

Scaffolding the English Language Skills of Rural Secondary School Learners in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *The realisation that language is a crucial variable in the education fraternity acted as an impetus for the current study. The study mainly focused on the various ways which secondary school classroom practitioners can scaffold the linguistic efforts of learners in a rural setting in Zimbabwe. The study was grounded in the domain of Psychology of Education with Bandura's social learning theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis acting as the theoretical framework. The descriptive survey research design was used with questionnaires as data gathering instruments. The purposive sampling technique was employed to generate a sample of 30 secondary school teachers from virtually all academic disciplines. The respondents generally concurred that rural secondary school learners need a lit bit of additional support to ensure that they realise the linguistic potentials. A number of ways of scaffolding rural secondary school learners' linguistic abilities were suggested which entail having field trips, conducting debates and public speaking competitions among schools, availing reading materials such as novels and newspapers with current affairs. It was recommended that stakeholders such as educators, community leaders and non-governmental organisations should work collaboratively to boost the linguistic abilities of rural secondary school learners in Zimbabwe.*

KEYWORDS: English language proficiency, debates, public speaking, language role models, scaffolding, adolescence.

I. INTRODUCTION

The success or failure of the professional efforts of classroom practitioners to impart knowledge is mediated by a number of variables one of which is language in its various forms (Goldstein, 2008:389). Language is merely a medium or a form of communication which is employed to transmit concepts through speech, signs or written symbols governed by certain rules (Santrock, 2004:56; Feldman, 2009:271). Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) maintain that language, whether verbal, written or in sign form, remains a critical determinant of the nature and quality of human interaction. Generally, teaching is done through verbal or non-verbal language as a medium of instruction. The English language proficiency of secondary school learners can vary on the basis of a number of factors such as the geographical setting in which the learners live. While secondary school learners who are resident in urban areas can benefit from various forms of technological innovations and many language role models, the same cannot be said for some of their rural counterparts. The current study is an endeavour to explore the various ways which can be employed by classroom practitioners to elevate the English language abilities of rural secondary school learners in Zimbabwe.

II. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Nkosana (2009) in Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) indicates that English language is dominantly used in a great proportion of countries in Southern Africa such as Botswana, Zambia and Kenya, despite it not being the vernacular language of the generality of the citizens in these countries. Nkosana (2009:15) reiterates that English language has unquestionable linguistic supremacy in Zimbabwe as the prime official language just like in many countries in Africa, such as Botswana, Nigeria, Zambia and South Africa. In Zimbabwe, the majority of the subjects at secondary school level are taught and examined in the English Language (Kufakunesu, 2015; Gravett & Geyser, 2004:69). The realisation of the utility of English language in many social, economic and technological spheres primed the researcher to embark on the current study.

On the international scene, a number of studies have been carried out to explore the usefulness of the English language in the teaching and learning setting and even beyond. For example, by Prins and Ulijn (1998:139-159) undertook a research study involving adolescents in which the research participants affirmed that cultural and linguistic variables in the ordinary language mediated learners' scholastic attainment in Mathematics. A related study was conducted by Mosqueda and Tellez (2008:416) who established that the English language proficiency of non-English speakers is very crucial in predicting the learners' academic attainment in Mathematics. Barton and Neville-Barton (2003:19) also established through research that learners with linguistic challenges in the English language tend to have poor academic performance in Mathematics particularly in bilingual and multilingual settings. Nevertheless, these studies did not make a deliberate endeavour to outline how the English language abilities of secondary school learners living in rural settings could be supported by classroom practitioners of different academic disciplines. The current study tries to close that gap in a Zimbabwean rural secondary school context.

In Zimbabwe, Kufakunesu and Chinyoka(2017) undertook a study in which English language secondary school teachers compared the English language proficiency of learners in different generational cohorts. The study was anchored on psychological theories and was situated in a secondary school teaching context. The study revealed that English language secondary school teachers rated the English language proficiency of the current cohort of secondary school learners as comparatively inferior to that of the learners in the preceding cohorts of at least one decade ago. The respondents attributed such a generational difference in English linguistic abilities to a myriad of factors. From the research participants' standpoints, a number of variables such as lack of reading role models, the prevalence of various forms of entertainment ushered in by technological innovations and limited parental involvement could be incriminated for aggravating secondary school learners' linguistic prowess in Zimbabwe. The study by Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) did not exert effort on exploring the various ways which can be employed to spruce up the English language abilities of rural secondary schools.

