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Socio-Cultural Background Factors Affecting the Teaching of Grade 3 English Literacy (Reading) In Mthathaeducation District of South Africa

JongiweTebekana* and E. N. Cishe**

Walter Sisulu University, Nelson Mandela Drive, Private Bag x1, Eastern Cape, South Africa, 5117

E-mail: * <jtebekana@gmail.com>, ** <ecishe@wsu.ac.za/bandlac@gmail.com>

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Jongiwe Tebekana* and E. N. Cishe**

Walter Sisulu University, Nelson Mandela Drive, Private Bag x1, Eastern Cape, South Africa, 5117

*E-mail: * <jtebekana@gmail.com>, ** <ecishe@wsu.ac.za/bandlac@gmail.com>*

Address for Correspondence:

Dr. E. N. Cishe

Walter Sisulu University

Private Bag x1

Eastern Cape, South Africa

Fax: 0866541093

E-mail: ecishe@wsu.ac.za

ABBREVIATED TITLE Socio-cultural factors in Grade 3 English teaching

KEYWORDS Second Language (SL), Adult Basic Education, (ABET), Home Language (HL), International language (IL).

ABSTRACT This study reports on the socio-cultural factors affecting the teaching of English Literacy (reading) in the Foundation Phase in selected schools in the Mthatha education District. This research has been motivated by the fact that irrespective of continuous intervention by educators, Government, NGOs and other concerned people in education, the Foundation Phase is accused of non-performances (Department of Education 2008, p.6). Learners are still struggling with reading in the Foundation Phase. Other studies conducted by the Department of Education, as well as international bodies, reflected that learners in South African schools perform poorly when tested for their ability to read at age-appropriate levels (Department of Education 2008, p.5). Qualitative approach informed the investigation. Purposive sampling was used to select four Foundation Phase Grade 3 teachers from four rural and semi-urban schools. Semi-structured

interviews that were voice recorded with participant's permission were used. The paper reveals that parents' low level of education; lack of parental involvement in the education of their children, the low-economic status of parents were some of the socio-cultural factors that affect the reading of learners. The paper concludes by suggesting that parents should play a vital role in the education of their children by helping them in reading and read stories to them. They should, in turn, be encouraged to attend Adult Basic Education Centres (ABET) so as to improve their level of education. Finally, the Department of Basic Education should conduct workshop for parents to equip them with skills to assist learners read at home.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is the key to the prosperity of any country and is generally acknowledged that reading and literacy assessments indicate the success or failure of a country's education. Furthermore, the 21st century requires a literate society constituting of people with the ability to effectively use different forms of literacy and not mere interpretation of lines of text Anderson (2005). This increasing literacy expectation is more worrying in the light of a research done by Aitchison & Harley (2006: 92), showing that 32% of adult South Africans are illiterate, which means that around 8.5 million South Africans cannot read. According to Aitchison and Harley (2006: 98), it is a sad reality that many schools in South Africa do not provide quality education necessary for continuous social and economic growth and development. Department of Education (2005) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2007) confirm that South African learners perform below standard in reading and numeracy, and it is alarming that there seems to be little improvement despite various efforts.

In South Africa, studies conducted by the Department of Education as well as international bodies show that the culture of reading is declining (Department of Education 2008: 5). The problem that reading skill has deteriorated confirms the findings of the NGO Khanyisa project (2005) which conducted a baseline learner assessment in reading for Grade 3 in Limpopo Province in 2005. Their results have shown that more than half of the learners who wrote the literacy test were struggling to read at the expected levels of this Grade. Studies conducted by Education as well as international bodies also show that learners in South African schools

perform poorly when tested for their ability to read at age-appropriate levels (Department of Education 2001: 7).

Poor reading literacy at Foundation Phase in South Africa is associated with historical disadvantages or factors such as socio-cultural and poor socio-economic backgrounds. Parents and caregivers have low literacy levels and find it difficult to understand and help with the task their children have to do (Department of Education 2008: 9). Reading is not perceived to be important except for study purposes, and not for enjoyment or for enrichment, Matchet (2006, p.58).

Learners who are not fluent in English Second Language (SL) experience difficulty in coping with the change of cultural environment. The reality is that the learners who are taught via the medium of English experience difficulties in the areas of reading, reading comprehension and writing. According to Landsberg (2005), there are various barriers to learners' acquisition of reading skills in the Foundation Phase, it has to be noted that these possible barriers are highly interdependent and are seldom responsible for reading difficulties, once Foundation Phase learners experience difficulties in reading, this will manifest in poor performance in other learning areas in the grade (Department of Education 2002: 20-21).

