

Language practices in school-based Grade R classrooms

A B S T R A C T The investigation on language practices aimed at establishing how the language of learning policy formulated by the Department of Education in South Africa was interpreted at classroom level. The study focused on language activities in school-based Grade R classes to observe how learners' home language was used as the language of learning. Evidence from literature indicates that the success of any policy depends to a significant extent on the implementation strategy adopted to promote such a policy, especially at district and school levels. The outcome of this investigation established that key factors were not sufficiently considered in the implementation strategy at district and school levels. Learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds, teachers' expertise and the lack of suitable learning materials all compromised the success of the language of learning policy.

Keywords: language practices, school-based Grade R classrooms, language of learning policy; implementation strategy

1. Introduction and background

The language-in-education policy formulated by the Department of Education (DoE) in South Africa recommends that, 'The learner's home language should be used for learning and teaching wherever possible. This is particularly important in the Foundation Phase where children learn to read and write. Where learners have to make a transition from their home language to an additional language as the language of learning and teaching, this should be carefully planned' (Department of Education, 2002:5).

The school-based Grade R class is the lowest level of the Foundation Phase. A second language in this research refers to a second African language that is not a learner's home language and not to English or Afrikaans as conventionally used. South Africa has eleven official languages nine of which are African languages. The implication of the language policy is that learners from all language groups should be taught in their home language, an option opposed by parents and some educationists (Mmusi, 1999:7-12; Sookrajh, 1999:113).

This research aims to highlight the manner in which the language-in-education policy is interpreted in the multilingual school-based Grade R classes of the research schools. It will investigate language practices in the classroom and will also establish what strategies are in place to facilitate the implementation of the language-in-education policy in the Foundation Phase.

The outcome of this investigation will highlight teaching and learning conditions in the Grade R classes and assist policy makers in the evaluation or modification of the language-in-education policy. Administrators will be enabled to improve structures for policy implementation and to create an environment in the schools that will facilitate successful implementation.

2. Literature review

In many instances education policies are designed during periods of transition, and are determined to find solutions to problems that plagued the system. This is also true in South Africa. The most important fact to note is that the success of any policy depends on the government's vision and how it guides and sustains the effort to bring about change (Winton, 2000: 87).

There are concrete ways of linking policy to practice. Implementation might be achieved through the involvement of for example a policy institute, the creation of pilot projects, and through information campaigns. Research results can also be directly endorsed by governments and made public in layman's language thus encouraging dialogue with early childhood development (ECD) workers (Evans *et al*, 2002:15; Winton, 2000:87).

It is important to open channels of communication and develop structures to facilitate communication. This ensures that ECD researchers and teachers understand each other and broad policies are made known to ECD workers. To disseminate policy, it is necessary for experts and institutions that are able to carry out studies on targeted learners to identify projects in priority areas and set them up (Tougas, 2000:20-21).

The application of policy will remain illusive if there is no earmarking and identification of adequate resources. A key strategy for implementation is to devolve resources to local authorities and to assure that resources get through to the learners for whom they are intended. This will be effective only if mechanisms for accountability, monitoring and evaluation are set up (Tougas, 2000:20-21).

It is also important to identify under-utilised resources that can be incorporated, for example people of all ages; donors; facilities that are used part time and recycled materials. It would also be useful to interact with other existing ECD programmes. Media and popular channels of communication could be used for advocacy. Teamwork and networking are regarded as major components of successful policy implementation (Evans *et al*, 2002:4; Torkington, 2001:2-4).

The important issues to consider at local level include the demographics that will help determine the nature of policies, and available resources that can be used for implementation. On the basis of these facts, measures can be taken for instance to examine existing structures. It is evident also that policy makers must consider how their policies will influence education planning, teaching and learning (Hayden, 2000:54-55; Shalala, 2001:9).

Promising policies can ultimately fail, either because national policy initiatives were not adequately transferred to the local level, or developments at the local level were not reinforced

by national policy-making. When programmes fail to achieve the desired effect, often it is the government that bears the brunt (Hayden, 2000:54-55; Shalala, 2001:9).

