

Teachers' Professional Knowledge Competence and Second Language Education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT In this paper, the researchers propose that teachers' professional knowledge plays a significant role in the scaffolding of second language education. This is because learners need both linguistic and content knowledge scaffolding to be able to make meaningful associations and build more knowledge onto what they already know. Teachers are not only responsible for comprehensibly delivering learning materials but they are also responsible for initiating the process of learning. It is through the teachers' use of the language that complex concepts are unraveled so that learners are able to build representational structures that are the basis for the understanding of unfamiliar subject-matter. In other words, professional knowledge underpins teachers' capacity to effectively link the demands of language to content subject matter. The researchers conclude firstly, by emphasizing that teacher training programmes have to be fore-grounded in professional knowledge that is congruent with appropriate theoretical frames underpinning English as a medium of instruction; and secondly, by acknowledging the pervasiveness of language across disciplines which embeds the fact that every teacher is a language teacher and as such, teachers need to be explicitly apprenticed in professional knowledge for the facilitation of new forms of practice and identities for themselves and their learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been established that the role that communication and interaction play in the learning/teaching process is a critical success factor in contemporary educational paradigms and because of this, one of the major functions of education is for learning how knowledge and interpretations are constructed so that learners can deploy an elaborated code for both learning and self-expression. That is, through language, the education system has to be active in appropriating and adapting knowledge for the development of society. As a result, access to a language in which global knowledge and information tend to exist becomes a necessity and the English language is at the centre of global knowledge. In the increasingly interdependent world of knowledge economies of the 21st century, academic knowledge conceived and discussed in English enjoys a privileged status of providing a common knowledge pool both nationally and internationally as opposed to academic knowledge conceived in other languages. It is the exchange of information on the global plane that is reshaping social, economic and cultural life of societies and as such the well-being of the nation state depends on the performance of its educational system. Hence the

impetus for the capacity of second language education to be a part of the crucial platform of achievements depends on its absolute potential to do so on the global knowledge arena through the global medium of the English language. As education is 'sense-making,' this means going far beyond the acquisition of subject knowledge to an ability to bring together disparate information in solving real problems or in finding relevance through an engaged process (Ridge 2009). The engaged process view requires the learners to have a dynamic sense of language in which they become increasingly skilled at using their full and varied linguistic repertoires in making sense of the world and in participating in the society outside of educational institutions. This translates into equipping the learner in becoming increasingly adept in the engagement of knowledge in the world.

2. THE CONTEXT

Learning difficulties in English are the most well-founded and serious indictment of the education system as a whole in rural South Africa. The low levels of proficiency in English among learners have been a long-standing defect with which academics have been grappling as they attempt to provide balanced university education. What is of significance is the fact that the legacy of the past pervades the class rooms of present day rural South Africa in matters of lan-

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guage education as what Macdonald noted in (1990:102) still holds true to date. He stated 'We have witnessed many English lessons that are full of teacher errors. By this we are referring to variance in the language that cannot be accommodated under the rubric of a non-standard dialect. In South Africa, the poor English proficiency of many of teachers has often been advanced as a reason for maintaining the status quo of the language policy. However, it is imperative that the cycle of poor English models, poor learning and poor teaching should be short-circuited, but this process will require genuine creative thinking'. The problem of a lack of vital skills in second language education has been exacerbated by the framework used in policy documents for education which do not provide adequately for rural areas that tend to lag behind urban areas. The fact that rural education has not been a priority of the post-apartheid government has resulted in an educational framework used in policy documents that is insufficiently cognisant to the specific conditions and needs of the rural poor. For instance, high school teachers more often than not, do not possess adequate proficiency in the English language for effective teaching and learning to take place and as such these teachers feel inadequate and unequipped to take charge of their teaching. As a result, they use very little English; use it incorrectly, or resort to home languages. What needs to be emphasised is the fact that home languages use is the norm rather than the exception in high school, college and university and this runs contrary to what Foley (2002) believes is the norm in his statement to the effect that apart from traditionally Afrikaans educational institutions, English is used as the language of learning and teaching at all universities, technikons and colleges, and this includes all secondary schools, especially in the senior grades.

