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Teaching social skills in the language classroom

A B S T R A C T Bullying has become a major problem in schools worldwide. It might escalate to serious forms of anti-social behaviour, therefore the teaching of social skills are important in the school as a whole. The language classroom is the ideal place to teach social and communication skills. In the whole language approach, combined with content-based teaching, the teacher can choose a theme, like 'bullying' and include specific language skills in the lesson. The class could for instance discuss the theme, debate the contentious issue, write a dialogue about the theme and dramatise it. By engaging with an issue in this way, learners not only learn social and communication skills, but also various language skills. Learners learn best when they are engaged in their own learning; when the learning material is part of their life world and they are interested in the topic.

Keywords: Bullying, social skills, communication skills, whole language approach, integrated language teaching, theme-based approach

1. Introduction

Bullying has become a major problem in schools. It might escalate to serious forms of anti-social behaviour, therefore the teaching of social skills are important in the school as a whole. The language classroom is the ideal place to teach social and communication skills. In the whole language approach, combined with content-based teaching, the teacher can choose a theme, like 'bullying' and include specific language skills in the lesson. The class could for instance discuss the theme, debate the contentious issue, write a dialogue about the theme and dramatise it. By engaging with an issue in this way, learners not only learn social and communication skills, but also various language skills.

As part of Vygotsky's theory of learning, social constructivism holds the tenets that knowledge is constructed through meaningful interaction between what one already knows and what is new. The kinds of past experiences as well as the ways these experiences are organized influence the construction process. Reflection plays a major role in organizing and converting past experiences into knowledge. Critical theory and critical studies as link to social constructivism would expect a person to be able to turn the new understandings into action and thus to

change oppressive conditions (Haley & Austin, 2004:20). Social constructivism is a learning theory that holds that truth, meaningfulness, and knowledge are created by social realities, but at the same time also create social realities (Haley & Austin, 2004). In this article the researcher will use a literature study to explain how social realities could be changed in the language classroom, by using an integrative language approach with content based teaching, to teach learners social and communicative skills with the view of handling the contentious issue of bullying.

Language as such is generative and constructivist. According to Chomsky (1965 in Bertrand & Stice, 2002:46) "studying a simple paragraph yields a rich system of interrelationships and cross-connections that are all consistent with a very subtle system of layers of grammatical rules. The human brain constructs meaning through its knowledge of how language works, how it can be used and not used... Indeed, if we have to learn all the rules for our language directly, that is, by being taught each one separately, it would take forever. No such system of learning can account for all the sound-meaning relationships that all of us have internalized about our language". The researcher believes that whole language teaching within an integrative approach will help learners to obtain language skills such as reading, writing and speaking through debates, dramatisations, comprehension reading, the reading of books and the watching of DVD's with a specific theme such as the handling of bullying as a social skill.

2. Bullying as anti-social behaviour

Bullying has become a major problem worldwide in schools. It is considered the most prevalent form of youth violence and might escalate to serious forms of anti-social behaviour (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005; Smith, Cousins & Stewart, 2005).

"Bullying is usually defined as a form of aggression in which one or more children intend to harm or disturb another child who is perceived as being unable to defend himself or herself" (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005:101; Smith, Cousins & Stewart, 2005). There is, thus, a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. The behaviour happens repeatedly (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). "Bullying occurs within a dynamic relational context, and the roles children play within bullying relationships as bullies or victims consolidate over time... Bullying ... can be sorted into two categories: direct bullying, which involves physical and verbal attacks on victims, and indirect bullying, which typically involves covert activities intended to isolate and marginalize victims (e.g., spreading rumors and excluding individuals from peer groups)" (Smith, Cousins & Stewart, 2005:740). Rivers, Duncan and Besag (2007:4) divide bullying into "... direct-physical aggression (hitting, pushing, kicking), direct-verbal aggression (name-calling, labeling, threatening), and indirect or relational aggression (telling tales, spreading rumors, social isolation)".