2.1 The role of the school with regard to education policies

Research has shown that successful transition from home to school might depend, in part, on the extent to which the home and school environments are mutually supportive. Although theories of achievement and motivation claim that the change in self-worth is a reflection of learners' cognitive development, these theories do not take into account the learners' actual experience of school (Evans *et al*, 2002: 6).

Shaeffer *et al.* (2001:7) indicate that in most developing countries formal education was accepted as one of the principal means available of fostering human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war. At the same time there is awareness that schools are generally not keeping up with the challenges today, let alone preparing themselves for the challenges of the new century.

Researchers like Winton (2000:90-94) claim that many schools have succeeded in bridging the gap through having a vision, providing a challenge to all pupils and by pursuing particular practices. They ascribe the success to knowledgeable principals who put more emphasis on the programmes and ensured that such programmes are in line with guiding policy. They also identified the role of teachers as pivotal in the implementation of successful policies.

However, other researchers (Barber, 2001:11-12; Evans *et al*, 2002: 4, Shaeffer *et al.*, 2001) are convinced that the solution to poor learners' school problems does not lie in the massive restructuring of schools. The most important issue is not how schools look but how teachers look at the learners who enter the schools each day and how teachers see their roles in their learners' lives.

In a publication of UNICEF edited by Chetley (2001:5) that looked at African learners, several strategies that could assist in the uplifting of ECD practitioners and teachers in the elementary school were considered but limited funds remained a constraint. The key message that emerged from their deliberations was that the basis of successful teaching must be building on what exists rather than imposing foreign solutions.

2.2 Language acquisition and the development of literacy

Language is an innate characteristic of humankind and enables humans to adjust in their environment. Its significance emanates not only from the fact that it facilitates communication, but mainly because it is a means of learning. Young children follow a specific order in acquiring their first language based on their level of maturation regardless of what language is being learned (Jackman, 2001:60-62; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000:36).

According to Brumfit (1997:219-221), Cunningham-Andersson (2004:45) and Jackman (2001:60-62), babies who are born into mixed language or immigrant families have a different language environment from that of children born in monolingual families. In the case of mixed language families where both languages are used at home, the children experience difficulty with both languages because there is not enough input in each language. Their pre-speech skills are slowed down by the different sounds they hear and it becomes difficult to associate certain sounds with specific objects.

Some mixed families adopt a system that controls the use of the two languages spoken in the family to meet the needs of their child. Consistency on the part of the parents when speaking to the child is required to reinforce the language. However, if parents do not spend equal amount of time talking to their children, which is usually the case in such families, the child's chance to learn one of the languages will be limited (Cunningham-Andersson, 2004:46).

The implication is that the bilingual child's literacy development depends on how language was presented at home; on the child's language proficiency; on the child's learning style and on the child's attitude. In early childhood terms, bilingualism is the acquisition of two languages during the first years of life. A bilingual child is one who has learned to understand and produce aspects of each language and has developed two systems of communication (Cook, 2001:179-180; Jackman, 2001:63-65; Kilfoil, 1997:116).

Where two languages are learned simultaneously there will be parallel development. It is difficult to acquire a second language to the same extent as the first language although some good learners may achieve almost complete proficiency in the second language. The critical period hypothesis states that 'there is a period in a child's development when language acquisition occurs with very little effort, and that after a certain age, the brain is no longer able to learn language in this way' (Cunningham-Andersson, 2004:56-57).

It is also an established fact that the language skills of disadvantaged learners are very poor and that this has a negative effect on their ability to learn. Poor environments do not provide the stimulation necessary to foster language development (Jackman, 2001:69-70; Jolongo, 2000:104; Taylor, 2002:123).

Most children experience a second language for the first when they enter nursery, preschool or school. When they begin to use a second language they have usually acquired the first language that can be used to acquire the second language. This transfer of learning takes place easier when the child is exposed to same experiences through which the first language was learned (Brumfit, 1997:222-223).

