English medium of instruction: a situation analysis

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The majority of learners in southern Africa receive their education through the medium of a second language, English. Although teachers of English play a crucial role in helping learners to acquire language skills in the medium of instruction, we argue that subject content teachers' lack of attention to the teaching of the four language skills may be a raison d'être *for learners' lack of academic achievement. A situation analysis conducted among three study populations examined the extent to which subject content teachers took responsibility for the teaching of language skills in the content classroom, as well as possible reasons for not doing so. It also shed some light on the amount of language teaching that actually took place in a content classroom. The aim of the situation analysis was to determine whether there was a need for a specialised training course for English second language medium of instruction teachers.*

Introduction

Despite a growing awareness that mother tongue (MT) education is more effective than bilingual or second language medium of instruction (Heugh, 2002: 171; Rademeyer, 2005:7), English as a second language has become the dominant medium of instruction in southern Africa (De Klerk, 2002:3; De Wet, 2002:119; Brock-Utne, 2000:6; Kgosana, 2006:17; Rademeyer, 2006:15).

The South African National Curriculum Statement (South Africa Department of Education (SADoE), 2002) declares that, since the first additional language (FAL) may also be used as language of teaching and learning, its teaching and learning should achieve levels of proficiency that meet the threshold level necessary for effective learning across the curriculum. This proficiency includes 'the abstract cognitive academic language skills required for thinking and learning' (SADoE, 2002:4). However, a recent survey conducted by independent consultants Horne and Hough (Horne, 2005:1) found that in contrast to the 20% of Grade 11 learners who could read and write English on the appropriate level in 1998, only 12% of the Grade 11s who applied for bursaries for tertiary education in 2005 demonstrated a corresponding level of literacy.

It is generally accepted that teachers of English play a leading role in providing learners with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to read, write, speak and listen effectively (Arkoudis, 2003:162). However, Goodwyn and Findlay (2003:27) point out that all teachers have a stake in effective literacy. Learners may fail to understand academic concepts through the language they are still learning because their subject content teachers are incapable of assisting them to do so (Crandall, 1998:18).

As a lack of attention to the teaching of functional language skills may be considered a *raison d'être* for learners' lack of academic achievement, the aim in this article was to report on and analyse the ability and willingness of some

Second Language Medium of Instruction (L2MI) subject content teachers to engage in the teaching of language skills in the subject content classroom. The following questions were investigated in this study:

- What do subject content teachers report regarding their responsibility towards and the frequency with which they include language-teaching activities in the content classroom?
- How much language teaching actually takes place in the subject content classroom?
- Have L2MI subject content teachers received training in L2MI; what needs for training can they identify, and what recommendations can they make regarding effective teaching through medium of a second language?

Methodology

A qualitative and quantitative survey was conducted among three study populations (SP1, SP2, and SP3) in order to obtain a composite picture of the teaching of language skills in some L2MI classrooms in southern Africa.

Thirty-two L2MI subject content teachers from six schools in North-West Province and three schools in Eastern Cape Province formed the first study population. The schools included primary and secondary schools from Klerksdorp, Potchefstroom, Ventersdorp, Elliot, Barkly-East, and Sterkspruit and represented urban, semi-rural, and rural communities. These teachers were an accessible population owing to time and practical constraints. Although a small sample, these teachers could be considered representative of the different types of teaching communities in South Africa. English language teachers were excluded. Foundation Phase teachers were also excluded, as most of these schools used the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in Grades 1 – 3. Only subject content teachers teaching Grades 4 – 12 with more than five years' experience in L2MI were included. All three of the research questions pertained to this group.

Study population two consisted of 38 in-service L2MI content teachers who were enrolled for the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) at the North-West University in 2005. These teachers provided some insight into how content teachers went about their lesson planning with regard to the inclusion of language teaching strategies. Teachers in study population 2 all applied for exemption from a language-training course on account of their experience as L2MI teachers (i.e. recognition of prior learning). Language teachers and Foundation Phase teachers were again not included. Study population 2 was not specifically asked to provide answers to research question 3, but their answers still provided an indication of the training needs of the L2MI teacher.