Thus the teaching/learning in school and university is characterized by poor language control problems, which are perpetuated by both learners and teachers. The linguistically poorly equipped learners gain entrance to college and university, and some of them return to the classroom as teachers with a limited knowledge base, recycling second language education problems in general. But current debates in South Africa favour the use of home language as a solution to all manner of educational ills. As a result,

other pressing requirements for addressing the ills are ignored. For instance, the question of how language (including mediation between languages may creatively be used to promote an effective educational system is not adequately examined. It is striking that at the time that global multiliterate and multilingual individuals are most valued as they bring tremendous knowledge capital to classrooms and societies more than monolinguals, second language education is receiving less support in the country.

In informal discussions with lecturers, teachers and learners, it has been noted that there is a disturbing trend of second language teachers' knowledge needs being increasingly subsumed in the needs of the general concerns about mainstream literacy and numeracy standards while blaming English for the failures of second language education. This results in teachers' professional knowledge needs for second language education being redefined as general literacy needs, special education needs, or more generally, needs related to socioeconomic status. This understanding ignores the real need for professional language knowledge development and support. When a teacher repeatedly switches from English to mother tongue in the teaching of subject matter or in the teaching of English for that matter due to lack of proficiency in the medium of instruction or as is popularly claimed - because the learners do not understand English; this undermines second language education as what is happening does not conform to the instructional role of input in the English language. The critical issue in the context of this paper is the fact that teachers' professional knowledge that is needed of English does not necessarily correlate with their professional knowledge in home languages. Teaching for home language use and second language interdependence requires that the education system examines critically the implicit assumptions underlying curricula before creating room for home language use for second language education.

3. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are a number of philosophies about teaching and learning that are matched by certain strategies on how to facilitate content and language development in the classroom. The theory that is in synergy with scaffolding and

teachers professional knowledge in second language education is located in social constructivism. Social constructivism as espoused in the work of educational philosophers, educational psychologists and theorists, such as Vygotsky (1978, 1987), Bruner (1986, 1990), Gee (1992, 2005) and Driver (1995) to mention just a few. This is a perspective on knowledge and learning which is fore-grounded in how one "comes to know". It refers to the notion that knowledge results from enacted mental processes that are as a result of individual schema interacting with the environment. This interaction allows the learner to organize experiences in such a way that s/he can go beyond the information given through connecting the experiences to prior knowledge. Ultimately, the learners should be able to take the learned material and apply it to novel situations so that s/he is able to make original discoveries of her/his own. The change instigated involves going beyond the subject matter while privileging analytical skills in the learner. After all, the objective of teaching is to ensure that learners are provided with the necessary tools for constructing further knowledge upon that which they have previously internalized or learnt. This alignment is geared towards creating habits in learner mind which is a germane feature of social constructivist pedagogy. This is clearly meant to go beyond the boundaries of compartmentalized thinking.

Social constructivism pedagogy, in the context of this paper, encapsulates Mohan's (2001) 'Knowledge Framework' (KF). The KF is a heuristic tool through which language is viewed as discourse in the context of social practice/activity and social practice is conceptualised as a combination of knowledge (theory) and action (practice). The 'knowledge framework' can successfully be utilized by professional knowledgeable teachers as a heuristic tool for the 'Whats' of the learning units – that is, the language and content demands and the 'Hows' are realised through systematically relating meaning in discourse to wording at the macro-level of social practice, which is complemented by the micro-level of written and oral expression. It is only through professional knowledge that teachers can effectively utilise the knowledge framework as a heuristic tool for the analysis of discourse in social practice: as it explicitly facilitates teaching' as well as learners' meaning-driven learning of language-in-social practice, as this

increases the language resources available to the learners to learn language, to learn through language and to learn about language. In addition, there are specific features of input that are acknowledged as playing a role in the development of second language proficiency as well as in the effective construction of discourse. According to Thornbury (1997: 326), one of the conditions necessary for effective learning to take place is that the learners 'attend to the linguistic features of the input' so that they notice their own interlanguage representations. In this regard, it is the linguistic features of the input that have a direct link to the need for teachers' professional knowledge in order for them to be able to facilitate the construction of acceptable discourse. Thus in the discussion that follows, we bring together strands from: social constructivist pedagogy, input, community (s) of practice, knowledge framework, scaffolding and the shifting of identity for second language education.

