

STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTION ON THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUE AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN FOUNDATION PHASE

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Abstract

The study investigated the perception of the student teachers in the use of Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction in Grades 1-3 and the perceived problems associated with its use. It also determined the relationship between attitude and age, sex, and place of origin (district). Guided by the Gardner's Socio-educational model (1985), the study collected data through a survey involving 150 student teachers enrolled in Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase program at Central University of Technology and Free State University. Data were analysed using frequency, mean, mode, and standard deviation. The relationship between variables was determined through the Chi-Square test for independence using SPSS. The outcomes showed that most of the respondents agree that the use of home language as a medium of instruction is good in principle. They believe it would enable teachers to express themselves clearly, and it would also make the lessons interesting to learners. However, some problems associated with its use were also identified, such as: difficulty in translation, teacher's low proficiency in Mother Tongue, learners' low proficiency in Mother Tongue, degradation of English proficiency, and lack of teacher's training in teaching Mother Tongue. Findings further revealed that the place of origin, not age and gender, influences the respondents' perception. The study, therefore, proves that the student teachers, in general, have positive attitude towards the use of Mother Tongue as medium of instruction and are willing to undergo training to be able to teach using the mother tongue.

Keywords: *Perception, student teachers, Mother Tongue, language proficiency.*

1. Introduction

The apartheid era in South Africa was characterised by a language policy that did not officially recognise indigenous languages (L1) spoken by majority of the population. In 1994, the government recognised the significant role played by the mother tongue in learning, thus an educational language policy raised the status of indigenous languages (Phindane, 2017). According to the official language policy of the 1996 Education Act and Department of Education (2002), children in Grade 1 -3 are to be instructed in their home language and learn English (L2) as one of the subjects on curriculum. In South Africa, parents are permitted to choose the language in which their children are to be educated (Department of Education 2002); but most parents demand that their children are educated in English (Heugh 2010). This is partly due to global prestige of English as a medium of international communication, language of business, and pre-requisite for employment (Bhoi 2014). Many studies were conducted to find out the impacts of using mother tongue in teaching and learning English. They seemed to focus much on the positive effects rather than the negative ones. English skills can be improved better if they are taught in an only English environment (Nguyen, 2022). We listen and respond to what we hear around us and then we succeed in mastering our mother tongue. As a result, the proponents of monolingual approach, we believe that second language learning follows a process similar to first language learning, claim that exposure is essential in learning English (Coo, 2001, Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989). In other words, learners of English should be exposed to an English environment as much as possible to become master in English.

1.1. Review of literature

The success of mother tongue instruction policy relied mostly on people's perception towards home language and English as First addition language. According to Khosa (2012), there are number of issues that play a significant role in influencing people's attitudes towards learning in mother tongue. The historical and political background was active in influencing mother tongue learning. The previous

apartheid language policies adopted the use of Afrikaans/English from the first grade or only encouraged the use of an African language as a medium of instruction in the lower grades in the primary school. This scenario can be regarded as the explanation behind the negative perception on mother tongue learning.

Studies have shown that instruction in the mother tongue is beneficial to language competence in the first language, achievement in other subject areas and training in a second language (UNESCO 2016). According to Phindane (2017:17) “instruction in the mother tongue helps in the search for self- affirmation, establishes group identity, satisfies the rational urge for cultural rootedness and avoids fanatics in concept formation, critical thinking, creativity and in important social values”. In other words, children who begin their education in mother tongue make a better start, demonstrate increased self- confidence and continue to perform better than those who start school in a foreign language. In their study on the effectiveness of teaching and learning mathematics using children’s home language and cultural tools, Hafiz and Farik (2016) observed that children who were taught without using their home language and materials from their cultural environment, did not perform well. They concluded by saying that the poor performance of learners in mathematics primary school is due to the negligence of incorporating children’s home language and material from children’s cultural environment.

In the context of education, studies of attitudes in the previous years have mostly dealt with the attitudes of students, teachers, and parents toward learning a second or foreign language (Baker, 1992; Gardner and Lambert, 1972). However, more recently, the focus of language attitude studies has shifted from L2 learning to L1 or mother tongue-based teaching in the hope of understanding more about the intended language innovation and in promoting greater success in education. Although studies in this field are of significance, research particularly on students’ attitude remains quite so few.

According to Tonio and Ella (2019), Chivhanga and Sylod (2014) compared the attitudes of student teachers toward the use of English and ChiShona as a medium of instruction in teaching Grade 4 Mathematics in Zimbabwe primary schools. The study revealed that parents, teachers/lecturers, and college/university learners preferred English over ChiShona as medium of instruction from primary to university level. Since Shona is prescribed to Grades 1 to 3 only, Webster, Mavies, Timothy, and Cordial (2012) investigated the influence of teachers and students’ language attitudes toward the use of Shona as medium of instruction if it will be adopted in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Both the students and teachers manifested a negative attitude to Shona and opted for English as medium of instruction. Most of the students agreed that Shona has limited use in their lives and is presumed to be inadequate for the effective teaching of science and technology. Based on these results, Webster et al. (2012) concluded that the attitudes of the users toward the language innovation negatively affects the implementation of Shona.