Jackman (2001:60-63) refers to three approaches to literacy, each with different implications for policy formulation. The skills approach is associated with functional literacy that defines literacy as the ability to read and write so that learners develop into resourceful citizens in their communities. This is a technical definition used to define literacy internationally.

The whole language approach to literacy on the contrary, emphasises purpose in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The approach adopts holistic and integrated learning of reading, writing, spelling and oracy. The communicative aspect of language is stressed and the child must derive meaning from it (Jackman, 2001:60-69).

The socio-cultural approach to literacy according to Myers-Scotton (2006:9) refers to the ability to construct appropriate cultural meaning when reading. Language is a means that promotes group identity. In acquiring reading and writing skills, previous language experiences, values and beliefs are utilised to create meaning from what we read. In this approach, literacy is seen not only as an overt measurable activity but also as an activity that ensures enculturation.

Of the three approaches to literacy, the one that is associated with home language instruction is the socio-cultural approach. Educationally, the argument is that literacy is most easily and

effectively learned in the home language. The home language provides a clearer literary and cultural meaning contained in literature (Cook, 2001:152; Hollister, 2003:1; Kilfoil, 1997:17).

In the early learning environment teachers translate the language development theory into practice by teaching listening skills to encourage receptive language, by repeating keywords to promote articulation, by using simple sentences to develop expressive language and using interesting teaching techniques to make learning a joyous process (Brumfit, 1997:219-221).

It is necessary to recognise the language experiences that young children can bring from home and to build on them. It is also important to know that the manner in which reading and writing skills are acquired differs from child to child. The children's learning environment should reflect a meaningful approach to the learning of print and how it is used to represent language. Labels, notices, 'news' and other forms of written information form part of an effective print environment and this meaningfulness is reinforced when teachers constantly refer to them (Cook, 2001:152).

2.3 The rationale behind language policies

Most language policies are founded on development theories and learners are allocated in bilingual classes on the same basis. However, some researchers (Myers-Scotton, 2006:9-11) insist that in bilingual or multilingual countries language policies are determined by the political situation in those countries.

A most common determinant of language policy is the official position of different languages. Learners may be required to learn through the medium of a specific language because it is the official means of communication and economic interaction (Cook, 2001:152; Jackman, 2001: 67-68).

In South Africa the use of the home language as medium of instruction is adopted on the basis of educational ideology (Cook, 2001:162; Department of Education, 2002:2) and socio-cultural considerations. The rationale behind the policy is also political in that the policy aims to give prominence to the indigenous languages that were previously suppressed by the old order and sees them as instruments for nation building (Cook, 2001:162; Myers, 2006:9-11).

There is a need to investigate whether classroom practices realise this purpose or whether the aims of the policy will be rewarded. To obtain such information, the qualitative and quantitative approaches will be used in the investigation.

3. Research methodology

The qualitative method was selected as the method for gathering data to establish how the language-in-education policy was implemented in the Grade R classes of the research schools. The techniques used for gathering data included interviews, observations and focus groups. In addition the quantitative method in the form of a screening ECD test was used to determine the language skills of school-based Grade R learners in the research schools. The use of both research paradigms was intended to provide a broader understanding of classroom interactions and to raise the level of trustworthiness of the research results.

3.1 *The pilot research*

The purpose of this phase was to get an overall view of how the school-based Grade R class was implemented in disadvantaged schools. A total of ten schools in four different provinces of South Africa were investigated. Classroom interactions were observed and interviews were conducted with Grade R teachers to establish how ECD policies were implemented in the classroom. The learners' language proficiency was also tested.

With regard to the language-in-education policy, teachers were probed to establish their compliance with the language policy, their strategies for policy implementation in the classroom, the challenges they faced and learners' language profile. Observations focused on classroom activities, teacher-learner interactions, learners' languages and the classroom environment. The screening test would establish learners' language competence upon entry into the Grade R class.