Bullies usually have problems processing social information and often interpret behaviour of other people as antagonistic even without real reason. Parents of bullies mostly use power-assertive techniques to manage others in their lives. Bullies often imitate the parents' aggressive behaviour, because according to what they observe, it works (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Caregivers of bullies often lack warmth, involvement, clear limits and boundaries. Parents of bullies often have violent parenting styles and use aggressive behaviour for disciplinary

action. Bullies want to be either popular or in control. They are seen as popular, confident and having lots of friends, but in essence they are anti-social, and not empathetic, and have a need to exercise power and control over others. They are hypersensitive to criticism and unable to handle frustration. Bullies can talk their way out of trouble or rationalise their behaviour easily, however, they often perceive themselves as unloved and uncared for and doubt their support systems (Anderson & Swiatowy, 2008).

Victims of bullying, on the other hand, are mostly passive or submissive and only occasionally aggressive. They usually have poor communication and problem solving skills, initiate conversation less than other children and lack assertiveness skills. Victims often do not report bullying, because of poor self esteem and a lack of assertiveness skills. Parents of victims are over protective and inhibit the development of conflict resolution skills in their children (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Children from such homes feel insecure. Consequently children often become victims, because of their level of self-esteem and social development. Passive and shy children are often victims of bullying behaviour, because they do not stand up for themselves. Victims believe that they deserve to be bullied or that the bullying is their own fault. They find it difficult to get out of the victim role. Many victims feel that adults are not on their side, because teachers and parents often perceive it as part of growing up (Anderson & Swiatowy, 2008).

Therefore there are communication problems and a lack of social skills on both sides of the bullying relationship - on the side of the bully and of the victim. Many role players, like parents, teachers, peers, pastors and counsellors, can do something about the prevalence of bullying. In this article the role of the teacher and specifically the language teacher as eliminator of bullying by teaching social skills with language skills, is emphasised.

3. Social skills

Peterson and Gannoni (1992:3 in Sonnekus, Van As, Gouws & Venter, 1998) define social skills as "the ability to organize cognitions and behaviours into an integrated course of action directed toward culturally acceptable social or interpersonal goals". Social skills help people to give and receive positive social awards, which may increase social involvement and positive interaction. The lack of social skills may come to the fore in aggressive, negative behaviour, which negatively influence future interactions.

The realistic assessment of social conventions, as well as the accurate perception of external and internal cues and empathic role taking, are essential for any person to survive in the outside world. Studies on accurate perception strongly suggest that non-assertive individuals lack social skills, because they are less sensitive to external cues and they misjudge the amount of anger communicated to them by assertive or aggressive individuals. Victims of aggressive behaviour often react subjectively and do not display assertive behaviour. Learners need skills inculcated in them to enable them to handle conflict situations. They need to learn to assess any situation, to make appropriate reasonable decisions and how to integrate adaptive and accurate discriminations into their decisions (Rakos,1991). It is, therefore, very important to integrate social skills into the whole school to assist those learners who struggle with relations and communication.

As bullying can be considered a real problem worldwide in schools, it needs to be addressed to ensure that children feel safe and secure. The teaching of social skills could possibly prevent many of the problems that lead to bulling. Most of the bullying prevention programmes (e.g. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program; The Bullying Project; Bullybusters) emphasise the importance of whole school involvement in programmes with a special focus on the development of social skills (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). The teaching of social skills could be done in all subjects/learning areas, but in this research the focus is on language teaching as a means of learning social skills.

Social skills are essential in building support structures, especially for victims of bullying. Every victim of bullying has "a lack of strong self-esteem and a lack of assertiveness skills and the social skills that tend to go with solid self-confidence" (Greenberg, 2004:31). Victims reward bullies by crying, failing to defend themselves and by responding passively and non-assertively. Learners need to get ideas on how to handle the problem of bullying and an opportunity to practice these skills in all classes in their school. Teachers can help to build self-esteem by emphasising personal strengths in learners. Learners must learn to replace negative statements about themselves with positive statements. Social skills, including listening, having conversations, asking to join peer groups and assertiveness training are important in this regard. Assertiveness skills would include 'confident body language, relaxation skills, positive thinking and verbal strategies for dealing with [issues such as] bullying' (Crothers & Kolbert, 2008:135

How can assertiveness skills and self confidence as part of social skills be developed in the language classroom? One way of teaching social skills will be to concentrate on communication skills.

