

Effects of Language Status on Assessment and Educational Development of Basotho Learners from Minority Languages' Backgrounds

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical overview of the theoretical and practical questions that prevail in the teaching, learning, and assessment of learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds in Lesotho. It investigates how far exclusion of minority languages affects both assessment and/or educational development of learners whose mother tongue is not Sesotho but other minority languages spoken in Lesotho. The paper advances a research-evidenced argument that the poor performance of students from such backgrounds is indicative of marginalisation and discrimination of such learners due to their language background. A constructivist qualitative study was adopted through use of focus group discussions with 246 learners and 142 teachers in 23 schools located in Botha Bothe, Mophale's Hoek, Qacha's Nek and Quthing districts in Lesotho. These places were selected based on their predominance of minority languages. The findings revealed diminutive if not absolute non-recognition of minority languages in teaching, learning, and assessment of learners from this linguistic background. Therefore, the study concludes that linguistically discriminative curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment educational practices can reasonably be associated with poor performance of learners. Based on these findings, the paper recommends that Lesotho's education system should respect and embrace existence of national minority languages. Again, the curriculum, its implementation and more importantly assessment should not be divorced from linguistic background of learners.

Keywords: Minority language, Language discrimination, Assessment, Lesotho languages

Introduction

Lesotho is a country of residence for a group known as Basotho. Gill (1993, p. xiii) defines Basotho as "people united under Moshoeshoe I during the first half of the 19th century." In Gill's view, the Basotho speak Sesotho (known as Southern Sotho) as their language but there are other languages such as siXhosa, Ndebele and siPhuthi spoken in Lesotho. While Sesotho is the language of the majority population and the other three are spoken by the minority groups, the Lesotho Constitution declares Sesotho and English as official languages in Lesotho and is silent

about existence of these other languages (MoET, 2009). Even though the two are declared as both official in the country, their status quo is defined by the roles that they play. According to Ansell's (2002) cited in Raselimo & Mahao (2015, p. 3), English was privileged over other languages even after implementation of Lesotho Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP). Illustratively, English is used as a language of business and administration. It is further used as a medium of instruction in schools from grade 4 to tertiary. Sesotho, on the other hand, is used as a medium of instruction from grade 1 to 3 because it is mistakenly regarded as the only mother tongue in Lesotho.

The CAP states that a child should be taught in their mother tongue in grades 1-3 (MoET, 2009). Contrarily, this is not the case in Lesotho given that only Sesotho is used as a medium of instruction from grades 1-3 while the other three languages spoken in Lesotho are marginalised. This means that learners who come from these minority linguistic backgrounds are also marginalised and their education development compromised. Such language status has denied the minority communities' linguistic rights which include freedom of using own language in education hence their presumed poor performance at school over the years. This observation is supported by Christopher (2008, p. 203) that

Poor linguistic development is bound to stunt an individual's intellectual and/or expression of knowledge in other subject areas, since language is the medium for the reception and expression of knowledge. It is likely that some students' achievement in other subjects/courses do not reflect the extent of their knowledge in the area due to their inability to express what they have in mind.

Premised on this reflection, the present study investigates how far exclusion of minority languages in the Lesotho school curriculum impact on the assessment and educational growth of learners from minority languages' background in Lesotho. The researchers bring forth a research-evidenced argument that the poor performance of learners from such backgrounds is indicative of marginalisation and discrimination of learners due to their language backgrounds

Literatur review

Language situation in Lesotho

In order to understand the motive behind undertaking of a study such as this one, it is crucial to at least outline the prevailing language situation in Lesotho. According to Kula (2004, pp. 1-2), Sesotho is the major language spoken in Lesotho. It has estimated speakers of about 85%. With independence in 1966, both Sesotho and English were made official languages by legislation. Today Sesotho, with the majority of speakers, remains the national and first official language with English as the second official language. Despite being the second official language, English remains a prominent language at all strategic and planning in particular, education (MoET, 2009). In education, Sesotho is used as a medium of instruction for learners from all the different national language backgrounds from grades 1 to 3 after which it remains the only local language taught as a subject at secondary school level and that may also be studied as a specialisation at institutions of higher learning such as the National University of Lesotho and the Lesotho College of Education. The practice is despite the CAP's clear stipulation that a child's mother tongue shall be the language of teaching and learning presumably of assessment as well during the first three foundational years (MoET, 2009, p. 8).