The third study population came from three Namibian schools. Namibian teachers were selected because Namibia follows one of the strictest English medium of instruction policies in Africa since it is compulsory after Grade 3 (Brock-Utne, 2000;2 Mutorwa, 2004:1). Most of the teachers in the system were either teachers or learners when the transition from a predominantly

Afrikaans or German educational system to English L2MI was made in 1990. Norris (1999:12) states that it is normally accepted that teachers generate their own educational theories from their personal teaching, reflection on that teaching and self-analysis. Namibian teachers could, therefore, be able to supply valuable information and/or advice regarding the inclusion of specific skills in the L2MI training programme, or could highlight some strategies and techniques for effective teaching through the medium of a second language. The Namibian teachers included:

- Four Grade 4 teachers from a primary school in Windhoek. They were selected because the transition to L2MI takes place in this grade. The teachers included two Social Sciences teachers (History and Geography), one Arts and Culture teacher, and one Mathematics teacher.
- One teacher from a primary school in a rural area in Bushmanland teaching learners ranging from Grades 4 – 7 in the same classroom. As this teacher was, at the time, the only teacher appointed at the school, he was expected to teach all the subjects prescribed by the syllabus.
- Four Grade 8 teachers from a secondary school in Windhoek. This school accommodated learners from both urban and rural areas. The teachers taught Mathematics, History, Natural Science, and Accountancy. Grade 8 teachers were selected because pupils' transition to secondary school not only increases academic demand but also because of 'the receptive and expressive "load" of language' (Olivier *et al.*, 2000:20).

All three research questions pertained to this group.

Four different data collection techniques were used in the study. The first study population completed a questionnaire. This required teachers to provide biographical information and to comment on what they regarded as the training needs of L2MI teachers. They were asked to reply to 24 questions aimed at providing a picture of how they planned their lessons and what these lessons contained. They were also asked to indicate the frequency with which they introduced the teaching of the four language skills in their content classrooms. General questions regarding the introduction of each language skill (e.g. how frequently do you teach reading skills?) were followed by more specific questions focusing on relevant teaching strategies (e.g. how frequently do you teach skimming and scanning?). Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale, indicating the frequency of their teaching practices. The final section of the questionnaire was aimed at establishing how teachers viewed their responsibility regarding the teaching of language skills in the content classroom. The questionnaire was piloted and refined. Of the 80 questionnaires distributed, 32 were returned.

Teachers in study population two (SP2) were required to submit a portfolio of lessons as proof that they could qualify for exemption from a compulsory language course for NPDE students. Twenty-six of the 38 teachers who submitted portfolios complied with the requirements (i.e. they had more than five years' experience in L2MI and none of them was a Language or Foundation Phase teacher). In addition to providing insight into the lesson planning of

L2MI content teachers, the portfolios provided some data regarding the level of these L2MI teachers' writing proficiency. Teachers were requested to select any lesson from the curriculum (textbook or syllabus) of the content subject that they taught. They had to design a lesson in accordance with guiding questions that focused on the inclusion of language teaching strategies in their subject content and were required to include the learning materials used in the lesson. These had to be included in the portfolio. The portfolios were assessed by both the researchers and an experienced lecturer with a proven record of academic attainment and publications on second language education.

A five-point Likert scale and a rubric[1] were used to assess whether teachers could identify language outcomes for the content classroom, and plan for the integration of language skills. Their writing proficiency was also assessed. Although these teachers were not specifically asked to provide answers to research question three, an interpretation of their responses shed some light on the training needs of the L2MI teacher.