4. DISCUSSION

The strands that we have mentioned underpin teachers' professional knowledge because the teaching of content has to be creatively linked to the demands of language. For this reason a community of practice can play a significant role in the teaching and learning environment. Teacher-learning does not only entail the discovery of the skills and knowledge of language teaching but it also involves what it means to be a language teacher as identity plays a crucial role in teaching, as opposed to other professions. Through understanding learning as identity construction, teachers have to construct their identity within the unfolding social interactions in the specific activities and the contextual relationships that they establish for themselves or created for them. In this connection, teacher-learning is embraced as the appropriation or resistance to skills and knowledge for the purpose of remaking identity. Hence teacher learning is a dialogic relationship between the self and the social, which consists of the daily encounters in the larger discourse community. In this respect, we postulate that that teacher identity and teacher knowledge are intertwined and should not be separated.

In the critical sociocultural view, learning is looked at as the remaking of identity, through

the mediation of new discourses. Knowledge is seen as the ability to use-in-practice (Hawkins 2004: 89). Thus during training interactions, teacher roles are to a greater extent shaped by the roles that the language or content teacher trainer assumes when setting up activities together with the kind of questions asked and the feed-back given to trainee teachers' responses, tests and assignments. By asserting their agency, teachers are remaking their identities as they strive for access and control of the language in class and it is this dialogic discourse that is all the more invaluable for teachers. Danielwicz (2001:168) argues that the training context is the site where teachers create and experience different representations of themselves. And for teachers to be able to successfully participate in diverse social settings and roles depends on their ability to deploy multiple identities and knowledge of the appropriate discourses for different purposes and times.

Wenger (1998) and Gee (1996) have made reference to how successful members 'take on' the practices of a community of practice in their everyday life. Wenger and Gee regard teachers as 'taking hold' of theories of second language education and also as acquiring pedagogical repertoires. This means teacher education has to include the behavior, attitudes, tools and ways of engaging that trainee teachers need for successful demonstration at the end of their training for these are learnt through apprenticeship into an identity of a successful member of a discipline community of practice. In other words, language learning has to be a tool for teachers to be active participants in the global society through providing them with opportunities for exploring what it all means in terms of curriculum design and classroom pedagogies. Becoming a member of a community of practice is not just about learning new content but also about acquiring new practices, values, and ways of thinking which facilitate embracing particular identities.

Therefore, teachers' professional knowledge enables them to embrace a social constructivist pedagogy because this perspective embeds the understanding that learners' language development is intentional, is shaped by the systems within which they derive meaning and occurs through the links between the student, the people with whom they interact, and their social history which represents the links between indi-

viduals across time (Vygotsky 1978). The crafting of teaching based on Vygotsky's model of scaffolding depends on teachers' professional knowledge in order to give learners opportunities for social interaction within the knowledge framework of Mohan (2001) and this interaction should be accomplished in stages recurrently.

The implications of teachers' knowledge and constructivist pedagogy in second language are that the teaching process is geared towards helping learners learn. That is, educational institutions should not focus on producing content only per se for learners, the focus is more and more on how to enable learners to find, identify, manipulate and evaluate existing knowledge, and to integrate this knowledge in their life and world of work in order to solve problems and to communicate this knowledge to others. Ovando et al. (2003: 310) state that: 'the overriding drive in current changes occurring in second language teaching is the need to teach language through something essential and meaningful to the student. Since the goal is to prepare students for life-long learning and academic success in classes taught in English, it is best taught through lessons that teach meaningful mathematics, science, social studies and language arts concepts simultaneously with second language objectives'.

