

Perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners of English as First Additional Language for communicative competence in Limpopo

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners of English First Additional Language (EFAL) for communicative competence in Limpopo. The study was grounded in self-determination theory (SDT) using a qualitative approach. Six focus group interviews were used to gather information from thirty learners who were purposely selected from three primary schools. Each group had five learners from grades 5 to 6. Data was analysed using a thematic approach. The study found that most learners viewed English as useful and popular to other languages because it gives them the freedom to express themselves, connects

them with people who do not speak their language and affords them the opportunity to become successful professionals. However, some learners perceived English as a threat to their Sepedi language. This study suggests that teachers should motivate and support learners in engaging in peer mutual learning, by creating social interactive activities that offer learners opportunities to learn the English language together.

Keywords: Communicative competence; English First Additional Language; perceptions and attitudes; motivation; rural primary schools; social learning environment.

CITATION

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1. Introduction

Perceptions and attitudes are crucial in learning English First Additional Language (EFAL) for communicative competence, particularly in underprivileged rural areas. Despaigne (2010), Tódor and Dégi (2016), and Getie (2020) assert that these perceptions and attitudes are influenced by personal experiences in learning or using the English language. Most rural Intermediate Phase learners view English as necessary for their academic growth; however, they face negative perceptions and attitudes from their peers when attempting to express themselves in this target language. Veliz and Veliz-Campos (2021) found that even though rural Chinese learners considered learning the English language essential, there were negative attitudes towards using the language, due to the unwelcoming and disturbing stares they received regarding their accents. Getie (2020) discovered that a lack of encouragement from English language teachers in Ethiopian schools, parents, and conducive learning environments negatively affected learners' attitudes. However, in South Africa, Omidire (2020) indicates that the challenge facing rural English learners is limited communicative competence. This paper argues that increasing learners' awareness of English as an international language, encompassing its global usage, diverse cultures and practical benefits may significantly reduce specific negative perceptions and attitudes, such as the belief that English is difficult to learn. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners of EFAL for communicative competence in Limpopo.

Ahmed and Pawar (2018) assert that communicative competence is the ability to use a language effectively in real-world situations to meet one's communicative needs. To learn language skills, one must practise them through repetition until they flow naturally (Ahmed & Pawar, 2018). Communicative competence aims not to focus on grammatical rules but on fulfilling communicative goals (Ahmed & Pawar, 2018; Whyte, 2019). This implies that instead of concentrating on grammatical rules, communicative competence aims to achieve communicative objectives in different social contexts. Yufriзал's (2017) study of Indonesian school learners and teachers revealed that the primary purpose of learning English is not to achieve native-like proficiency, but to enhance communicative abilities in the language.

Against this background, this study aims to answer the following question: What are the perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners of EFAL for communicative competence in Limpopo? Drawing on various studies in language learning, the author argues that this paper is distinctive and adds a new perspective to the ongoing discussion in this area. Most research on perceptions and attitudes about learning EFAL for communicative competence focuses on secondary schools and

higher education institutions. For instance, higher education institutions and secondary school learners revealed great excitement towards learning English in preparation for visits to other countries, with the opportunity to communicate in English, since it is an international language (Hashwani, 2008; Rezaei et al., 2019; Zulkefly & Razali, 2019; San-Isidro & Lasagabaster, 2022). This inquiry is significant because it is conducted in a rural area where EFAL Intermediate Phase learners have often been overlooked in research. The structure of this paper is organised into the following sections: literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1 Perceptions and attitudes towards learning English

Perceptions play an important role in non-English speaking people's learning of English. Despagne (2010), and Zulkefly and Razali (2019) show that perceptions towards language learning may mostly be influenced by the perceptions of parents, teachers and peers, which may be determined by the social contexts in which they are living. Schultz (n.d.) describes perception as involving the brain interpreting and organising sensory input from the environment to create a coherent experience of the world. This process can be affected by individual experiences, emotions, motivations and expectations, sometimes resulting in illusions and incorrect interpretations of reality, according to Schultz (n.d.).