The parents' education is crucial as a factor for socio-economic status because there is a correlation between higher parental education and high school attainment or performance for the child (Bradley and Corwyn 2002: 17). They further state that the parents who are uneducated and earn small wages have stress or depression because they cannot meet their learners' needs in terms of buying reading books, magazines and other school needs. Parents who are more educated appear better able to provide their children with the academic and social support important for educational success when compared to parents who are less educated.

Despite numerous attempts to improve reading, reading failure continues to exist irrespective of various strategies used in the classroom by teachers. Maharaj (2007) argues that there are numerous challenges that surround reading, for instance: modern technological systems, illiteracy, poor environment and ignorance in reading. They all pose problems to learner's ability and commit miscues like omission, insertion, substitution and lack self-correction. In response to this challenge of the declining culture of reading, the former Minister of Education, Prof K Asmal, launched the Masifunde Sonke Project in December 2000. The project was aimed to fulfil the Department of Education's second major strategic priority, namely, "Breaking the back

of illiteracy among adults and youth”. Its main objective was to mobilise and promote the importance and value of reading and writing in schools, libraries and homes. It was also mandated to participate and support other reading promotion initiatives facilitated by Non-Governmental Organisations, Corporate Business Organizations and Non-Profit Organisations. Learners in the Foundation Phase have difficulty in reading a simple sentence correctly. The problem of factors affecting the teaching of English reading in South Africa is quite challenging, PIRLS (2007: 70) Department of Education (2008: 8). This stimulated researchers’ interest in undertaking the study on the topic to unearth the socio-cultural factors affecting the teaching of English literacy (reading) in Grade 3. This problem affects the teachers because they spend a lot of time attending to reading difficulties. This reading problem extends also to communities. For example, in community or church meetings Foundation Phase learners find it difficult to read the bible and tend to omit certain words or read something that is not there.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to investigate socio-cultural factors affecting the teaching of English reading in the Foundation Phase (Grade 3). It was carried out in one district of the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. It was part of a larger study which investigated factors that contribute to poor literacy of Grade 3 learners in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. The objective was to unearth the socio-cultural factors affecting the teaching of English literacy (reading) in Grade 3. Qualitative data through semi-structured interviews was generated from the Foundation Phase Grade 3 teachers from four rural and semi-urban schools.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This a qualitative research design in which the case study was used. An in-depth investigation of small number of cases was employed. The data are preserved in descriptive narratives like field notes and recording. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 8), qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied. Qualitative researchers aim to acquire an in-depth understanding of human behaviour.

Population and Sample

A population is a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events, that conforms to specific criteria to which the researcher intends to sample/select the target population (McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 34). Bell (1999: 34) defines target population as a specific pool of cases from which the researcher draws the sample. The target population consisted of Grade 3 teachers teaching in the Foundation Phase primary schools in the Mthatha Education District, Circuit 3 from rural and semi-urban areas.

A sample is a group of subjects or situation from large population (White 2005: 114). Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich individuals and increase the utility of information from such a small sample as suggested by both Creswell (2007) and Henning (2004). The sample for the paper was comprised of four Grade 3 teachers drawn from the four selected schools in the Mthatha Education District, Circuit 3. They were all females. Purposive sampling was used in selecting teachers for the study. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), in purposive sampling, the researcher identifies subjects to participate in the research. The purposive sampling is less to generalize to a larger population than it is to gain deeper understanding of specific type.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews were used as data collection method in the paper. Interviews were recorded using the voice recorder and field notes were taken. The purpose of the interview is to understand someone's views and enter into their perspective to find out things like feelings, memories and interpretations that we cannot observe or discover in other way (Patton 1990: 80). The aim of the qualitative interviews is to see the world through the eyes of the participants, and they can be a valuable source of information, provided they are used correctly. Using interviews may have some advantages; they are a good method for producing data based on informants' priorities, opinions and ideas (Maree 2008: 87). When using interviews, informants have the opportunity to expand their ideas, explain their views and identify what they regard as crucial factors.

The interview questions were asked in such a way that the participants were able to give a detailed description of their experiences, feelings and views concerning the socio-cultural

factors. English was used as a language of communication. With the permission of the participants, a voice recorder to record the participants' responses was used. Participants were interviewed at their respective schools. Interviews were held in settings in which the participants felt comfortable and relaxed. This allowed participant to feel at ease and promoted honest and open responses. Responses were transcribed after the interviews were completed (Gay and Airasian 2000: 291-292). The researcher retained all transcribed recordings for safekeeping so that the written responses could be used to verify the data, if needed.

Data analysis and procedure

As a starting point in data analysis, all information collected was studied to determine if any themes have crystallised (Henning 2004: 117). After data was collected from the sample, it was grouped according to the responses, and then analysed manually to determine the effect of responses. The data were grouped into themes and sub-themes and coded for easy referencing (Gay and Airasian2000: 242).