The teachers in study population three were interviewed, then observed in their classrooms, and again interviewed as a follow-up. They were questioned on their teaching experience, training in L2MI, problems they encountered in their teaching (if any), and their views on what constituted effective L2MI teaching. They were also asked to suggest specific areas that prospective L2MI teachers needed to be prepared for in their training. Interview questions were aligned with the research questions. Observations of lessons were aimed at establishing whether information provided during the semi-structured interviews was reflected in the lessons. No observation sheet was used but, in line with qualitative research practice (Leedy & Ormond, 2005:133), impressions and comments relating to the strategies used for teaching language skills in the subject content classroom were listed. During the follow-up, questions relating to their individual teaching practice were asked, e.g. Why didn't you write the new words on the blackboard? Why did you speak so slowly?

Analysis and discussion of results
The results of the study are discussed in terms of the three questions investigated. The findings from the three study populations are integrated in order to arrive at a composite picture reflecting the L2MI classroom situation.

Question 1: What do teachers say about language teaching in the subject
            content classroom?
SP1 and SP3 provided answers to Question 1.

A cross-tabular analysis of the data collected from the questionnaires completed by SP1 (*cf*. Table 1) compared the teachers' assumed responsibility regarding the teaching of language skills and their actual teaching practice. Answers indicating that teachers 'always' or 'usually' taught these skills were grouped together. Although 66% of the teachers regarded the teaching of the

four language skills as their responsibility, only 47% of the teachers reported that they always or usually taught language skills (*cf.* Table 1).

Table 1 A comparison of assumed responsibility and actual practice of language teaching

	I always/ usually teach language skills (% rounded)	My responsibility (% rounded)
1. READING		
1.1 Teaching reading skills	87	82
1.2 Teaching skimming and scanning techniques	43	68
1.3 Showing learners how to identify key vocabulary in a passage	72	83
1.4 Teaching learners how to read with comprehension	63	82
1.5 Introducing reading strategies e.g. webs or timelines for improving reading skills	26	37
Average	58	70
2. WRITING		
2.2 Teaching writing skills	57	46
2.3 Teaching learners how to write coherent sentences	44	58
3.3 Identifying spelling errors in learners' written work	65	78
3.4 Helping learners with techniques to promote correct spelling	38	40
3.5 Teaching learners how to write well-structured paragraph	36	28
3.6 Indicating grammatical errors in written work	45	66
3.7 Introducing exercises that will promote grammatical correctness	27	40
Average	44	51
4. SPEAKING AND LISTENING		
4.1 Introducing group and individual activities that will require my students to use speaking and listening skills	64	92
4.2 Promoting my learner's speaking and listening skills by using additional scaffolding, listening exercises, recordings, etc.	22	40
4.3 Teaching pronunciation	32	60
Average	39	77
Average of all the language skills	47	66

A closer analysis of the data indicated that the highest frequency of language teaching occurred in the more general areas of language teaching, e.g. the teaching of reading skills or the introduction of group activities for oral purposes. Questions that focused on more specific strategies, e.g. exercises for promoting effective listening, teaching skimming and scanning techniques or specific reading strategies, indicated that fewer teachers regarded it as their responsibility to teach these skills. The frequency with which teachers from SP1 and SP3 reported that they taught writing skills, or accepted responsibility for the teaching of these, indicated that this was one of the most neglected areas. Although most teachers indicated that they identified spelling errors in their learners' work, only 44% of the teachers from SP1 said they took an interest in teaching their learners how to write coherent sentences. They also seldom indicated grammatical errors in their learners' written work. However, Parkinson (2001:280), Short (2002:23), Schleppegrell, Aghugar and Oteiza (2004:67) as well as Mohan and Beckett (2003:423) emphasise the importance of the consistent teaching of grammar and writing skills in the content classroom as a way of promoting the learner's ability to engage in academic discourse.

Three of the four Grade 8 teachers from SP3 felt that the teaching of language skills was not their responsibility. They expected language skills to be in place by the time learners reached high school. Two of the four Grade 4 teachers held similar views. All the Grade 8 teachers were worried about completing a full syllabus if too much time was spent on teaching language skills. Although they expressed concern about the lower levels of language proficiency displayed by learners from the rural areas, they could not suggest any strategy for effectively dealing with this problem. The Grade 8 History teacher commented that many of these learners found it very difficult to pass their first year in high school.