As it reads, the policy is unquestionably inclusive and responsive to the linguistic situation of Lesotho. It provides for children from minority languages' backgrounds to be taught in their

mother tongue for the first three years of schooling as this will, similarly to their schoolmates from a Sesotho-speaking background, benefit from a fair chance of gradually adjusting to English as a medium of instruction, and Sesotho as just another language and subject. So, the policy was meant to “ensure access, quality, equity and relevance in the educational sector” (MoET, 2009, p. 1). Foundational level as spelt out in Raselimo & Mahao (2015) is geared towards creating the basic foundation for secondary, technical, vocational education and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982).

Should Lesotho disregard existence of minority languages as mother tongue to other Basotho, this means that learners whose mother tongue is either siXhosa, Ndebele or siPhuthi are mistakenly taught and assessed in Sesotho as a mother tongue yet it is a language which is foreign to them, hence their educational development is disadvantaged. This is evidenced by Christopher’s (2008) argument that the best first language education provides a rich foundation that a learner can use to acquire a second language or even perform well in other subjects. She further states that the literacy skills that are already developed in the first language would enhance easy transition to the second language medium education. The situation in Lesotho does not seem to acknowledge this claim since minority languages are excluded in the school curriculum.

Gacheche (2010, p. 3) shares the same sentiments with Christopher that education should be tailored such that it is delivered in the learners’ mother tongue in the foundation grades for “people learn best when they are taught in a language they understand well.” Christopher further mentions that

Effort should be made to discountenance the growing perception that local languages are inadequate for education. If mother tongue education is given sufficient attention, the product of basic education could be empowered and sufficiently equipped in at least one language to participate in political, social and economic development in society (Christopher, 2008, p. 207).

The present study notes that none of the minority languages in Lesotho is used as a medium of instruction and assessment for students. That is, not only is teaching in Sesotho, but setting and writing of examinations as well. This paper advances an argumentation here that Sesotho is the language that speaks to only a part of the Basotho nation. What happens to the rest of the nation?

Matsoso (2001), Kometsi (2014) and MoET (2019) aver that Lesotho is not as monolingual and mono-cultural as often thought. The authors make reference to areas in Lesotho which are significantly populated by Basotho who come from Nguni language-speaking backgrounds and have continued to live their ethnicity language and culture since King Moshoeshoe I’s creation of Basotho as a nation of diverse ethnic linguistic and cultural groups. This observation is consistent with what is advanced in Rosenberg, Weisfelder & Frisbic-Fulton (2005), Legere, Karstern, Fitchat & Akindede (2002) and Webb (1995), all of whom acknowledge that the languages are the predominant ethnic minority languages characterising language situation in Lesotho.

Despite existence of these other mother tongue languages, Lesotho curriculum and assessment tools are developed with a blind eye on other mother tongue languages; hence, examination question papers and the examination exercise itself are all conducted in Sesotho in total non-recognition of learners from other linguistic speaking backgrounds. This practice displays marginalisation and exclusiveness that learners from such backgrounds suffer as their languages are not recognised in their educational development. Moreover, this reflects negatively on the minority communities’ freedom to learn in their own language and to be assessed in the language that they understand well the same way their counterparts from Sesotho-speaking background do.