In Mexico, the colonial past and the effects of language colonisation were linked to learners' negative perceptions of English (Despagne, 2010). Faramarzi, Elekaei and Afghari (2015) found that some Malaysian learners regard English as a useful language which brings success and higher academic and professional accomplishment, while others believe that the English language may eventually lead to the destruction of their culture, language and heritage of their homeland. On the other hand, Fenyvesi (2020) found that primary school learners in Denmark said that English was their favourite subject, they liked using it in real life and they were motivated by the fact that English is an international language. They were motivated by playing games and watching English-language YouTube videos (Fenyvesi, 2020). According to Setianengsih (2017), most Indonesian learners consider English essential for travel, intercultural communication, internet use, technological advancement and entertainment. Alnajjar et al. (2015) and Tang (2020) discovered that learners in Palestine and Thailand preferred English because they believe it provides possibilities to study and work abroad,

facilitates business opportunities, and promotes the country's culture and advancement. Most non-native English-speaking learners in Bahrain agreed that learning English was fun (Alkaff, 2013; Al-Wadi, 2018). Mushaathoni and Cekiso (2022) found that learners perceive teachers' teaching strategies as a motivation towards learning English in South Africa. According to Minh and Nhu (2020), positive perceptions, therefore, would inspire learners to participate in using the target language.

One element affecting language learning is attitude, which varies depending on perceptions, experiences and circumstances. According to Vargas-Sánchez et al. (2014), an attitude refers to a person's perspective and assessment of something or someone, as the propensity to react favourably or unfavourably to a certain concept or circumstance. Researchers have discovered that determining learners' attitudes is crucial since attitudes have the potential to impact a learner's motivation to acquire the English language (Savignon & Wang, 2003; Ahmed, 2015; Herwiana & Laili, 2021). For instance, Zulkefly and Razali (2019) found that Malaysian learners who live in isolated areas do not show a positive attitude towards learning English, as they fail to see the need to use it in their everyday lives. This led to learners developing a negative attitude towards learning the language, because there is minimal necessity for using English in their community. In South Africa, Vukosi et al. (2021) found that learners' negative attitudes towards the English language were primarily attributed to their restricted vocabulary, which results from insufficient exposure to the language at home or within the community.

2.2 The learning environment

The environment may be a contributing factor for learners to acquire and improve their English communication skills. Lobanova et al.'s (2022, p. 1887) study discovered that a lack of spontaneous speaking, communication with native speakers and non-applicability of speech skills in real life contribute to a lack of communicative competence. In studies conducted in rural Indonesia by Cakrawati (2019) and Malaysia by Zulkefly and Razali (2019), some learners displayed negative attitudes towards learning the English language because of experiences such as being humiliated by either their teachers at school or their friends, whenever they attempted to practise their language skills. As a result, they did not participate fully in English lessons owing to the embarrassment they received while pronouncing some words poorly; the memory of these negative experiences persists. In contrast, Rupiwin and Shah (2021) found that Malaysian rural primary school learners had positive attitudes towards English language

learning; however, their low proficiency in the target language led to a lack of confidence and experiences of anxiety. Mai and Liang (2021) warn that if teachers are too focused on form, just a few grammatical errors can completely disrupt understandable language interaction, possibly resulting in future feelings of apprehension and anxiety. This can cause learners to feel that their participation in the conversation or presentation is ineffective.