In Zimbabwe, there are secondary schools in rural areas, peri-urban settings and urban settings. Demographically, there are more secondary schools in Zimbabwean rural areas than in urban settings simply because the greater part of the country is rural. Most Zimbabwean urban secondary schools have fairly functional and stocked facilities such as libraries and laboratories (Chinyoka, 2013). There are quite a good number of urban secondary schools with internet connectivity (Chinyoka& Kufakunesu, 2017). Highly qualified teachers normally prefer to work in urban settings where the standard of living is comparatively high. There are some rural areas where there is electricity in Zimbabwe. At such secondary schools, the standards almost resemble those of urban secondary schools. However, there are numerous rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe where there are no crucial resources such as electricity, libraries, laboratories and highly qualified and experienced teachers (Chinyoka, 2013). There are some satellite schools which are extremely depleted in terms of both human and material resources. It is when one considers such schools that one wonders if scaffolding is not required to assist learners at such schools to sharpen their English language skills.

The researcher's experience as a rural secondary school teacher in Zimbabwe has revealed that vernacular languages such as *Chi Shona* and *Isi Ndebele* are significantly used for instruction in subjects which are ultimately examined in English. The same scenario was witnessed by the researcher during teaching practice supervision tours in rural secondary schools. While some teachers justified such a practice using the idea that they would be trying to make concepts clear to the rural secondary school learners, it could be criticised for a number of reasons. For instance, teaching in vernacular language may stifle the creativity of learners to think and function in the English language. Moreover, confining learners to the use of their vernacular languages would limit their abilities and chances to function on the international scene where English language normally becomes the medium of communication among people of different tribal and ethnic origins. It was after considering such a phenomenon that the researcher felt primed to embark on the current study in which scaffolding the English language abilities of secondary school learners took centre stage.

Developmentally secondary school learners are adolescents, that is, they are in the process of changing from being children to become adults (Feldman, 2009). Adolescence has a number of unique characteristics which include the overt physical changes in the reproductive system due to hormonal secretion (Kufakunesu &Chinyoka, 2017). On the social front, adolescents normally flock with their peers and spent less time with their parents or guardians(Steinberg & Morris, 2001:93; Zarrett& Eccles, 2006:21-22; Mwamwenda, 2004). Moreover, secondary school learners, by virtue of being adolescents, have an inherent quest to develop an identity (Lahey, 2009). They try to figure out who they are and what roles they can assume at home, in the community and at school. Moreover, adolescents tend to be engrossed by the need to make career choices(Kufakunesu &Chinyoka, 2017). It is during middle and late adolescence that secondary school learners grapple with the desire to pursue specific career trajectories. This is where the utility of English language proficiency becomes topical and central. Many career options require a pass in English language or general ability to communicate verbally or in written form in the English language(Kufakunesu &Chinyoka, 2017). If

learners are not comfortable to express themselves in the English language, they may have difficulties in making career options. Scaffolding the English Language abilities of secondary school learners can arguably go a long way towards widening the spectrum of their career options.

