



## Challenges with the Teaching and Learning of English Language in a Bilingual Classroom

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### Abstract

The aim of the study was to identify challenges encountered in the teaching and learning of English in a bilingual classroom and as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT) among rural schools under the King Cetshwayo District of South Africa, and to suggest ways to improve the situation. Using mixed research methods, data were collected using interviews and questionnaires from a randomly selected group of twenty (20) teachers and forty (40) bilingual learners within the district. It was found that the majority of teachers lack training on grammar, which leads them to focus more on literature. The study recommends re-skilling of language teachers and improvement in their approaches to the teaching of grammar.

**Keywords:** Bilingual learners, barriers, linguistics, pedagogy, language teacher

### Introduction

The language of education is arguably a very powerful obstacle to the educational achievement of bilingual learners in their quest to learn through the medium of English in a bilingual classroom. The most common problems which contribute to the poor performance in state schools include the teacher-pupil ratio, the availability of teaching and learning material and the inadequate training of the teachers to teach in English (Jawahar & Dempster, 2013; Rudwick, 2004, Pretorius & Matjila, 2004), which is the language of education and school management as a whole. This signals inefficiency in the academic and economic progress of the country as a whole. In addition to these challenges, teachers and learners are exposed to the linguistic problems that emanate from the everyday teaching and learning of language in schools. Rudwick (2004) observes that learners find it

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difficult to learn through a second language which neither teachers nor learners have mastered.

In their study, Othman and Saat (2009) found that there was a need to address the needs of English language learners with regard to other academic language developments that are not limited to vocabulary, but which also include language structures and discourse features in science. It could be argued that learning opportunities are not designed to meet the basic learning needs of bilingual learners if the language of instruction becomes a barrier of knowledge to both learners and teachers. Education cannot possibly be equitable and non-discriminatory when the medium of instruction is a language that neither the teachers nor the learners can use effectively (Rudwick, 2004; Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2004). As a result, it will be difficult for many learners to understand classroom conversations and discussions if both teachers and learners are not exposed to the grammar of English and how words ought to be used to negotiate meaning in both social and academic situations (Hoadley, 2012) as is the case with most rural state schools in Southern Africa. In a rural bilingual classroom environment, learners come from different backgrounds which include those with low exposure to English. Other linguistic challenges include the teaching of language by non-language teachers, the use of a single teaching strategy throughout the year on various classroom activities, and many other contributing factors.

Linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) enable the learners to express themselves across cultural and language boundaries, are pivotal in the study of any language and they must be taught by a qualified language teacher who has a complete understanding of both the learners' L1 grammar and the grammar of English language. Without a thorough understanding of the rules of the language, the learners will be at a disadvantage to cope with the realms of academic life, negotiate meaning and express themselves in the English language. This study was conducted in schools where English is taught as an L2 with isiZulu being L1 of most learners, which is an indication for bilingual education. This district consists of both urban and deep rural schools wherein the majority of the learners are

Black Africans who speak isiZulu as their L1 and study English as their L2.

### **Research objectives**

1. To identify the challenges in the teaching and learning of the English language in a bilingual classroom in King Cetshwayo District.
2. To find ways to improve the teaching and learning of English in the King Cetshwayo District.

### **Research questions**

1. What challenges, if any, do English language teachers face in the teaching of the English language in a bilingual classroom in the King Cetshwayo District?
2. What challenges, if any, do learners face in the learning of the English language in a bilingual classroom in the King Cetshwayo District?
3. How can the teaching and learning of the English language be improved in the King Cetshwayo District?
- 4.

### **Literature review**

Fatchulkip (2008) argues that linguistics is important for language teaching, because linguistics and language teaching can be likened to the relationship of knowledge about the engine and the skill of driving a car. It will be better for the driver to be supported with some knowledge about the car or the engine so that they can drive it well and know how to overcome some engine trouble in case they have to face it. In the same way it will be better if language teachers have some knowledge about, for instance, the characteristics of language in general and the specific language they are teaching in particular. In this relation, they should know how language works, and what structures are used in the particular language they are teaching. They should get familiar, for instance, with the theory about the general mechanism of producing speech sounds, so that they will be able to tackle any pronunciation problem the learners may encounter.