The study conducted by Omidire (2020, p. 25) in South Africa revealed that learners perceived their negative learning environment as clouded by overcrowded classes, lack of resources and teacher support thwarted their positive hopes for English language proficiency. Therefore, it is essential to identify the source of the negative attitudes, analyse and discuss them in an open class setting, and find a solution (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). Elyıldırım and Ashton-Hay (2006) advise that negative attitudes can be changed by thoughtful teaching methods and by creating environments conducive to language learning. Zulkefly and Razali (2019) suggest that the English learning environment must first be developed, particularly in rural areas. Vukosi et al. (2021) also discovered that the main reason for negative attitudes in South Africa was a limited vocabulary, resulting from insufficient exposure to English at home. This implies that the school community, most importantly, the parents directly involved with their children at home should provide an autonomous and competent environment for understanding the English language.

3. Theoretical framework

Self-determination theory (SDT) developed by Ryan and Deci (2000) served as the basis for this study. SDT is a motivation theory based on the assumption that all language learners share the psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Firat et al. (2018), motivation is one of the most important aspects of learning in any environment. Motivated and self-determined learners are more likely to complete more challenging tasks, participate actively in tasks and enjoy them, feel autonomous and competent in being socially connected inside and outside the class environment (Schunk et al., 2008; Firat et al., 2018). Ryan and Deci (2000) confirm that when these learners get positive feedback from the community, parents, peers and teachers' interactions, they are likely to develop a positive attitude towards learning the target language. This implies that it is through socialisation that learners learn English. Davis's (2022) study found that learners felt satisfied with their autonomy in English learning environments when they got motivation from their

teachers. Their effective communication in the target language was linked to their sense of competence, as they felt understood by other learners. This resulted in a feeling of relatedness and community when they used their English proficiency to help others. Furthermore, Moore et al. (2024) affirm that feeling autonomous and competent helps learners achieve their English language goals. Meeting these needs also makes learners feel connected, which helps them perform better when learning with others. However, if the socialisation within the community, parents, peers and teachers is thwarted, then negative perceptions and attitudes towards learning English can occur. Mai and Liang (2021) indicate that rural learners whose psychological needs have been met are more likely to achieve academically, linguistically and psychologically, as well as being more self-determined and engaged in English language learning.

SDT is relevant to this study because it acknowledges that learners are active beings who develop language abilities by interacting in a socially related environment. The theory encourages the language teacher to create a socially relaxed environment, where learners are given the choice and freedom to express their thoughts among their peers using the target language. The parents also play an essential role at home, as their motivation towards learning the additional language ignites a self-determined feeling of competence in their children. This gives learners the feeling of autonomy and motivates them to learn English as an additional language. Hence, the willingness to practise and learn the language develops positive attitudes, since learners perceive the background environment as supportive.

SDT focuses on motivation, autonomy, competence and relatedness, therefore, deemed necessary as the study focuses on the perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners of EFAL for communicative competence in Limpopo. The theory formed part of the literature review, for example, Getie (2020) notes that the educational context can bring incompetency and lack of relatedness, whereas Ziegenfuss et al. (2014) and Vukosi et al. (2021) attest that a safe learning environment provides learners with a choice of freedom of expression and, as a result, they become motivated in learning the target language. The author concurs with the ideas raised by Getie (2020), Ziegenfuss et al. (2014) and Vukosi et al. (2021), which are consistent with the study's selected theory. The theory was appropriate since it permitted the author to adopt an interpretivist viewpoint and was able to account for the study's findings.

4. Methodology

The *interpretivist* perspective was adopted in this study. This descriptive case study used a qualitative approach to explore rural Intermediate Phase learners' perceptions

and attitudes towards English language learning in-depth and within their real-life contexts in Limpopo, South Africa, during the schools' second term. Six focus group interviews were conducted. Each group included five learners from grades 5 and 6, aged 11 to 12, from three primary schools. Thirty learners were purposefully selected with the assistance of the EFAL Intermediate Phase teachers, based on their English proficiency to respond during the interviews. The learners in group one at each school were in Grade 5, whereas group two learners were in Grade 6. Mixing the grades was avoided, as this could have led to learners from the higher grade dominating the conversation. Through open-ended questions, participants were allowed to elaborate on their feelings and encouraged to share their thoughts. The interviews took place in each school's classrooms, after the lessons. The interview protocol was followed during the interviews to ensure consistency across different focus groups. The interviews were also audiotaped with permission from the participants. In addition, the study included active participation in the field and member checking to improve the data's trustworthiness. To achieve this, the author carefully kept reflective notebooks, as recommended by Anney (2014).