There are three types of communication skills included in social skills which should be noted by all teachers in a school, but especially by the language teacher seeing that communication is an integral part of language teaching. These are passive, aggressive and assertive communication skills. If learners could learn to communicate assertively, they should feel more confident and will better handle problem situations like bullying. The language teacher could through various interventions that will be discussed in the next sections, enable learners to stand up for themselves.

Passive or non-assertive communication or behaviour does not help to meet the individual's needs. Passivity is connected to learned helplessness and an external locus of control. Passive people do not stand up for their rights and allow others to take advantage of them by not being able to say 'no'. They are afraid to upset others. Besides this, they often communicate a message of inferiority, because the wants and needs of others become more important than that of their own, so they become victims easily by submitting to the demands of others. This boils down to the violation of one's own rights by failing to express honest thoughts and feelings (Kolb & Griffith, 2009; Lloyd, 1995; Weaver,1993; Verderber & Verderber, 1992).

People who use aggressive communication on the other hand, use power, language and position to coerce others to do what they want them to do. Aggressive communication implies a lack of respect for the rights of others. Aggressive behaviour is often judgmental, dogmatic, fault finding and coercive and aggressive people lash out without regard for the situation or the feelings of the other person. Aggressive behaviour can be active or passive; direct or indirect;

honest or dishonest, but it always comes from a position of superiority and disrespect (Kolb & Griffith, 2009; Lloyd, 1995; Weaver,1993; Verderber & Verderber, 1992).

Assertive communication, however, meets needs in a constructive manner. Assertive communicators express their thoughts, feelings and needs in a clear manner, making good eye contact. They are confident, direct and honest and realise that they have choices in how to handle problem situations. They respect the rights and viewpoints of others. Assertive behaviour communicates respect for the self and others. An assertive person wins by influencing, listening and negotiating to get others to cooperate willingly (Kolb & Griffith, 2009; Lloyd, 1995; Weaver,1993; Verderber & Verderber, 1992). "Assertiveness is the ability to share the full range of your thoughts and emotions with confidence and skill. It means speaking and acting in a way that communicates who you are and what you want. You can be assertive without infringing on the rights of others…" (Weaver,1993:398). To be assertive means to stand up for your rights, but this can only happen when you know and believe in you rights. Assertiveness builds self-confidence and self-esteem (Sonnekus et al., 1998).

4. Language teaching approaches

Social and communicative skills can be taught in the language classroom by using a content-based or theme approach.

According to Snow and Brinton (1997) content-based and theme-based instruction are the same – they imply a sequence of topics tied together with one overall theme, which forms the basic structure of the curriculum. In the primary school one gets content-area themes (drawn from e.g. social studies); calendar related themes (e.g. seasons); conceptual themes (e.g. abstract themes such as courage); biographical themes (e.g. famous people); or current event themes. In secondary school themes will for instance revolve around science, social science, literature and vocational issues. Themes must be conceptually important and relevant to the specific group being taught. It should be context bound.

Consequently the theme should be part of real life situations that could necessitate communication. This approach is part of communicative language teaching. Learners are motivated by communicating in a meaningful way about meaningful themes/topics. The teacher's role changes and he/she becomes more of a facilitator, observing what happens in the classroom. Teachers know that by merely teaching rules from pre-set texts, learners do not really learn to apply language skills in everyday situations. The learners are more actively involved in the learning situation when the learning forms part of everyday life. The language activity is placed in a true-to-life communication situation (e.g. role-play and simulation) and the learner responds to the situation by using language, developing language skills such as listening, reading, speaking and writing, but also by learning social skills appropriate to the situation (Nieman, Swanepoel & Venter, 2004).

The thematic approach often implies that the same theme be tackled from different angles or in more than one discipline/subject/learning area (see Snow & Brinton, 1997). This way of teaching requires a tremendous amount of effort and coordination, but is worthwhile, because learners learn more easily in a holistic approach where the same themes are covered in different contexts.