The importance of teachers' professional knowledge for second language education is bolstered by the fact that each of the content disciplines contains a unique and demanding technical vocabulary, and at times familiar concepts are used in completely different ways from everyday usage. For instance, the theory of evolution in biology is one of the concepts that most learners have problems with. The learners' poor grasp of the concept has arisen because of the teachers' failure to interact with relevant knowledge in the teaching of sub-concepts, such as "natural selection." Words like "competition", "adaptation" and "assimilation" tend not to have exactly the same meanings as in the everyday context of usage. For instance, competition in evolution does not mean that the individual organism strives to bring about the change in a purposeful manner, as is generally accepted in everyday usage where there is purpose and willingness to beat the opponent. In evolution it is not as simple as that. In evolution, the competitiveness is an innate biological trait that gives

the individuals the urge to survive. In common usage it can also denote aggression or aggressive ambition which does not characterize competition in evolution. Hence the interpretation and interaction in class relies on the teacher's professional knowledge and on prior meanings that have been established within the subject matter context for meaning is conveyed by language in the classroom as the teacher and the learners interact in a social classroom set up. That is why teachers' professional knowledge is crucial in facilitating learners' learning to navigate through the incredible knowledge spaces while feeling comfortable and located in doing so. Learners need deliberate guidance to focus on the features of language and context that help them in recognising and in producing the correct patterns - the patterns that are shared by the community of practice to which they are being "apprenticed".

Teachers' knowledge is also useful in the designing of units of work collaboratively to scaffold content and language development. The collaborative effort of teachers that is underpinned by a knowledge framework can result in sophisticated units of work that scaffold learners' content and language development as this is the systematic relation of discourse meanings to wordings. The enacted teachers' professional knowledge plays a pivotal role in student achievement and this is illustrative of the importance of qualified English as second language teachers for learner attainment. Zundel and Deane (2010) argue that when language and content teachers work together as designers and facilitators, instead of seeing themselves as dispensers of formal declarative knowledge, the preparation of teaching materials is embraced as a pedagogical design problem over the ultimate objective of a task of selecting content with a monthly scheme of work.

It is within the context of professional knowledge that scaffolding and collaborative teaching can contribute to the quality of education. Scaffolding offers opportunities for optimizing interaction and communication between teachers and learners, and learners and members of communities of practice. Scaffolding as the term given to the provision of appropriate assistance to students in order that they may achieve what on their own would be difficult to achieve is foregrounded in teachers' knowledge in providing comprehensible input and moving the learner

into the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Scaffolding provides contextual supports for meaning through the use of simplified language, teacher modeling, visuals and graphics, cooperative learning and hands-on learning. Wenger (2010) defines the locus of learning as "taking place in a living landscape of communities of practice". And communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". Community of practice thrives within contemporary social paradigms because of its richness in terms of communication and interaction and second language education is particularly dependent on skillful relevant knowledge scaffolding.

The input which second language learners are most likely to notice is the one which satisfies their communicative needs with minimum effort involved in processing the message. This then translates into "an automatic process for learners to search for the optimal relevance of the teacher's utterances (Nizgorodcew 2007: 16). It is the specificity of classroom interaction, which includes teacher utterances that in large part shape students' proficiency levels and discourse competence. learners are exposed to teachers' second language output throughout the span of their instructional years on a day to day basis and because of the quality of second language interaction that goes on in the class, teacher discourse, is without doubt, a powerful tool for and an indisputable factor in shaping students' levels of second language interaction, including discourse competence.

Brazil (1995b: 107) adds 'the classroom lesson is perhaps the clearest example of an event in which what is talked about is under the virtually total control of one participant – the teacher. Teachers are not only dominant in the sense that they control the development of the discourse, they also set the agenda and determine which learner contributions will be admitted as relevant to that agenda and which will not'. Hence the teacher determines the form and structure of discourse in the class room. In this connection, teacher talk is expected not to contain incorrect forms as this is the talk that is generally at the learners' disposal. But as already stated above, in most rural parts of South Africa, teachers' utterances are replete with incorrect grammatical, lexical and general discourse errors. Therefore, it is a given that teach-

ers' knowledge has an active effect on second language discourse competence because a teacher's language habits are often taken over by the students. So, poorly qualified teachers have a negative impact on second language education as the model of both language and presentation of content depend on the interpretation, commitment and level of training of those charged with the responsibility of implementing the curriculum. When teacher modeling is flawed, the learners' discourse is likewise flawed.

