

Language Barrier Challenge in South African Schools

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Context and Background: Desegregation and the Language of Learning and Teaching

During Apartheid, language was used to make education exclusive and since the end of Apartheid it has continued to create learning challenges in the classroom (Tshotsho, 2013). Policies such as The South African Schools Act (Act No. 37 of 1997) and the South African Constitution, sanctified the desegregation of schools in South Africa (Vandeyar, 2010) and, in turn created the opportunity for previously disadvantaged students to attend the public school of their choice. Many students then, and now still struggle with language as a learning barrier in the classroom (Lafon, 2009; Mda, 1997; Owen-Smith, 2010; & Tshotsho, 2013).

Currently in South Africa the official Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), with the exception of a few schools, from grade 4 onwards is English (Lafon, 2009). Many children are taught in their mother tongue (MT) in first, second, and third grade, however, many parents are opting for schools that teach in English from first grade (Owen-Smith, 2010 & Pinsloo, 2009)

Impact of the LoLT

One of the main problems with LoLT is the lack of high performance by students who are not learning in their mother tongue. Owen-Smith (2010) explains that without the “firm linguistic foundation [in the mother tongue], the majority of African-language students learning through English will only score between 20% and 40% in English by the time they reach Grade 12” (p. 34). Because these students are not learning in their mother tongue they have the disadvantage of not performing at their best level. Pinsloo (2009) agrees that the grasping of concepts in another language is problematic, but if the once concepts are mastered in the MT, these

“concepts and vital cognitive skills also transfer readily and are available for use in intellectually demanding contexts” (p.4.).

Stemming from the above, students who repeatedly fail due to language barriers while learning run the risk of developing a low self-esteem (Owen-Smith, 2009). Lafon (2009) explains that the dropout rate or failure to complete the education cycle is significantly more common among “former apartheid racial categories 2” (p. 1).

Additional impacts of the LoLT include the risk of school closure. According to Lafon (2009) many schools in Soweto have adapted an English-medium school, whereas many others, which didn’t adapt, eventually closed down.

Further Challenges

A further challenge caused by the LoLT is social segregation within schools and communities (Lafon, 2009 & Owen-Smith, 2010). Lafon (2009) describes a division that often forms between those groups with a strong understanding of the English language and with those with a weaker understanding. He further explains that division occurs between members of a cultural community, particularly among the African youth between the underprivileged youth and those from “elite” families, who have now largely severed ties with their historic social and cultural environments. Some of these students find difficulties communicating with peers from underprivileged background” (pg.3).

Suggestions

Owen-Smith (2010) suggests that multi-bilingualism as a means to minimize the language barrier on non-English speaking students. She suggests same-language peer interaction to help students internalize concepts, alongside the use of parallel language texts. Students would

then benefit by learning concepts in both their mother tongue and in the LoLT. Lafon (2009) explains that “code-switching [as a language barrier coping strategy since the 1979 change in language policy] has always occurred in the classrooms” (p. 3). Included in the Bill of Rights is the right to education in a language of choice, should the “resources and administrative capacity warrant it” (Prinsloo, 2009, p.9). If parents are unwilling to change their children’s language of instruction from English, then utilizing available resources in their MT alongside English resources could be a feasible option.

A similar form of multi-bilingualism in the classroom has been suggested in the Philippines called Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) to help decrease the rate of grade repetition and dropouts (Rowete, n.d.). Rowete (n.d.) explains that students would be taught in their MT until third grade to master academic concepts, while Tagalog and English would be gradually introduced, and compulsory as the LoLT from the high school with MT as an auxiliary language. Freire (2016) explains that the use of dual languages in the classroom has proved successful in the United States of America. According to Valdes, 1997; Valdez, Delavan, & Freire, 2014) the utilizing dual languages in the classroom “offers Latina/o students the possibility to meet the three goals of [dual language] education-academic achievement, bilingualism/biliteracy, and bi/multiculturalism” (as cited by Freire, 2016, p.36).

Conclusion

As businesses use English as the main language currency in South Africa, using English as the LoLT remains the most beneficial solution. However, casting aside the mother tongue of the students places the student at a disadvantage to perform well in school. Utilizing peer

interaction and parallel language texts could bridge the gap between students succeeding and dropping out of schools in South Africa.

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