Apart from teaching across disciplines with a content/theme approach, one could also apply the theme/content-based approach to whole language teaching (Snow & Brinton, 1997). Integrated language teaching or the whole language approach functions at its best when the teacher follows a theme approach, as in content-based teaching.

The whole language approach has its roots in the writings of Rousseau and Pestalozzi in the eighteenth century, both of whom encouraged a holistic approach to all education (Snow & Brinton, 1997). Shannon (1991 in Snow & Brinton, 1997) points out that the current whole language approach has its historical roots in student-centred education and social reconstruction, thus, always taking the learners' experiences into consideration during teaching. Learners have to be enabled to look critically at their social reality.

Wessels and Van den Berg (1998) describe the whole language approach as follows:
- Reading and writing are acquired through reading and writing texts for real life purposes.
- All the various language components work together (e.g. spelling, phonics, comprehension) in the use of real life texts and not through artificial exercises to establish particular grammatical aspects in the minds of learners.

Consequently, language teaching should be based on integrated language teaching. The different components, such as composition, prose, poetry and grammar should be taught in an integrated way (Nieman *et al*., 2004). "The whole language approach encourages the learner to use language in a functional and focused manner in integrated discourse. Therefore, from the very start of the lesson, the teacher and learners are using language authentically" (Nieman *et al.*, 2004:202).

Language skills are integrated in the language lesson when learners speak to each other by for instance debating a contentious issue, listen to each other respond, as well as read and write texts on the issue. "Communicative competence, which includes grammatical, sociolinguistics, discourse, and strategic competence, means that students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge about the rules of language, social norms for language use through performing communicative acts and to use strategies for developing and maintaining conversations or written discourse". Therefore, it is important to use language for authentic purposes where learners function in social interaction in a specific context (Haley & Austin, 2004:13). Learners must listen, speak and write in the 'real world'. The teacher should, with the help of the learners, identify themes that are part of the learners' life worlds. Within activities based around the theme, learners should learn language skills, but also social and communication skills necessary to survive in their everyday world.

5. Teaching social skills in the language classroom

As mentioned earlier use of an integrated language approach, which is theme based, is the ideal way to teach social and communicative skills, as well as language skills. The research done here is on handling the issue of bullying through the teaching of social and communicative skills in the language classroom.

A whole school approach to the problem of bullying incorporates the help of every teacher in the school, including the language teacher. The development of curriculum materials for the

implementation of social skills would include the use of content-based language teaching with a theme such as 'bullying' and the teaching of social skills such as empathy building, friendship-making and assertiveness (see Edmondson & Hoover, 2008). It could for instance be done by using role-play, as well as reading stories on ethical matters such as self-respect, respect for others, self-control, kindness and generosity (Biggs, Vernberg, Twemlow, Fonagy & Dill, 2008). "One comprehensive bully prevention program, *Steps to Respect*, includes literature-based lessons that fulfill both language, arts and social and emotional objectives" (Committee for Children, 2004 in Hall, 2006:231). Lessons include problem solving skills and assertiveness training with an increasing awareness and knowledge of bullying through the use of real case studies. By dividing the class in small groups to discuss the issue and to give feedback, learners practice important communication, as well as language skills (Hall 2006).

Salmivalli (1999 in Salmivalli, Kaukiainen & Voeten, 2005) suggests three steps in curriculum based preventative and intervention work against bullying, namely (i) raising awareness by discussing the theme with the whole class, indicating that people often behave differently from what they think is right in a group situation; (ii) encouraging self-reflection, by discussing the different roles in bulling (bully, victim and bystander); and (iii) discussing anti-bullying behaviour, especially as individuals within a group.

6. Debates/discussions and interviews

Teachers can use short skits about common bullying situations in school to start classroom discussions about the phenomenon. The whole class should engage in discussions and activities related to bullying so that learners who might otherwise watch passively become empowered and voice their opinion (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Debates are a good way of developing language skills, because it consists of controlled arguments by informed persons with opposing views with the purpose of persuading the audience (Bertrand & Stice, 2006). In a theme-based approach learners would also learn valuable language skills with the social skills.