A significant finding from the first study population related to the low number of teachers (only 32%) who indicated that they taught their learners to pronounce English. The fact that teachers in SP1 were all second language speakers of English suggested that they may either not have recognised incorrect pronunciation or may not have known how to assist learners with it. It is also possible that they do not regard pronunciation as important. All the teachers in SP3 said they taught pronunciation when introducing new vocabulary at the beginning of a lesson or when reading to the class. The observation of classes provided only limited evidence of this, however, especially the Grade 8 classes. None of the teachers teaching Grade 4 or Grade 8 drew attention to differences between spelling and pronunciation or had the learners repeat a difficult term out loud. Both these strategies are important for teaching correct pronunciation (Titlestad, 1999:341).

Question 2: How much language teaching actually takes place in the content classroom?

All three study populations provided answers to this question.

When asked about the vocabulary, language structures and grammatical functions required for teaching a specific lesson, the majority of teachers identified vocabulary. When this was scrutinised, however, the 'key vocabulary' they identified often bore no relevance to the learning material for the lesson, or was too easy for the specific grade (e.g. words such as 'roar' and 'play' for Grade 7 learners). Only 1% of SP3 teachers indicated that they made use of scaffolding techniques such as pictures and/or demonstrations to explain the meaning of new words, while 3% of them planned for learners to use dictionaries to look up synonyms for new words. Observation of teachers in study population three showed only the Grade 8 Mathematics teacher and the Grade 4 Social Sciences (Geography) teacher focusing on new vocabulary in their lessons. Both these teachers wrote the vocabulary words on the blackboard and explained them by asking pupils what they thought the words meant. They did not use any strategies or techniques for introducing new vocabulary.

When it came to the identification of grammatical structures, only two of the teachers from SP2 could identify grammatical structures that were applicable to their lessons. None of the teachers from SP3 attempted to identify specific grammatical structures — not even in a Grade 8 History class where the theme of 'Causes of the Second World War' presented an opportunity for teaching or reviewing cause and effect statements or the sequence of tenses. A similar situation was observed in the Grade 4 Arts class. This teacher demonstrated rather than explained Art techniques. Although Echevarria, Vogt and Short (2004:19) suggest demonstration as a strategy for bridging the language gap in an L2MI classroom, the Arts teacher overlooked an opportunity for teaching appropriate adjectives and adverbs that would, for example, enable learners to describe the method or the texture and colour of their works of art. These findings suggest that, even when teachers are using satisfactory subject-teaching strategies and techniques, they need to be made aware of how to recognise and optimise language-teaching opportunities in the content classroom.

When teachers in SP2 were required to indicate how they would introduce a reading activity in the lesson they presented in their portfolios, more than 50% included a reading passage that bore no relevance to the subject topic of the lesson. There was no indication that these teachers knew how to help learners understand the specific textual demands of a discipline so that they could gain control of the language, as Schleppegrell *et al.* (2004:88) suggest should be done

None of the teachers in SP2, or those in SP3, planned for the teaching or use of reading strategies, such as predicting or restructuring texts, or interpreting graphic organizers such as webs, Venn diagrams or charts. Lewis and Wray (1999:278), as well as Olivier *et al.* (2000:29), consider these strategies of particular importance for the development of academic literacy.[2]