Furthermore, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) state that second language teachers must serve as master craftsmen (and women) to whom the student is apprenticed in accordance with Vygotsky's (1978: 78) notion of 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) and scaffolding. Scaffolding is the term given to the provision of appropriate assistance to students in order that they may achieve what on their own would be difficult to achieve. It is encumbered upon teachers' knowledge to provide comprehensible input and to move the learner into the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Scaffolding provides contextual supports for meaning through the use of simplified language, teacher modeling, visuals and graphics, cooperative learning and hands-on learning. And second language education is particularly dependent on skillful relevant knowledge scaffolding. Scaffolding offers opportunities for optimizing interaction and communication between teachers and learners, and learners and members of communities of practice. When language and content teachers work together as designers and facilitators, instead of seeing themselves as dispensers of formal declarative knowledge, the preparation of teaching materials is embraced as a pedagogical design problem over the ultimate objective of a task of selecting content with a monthly scheme of work.

5. SHIFTING IDENTITY

A country's active participation in the global economy is linked to its ability to have access to the information and knowledge that facilitates the basis for both social and economic development and what is pivotal to this are second language education in general, English language teachers and English teaching. Hence there is a need for the South African educational system

to understand and appreciate its own essential knowledge base and corresponding instructional practices in teaching and teacher education in order to effectively respond to the pressures brought about by the need for English as a language of global interaction and communication. The nature of teacher learning should be viewed as a form of socialization into the professional thinking and practices of a community of practice for second language teaching. It requires a specialized knowledge base that is obtained through both academic study and practical experience. In fact, the South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) to be implemented in schools incrementally from 2012, states that teachers of Life Sciences should be aware that they are also engaged in teaching language across the curriculum. This is critical as it is a move in the right direction for the embedded assumption is that teachers who will be responsible for implementing the curriculum will have the capacity to decipher correct scientific knowledge as well as correct linguistic patterns in the way the learners give meaning in context and the teachers have to also give meaningful feedback to learners.

Freeman (2002) makes the observation to the effect that as the knowledge base is largely drawn from content disciplines, and not from the work of teaching itself, it is a field of work where membership has to be based on stringent entry requirements and standards. A teacher's identity is remade through the acquisition of new modes of discourse and new roles in the class room and this does not entail only "language acquisition", but also "discourse acquisition" including what it means to be a language teacher (Miller 2006). Professional identity refers to teachers' subject matter knowledge of their field. Lado (1960:8) adds that: 'to perform professional duties, one must be professionally qualified'. Therefore, professional identity calls for a specific career role which requires the acquisition of specific foreign language knowledge and teaching skills alongside critical thinking and interpersonal skills. It involves a shift in attitudes and behaviours corresponding to a shift in the situation or context. A shift from one language to another should be a code shift in social roles and emotional attitudes.

Thus the identity that teachers should strive to model through their professional knowledge for themselves and learners, should be one that

embraces Rodby's (1990) kaleidoscopic notion of the self. In the kaleidoscopic notion, teachers' knowledge helps in equipping learners to use English for their own purposes as it facilitates the accessibility of various communities of practice which contribute to the enrichment of the learners' worldview. Bakhtin (1986: 7) states that interaction is most beneficial when it crosses cultural boundaries for it is through the dialectical encounter with an "other" (which could be a person or an idea) that a reflexive engagement with self follows. It is the social construction of meaning, which goes beyond a set of skills to include the potential for uncovering new views of the world and the ability to change.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this therefore means that every teacher is a language teacher and as such, teachers' professional knowledge requires a move towards a collegiate stance of facilitating learning. Some content discipline teachers expect learners to write about things in English but these same teachers do not provide the systematic attention to the language that is needed for the benefit of the learners. This is the reason for the rote learning and the regurgitation of knowledge and information that is observed among students because they fail to take full possession of their learning. In short, explicit and careful attention to teachers' professional knowledge needs have to be addressed at both macro- and micro-levels of instructional design and practice.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers wish to state that South African educational system must acknowledge the need for properly qualified second language education teachers with a professional interest and expertise in the language because second language curriculum content is challenging and requires a deep understanding of the demands of language as a medium of learning. In this regard, professional knowledge creativity becomes an imperative for teachers in order to be able to extend and vary basic heuristics to facilitate the integration of language and content. And to also systematically relate meaning in discourse to wording at the macro-level of so-

cial practice while written work and oral expression fit in at the micro-level. With an educational system that has been seen as repeatedly failing to attain a minimally adequate performance from the majority of its clients, it is important to underscore the pervasiveness of language across disciplines.

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