A scenario that could be discussed with older learners could be the following (Hall, 2006:232):
> John is frustrated and sad. Every day he comes to school, other students tease him. Some call him names, while others talk about him and spread rumors. One boy even pushes him and threatens to beat him up. He's tired of coming to school and wants to drop out.

Learners should discuss the scenario, get facts from it, ask open-ended questions (use who, what, when, where and why) and form hypotheses for each question for example (see Hall, 2006:233):

(1) Why is John frustrated and sad?
John is frustrated and sad because others are picking on him.

(2) Why do students tease him?
Students tease him because they don't like him.

(3) Why do students call him names?
Students call him names because they are mean and jealous.

(4) Why do others spread rumors?
Students spread rumors because they don't want John to have friends …

(5) Why does the boy push and threaten him?
     The boy pushes John because John is smaller than him.

(6) What does John do when these things happen?
     John ignores the other students, pushes back, or teases back.

(7) What can John do when these things happen?
     John can ignore them, tell the teacher, or fight them

(8) Why does he want to drop out of school?
     John is tired of people picking on him.

(9) What will happen if John drops out of school?
     John will go to jail or will not get a good job.

The teacher could then ask the learners to identify the most important question e.g. *'What can John do when this happens?'* Learners should then use different resources such as the internet, books, articles, or interviews with teachers, parents, community leaders, pastors or counsellors to answer the question in more detail than the hypotheses given. The teacher should have resources available in the classroom and possible questions for an interview should be discussed (Hall, 2006).

Interviewing is a good way for learners to get to know and understand issues around them in the real world. They acquire language skills, because they get experience in talking to people they may not know, asking questions and organising material so that they can present it to the class. They learn to become active listeners. "Interviewing helps build self-confidence and gives learners practice in both oral language (asking questions) and written language (taking notes)" (Bertrand & Stice, 2002:87-98). The actual words of the interviewee, as well as impressions and perceptions of the interviewer are of value. Learners can write out their report (with comments and observations added in brackets) and then present it orally. The presentation could take the form of a television interview if the dialogue is transcribed.

Afterwards the possible solutions should be discussed and learners should practice the necessary skills required, for example assertiveness skills. Positive skills/answers should be practiced, such as saying in an assertive tone 'I would appreciate if you could stop picking on me!', and negative advice such as 'Hit the bully and he or she will leave you alone!' should also be discussed (Hall, 2006).

It may be necessary to teach assertiveness skills to help learners acquire verbal and emotional defense mechanisms. Children need to use 'I' messages when confronted with a bully (Anderson & Swiatowy, 2008). Language teachers need not take on the role of counselors to help learners distinguish between submissive/passive, aggressive and assertive communication. It is always better for communication to use assertive words and phrases. In assertive communication one would use clear, direct requests or directives instead of hinting, or using indirect/direct commands. Learners should learn to use 'I' instead of 'you' messages (e.g. 'You need to stop immediately with your nonsense' (aggressive communication) in comparison to assertive communication 'I would really appreciate it you could stop saying the things you say'). Learners should learn to express thoughts, feelings and opinions reflecting ownership (e.g. 'He makes me really angry' – denies ownership in comparison to an 'I' message reflecting ownership – 'I get angry when he bullies me') (Lloyd, 1995).

7. Role play and dramatization

> "Classrooms should be structured to promote kindness, cooperation and communication … Positive social interaction should be reinforced through role-playing, literature, writing, and various other assignments" (Adamski & Ryan, 2008:25;26).

According to Wessels and van den Berg (1998:145-147) role-play empowers learners in the following ways:

- They are exposed to everyday situations that occur inside and outside the classroom.
- They acquire social skills, the ability to conduct small talk and interact with people.
- Role-play helps them to become fluent speakers.
- Role-play maximises learner talk-time.