In the meantime, studies dealing with the relationship between language attitude and age, gender, and place of origin have provided valuable insights in relation to the discussion of the shift from English to home language in the classroom. Ajepe (2014) revealed that age and gender influence students’ attitude toward the use of mother tongue. Students between 15 and 18 years old in his study were shown to be more interested in the use of home language. Additionally, female students have more positive attitude toward mother tongue use than male students. Nevertheless, in Alieto’s (2018) study, gender difference on language attitude was not evident. Apart from age and gender, Assefa (2002) reported that place of origin (district) is another significant factor that can affect language attitude.

1.2. Research questions

This study investigated the attitudes of the student teachers toward the use of home language as medium of instruction in Grades 1-3 and their willingness to teach in home language when they complete their studies. Explicitly, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of student teachers towards home language-based teaching in Grades 1-3?
2. Is there a substantial relationship between the attitudes of student teachers towards home language-based teaching (i.e., age, gender and place of origin)?
3. What are the perceived challenges in the use of home language as medium of instruction in Grades 1 – 3?

1.3. The socio-educational model

This study is guided by the socio-educational model that was developed by Robert Gardner in 1985. The socio-educational model was created on the notion that language learning builds a learner’s identity that enables him/her to adapt and operate in a new environment. The model presents four interrelated variables, such as social setting (i.e., individual’s culture and environment), individual differences (i.e., intelligence, aptitude, motivation, and anxiety), second language acquisition context (i.e., formal and informal settings), and outcomes (i.e., linguistic skills and non-linguistic skills).

Furthermore, the model suggests the interdependent relationship between attitude and motivation as these two variables directly or indirectly influences successful language learning both in formal settings where language acquisition is the primary objective, and informal settings where language acquisition appears to be secondary and incidental (Gardner, 1985).

2. Methodology

This descriptive-quantitative study involved 150 student teachers enrolled in Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase program at Central University of Technology and Free State University (Qwaqwa campus) through a survey. There were 30 respondents for each area. The respondents were composed of 39 (26%) males and 111 (74%) females. In terms of age, 75 (50%) of the respondents were between 18 to 19 years old; 54 (36%) of the respondents were 20 to 21 years old and lastly, 21 (14%) of the student teachers were 22 years old and above. There were 54 (36%) of the student teachers who reported that their L1 is different from the home language stated by Department of Education (DepEd), while 96 (64%) reported no difference as to their L1 and the home language identified by DepEd for their city or province.

The survey questionnaire was adapted from Ejieh (2004). Some modifications on the statements were made to fit the South African context. The modified questionnaire earned a reliability rating of 0.80 using Cronbach's Alpha. Also, the researchers opted for a 4-point Likert Scale that varied from strongly agree to strongly disagree instead of yes/no response. The survey questionnaire was divided into two parts. In Part 1, respondents were asked to provide pertinent personal information such as gender, age, district, first language, and whether their native language different from the home language identified/declared by Department of Education for their city or district. Meanwhile, the 10 statements included in Part II are made up of two levels; Level 1 includes items 1- 9 which seek the views of the student teachers on some issues and problems related to teaching and learning in home language such as the benefits of teaching and learning in home language to pupils, teachers and parents, as well as the limitations of instruction in home language. As for the second level, item 10 which is an open-ended question was included. The item requires the respondents to list down problems that they foresee in teaching home language in primary schools, specifically in Grades 1 to 3. Following the research ethics procedure, the researchers sought the approval of the designated deans and administrators of the institutions involved through a communication letter prior to the administration of the survey. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, namely: frequency count, mean, mode and standard deviation. Furthermore, qualitative approach was employed to analyze the perceived problems in the use of home language.

3. Results and discussion

Table one below represents attitude of student teachers towards home-based teaching in Grades 1-3.

Table 1. Attitude of student teachers towards home language-based teaching in Grades 1-3.

| Statement | SA | A | D | SD | Mean | DE |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|------|----|
| 1. A policy on the use of home language in the South African primary schools (Grade 1-3) is good in principle. | 56 | 85 | 9 | 0 | 1.69 | A |
| 2. It is possible to teach all primary school subjects from Grade 1-3 in the home language or language of the local community | 43 | 82 | 24 | 1 | 1.89 | A |
| 3. It is possible to teach my own subjects completely in home language | 16 | 75 | 53 | 6 | 2.33 | D |
| 4. Teaching in home language will enable teachers to express themselves clearly in class | 52 | 88 | 10 | 0 | 1.72 | A |
| 5. Teaching in home language will enable pupils to understand easily. | 60 | 80 | 8 | 2 | 1.69 | A |
| 6. It will make lessons interesting to pupils. | 40 | 95 | 13 | 2 | 1.85 | A |
| 7. It will enable children to perform well in English language in the future. | 14 | 83 | 47 | 6 | 2.31 | D |
| 8. It will enable parents to participate in the education of their children. | 45 | 99 | 6 | 0 | 1.75 | A |
| 9. All technical terms and expressions in my subject area(s) can be easily translated into home language. | 13 | 71 | 57 | 9 | 2.41 | D |

