method of collecting empirical data in ALE research. However, they are not suited to accessing actors' views in depth, which is a strength of qualitative techniques such as focus groups, participant observation and interviews. Such data were required to meet the aim and objectives of the present study. For practical reasons, only interviews were feasible. Interviews come in many forms (Benny & Hughes, 1977). A decision was made to interview educators from a range of ALPs, so that the findings would not be driven by the idiosyncrasies of any individual institution. It was also decided to interview practitioners, because students can be viewed as the outputs of ALPs to the workplace, and practitioners' views might differ from those of faculty. Practitioners are exposed to current workplace demands and have experienced the transition from academic study to professional practice, so their views are likely to possess validity. Twelve interviewees (seven educators, from two different state universities, and two practitioners) participated in the study. The interviewees were assured of data confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting of findings. The research approach was approved by the relevant university ethics committee. The aim of the study and a broad understanding of the African language education literature in mind, guidance for question themes was derived through a reading of Bui and Porter (2010), which is an interview-based study focused on the gap between the competences employers expect and perceive African language graduates to possess. Reference was also made to three studies that use interviews and draw on institutional theory (Gonzalez et al., 2009; González & Hassall, 2009; Hassall et al., 2005).

5. Discussion / Conclusions

The teachers and their contribution to the development of our students; depend on a teaching school to fulfil multiple roles. In addition to their teaching role, they also have to take up the role of school-based teacher educator, dealing not only with the complexity of working with and managing groups of students, but also collaborating with the university-based teacher educators (Gravett, 2012). Ideally, such teachers should be purposefully selected to ensure that they have the potential to fulfil these multiple roles. However, as a public school, the teachers are appointed by the School Governing Body (SGB), and they do not necessarily have the profile that fits the requirements. Not only do these teachers require a more specialised knowledge of their subjects and of teaching methods, but also of how to mentor students. Feiman-Nemser and Buchman (1985) profoundly make the point that if classrooms are to become settings for learning to teach that go beyond adaptation and unreflective imitation, purposes of learning to teach cannot automatically be subordinated to the goal of pupil learning. Teachers also must see themselves as teacher educators willing to plan for the learning of a novice. A teacher's experience as teacher alone is not sufficient. Regarding the coursework planning and structuring suitable tasks for students, the interweaving of practical knowledge situated in the school with knowledge of ideas in the coursework requires careful planning and familiarity with the curriculum followed in the school. It also necessitates close collaboration between school staff and university staff (Gravett, 2012). These pre-requisites present challenges that are

not insurmountable, but they still place an additional burden on staff at the school and university. We have also learned that student observations need to be planned and structured carefully beforehand and that students need to be prepared well for observation.

Synergy in curriculum change conversations; Looking to Africa: Stuck in a dilemma of change; and Re-humanising education and the curriculum: Making better human beings for a better society. All participants were allocated pseudonyms to protect their identity and to comply with research ethics. Le Grange (2016) asserts that decolonising the curriculum is not an occurrence but a complex process of productively moving forward, being unable to turn back the clock, and beginning with a clean slate to challenge dominant ideologies and knowledge systems. Therefore, curriculum should include integrated histories that are “conducive to a reconstructed curriculum, that incorporates reality as perceived from different cultural historical moments” so that learning becomes a meaningful experience (Shizha, 2013:15).

. In South Africa, academics in this position are still in the minority and so it will take time for decolonisation to take place within higher education (Maserumule, 2015). Heleta (2016) elucidates the opposition to be within the institutional structures who hold on to power, influence, and decision-making, and will do anything in their power to resist change and to maintain the status quo. In responding to decolonisation as a process of curriculum change, some participants called for the process of decolonising the curriculum to commence with an abrupt departure from the status quo that interrogates and removes colonial and apartheid knowledge systems, and with holding institutions which perpetuate colonial thoughts and ideals accountable.

This paper attempted to situate the curriculum decision-makers within the context of teacher education curriculum development for the purpose of understanding their thinking regarding the curriculum and what it means for reengineering the curriculum considering the current debates surrounding decolonisation.

In South African education, many changes have taken place over the past 28 years of democracy. (Grosser & De Waal (2008); Swart & Oswald (2008) postulate that in particular, the introduction of the outcomes based curriculum demanded that changes be made in teacher development with regard to pedagogy, teacher identities and roles to facilitate effective implementation in schools. Ongoing efforts are being made to induct teachers into the New Curriculum Statement (NCS), but the training does not focus on teachers’ epistemological and pedagogical development in terms of conceptual knowledge, creative thinking and innovativeness.

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