Data from these interviews and observations was analysed by coding responses that were similar and by grouping them into separate categories. These categories were compared to literature discussions on language policies in education.

3.2 *The research*

The case study was considered a most suitable research design for this research because it allows emphasis on the research setting and places the investigation within context (De Vos *et al*, 2003: 275-276; Mouton, 2003:150; Wellington, 2000:90-91). The methodology and techniques resembled those of the pilot study.

The target population comprised all four of the primary schools that offered Grade R classes in the research area. The research schools are situated in a very densely populated disadvantaged and multilingual urban area in the Gauteng province. The learners come from very impoverished families living in informal settlements where squalid conditions prevail. Inter marriages among different language groups are common and there is a high presence of foreign blacks from neighbouring countries around South Africa.

3.3 *Data collection*

Fieldwork was undertaken in the research schools at the beginning and end of the year to observe classroom situations and to conduct interviews with Grade R teachers. The interviews were conducted in the teachers' home languages and captured on tape. The questions were derived from the research investigations that were conducted during the pilot phase.

A total of 100 learners were tested at the end of the year through the use of the School Readiness Evaluation test by Trained Testers (SETT). The SETT is a South African screening test for school readiness and measures language development as one of the developmental aspects of school readiness. It was employed to indicate the learners' language competency and not as a measure to establish the effects of the language policy.

3.4 *Data analysis*

The information from interviews was coded into four categories, namely

- The languages offered in the school
- Learners' language profile

- Teacher’s language profile
- ECD training experience

Classroom situations and the availability of learning materials were informed by observation. The outcome of learners’ performances in the SETT was measured against the norm of the language scale.

4. Research findings

4.1 Research findings of the qualitative investigation

A total of seven Grade R teachers were interviewed individually. Their responses are recorded in Table 1.

Table 1: The outcome of interview responses from different schools.

School	Learners’ language profile	Languages offered in the school	Teachers’ languages	ECD training experiences
A	>2	2	2	1
B	2	1	2	-
C	>2	1	2	-
D	>2	2	2	-

Table one shows that in all the schools learners speak two or more languages, two schools offer two languages and two are monolingual. Teachers can communicate in two languages and only one had formal ECD training. It is evident that this language distribution will influence the manner in which the language policy is interpreted in the Grade R class.

4.2 Research findings from observations

The shortage of learning materials in the Grade R classes of all the research schools but one was conspicuous. In three of the schools the Grade R classes are accommodated in storerooms and in prefab structures, typically congested and prohibiting any display of learning materials. Possibilities of supplementing the language of instruction were therefore minimal. A striking feature of the meagre learning materials is that they were all written in English. The walls were donned with English words and Eurocentric backgrounds that had little bearing to the learners’ home background. The classroom environment did not complement the language-in-education policy in any way.

4.3 Research findings of the quantitative investigation

Table 2: Research findings of the language development scale of the SETT.

School	% pass	% failure	No of learners
A	13%	87%	23
B	36%	64%	28
C	21%	79%	28
D	33%	67%	21
TOTAL	26%	74%	100

Table 2 shows performance in the language scale of the SETT. All the learners performed badly in the test, school A being the worst with a failure rate of 87% and school B the best with a failure of 64%. In total, only 26% of the learners possessed the required language competency and 74% were inadequate.

5. Discussion

5.1 Table 1

Learners' language profile: On average four languages are spoken by learners in the playgrounds except at School B where two languages are spoken. At the same time some learners from rural areas could only speak one language, which was sometimes not the language of learning in the school. The implication of this language diversity on the language-in-education policy is non-compliance and the adoption of alternative teaching strategies that may not be fruitful.

Languages offered in the schools: Of the four schools, two are monolingual and two are bilingual. In this instance too, all the schools will not be in a position to instruct all learners in their home language. Teachers switched languages and thus deviated from the recommended language-in-education policy.