Assertiveness skills can be acquired through role-play. Ideally easy scenarios should be used for children to practice appropriate reactions. Learners and the teacher as facilitator should discuss how one would react aggressively, passively and assertively and why assertive behaviour is better than the other two ways of communicating. Examples that one could use is:

> *Sipho has taken Thandi's pen without permission.*
> *Thandi called Jane 'names' in front of other learners.*
> *John threatens you into giving him your maths homework answers.*

To ensure the development of good listening, writing and speaking skills, the teacher should find material that challenges learners to find solutions. The teacher could for instance read a letter from a magazine or newspaper on the issue at hand (e.g. 'bullying'). The selected letter is re-written as a dialogue by learners and then acted out by learners as the 'writer' and 'dr Misery'. Learners can debate a possible solution to the problem in groups and compare the solutions. The class could then write a letter to explain possible solutions (see Wessels & van den Berg, 1998). Any oral text on an issue such as 'bullying' can be dramatised by learners.

Dramatisation helps with the following (Wessels & van den Berg, 1998:162):

- Learners usually enjoy the activity and learn in a playful way.
- Drama provides an outlet for self-expression.
- It helps learners to become more socially aware.
- It helps with fluency in speech.
- Learners gain self-knowledge, self-respect and self-confidence.
- It teaches children to co-operate with others.

By using drama, learners learn to listen to each other, to speak their mind, but also to use critical thinking skills to create solutions to problems in scenarios. They become better observers and learn to comment on issues. Learners can conduct interviews with each other, where the interviewee plays a role of for instance the 'bully' or the 'victim' in a bullying scenario or the class can conduct a court case to decide whether the bully is really guilty of the accused behaviour. They can even write and shoot a film on a theme like 'bullying' (see Wessels & van den Berg 1998).

7.1 Puppets

"Teachers of young children can act out bullying scenarios using puppets to play the roles of victim and bully. As children mature into adolescence, teachers can encourage children

to develop scripts that depict bullying and use puppets to act out the scenarios (Crothers & Kolbert, 2008:134). The use of puppets removes the storyteller from direct contact with the audience. It is easier to express emotions and feelings in such an indirect way. Decision making, cooperative planning and problem solving are some of the skills learners will learn to use when doing a story with puppets (Bertrand & Stice, 2002).

The use of puppets would also enhance the following skills (Wessels & van den Berg, 1998):
- It improves self-confidence.
- Language usage improves.
- Learners learn to think about an issue and to handle it creatively.
- It helps with concentration and with smaller children it helps with hand coordination.
- Bigger children practice their writing skills, especially the writing of direct dialogue when writing a puppet play.
- Working with a theme such as 'bullying' may include discussions/debates, literature (reading books/articles or Internet sites), drama and practicing skills.

7.2 Stories

Learners can act out scenarios, watch videos/DVDs and read books/poems on the selected theme (Crothers & Kolbert, 2008). Reading stories develops a learner's imagination and stimulates creative and critical thinking. Stories about virtues such as 'empathy' develop moral values. Movies could have the same purpose.

Storybooks on bullying might help bullies and victims to identify with characters and they might either learn to stand up for themselves or to feel empathy (Anderson & Swiatowy, 2008). Books like *My Secret Bully, Queen Bees and Wannabes, Nobody knew what to do a story about bullying or Crash* could be read aloud in class and debates could follow. Movies/DVDs like *Odd Girl Out, Bullies are a pain in the brain, End the silence: stop the bullying or Cliques, Phonies, and other Baloney* could be shown and discussed with great success (Adamski & Ryan, 2008).

8. Conclusion

All of the preceding ideas on how to inculcate social and communicative skills in learners, also have the advantage of teaching many language skills in an integrated way. Good teachers know that learners learn best when they are engaged in their own learning. Learners engage with learning material if it is part of their life world and they are interested in the topic. Learners learn best when they are in pursuit of something they want to know or learn about. "Engaged learners are motivated, strategic, knowledgeable, and socially interactive" (Bertrand & Stice, 2002:xviii).

For survival in this world, young people need to learn specific skills. Social and communicative skills are important for learners to say what they think and how they feel. If learners can learn these skills in the language classroom in an indirect but content-based way, it will be to their advantage when confronted with contentious issues like bullying.

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