Assessment and minority languages

There are various dimensions pinned on the assessment phenomenon. Cheng & Curtis (2004, p. 224) explain that assessment is a mechanism to correct or minimise biasness in the allocation of opportunities. This means that it is through assessment that one's suitability or qualification in the world market is determined. Therefore, if a tool that is used for assessment is uneven for all learners, then assessment should not be used as a sieve. Cheng & Curtis (2004) and Khalanyane & Hala-Hala (2014) summarise fundamental roles of assessment in educational development. They list them as tracking and selection, programme accountability, minimum competency testing, school and district accountability and standards-based accountability. This means that assessment is used to refer to all activities teachers use to assess learners' progress in learning, and measure their knowledge of the curriculum content.

Similarly, Ukwuije & Opara (2013) define assessment as an encompassing term covering various dimensions where academic achievements are measured. It incorporates evaluation of the cognitive, psychomotor and affective skills of an individual; while Lambert & Lines (2000) and Rust (2002) encapsulate it as appraisal of learners' learning outcome. According to these authors, assessment involves making judgment about learner's performance as well as identifying their strengths and weaknesses. In the context of language situation in Lesotho, educational practice at curriculum content, teaching and learning as well as assessment levels glaringly marginalise and disadvantage all Basotho learners from minority language backgrounds by subjecting them to the same scale of judgement yet the channel that is used to prepare them for assessment is foreign to them while native to their colleagues from the Sesotho-speaking background. Therefore, this paper affirms that the role of language in facilitating assessment process cannot be overemphasized. The effectiveness of any assessment and related performance at any educational level depends on among others and mainly, how linguistically well-grounded learners are as highlighted in the above sections of this paper. For instance, as research shows, learners at foundation education levels are assessed through their mother tongue, it can reasonably be assumed that by virtue of strong grounding and communicative competence in such, they are more likely to perform better than if their learning and knowledge were assessed through a foreign medium.

Assessment of learners' learning can also be understood as a progressive process of gathering information about learners' progress towards learning outcomes (Linn & Miller, 2005) while Huba & Freed (2000) add that assessment includes discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what learners know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of educational experiences. Thus, assessment also includes learners, teachers and peers' real life situations that seek, reflect upon and respond to information from "dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance on-going learning" (Klenowski 2009, p. 265). This declaration, therefore, makes language, particularly native language a premium aspect in once educational development.

Kapukaya (2013, p. 84) extends the definition of assessment as a "systematic collection, review, interpretation, and use of information about learners' achievements and educational programmes for the purpose of improving learners' learning and development." General speaking, assessment helps learners to level with their strengths and weaknesses in the teaching and learning process. In her investigation on the assessment practices by primary school mathematics' teachers in Lesotho, Khechane (2016, p. 20) encapsulates assessment as all the actions and activities that the teacher uses during the teaching and learning process to measure learner's learning as defined by the learning outcome.

Theoretical assumption

Social constructivism (SC) as one of the three main types of constructivist theory, underpins the study on which this paper draws. The theory served as a framework with principles that imbed the researchers' conceptualisation and operationalisation of the term minority language and its role in educational assessment. As a research paradigm, SC focuses on how knowledge develops as a social construction (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). SC is in principle, interpretivist and a framework for establishing and understanding how social groups interpret and attach meanings to experiences and practices making their natural world (Eusafzai, (2014); Scotland 2012). It is also about the need to appreciate for research purposes, that perceptions, and interpretations of behaviours of social groups chosen for investigation which are best understood in their natural contexts. According to Burrell & Morgan (2005, p. 28), the interpretive dimension of this theory is informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, and the central nature of social world at the level of personal experience. This is because based on their natural world, social groups develop and attach their own meanings to particular cultural behaviours, languages, experiences and related practices, all of which for purposes of research should be accepted as the vital interests of the researched social group. SC in this manner is about among others, the principle on need for observance of social reality or construct in researching social groups (Creswell 2013; Galbin, 2014). In this constructivist study, the status of the minority languages and assessment provisions and practices in Lesotho's provision for education, are considered the natural educational context and social interest about which minority languages' background learners (henceforth MLBLs) in Lesotho could reasonably be assumed to have perceptions regarding the effect(s) of the situation on how they are assessed. Underpinning such an assumption is a social constructivism principle that perspectives of those groups most directly and negatively affected by the status quo are necessary in constructivist research aimed at influencing transformation (Higgins, Trehan & McGowan, 2015). MLBLs are in this case the social groups assumed to be negated against by the status of their languages in Lesotho's education system (MoET, 2019).