This study used the six stages of thematic data analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Naeem et al. (2023) argue that the identification and interpretation of themes in the thematic analysis approach can be subjective and influenced by the researcher's perspectives and biases. Regardless of the limitation, all the interviews were professionally transcribed, and the author read the transcripts numerous times. According to what the participants said, common phrases were grouped. Each sentence was assigned a code (keyword) to identify patterns throughout the dataset related to the research question, and similar or connected ideas were highlighted with highlighters. The codes were sorted into categories and grouped according to themes. After that, the potential themes were assessed again, grouped with those that overlapped, adjusted and, occasionally, compared to the raw data. Using participants' verbatim remarks concerning the research topic, the key to each theme was identified and given a name. Finally, a written narrative report was produced.

The necessary permission was secured from the university (ethical clearance number: 2017/09/13/90233522/01/MC), the Department of Education of the Province of Limpopo, the circuit office and participating schools. Before the commencement of the study, the assent forms were sent to parents to gain permission for their children to participate in the study. At the beginning of each interview, the author explained the purpose to the participants, and they were requested to ask questions to obtain clarity, if necessary. Participants were asked to sign an assent form. Pseudonyms were used in

the transcriptions to protect the participants. For example, School A-Learner 1: SA-L1, School B-Learner 11: SB-L11 to School C-Learner 30: SC-L30.

5. Findings

This study explored perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners of EFAL for communicative competence in Limpopo. The following four themes emerged from the data analysis:

- the perceptions of learning EFAL
- the attitudes towards learning EFAL
- the use of EFAL in the class
- the use of EFAL outside the class

5.1 The perceptions of learning EFAL

Twenty-nine participants perceived English as a spontaneous language and offered them opportunities to win awards. English was also considered the language that allows communication between people who do not speak the same language. For example, SA-L7 shares the same sentiments with SB-L12 and said:

English is the best because it is a natural language and helps us get awards.

SC-L25 indicated that:

English is the most popular language and when I am out of South Africa and in other countries like America, I can speak to people in English who do not know my language.

SA-L2 and L5 were extrinsically motivated by the target language and had this to say:

When I grow up, I want to be a lawyer and most lawyers speak English.

SA-L5:

I want to be a doctor and some of my patients will not know Sepedi, so it is better to speak English.

From all the above responses, it is deduced that the learners under study had different perceptions of learning and using the English language. Most indicated the necessity of acquiring and developing English as a communicative language to be able to communicate with others who do not speak their home language and as a language that

affords them the opportunity to win awards, attend higher education institutes and train as professionals.

5.2 The attitudes towards learning EFAL

When the participants were asked about how they felt about using the English language, SB-L14 emphasised that:

I feel so happy because the English language is cool and is my favourite.

SC-L30 shared the same view as above:

I practise speaking English because I love it, makes me feel better and calm.

SB-L17 expressed excitement and indicated that:

I feel very excited because when I know English, I will be able to teach my siblings.

SC-L21 was intrinsically motivated by a nurse who came to her school and related her story like this:

When I was in Grade 4, I did not understand English, and one day, some people came to my school, the other nurse spoke English and tried to speak with us, but we just kept quiet. From there, I learned to read English books and try to speak English.

In contrast, there were negative views about learning the English language. SA-L1 reported that:

When I speak English, they say I think I am better.

Responding to the statement above, SA-L7 emphasised that:

I think they are supposed to be happy and learn about English, not tease other children.