The critical role played by classroom practitioners in the teaching and learning setup primed the researcher to make them the research participants. According to Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) teachers are a critical variable in the education fraternity. It was intimated by Herrero, Este´vez, and Musitu (2006:674) that teachers as professional adults are very crucial in helping the adolescents to deal with a diversity of challenges they encounter at school. Teachers can plug the loopholes of erratic parenting styles which can prevail in some cases. This was alluded to by Zarrett and Eccles (2006:20) who opined that some adolescents hail from families where parents are unavailable, unable, or, in some cases, reluctant to give the support to their adolescent children as an outcome of variables such as parental divorce, poverty, unemployment, hectic lifestyles, death, or psychological estrangement of parents and their children. In line with learners' linguistic abilities, Ball and Farr (2003), Lee (2004) and Meltzer and Hamann (2004) maintain that knowledge of learners' strengths, areas of challenge, and socio-cultural backgrounds together with their understanding of literacy, can seriously affect the way teachers undertake their professional duties. Meltzer and Hamann (2005) challenged secondary school teachers to concentrate on preparing adolescent learners to become independent learners who can use reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking skills to successfully negotiate their roles as future employees, family members, and democratic citizens. According to Wong and Snow (2000:3) in Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:92), "Too few teachers share or know about their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, or understand the challenges inherent in learning to speak and read Standard English". Such remarks make it imperative to engage teachers in a study in which they elevate their understanding of the ways through which they can scaffold the English language abilities of secondary school learners in rural areas.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study was theoretically based on the principles of Psychology of Education, particularly focusing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and Bandura's cognitive social learning theory. Lev Vygotsky is a Russian 20th century cognitive psychologist whomade a posthumous impact in the field of Psychology. In his sociocultural theory, Vygotsky made an endeavour to outline the relationship between language and mental functioning. According to Santrock (2004:52) Vygotsky claimed that although language and thought develop as separate entities at first, they later merge. Bhatt (2007:37) reiterates that Vygotsky theorised that language is a tool for thinking, that is, inner speech is verbal thinking and hence language is a vital tool for thinking. Concepts at first develop in the individual at the inter-mental level and subsequently become internalised at an intra-mental terrain. After mastering the ability to engage in self-talk, the individual uses language as internal thought for regulating behavioural and cognitive processes (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017). A person's private speech is thought that the individual uses to communicate with herself or himself for purposes of self-guidance, self-direction and problem-solving (Bhatt, 2006:37). According to Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggests that linguistic fluency is to some extent related to mental sharpness and therefore, the extent to which learners are proficient in the language used as the medium of instruction can determine their academic performance.

Apart from his views on the relationship between language and cognition, Vygotsky also talked about scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (Mwamwenda, 2004). Vygotsky maintains that the zone of proximal development is the difference between what learners can undertake with the help of others and what they can accomplish when working individually (Lahey, 2009; Kufakunesu, 2015). Scaffolding according to Vygotsky, is the temporary assistance which is given by a competent individual so that a learner can master a particular concept or skill (Feldman, 2009; Tuckman & Monetti, 2011). This implies that learners can navigate their zones of proximal development when they receive scaffolding. Giving hints when learners are stuck and availing relevant material resources are simple examples of scaffolding.

Another theory in which effort was made to draw a link between language and thinking processes is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In general, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis maintains that the way people think depends on the nature of the language they speak in their culture (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008:241; Nisbett & Norenzayan, 2004:6). Named after its two proponents, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has two versions which are linguistic determinist postulated by Edward Sapir and linguistic relativity advanced by Benjamin Lee Whorf (Kufakunesu, 2015). According to Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) and Goldstein (2008:387) the extreme view by Sapir that language determines thought has been labelled linguistic determinism while linguist Whorf's opinion that language affects thought has been taken as the weaker version of the hypothesis called linguistic relativity. Nisbett and Norenzayan (2004:6) and Park (2000:19) posit that numerous studies have generated more evidence in support of linguistic relativity than linguistic determinism. Whether taken in its radical or weaker form, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has educational implications which stakeholders can hardly afford to ignore (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017). It was through making such considerations that the current researcher decided

to undertake a study to explore the various ways through which the English language abilities of rural secondary school learners in Zimbabwe could be spruced up.

Albert Bandura is a Canadian neo-behaviourist who added a cognitive dimension to the principles of mainstream behaviourism. In his cognitive social learning theory, Bandura postulates that people learn through imitation, that is, observational learning, among other things (Lahey, 2009). Through his experiments with Bobo dolls, Bandura established that learning can occur in the presence or absence of reinforcement (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017). According to Santrock (2004:227) observational learning, which is also called imitation or modelling, is a type of learning which takes place when a person observes and subsequently imitates another person's behaviour. Feldman (2009:201) maintains that there are researches which established that human beings are genetically pre-wired to imitate other people. This implies that the presence of language role models among learners can result in better language abilities acquired through imitation. Apart from observational learning, Bandura also advanced the principle of self-efficacy. According to Bandura (2002), self-efficacy is a set of beliefs held by an individual regarding the extent to which an individual can engage in a given task and accomplish it. The higher the level of an individual's self-efficacy, the greater the effort the individual is likely to exert towards accomplishing the task (Kufakunesu, 2015). Rural secondary school learners imbued with self-efficacy can work hard to perfect their English language acumen.