Since L2MI teachers are expected to help their learners explain, describe, define, justify, sequence, compare and evaluate content (Short, 1993:4; Mohan & Beckett, 2003:423), one of the most significant findings in the port-

folios related to the absence of writing skills of the in-service L2MI teachers. In 15% of these teachers' work, spelling errors were frequent (more than 12 errors), even of common words. Frequent errors (concord, pronoun misuse, tenses) were very noticeable and affected meaning. Some sentences were incoherent and/or incomplete. Ideas were, in general, not well communicated. Fifty-three percent of the teachers made between four and 12 grammatical and/or spelling errors. Their writing not only lacked some cohesion and suffi-cient and/or appropriate vocabulary, but they could also not sufficiently organise and/or communicate their ideas. As the teachers in SP2 had had the opportunity to edit their work, and consider their language usage before sub-mitting the portfolio for assessment, the findings indicated that almost 68% of these teachers were incapable of recognising and correcting grammatical and spelling errors in their own work. Researchers agreed that learners' lan-guage proficiency would not improve unless they received specific and consis-tent feedback on their language usage (*cf*. Parkinson, 2001:295).

Question 3: What teachers say about their training, training needs and re-
            commendations they make regarding effective practice
Answers to Question 3 were obtained from SP1 and SP3.
     Forty-three percent of the respondents in SP1 indicated that they had received L2MI training. Yet, closer scrutiny of the answers revealed that some of the teachers who claimed to have been trained regarded Capital E en-dorsement[2] (an English Academic course on first-year level or a general com-munication course) as an adequate qualification for teaching through the medium of English. Some teachers indicated that they had received their own subject content training through the medium of English and they felt that this enabled them to teach their subject through medium of this language. None of the teachers had, however, received training in a course specifically aimed at enabling teachers to teach through the medium of their second language and/or to teach second language speakers of the medium of instruction.
     A subsequent review of the language training programmes[3] offered L2MI teachers in 2005 (i.e. not English as a major subject) at five teacher-training institutions showed the following:
• English language training is not compulsory at four of these training in-stitutions. On three of these campuses, first and second language speak-ers who can pass a diagnostic test confirming proficiency in the language are exempted from language training.
• Only 0.8% to a maximum of 6.6 % of time allocated for the attainment of a BEd degree is spent on the English language training of second lan-guage content teachers.
• Language courses are furthermore mostly scheduled for the students' second year, thereby disregarding the fact that language skills diminish when not in use (Malone *et al.*, 2003).
• Outcomes for the elective English language courses ranged from general, generic communication outcomes to the study of a number of literary texts. One university combined a course in language teaching methodo-

logy with a general English language course, but the methodology course could be taken in the students' first language.

These findings indicated that administrators and programme organisers may still be ignorant of the importance of extensive (and prolonged) training for L2MI teachers. The divergent outcomes and requirements for language training courses at the different universities highlighted the importance of establishing a framework, or guidelines, for the training of L2MI teachers.

Conclusion

Anstrom (1999:1), Al-Ansari (2000:194) and Short (2002:18) claim that learners' probability of attaining academic literacy[4] is much higher if subject teachers, not only language teachers, have received training that enables them to teach the four language skills and consciously promote the development of functional language skills in the content classroom.

The survey showed that, although many of the subject content teachers surveyed had acknowledged their responsibility for the teaching of language skills in the subject content classroom, the majority failed to perform these duties in the classroom. The reasons for these teachers' inability to assist their learners in the acquisition of academic literacy may be ascribed to some, or all, of the following factors:

• Teachers were often unaware of their inability to meet the language-related needs of their pupils.
• Teachers not only lacked the knowledge and skills for teaching the four language skills, but also lacked the insight to identify strategies that would promote effective L2MI.
• Teachers lacked the personal language proficiency required (both spoken and written) to assist their learners in the acquisition of academic literacy.
• Language proficiency was still regarded as the single most important prerequisite for effective L2MI. Teachers disregarded, or were ignorant of, the importance of applying methodological skills.
• None of the teachers had received training that equipped them with skills for effectively teaching through the medium of English.

These findings stressed the need for developing an appropriate training course for L2MI content subject teachers. Effective training in L2MI is one of the most important factors in improving the level of academic literacy in South African learners.

More hours spent on [effective] English medium of instruction in content subjects may be more beneficial than hours spent on formal language instruction in the English subject class (Al-Ansari, 2000:175).