Pica (1983) has argued that instruction may lead to improved accuracy for formally simple structures that display a straightforward form-

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function relation (e.g. plural –s) and it may help learners learn the form but not the use of formally simple structures that display a relatively complex form-function relation (e.g. progressive –ing), and that this may lead learners to commit errors. Reeves (2009:112) as quoted in Beckerman (2017: 5) argues that ‘Linguistic knowledge for teaching in the new sociocultural frame is teachers’ ability to use and teach language in ways that grant learners a full range of expression’. Language knowledge is important in the school environment. It is vital for the learners to know how to comprehend, analyse and to punctuate speech without any linguistic difficulties. If language skills are not well structured to the learners’ academic and social journey, the learner is more likely to struggle with progression in both academic and in social life.

The findings of the study conducted by Çelik and Kocaman (2015) revealed that middle school students have difficulty in linguistic areas of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, respectively. The instructional factors such as teachers’ choice of methodology, teaching and management skills, teacher knowledge of the field and affective factors adversely affect the language learning and development in the school system. It could then be argued that teacher training in universities needs a strong focus on linguistics in order to minimise the linguistic gaps raised in literature. Beckerman (2017) is of the view that school performance seems to be most affected in subjects that require higher levels of concentration, such as grammar. It is for this linguistic fact that teachers of language must be qualified language teachers so that language does not become an obstacle to academic and social development of a child. The author argues that any interruption in education and not having any education contribute to pre-literacy or significant low-literacy levels and other academic challenges when learning English grammar.

Mkhatshwa (2005) established from the students’ work that it cannot be presumed that non-native speakers would have knowledge of the structure of a given language and working of the English language without explicit instruction. This grammatical knowledge of sentential structure, as argued by Mkhatshwa, also applies to native speakers in

order for them to fully appreciate and negotiate meaning, in terms of what they mean to say exactly. It could then be argued that learners' lack of sentential structure restricts their ability to access information in the form of thoughts and ideas. This is largely worse if both the teacher and the learner do not have knowledge of grammatical structure, and even worse if language is taught by a non-language teacher. A study conducted by Lukhele in 2011 highlights absence of linguistic knowledge from a language teacher as an obstacle itself since the teacher will not be in a position to explain, analyse and give relevant feedback on issues of language in a classroom if knowledge of linguistics is absent. In her language study, it was found that the course that was failed by most participants was Academic Communication Skills, which involves among other skills, report and composition writing, reading comprehension, summary writing, grammar and literature.

Further, Perkins (2013) argues that many teachers know nothing when it comes to the teaching of language (grammar). In addition, their experience (teachers) of reading and language teaching does not enable them to critique any model of reading given to them. This is a serious problem to the study of language as it raises concerns such as those highlighted by Rudwick (2004) when she postulates the probability of the amount of language content which may be transferred from teacher to learner when both teachers and learners do not understand knowledge presented in English. If the linguistic analysis skill is missing from the teachers who teach language, there is very little or none that could be transferred to the learners.

Pretorius and Matjila (2004) are also of the same view that teachers and learners are struggling, not only with English but also with literacy in general (Pretorius & Matjila, 2004:16). The problem that many learners in public schools have today is not simply a language problem but is a literacy problem. Once learners have learned to read (i.e. decode), they are progressing towards attaining mastery of a text. This will help the learners to master other subjects as well without difficulties. Therefore, since second-language learning usually takes place in situations of formal instruction and learners acquire the rules

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and units of the target language through guided instruction by a teacher, the language teacher should be an expert in the target language to be able to make informed judgements as regards the immediate aspects of English grammar that are a source of difficulty in students' act of understanding English grammar (Mkhatshwa, 2007, Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000, Govender, 2009).

### **Research methodology**

This study was conducted through the use of mixed research methods, which include the use of interviews and questionnaires. According to Wium and Louw (2018), mixed methods can be used when the quantitative or the qualitative method by itself appears to be inadequate to create a complete understanding of the research problem or to develop multiple perspectives of a phenomenon.

### **Research instruments**

Questionnaires and interviews were used as instruments to collect data in this study. There were separate questionnaires for teachers and learners. Both questionnaires and interviews were administered to a group of selected teachers who teach English in rural schools under King Cetshwayo District and bilingual learners in the FET phase who study both English and isiZulu. These are the same participants who responded to questionnaires. The interviews were conducted in both isiZulu and English since some students were not comfortable enough in speaking English. A recording device was used during interviews on both teachers and learners. Ethical considerations were taken into account when this instrument was used. The recording device was only used if the participant granted permission to do so, and in the case where a participant was not happy with the recording; it was not used, instead, what was discussed was written down after the interview.