Also enshrined in social constructivist research is the value of the strategy of interaction amongst social groups assumed to be affected by the status quo. Interaction in this situation is a research strategy and/or vehicle for gathering synthesis of knowledge about the research phenomenon as constructed by the social group purposively selected for participation in the inquiry (Maree, 2007 cited by Matsoso, 2012). In line with the SC principle of social interaction, interactive FGDs generated data that thematised into knowledge in the form of perspectives held by MLBLs about the effect of the status of their languages on how they (MLBLs) are assessed. What these MLBLs collectively perceived to be their language-sensitive educational assessment-related needs was deemed as socially constructed knowledge and of relevance in a study pursuing an understanding of the "we perspective" of the effect(s) of language status on educational assessment of Basotho learners from minority languages' backgrounds. In sum, the theoretical assumption underpinning the paper is that access to education and related processes of teaching and learning and assessment are a reality that is socially constructed; and should therefore be ideally researched from the social constructivist perspective from time to time as circumstances of SDG-related issues such as the current lifelong inclusive quality education for all emerge.

Methodology

In order to investigate how exclusion of minority languages from school curriculum impact on the assessment and educational development of Basotho learners from minority language-speaking backgrounds in Lesotho, we adopted a qualitative-consultative approach. Qualitative studies are understood to be naturalistic in that they allow the researcher an opportunity to study

and understand the research phenomenon in the context of its natural setting (Babbie, Mouton, Vorster & Posezki, 2001). They gather an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that govern such behaviour (Altheide, 1996; Stake, 1995; Meyer, 2001; Creswell, 2008). This paper, in particular, seeks to know why learners from linguistically disadvantaged backgrounds perform poorly in their academic work. Moreover, qualitative studies characteristically call for the need to understand the research phenomenon in the voices of the people most directly affected by the status quo (Leedy & Ormrod, 2009). For this study, the present study understands that by virtue of being from Lesotho's ethnic minority language-speaking backgrounds, teachers and learners identified in this study as participants are most directly affected by the nature of the curriculum content, teaching/learning and therefore assessment. Even if they may not necessarily be from the same language backgrounds as learners, teachers of learners were presumed to be similarly naturalistic in their interpretations of the situation in which they have to effect the non-inclusive curriculum to linguistically marginalised learners hence their participation in this inquiry.

Population of the study

The population for the study comprised teachers and learners from schools in the designated areas identified by the researchers. The selected schools are located in four districts of Lesotho namely Botha Bothe, Mohale's Hoek, Qacha's Nek, and Quthing. As illustrated by Matsoso (2001), siXhosa and siPhuthi are spoken in the Mohale's Hoek, Quthing and Qacha's Nek districts of Lesotho; while Ndebele is spoken in the Botha-Bothe district.

Data collection methods and procedure

Data for this study were collected by means of consultative discussions with focus group discussions (FGDs) in those parts of Lesotho where Nguni languages are prevalent. 23 schools were identified from Botha Bothe, Mohale's-Hoek, Qacha's Nek and Quthing districts of Lesotho. Researchers held focus group discussions with 142 teachers and 246 learners from the schools. After proper introductions at each school, researchers met with teachers first to investigate the impact of language status especially of minority languages on the teaching and learning, and assessment of learners from Nguni languages' backgrounds. After the consultative discussions, researchers met the learners to also find out from them how they are affected by exclusion of their mother tongue languages from their school curriculum and how that impact on their educational development. These FGDs were guided by probing questions to ensure relevance of collected data.