Recommendations

Based on the results obtained in this study, the following suggestions are made:

Suggestions for pre-service training

- Even if programme organisers are faced with the reality of a national policy limiting the amount of course work that can be required for initial teacher certification, administrators and programme organisers should realise that, at least for the near future, extensive training in L2MI should prevail over some of the more generic courses.
- The linguistic, methodological, and presentational skills required for effective English medium of instruction should be standardised to enable training institutions to design appropriate training courses.
- L2MI training should be compulsory for all teacher trainees. First language speakers who do not require a language development course, still need to complete a course focusing on the methodological and presentational skills required for effective L2MI. Cross (1995) says that first language trainees are often singularly unaware of English grammar and may need to receive training in what he calls pedagogic grammar. Not only do they need to become acquainted with pedagogic grammar but they should also be made aware of contrasts with their pupils' mother tongue. Klaassen (2002) states that first language speakers are often unaware of the complexity of their sentences or their fast rate of delivery. This makes training in the methodological and presentational aspects of L2MI imperative for first language speakers.
- Pre-service teachers should be trained for at least three consecutive years. Programme organisers and administrators need to be made aware of the fact that language skills are highly perishable and will deteriorate unless frequently used. This implies that language courses need to be extensive and ongoing, spanning the four years required for obtaining a pre-service teaching qualification. An integrated course encompassing training in language development, methodological, and presentational skills, should ensure that students receive consistent and intensive language training.
- Subject content lecturers at teacher-training institutions should become involved in the teaching of language skills in the content classroom. The subject classroom at the teacher-training institution is the one place where subject lecturers can help teacher trainees deconstruct the language of their text-books (Schleppegrell *et al.*, 2004:67), thereby also enabling them to develop the academic language required for teaching their subjects through medium of English.
- L2MI language specialists should be trained to assist L2MI teachers on-site in schools or districts. It is recommended that L2MI language specialists complete an Honours degree in language education that focuses on comprehensive knowledge of the language methodology and presentational skills required by L2MI teachers from different subject areas. Assistants could, after graduation, be employed by one or more schools from the same district. In contrast with workshops and short courses that are notorious for the fleetingness of their influence (Echevarria *et al.*, 2004:21), language assistants may have an ongoing and consistent effect on the teaching of L2MI content subject teachers by providing on-site

training, advice and feedback to L2MI subject content teachers. This may prove to be a useful and effective 'intervention strategy' (Horne, 2002:42) for improving L2MI in South Africa. Upgrading teachers' proficiency and skills will have an effect on learners' attainment of academic literacy.

Suggestions for in-service training

In-service training should be extensive and ongoing. All teachers who have to teach through the medium of English should be required to obtain a qualification in English medium of instruction. This would involve training in the required language, methodological and presentational skills. A language proficiency certificate should be issued once adeptness has been assessed and found satisfactory.

Notes

1. A full report and analysis as well as the rubric with its criteria are available from the authors.
2. So-called Capital E certification is required by any South African educator who wishes to teach through the medium of English. There are no national guidelines for Capital E accreditation (Plüdemann *et al.*, 2000:12).
3. E-mail correspondence was conducted with the course designers and/or the programme organisers at the universities of Johannesburg (WA van Rensburg), Nelson Mandela Metropolitan (J Roux), Pretoria (H Dippenaar), Stellenbosch (C van der Walt) and the North-West (BJ Richter).
4. 'Academic literacy' entails more than the conventional notion of literacy as the ability to read and write. Academic literacy requires the ability to understand how language construes meanings in content-area texts and how meanings and concepts are realised in language (Scheppegrell *et al.*, 2004). When a learner can demonstrate ability to translate his or her knowledge of a subject and knowledge of the conventions of language into a concrete, meaningful action and requires infusion of all his or her knowledge and opinions, one can say that such a learner has attained academic literacy (Cummins, 1995:35).

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