Teaching in monolingual schools is carried through the chosen language of the school but translations into other languages are made to help non-language speakers. Emphasis is on the language of the school and by the end of the year that language dominates.

In bilingual schools the situation is more challenging in that the teacher must first establish which of the two languages offered in school predominates in the class. Teaching takes place in two languages and a lot of English is used to communicate with all the learners simultaneously. Learning activities such as counting and reciting weekdays are done in English. In all the schools the use of English is fuelled by parents' requests to have their children taught in English. The value of home language instruction is diminished because learners are constantly exposed to three languages at the same time.

Teachers' language profile: Although all the teachers at the different research schools can communicate efficiently in two languages, they would not be able to include all the learners in their teaching. By enforcing one of two languages, they violated the essence of the language-in-education policy.

ECD training: Only one teacher had formal training in ECD and was equipped with appropriate teaching methods and skills to make learning resources. The lack of such skills among the other teachers and paraprofessionals made it difficult for them to improvise and counteract the disadvantage of the language practices they had adopted.

5.2 Table 2

School A had the worst results as it was the most multilingual and the teachers faced more problems when communicating with the learners. School B had the least language diversity and therefore not many learners faced language problems. The teachers at this school could also speak both the languages spoken by the learners and thus accommodated all of them when teaching. It recorded the lowest failure rate. However, the failure rate at all schools exceeded the acceptable norm of 24%.

The poor language performance confirms what was discussed earlier in literature with regard to multilingual populations and poor environments (Click, 2002:159; Cunningham-Andersson, 2004:65-69; Jalongo, 2000:12-13). Many of the learners in the research area come from bilingual, poor families with parents who are usually not educated to know the importance of early language stimulation. The young age of some of the learners was also a contributing factor.

5.3 Observations

The support system for enforcing home language instruction in the research schools is weak and will impact negatively on the language practices in the classrooms. The key strategy to any policy implementation is creating ideal conditions and assuring the availability of resources that will facilitate implementation. Multilingualism is a constraint to home language instruction and possibilities of implementing such a policy within a small area are remote. Problems emanating from a lack of fiscal and human resources also lead to a deviation from policy.

6. Limitations of the research

The interviews were conducted in the teachers' home languages and some translations may not have been very apt. Although the SETT is a South African screening test, it was not standardised for African children. The cut-off scores were lowered and time extended to offset the shortcoming and to accommodate the learners.

7. Recommendations

There is a need to establish the demographics of the three to four years age cohort in order to plan appropriately for the implementation of the language policy in Grade R. The Department of Education and Department of Social Development should undertake a baseline research jointly since both deal with young children in South Africa. It is also important to investigate the language of learning at nursery schools that cater for disadvantaged black learners so as to build on what exists and promote continuity.

Implementation strategies for the language-in-education policy at the Foundation Phase level should be discussed at a forum that includes those departments responsible for children from age three so as to encourage continuity and to bridge the transition from home to school. The proposed Tshwaragano Ka Bana, an initiative of the Department of Social Development (Department Social Development, 2005) aimed at promoting an integrated approach to ECD, could be considered as a possible vehicle. In addition a survey to indicate parents' preferences for language of instruction should be undertaken.

Home language instruction could be the answer to learning success provided the issue of multilingualism in the schools is resolved. An alternative approach would be to use English parallel with home languages from nursery school and train teachers in this regard. The home languages could be enforced as subjects throughout the school system to ensure their continued existence.

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to highlight existing problems experienced when the language-in-education policy is interpreted in the Grade R classes of the research schools. The main findings

of the research lead to the conclusion that the language-in-education policy is, by force of circumstances, not implemented as recommended. A major concern is the practice adopted by teachers that is not in line with policy recommendations.

The findings of this investigation confirm the fact that schools in developing countries are not prepared for learners and the challenges of the new era (Shaeffer *et al*, 2001:7). The observed classroom deficiencies and conditions in the research schools are factors that underscore the intended goals of the language policy and promote undesirable improvisations.

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