Discussion of the results

The following sections discuss key findings from both teachers and learners from Nguni language-speaking backgrounds. The findings are presented according to themes that surfaced from the focus group discussions held at different schools. This approach aligns with Creswell's (2008, p. 46) declaration that qualitative research requires the researcher to collect data containing largely of words or text from participants; describe and analyse these words for themes. Generally, all participants for this study felt that assessment of learners from minority languages' backgrounds in Lesotho is negatively affected by discriminatory and marginalised language practices.

Recognition and respect of human rights

Findings from both teachers and learners reveal the need for state's governance structures to recognise and respect human rights at strategic planning and implementation levels. Participants

for this study spelt out that it is one's right to use one's language and culture freely without feeling discriminated and labelled "a black sheep". This is in line with Schiff-Myers, Djukic, McGovern-Lawler & Perez (1993) that if learners are not provided with even transition from mother tongue to second language that is likely to impact negatively on the learning of second language, hence poor performance at school. Participants further pointed out that to ensure inclusiveness as spelt out in the CAP (MoET, 2009) regardless of one's language background, learners in particular should enjoy national resources equally without being judged according to one's ethnicity, linguistic background or otherwise. To illuminate relevance of language competence in education, Badger & Wilkinson (1998) note that teachers should provide opportunities for learners to try out their literacy competence. Similarly, Christopher (2008) states that language proficiency is key to personal and national development. She emphasizes government's need to enforce compulsory basic education and provide sufficient conditions for individuals to learn the language(s).

Freedom and flexibility to choose languages for educational development

Data revealed restrictions over subject choice at schools. Participants demonstrated a need to include all languages spoken in Lesotho with no judgement as to how many speakers each language has. They pointed out that learners need a platform that can allow them flexibility to choose which language(s) to study. Meaning that, learners should be allowed to study Sesotho, siXhosa, Ndebele or siPhuthi since that freedom would enhance their love for education and the urge to perform well. They further revealed that the present situation in Lesotho recognises only one mother tongue, which is Sesotho probably because it is spoken by majority of Basotho population not because it is the only mother tongue in the country. This revelation shows that the status of a language has an impact on how learners perceive education. They acknowledge that language is a significant determinant in one's educational development.

Transparency

Again, data featured transparency as another theme gathered from the participants. It was apparent from the participants' discussions that they need to be consulted on matters that concern their linguistic knowledge so that when school curriculum is developed, developers do so in cognizance of their existence as stakeholders (Raselimo & Mahao, 2015). In that way, they would feel they are part and parcel of policies and not feel as if they do not belong to this country as it is the case now. Specifically, teachers showed that their inclusion in school curriculum development will inform their approach in teaching and assessing learners. This observation is supported by Christopher (2008, p. 1) that it is about time that "examining bodies and curricula designers appraise their philosophies and practice with a view to aligning language teaching and assessment in national development goals and international best practice."

Roberts (2006, p. 6) adds that

... if learners are actively involved in decisions about how to learn, what to learn and why they are learning, and are also involved in decisions about criteria for assessment and the process of judging their own and others' work, then their relationship to their studies will be qualitatively different to those learners who are treated as recipients of teaching and who are the object of others' unilateral assessment.

populace of Basotho from Nguni language-speaking backgrounds perform badly in the exit examinations sat for at the end of each year. This poor performance compromises the learners' educational development and biased evaluation for life long opportunities. The study also concludes that Lesotho subdues growth of cognitive facilities in learners' first language by barring use of minority languages as some learners are denied an opportunity to use them as their first languages.

To address these issues, the study recommends that a credit in a local language should be made a requirement for admission into institutions of higher learning to uplift appreciation and status of local languages. Furthermore, it recommends that, siXhosa, Ndebele and siPhuthi be taught at schools as part of the Lesotho curriculum. To ensure practicality of this inclusiveness, the study also recommends that institutions of higher learning train teachers in the minority languages so that there could be qualified personnel to teach these languages. Moreover, all assessment material should be written in the different languages spoken in Lesotho including ethnic languages so that learners in lower grades could be assessed in the language that they understand which is their "mother tongue" as it is the case with their Sesotho native speakers.

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