### **Sampling of the participants**

Schools were randomly selected from the list that was obtained from the Department of Basic Education in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Rural schools were targeted within the King Cetshwayo District. The district consists of four circuits: Umlalazi, Mthonjaneni, Mthunzini, and Nkandla. In each circuit, five teachers who teach English in grades

10, 11 and 12 were selected and were each asked to identify two of their best learners in English. This means in each circuit five teachers and ten best English learners who were selected by their English language teachers participated in the study. In total, twenty (20) teachers and forty (40) learners (who were identified by their teachers) participated in the study. All of them participated in both interviews and questionnaires.

### ***Data analysis***

Data were analysed using the interpretive paradigm, as described by Cohen and Manion (2000: 36) that ‘...the central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience.’ Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) maintain that in the interpretive paradigm every effort is made to try to understand the viewpoint of the subject being observed, rather than the viewpoint of the observer. This study focused on qualitative methods to interpret data that were collected in schools at King Cetshwayo District.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Results from teacher interviews and questionnaires***

Teachers indicated that they experience various challenges during teaching and learning in English classes. Among others, these include learner motivation, reading and writing problems, lack of resources to teach and assess language and the use of English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). While the academic role of a language teacher is to be in a position to detect language errors in the learners' work, explain them, and try to remedy the problems, it was evident in most sampled schools that teachers are unable to detect and to explain how the errors ought to be corrected. This could be an indication of why most learners who have passed their matriculation struggle to read and write in an acceptable academic manner. Fareed et al. (2016) claim that poor writing skills originate from two factors: the teacher and the learner. Teachers lack appropriate pedagogic approach to teach writing. On the other hand, students face numerous challenges, like effects of L1 transfer, lack of reading, motivation and practice. It could then be argued that learners' written

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work requires a level of control where it is characterized by sentence units that contain a sequence of events that are not in order, disconnected ideas and clausal chaining. In order for a teacher to make meaning of a learner’s work, the teacher must know why language units need to be presented in a logical manner and explain to the learner reasons for such logical sequence. Therefore, linguistic knowledge is of great help when language teachers are faced with such situations and helps both the teacher and the learner to develop a sense of understanding and motivation to learn more.

The table below tabulates the challenges which are faced by teachers in the provision of a fair and just language teaching and learning atmosphere to bilingual learners in a bilingual classroom. These challenges represent the themes that were identified in the qualitative data.

**Table 1: Teacher challenges during the teaching of language in their classrooms**

	Learner Motivation to learn	Teaching Aids Availability	Teaching Styles/Methods	Teachers' Knowledge of LoLT	Teachers' Knowledge of English Grammar	Teachers' Knowledge of isiZulu Grammar	Language Skills Knowledge
Grade 10	65/100	45/100	65% Teacher to learner	65/100	50/100	80/100	40%Listening 30%Speaking 35% Reading 40% Writing
Grade 11	45/100	40/100	75% Teacher to learner	70/100	50/100	80/100	20%Listening 30%Speaking 40% Reading 50% Writing
Grade 12	50/100	55/100	55% Teacher to learner	80/100	55/100	80/100	50%Listening 60%Speaking 50% Reading 50% Writing

Quite a few of the teachers expressed concerns about knowledge of these language units. Some indicated a need to be trained in the language (grammar) so that they are better equipped with the



linguistic and communicative approaches to language teaching. Some indicated that these language structures were not part of their tertiary studies and the worst part is when they attend workshops where there are no skilled professionals within the department who will adequately assist them.

This study found that there is more focus on literature than on language (grammar) in the rural bilingual classroom. The language activities which are given to the learners with an aim to develop their language skills in most cases include the following: fill in the missing words, match column A with column B, reading aloud, writing of an obituary, writing of a diary entry, writing of letters, advertisements, comprehension passages, and many other writing activities, which happen in the classroom when the main focus in the writing is in content rather than the assessment of linguistic units which form part of a language study. The language assessments that are done highly promote oral proficiency over the other skills, which means there is no balance in all the four language skills. This then becomes difficult for the teachers to monitor learners' progress in language learning and, as a result, they are unable to help and identify the learners who are struggling in language. Some teachers admitted to lacking the basic knowledge of grammar and language learning theories. For instance, a response which was received from a Grade 12 educator states that there is no need for any theory to be used in the language classroom:

*'We don't need a theory to teach language. Theories are old and outdated. Now we even use SMS language to communicate with our learners, even government external papers promote that. So which theory is that?'*

Another teacher explained that teaching a novel, short story and poetry is the best way of teaching language:

*'Focusing on grammatical structures is a problem because it makes learners afraid to talk fearing that they will make errors and other learners will laugh at them. During the teaching and learning of*

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*literature, learners can talk about characters in a short story and that is how they learn the language, through talking and listening’.*

This was a common belief in most schools that participated in this research. On the contrary, when language teachers were asked to provide more information on the linguistic structure of English and isiZulu languages, the majority (90%) of them had no idea of what structure was all about. This confirmed what the majority of them had said – that they lacked basic knowledge of grammar.