IV. ANCHORING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study revolved around the following anchoring research questions:

- To what extent do secondary school teachers deem it necessary to scaffold the English language skills of rural secondary school learners?
- How can secondary school classroom practitioners and allied stakeholders scaffold the English language abilities of rural secondary school learners in Zimbabwe?

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed the descriptive survey research design in the current study. According to Chinyoka and Kufakunesu (2017) a descriptive survey is a qualitative research design which attempts to describe and interpret the existing situations in the form of processes, effects, attitudes and beliefs. The suitability of the descriptive survey research design in exploring the sentiments of secondary school teachers regarding the steps which can be taken to elevate the English language abilities of learners in rural areas was considered by the researcher. Due to the literacy level of the research participants, the researcher collected data through questionnaires. A questionnaire is a document containing systematically structured questions prepared by the researcher to solicit responses from the research participants during data collection (Sidhu, 2001; Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017:95). The purposive sampling technique in which respondents were selected on the basis of the researcher's judgement was used in the current study (Chiromo, 2006). The resultant sample comprised a total of 30 rural secondary school teachers from virtually all academic disciplines in Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. The researcher could not focus on all the provinces in Zimbabwe due to financial, time and logistical limitations.

VI. RESEARCH FINDINGS

A scrutiny of the data collected during the empirical investigation yielded the following major findings:

- Seventy percent of the secondary school teachers who took part in the study generally concurred that it was necessary to support the English language efforts of rural secondary school learners for a number of reasons.
- Exposure to academic experiences in which rural secondary school learners could learn through modelling were indicated as a way of scaffolding their English language abilities.
- Increasing the material resources in libraries was mentioned as a way of elevating rural secondary school learners' chances of realising their academic potential in relation to English language proficiency.
- The introduction of debate and public speaking competitions was reiterated by more than half of the research participants as a plausible way of supporting rural secondary school learners' English language efforts.

VII. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Twenty-one out of the 30 secondary school teachers who participated in the current study acknowledged that there was need to spruce up the English language endeavours of rural secondary school learners. Numerous reasons were given for their opinions. Firstly, 19 out of the 30 respondents indicated that rural secondary school learners were generally more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts. The fact that a significant proportion of rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe do not have electricity and internet connectivity

was stated as an apparent disadvantage on the part of rural secondary school learners (Chinyoka, 2013). The English language efforts of rural secondary school learners were reported stifled by the scarcity of reading materials. Lack of electricity implied that the rural secondary school learners were deprived of viewing language role models on television or on the various forms of internet applications which require electricity and internet connectivity. The presence of role models can foster some verbal and written linguistic skills through observational learning as implied by Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 2002). The research participants also conceded that at some rural secondary schools, there were no libraries while in some cases libraries were nominally present but literally empty or stocked with antiquated textbooks. Apart from the issue of libraries, the research informants also made reference to cases where textbooks were so seriously scarce that the whole school could operate with less than five textbooks in a given subject and most of the learners would not have the opportunity to read the textbooks (Chinyoka & Kufakunesu, 2017). According to this group of secondary school teachers, learners who live in such impoverished settings may not develop good reading habits because of scarcity of reading materials.

The secondary school teachers who responded to the questionnaires also justified the need to scaffold the English language skills of rural secondary school learners by mentioning the fact that most secondary school subjects are formally examined in English. They argued that high levels of English language proficiency can translate to better academic performance in allied academic disciplines such as History, Divinity and Geography (Kufakunesu, 2015). The fact that English language skills normally act as bedrock for training in tertiary institutions such as colleges, universities and polytechnic institutions was mentioned by the respondents as an impetus for scaffolding rural secondary school learners in the English language. Moreover, it was indicated that learners would need the formal English language communication skills for effective functioning in the world of work as they would use the language for problem solving and negotiation. The utility of English language proficiency in complementing learners' academic performance in other subjects as indicated by the respondents to a large extent tallied with the sentiments expressed by Mosqueda and Tellez (2008:416) and Barton and Neville-Barton (2003:19). However, there were some secondary school teachers who challenged the idea of scaffolding rural secondary school learners in English language only at the expense of allied vernacular languages such as *Chi Shona* and *IsiNdebele*. They argued that rural secondary school learners needed to be assisted not only in English language as a subject but in all subjects including vernacular languages.