SC-L23 reacted differently:

I do not like to learn the English language because I am staying in Sedibaneng (pseudonym). Because the people here speak Sepedi. I do not feel happy when I speak English and I will not go to university.

When he was asked about where he wanted to work when completing his education, the response was:

I will work in town, and I can try to speak and learn English there.

The above responses showed that most learners had a positive attitude towards learning English. Some learners believe that speaking English makes them emotional and creates an inner feeling of happiness and enjoyment. However, one learner did not see the need to learn English, as it was not used in the village, would not attend university, and would only learn English in the workplace.

5.3 The use of EFAL in the class

The learning environment can significantly influence learners' perceptions and attitudes towards EFAL learning. When the learners were asked about English language usage in the class, SB-L15 explained that:

We talk to each other in English, but our English is little. But I help them, and I say, 'Do you know when they ask you where you live, can you understand it?' If he or she says no, then I tell him or her in Sepedi. Then they can understand as I tell them in English.

SC-L27 reported that because competence in the use of English was low, learners tended to code-switch:

Other learners mix English with Sepedi, but when they are mixing, I just tell them in English only.

SA-L3 felt that some learners had a negative attitude towards the learning of English, as portrayed by their behaviour:

Others talk in Sepedi. They do not listen to the teacher, and they say it is their mother tongue. They do not like English. When we teach them, they just look at us and keep quiet. I want to teach other learners to speak English. I hope that they will allow me to teach them.

SB-L11 acknowledged that:

When the teacher is teaching us, he talks in English. My friends and I talk in Sepedi because we do not understand other words that are in English.

The above responses illustrate that some learners are working hard at acquiring proficiency in English and they love to speak the language. Even though some learners have not fully developed proficiency, they were willing to assist each other in developing their communicative skills. However, some learners did not seem motivated to speak English and appeared to be struggling with learning the language.

5.4 The use of EFAL outside the class

In a region of the country where Sepedi is the predominant language, English is rarely spoken. The learners indicated reasons that motivated them to learn and use the target language outside the class. SC-L22 shared that her family supported her in developing her English language skills.

SB-L15 reported that the family realised the necessity of becoming proficient in the English language:

My mother often likes to communicate with me in English because it is my family language, and she says she will take me to boarding school and university if I learn and speak English.

SB-L19 learned the language from her sister and elucidated that:

My sister is from London and speaks to us in English only.

SB-L13 attested that:

I speak English at home. When I use English outside the class at school, other learners say, oh, this kid thinks that she knows everything. Then I use Sepedi outside the class because I feel sad when they talk about me.

SC-L30 claimed that:

Sometimes when I see girls, I like to talk in English.

SC-L30 said:

When I am with people who do not know English, I speak Sepedi.

From the responses above, it can be concluded that learners have different motivations to learn and communicate using English. However, there are some challenges that they have to face, particularly when living in an area where English is not used often.

6. Discussion

The study explored the perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners of EFAL for communicative competence in Limpopo. The findings revealed that the Intermediate Phase participants viewed English as useful and popular compared to other languages because it is universally understood and helps them connect with people who do not speak their Sepedi language. It also gives them opportunities to become competent, win awards and become successful professionals. This means that in some

of the schools studied, learners were rewarded for using English in their classes, particularly in English lessons for language usage improvements in reading. Learners also realised that as English is a global language, it is vital to becoming proficient in it, as this could help them advance their studies. Learners believe that being open to different cultures and languages can assist them in becoming open to learning, thus, developing proficiency in English enables one to have a successful career. Learning English is a requirement for any individual who wishes to travel the world, work and advance in one's chosen profession, or for social reasons (Tillayeva, 2020).