### **Results from learner interviews and questionnaires**

It was found that learners in their grammar learning are faced with problems of translating isiZulu texts into the English language with the aim of finding meaning in English. It could, however, be argued that any textual mastery requires one to have a developed structure of the target language. If the target language is not fully developed, certain aspects of a language will be fossilised. Fossilisation is a linguistic phenomenon in its own right and manifested as deviant forms from target language (TL), and it occurs at all levels, from phonological layer to pragmatic layer (Wei, 2008). The transition from learning to read in young children to reading to learn among older children is essential for advanced vocabulary development. Learning to read and write alone is significant, but needs to be boosted by the ability to use and apply all linguistic skills in a given scenario by language users, and, arguably, this skill can be best developed by qualified language teachers who know the various language components and how these should be taught to second language learners of the target language (English).

Learners also expressed challenges that they were facing. The majority of them expressed their unhappiness in the manner in which they learn the language. They highlighted that language learning is crucial to their academic excellence, yet there is no available means to foster language learning except for sharing a literature textbook. They highlighted that the only time that they learn the language is when they are introduced to parts of speech and in most cases, teachers do

not give learners feedback. One Grade 12 learner responded by saying that:

*'We are given sentences to change and fill in missing words, join the sentences using conjunctions, give singular and plurals of words; we are given an activity to write and most of us fail it and we are given corrections. The teacher comes to write answers, but when we ask about those answers, we are told its grammar rules. The next morning, we are told to go in the front and present, it's oral time now, then the teacher sits at the back and records marks based on our presentations. We then accept whatever marks we are given because we don't even know and we haven't been taught or told about presentations.'*

From a linguistic perspective, a grade 10 and 11 language teacher needs to teach more of a language (grammar) and then literary texts so that by the time learners experience all the stress in Grade 12, they are in a better position to apply their linguistic skills in the content subjects as well. In this way, they acquire the much needed knowledge of discourse analysis since their learning will require them to understand, interpret and analyse any given text for them to write for examination purposes. It cannot be further underscored that denying learners exposure to grammar and focusing largely on literature has dire consequences as learners are unable to interpret the very literature they are learning. It takes adequate training and competence on the part of the teacher to fully appreciate the value of grammar as central to the understanding and interpretation of literary texts and other learning materials and to devise strategies of teaching it in class. This would go a long way in paving way for learners, especially second language learners of English, in this case, to enhance their understanding of literary texts in English, and to improve their general understanding of and competence in the language. This is especially expressly required for learners in similar contexts, where exposure to the English language is limited.

### **Conclusion**

This article has discussed the challenges associated with the teaching and learning of English as an LoLT in a rural bilingual classroom, focussing on schools in the King Cetshwayo District. Among the challenges are inadequate training on the part of teachers to identify and correct learners' grammatical errors. This could be remedied if English is taught by qualified language teachers, instead of allocating language teaching to any non-language specialist. Having little or no training means that teachers often lack opportunities to gain competence in the LoLT. The majority of teachers in the district who participated in the study are themselves second-language speakers of English who, by their own admission, lack knowledge and competence in grammar. Being a second language speaker of English is no problem at all, as being a first language speaker of a language is not a qualification to teach it, but the lack of knowledge and competence on the part of English language teachers is a serious challenge that needs urgent attention.

Teachers must be empowered such that they are in a position to assist learners in grammar, which learners insist is much needed. During language teaching and learning, it could help if the language is viewed and used as an object of fascination and excitement, and learners are given plenty of opportunities to use their languages for authentic communication, collective knowledge generation, and affirmation of personal identities. Perhaps, a mixture of the communicative approach and structural approach would best remedy the current linguistic situation, which inhibits the current language teaching and learning in rural secondary schools, as shown in the findings of this study. Also, feedback must be given to learners, and this has to be done regularly in order for it to be effective. Teachers need to explain to learners why the wrong answer cannot be correct, instead of just saying 'it's grammar', as was reported by learners during interviews. In this way, learners would be learning some rules of grammar, which would go a long way towards assisting them with the much-needed tools of language that would unlock their potential to read and understand literary and other texts. This would bear fruit in the long

run and ensure access to reading materials (prescribed and recommended readings) and overall success in their academic lives.

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