Regarding the various ways which could be used to boost rural secondary school learners' English language proficiency, 23 out of the 30 respondents suggested that the principle of modelling as postulated in Bandura's social learning theory could make a positive difference (Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017). Firstly, the respondents proposed that rural secondary school teachers should articulate their ideas in good English during lessons so as to nurture the linguistic intelligence of the learners. Since observational learning as advanced by Bandura (2002) suggests that human beings learn through imitation, rural secondary school learners can emulate the English language skills and vocabulary from their teachers. The respondents lamented cases where some secondary school teachers sparingly used the English language and conducted lessons in vernacular language in subjects where English should be the dominant medium of instruction. As a way of boosting rural secondary school learners' English language self-efficacy, the respondents opined that teachers must employ reinforcement techniques whenever learners demonstrate a semblance of English language command. The respondents also suggested that rural secondary school should occasionally arrange field trips to places where learners would see English language role models. Examples of such destinations mentioned were tourist destinations such as Victoria Falls, the Great Zimbabwe monuments and some national parks. Visiting such places which are also frequented by international tourists could accord rural secondary school learners the opportunity to see how the English language can enable people from different continents or countries to communicate.

The respondents could not deny the fact that a significant proportion of secondary schools in Zimbabwean rural areas lacked reading materials as pointed out by Chinyoka (2013). In an endeavour to address that challenge, it was suggested that secondary school teachers needed to be creative and to improvise with regard to availing reading materials in English. The research informants suggested that rural secondary school teachers could gather newspapers and magazines whenever they go to town and bring them to their respective schools thereby increasing the reading material available to learners in rural areas. Some secondary school teachers who took part in the study proposed that rural secondary school heads should visit colleges and universities to seek reading materials which could make a positive difference in the lives of rural secondary school learners. Apart from seeking material support from colleges and universities, the respondents suggested that school administrators could solicit material assistance from the business community, political dignitaries and some non-governmental organisations. Examples of situations where material resources were sourced from such individuals and organisations were cited by some respondents.

Two thirds of the secondary school teachers who completed the questionnaires during the empirical investigation suggested that debates and public speaking could make a positive difference in the lives of rural secondary school learners relative to English language proficiency. It was suggested that each rural secondary

school should allocate time for secondary school learners to engage in debates in which they would practice to express themselves in the English language. Public speaking should also be undertaken at each rural secondary school as a way to nurture the fluency of learners in English language. Apart from having debates and public speaking exercises at schools, the respondents suggested that school administrators and Education Officers could arrange debate and public speaking competitions among rural schools before they could compete with their urban counterparts. Such a practice could allow cross pollination of English language skills among learners resident in different geographical contexts as implied by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Mwamwenda, 2004). Moreover, the research informants argued that since language facilitates thinking as implied by Vygotsky and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, debate and public speaking competitions could arguably sharpen the thinking skills and English language fluency of secondary school learners (Goldstein, 2008:387; Nisbett&Norenzayan, 2004:6; Park, 2000:19). Another way of garnering reading materials which was suggested by seven respondents was to appeal to former students who have succeeded in life to at least remember their former schools and source reading materials for them. However, the respondents admitted that commitment was required from teachers, school administrators and Education Officers since a number of logistical challenges have to be overcome for such an ambitious undertaking to be a success.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The empirical investigation confirmed that it is necessary for rural secondary school learners to be supported in many ways to ensure that their levels of English language proficiency could be spruced up. The respondents suggested ways of helping secondary school learners in rural settings beginning with the way teachers attempt to articulate themselves as English language role models. It was also suggested that debate and public speaking competitions at school, cluster, district or provincial levels or even at national level could create an environment which is conducive to boost rural secondary school learners' English language abilities. The respondents indicated that stakeholders such as teachers, college and university administrators, non-governmental organisations and alumni of rural secondary schools could assist rural secondary schools to garner reading and allied materials which could boost the English language abilities of secondary school learners who are resident in rural areas.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommended that other researchers can explore the same phenomenon in a different province or at national scale in Zimbabwe. The same study can also be replicated by interested researchers in any part of the world with variations in theoretical thrust, methodological orientation or category of respondents. Other researchers may undertake similar studies to establish the extent to which rural secondary school learners need scaffolding in other subjects apart from English language. Moreover, the researcher recommended that stakeholders such as Education Officers, teachers, parents and other well-wishers should be more sensitive and responsive to the general educational needs of rural secondary school learners.

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