Most learners believed that learning English gave them the freedom to express themselves and the motivation to teach others, as teachers encouraged them to do so. However, it can be argued from the findings that even though some participants regarded learning English as helpful, they had a negative attitude towards it. For instance, participant SA-L1 indicated that she had been teased when speaking English, as her peers felt that she thought she was better than others. However, these could be peers who criticised those who expressed themselves in English outside the class and, perhaps, those who were envious of their proficiency, but still mocked her ability to use the language. Participant SC-L23 mentioned that the area in which he lives is predominantly Sepedi-speaking. There is, thus, no need to learn English for communicative purposes and independence does not rely on knowing English. Noels et al. (2019) refer to this attitude as identified regulation – a self-determined form of regulation. This learner does not value the importance of knowing the language and does not see that learning the language can meaningfully benefit him, which means that he is less self-determined to know and use the language. Alaga (2016) suggests that the specific social context in which language learning occurs can also impact this type of attitude. This means that the learner needs to realise that competency in English does not necessarily mean avoiding or losing the home language (Klapwijk & Van der Walt, 2016). Learners' attitudes are influenced by their perceptions of both the target language culture and their own culture, which usually begins at home (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

The study's findings supported Getie's (2020) findings that learners whose home language is not English, often face challenges such as low self-esteem regarding their ability to communicate in English, which leads to resistance. In this study, some learners were motivated to learn the language and provided peer support to those with learning difficulties or struggling to use English. These learners wanted to assist their peers in learning from them by practising the language with the support of their teacher and supported in an environment that was conducive to learning. In support of this, Rupiwin

and Shah (2021) indicate that a positive attitude towards learning English can be built through learners' motivation and by creating a favourable learning environment where learners find it easier to learn the language.

The study found that some parents encouraged their children to develop their English proficiency at home, by promising to send them to boarding schools and universities. The implication is that parents extrinsically motivate their children to reach their best abilities to attain communicative competence in English. Some learners had limited English vocabulary, which led to a negative attitude towards speaking in the English language, resulting in feelings of insecurity in communication. As a result, criticism was often used as a defense mechanism. This finding is in line with Chand's (2021) study, which found that learners became hesitant to speak outside the class for fear of being mocked. This attitude deprived learners of the opportunity to use their language competency and participate in informal conversations and discussions, since learning does not have boundaries and takes place outside the class. Though they were criticised in their attempts to learn English language skills, some were discouraged, and others kept learning as their parents supported them and offered an environment where they could express themselves and practise using English at home.

One participant indicated that when he sees girls, he likes to talk in English. This implies that the participant considered the language prestigious, and easily brings a sense of competence and relatedness to the opposite-sex peer group. This perspective is supported by Mahmud (2015), who found that males consider females to be good inspirations for learning a language.

7. Conclusion

This inquiry explored perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners of EFAL for communicative competence in Limpopo. The study found that most learners viewed English as useful and popular in comparison to other languages because it gives them the freedom to express themselves, connects them with people who do not speak their language and allows them to become successful professionals; however, some learners had negative attitudes towards learning the language. The findings illustrated that even though learners' English is limited, they are motivated to help each other learn and use the language, even though some resist because they have not developed a good vocabulary, which causes negative attitudes. From the data, it appeared that English was viewed as a language of competency, and it provided autonomy when relating with different cultures for a common goal. However, not all learners perceive English as

obligatory in their lives. For instance, one learner expressed that they would not learn English because it is unnecessary within their community. It was concluded that limited vocabulary and the social environment caused a negative attitude in some learners towards learning and using the language.

It is recommended that:

- teachers motivate and support learners in peer learning by creating interactive social activities that offer learners many opportunities to learn the English language, develop their vocabulary and become proficient in using English for communication.
- policymakers should update and adapt the curriculum to include culturally relevant materials and contexts reflecting the learners' environments and experiences, making learning more relatable and engaging.
- rural schools should be resourced with learning materials and technological tools that facilitate interactive and practical language learning.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that understanding the perceptions and attitudes of rural Intermediate Phase learners towards English as a First Additional Language is crucial for promoting communicative competence. It is suggested that further research be conducted to investigate the urban primary school learners' perspectives on learning English.

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