The researcher listened to the voice recorder and organized the data by breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important to be learnt. The goal of the researcher was to create descriptive, multidimensional categories, which form a preliminary framework for analysis. Words or phrases or events that appear to be similar were grouped into the same category. Data were coded, units and categories were formed and patterns were identified. Data were analysed thematically (themes that emerged from the respondents responses were used to analyse data).

Ethical considerations

Permission to carry out the study was received from the Provincial Department of Education, the Mthatha education district and the principals of the sampled schools. Participants consented to participating in the study by completing an informed consent form. Participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study if they so wished. Fortunately, no one withdrew from the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings pertaining to the socio-cultural background as it affects the teaching of English reading in the Foundation Phase are presented. In the thematic analysis, the following categories emerged:

- Involvement of parents in their children's reading
- Level of education of parents
- Community role in promoting English reading

Involvements of parents in their children's reading

When the participants were responding to the question of how they involve parents in promoting English reading skill, participants argued that they give learners homework and reading books to be done at home with the assistance of parents.

I used to give learners some work to do at home e.g. I write down words on the chalkboard and give learners to read at home so that their parents should help them at home (Interviewee1).

It was discovered that home environment is not conducive to improve reading performances of the learners. There is lack of parental involvement in children's education and that contribute to their inability to develop good reading skills. This has a negative impact on the learners' ability to learn in other subjects.

This study also reveals that most parents are unemployed and they live below poverty line. Due to financial constraints and lack of jobs, parents do not afford to buy books for their children and this adversely affects reading performances of learners. It also emerged that learners do not read at home because there is lack of books and this promotes reading failure.

This finding is in line with Calteaux (1996) who asserted that home background of pupils is the most important chapter.

The level of education of parents

Most Foundation Phase learners live with parents who are generally not educated; hence parents cannot help learners in reading. Thus the data reveal that parental involvement is very low. This was reiterated by one teacher who said:

In my community, most parents are illiterate [and] not every learner [is] assisted at home. So their reading ability is affected. (Interviewee4).

The level of education of parents was found to be very low and the majority of the parents are illiterate. It is difficult for them to assist their children in reading and that could have a bearing on the learners' performance in reading English. This study reveals that most parents were not educated and that could have an impact on the learners reading in the First Additional Language (FAL). The participants in the study pointed out that some parents never went to school and consequently they could not read and write and their learners lack reading ability. In support of this:

Some parents are illiterate; they can't read; can't help learners to read; so those learners find it difficult to read. It affects their reading ability (Interviewee 2).

The finding confirms Beard (1994) who argument that "parental involvement in reading had a highly significant effect on children's attainment of reading across the whole ability range". Beard continues to say parents are teachers at home whereas teachers are educators at school.

Community role in promoting English reading

This section presents findings on the role played by community in promoting English reading. It was discovered that home environment is not conducive to improving reading performance of learners. The majority of participants (75%) disclosed that communities do not take part in promoting reading skill in that there are no libraries in the communities, no debates conducted, and no drama performed to improve the children's reading skill. This was evident from the following comment:

There is nothing that the community help learners in promoting reading because [there is a lot of poverty and it affects learners] (Interview 1).

The same participants agreed that there is no role played by communities in promoting reading ability but it's only the school that prepares everything for reading.

There is no role at all and there are no activities [done in the community to promote reading] (Interviewee 4).

Du Plessis (2001: 43) stated that the commitment of working together will give the learner or a child a better choice to strike a balance between reading and leisure time. It is very important that the school community, parents, and other stakeholders work co-operatively on this problem of reading. The goal is to uplift the status of reading skill of the community. For effective learning to take place, teachers should take a leading role in creating and maintaining a supportive learning community (Taylor, Muhall 2002: 179).

CONCLUSION

Irrespective of continuous intervention by the Department of Education and teachers, learners still struggle with reading. It was discovered that home environment is not conducive to improve reading performance of learners for there is lack of resources like reading books. Due to financial constraints, parents do not afford to buy books for their children and this adversely affects the reading performances of learners. This paper reveals that most parents are unemployed and they live below poverty line. It also emerged that learners do not read at home because there is lack of books, lighting or places to do their homework and this hampers the reading performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents or guardians should frequently visit school so as to find out about what is expected of them on how to help their children in reading activities. The parents should take initiatives of

helping their children with reading activities. Parents and teachers often live in different socio-economic milieus, therefore; achieving a constructive parent-teacher relationship is of paramount importance. Also, parental cooperation can assist teachers in learning more about the needs of learners and thus, creating purposeful and effective collaboration between home and school. Finally, the Department of Basic Education should conduct workshops for parents to equip them with skills to assist learners read at home.

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