Legend: SA – strongly agree; A – agree; D – disagree; SD – strongly disagree; DE – descriptive equivalent

Table 1 shows that statements 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8 generated a weighted mean of 1.69, 1.89, 1.72, 1.69, 1.85 and 1.75 respectively or a descriptive equivalent of “**AGREE.**” On the contrary, statements 3, 7 and 9 earned a weighted mean of 2.33, 2.31 and 2.41 and correspondingly or a descriptive equivalent of “**DISAGREE.**” Based on the above findings, it can be claimed that student teachers agree that the use of home language in Grades 1-3 is good in principle and that its use as a medium of instruction in Grades 1 to 3 would enable teachers to express themselves clearly and would make the lessons interesting to pupils, thus allowing pupils to understand the lessons easily. Similarly, student teachers view the use of home language to enable parents to take part in the learning of their children. Nevertheless, student teachers also realized that the use of home language as medium of instruction in teaching all the subjects in Grades 1 to 3 is not feasible since student teachers agree that it is impossible to translate in home language all the technical terms and expressions in their subjects.

3.1. Possible challenges associated with teaching Home Language

Table two summarizes the possible challenges that student teachers might encounter in home language in primary schools, specifically in Grades 1 to 3. As shown in the table, there are 10 challenges identified. The five most common problems identified by student teachers as ranked from highest to lowest are: first, difficulty in translation with 25.71%; second, teacher’s low proficiency in home language with 16.57%; third, pupil’s low proficiency in home language with 12.57%; fourth, degradation of English language proficiency with 11.43%; and fifth, lack of teacher’s training in teaching home language with 8%.

Table 2. Challenges identified by student teachers with regards teaching home language.

| Challenges | f | % | Rank |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------|
| Difficulty in translation | 45 | 25.71 | 1 |
| Degradation of English language proficiency | 20 | 11.43 | 4 |
| Lack of textbooks, references and instructional materials | 13 | 7.43 | 6 |
| Lack of teachers’ training in teaching home language | 14 | 8 | 5 |
| Low teachers’ proficiency in home language | 29 | 16.57 | 2 |
| Low pupils’ proficiency in home language | 27 | 15.43 | 3 |
| Incompatibility of HL used by pupils and of HL assigned by DepEd | 12 | 6.86 | 7 |
| Difficulty in teaching the different varieties of HL | 6 | 3.43 | 8.5 |
| Language barrier for transferees and pupils with different L1 | 6 | 3.43 | 8.5 |
| Resistance of parents in using HL as medium of instruction | 3 | 1.71 | 10 |
| TOTAL | 175 | 100 | |

According to the above findings, it appears that the primary challenge identified by the student teachers is the difficulty in translation of technical terms and concepts, specifically in the subjects like Mathematics and English. The following excerpts below provide source for the claim:

1. Difficulty in translating in Math.
2. Technical terms may be difficult to translate.
3. Translation may be hard.
4. Some English terms do not have exact translation in home language.
5. Using home language in Math is difficult.
6. Difficulty to translate Math concepts in home language.

4. Conclusion

Firstly, student teachers, in general, agree on the use of Home Language as a medium of instruction in Grades 1-3. This indicates that they have a positive attitude toward Home Language, which can be explained by the advantages that it can bring as it is popularly believed that it creates a positive impact on students and thus enhances students' learning experience and achievement. Their willingness to be trained

to teach using the Home Language implies that they support the implementation of the new language in education. Further, Alieto (2018) even noted that the training and discussions provided by their institutions could have conditioned the student teachers to accept the idea of teaching in home language, hence establishing a positive attitude towards its implementation.

Secondly, there is no relationship between age and attitude, and between gender and attitude. Attitude is not in any way dependent on age and gender. Regardless of age, both male and female respondents have positive attitude towards the use of Home Language as medium of instruction. Meanwhile, a significant relationship is found between place of origin (district) and attitude, implying that attitude is influenced by place of origin. Intervening factors like limited or varying levels of exposure of the students to multiple languages, diverse social and cultural settings, or ease of expressing themselves using the Home language in both formal and informal settings among others appear to be critical in this case. Nevertheless, these results cannot be generalized and should be considerably taken with caution as these can only be true in the current study.

Lastly, the many and different problems pertaining to translation of learning materials, teachers' and pupils' proficiency in Home Language and in English, trainings, and development of instructional materials as perceived by the student teachers imply that the implementation poses a great challenge to the educational system and to the student teachers who will be future teachers. The country's inadequate preparation for the shift to Home Language can directly affect the certainty of the full and successful implementation of the language program.

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