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Cognition and the Language of Learning in South Africa: A Grade 10 Economics Perspective

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Keywords

limited English proficiency, language of learning, Economics classroom

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Cognition and the Language of Learning in South Africa: A Grade 10 Economics Perspective

by
Gawie Schlebusch⁺

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Abstract

In South Africa an increasing number of learners are taught through the medium of English. Limited English proficiency (LEP) learners who enter classes where English is the language of learning, encounter serious problems in coping with their academic work. These learners have usually acquired informal, colloquial language or Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), but lack Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The primary aim of this article is to explore the language dilemma which Grade ten LEP learners' experience. From these findings, recommendations are made concerning ways in which educators can support English language acquisition in the context of the learning areas for which they are responsible.

In this study the focus is on LEP learners in the Economics classroom. Although Economics has its own "language" or terminology, concepts are explained in English by the educator, as it is the language of learning. The researcher is a lecturer in the methodology of Economics, and became aware of the language problems of LEP learners while evaluating his student educators in the school setting.

Key Words: limited English proficiency, language of learning, Economics classroom

Introduction

Learners' ability to participate meaningfully in school learning activities is intimately linked to their proficiency in the language of learning at school (Cummins, [1984](#); Ortiz, [1997](#)). In South Africa an increasing number of learners are taught through the medium of English. Cleghorn, Mtetwa, Dube and Munetsi ([1998](#)) confirm that such learners are fluent enough in English to have passed an admission test measuring general language ability, but lack the command of English needed to comprehend the various concepts, principles and techniques required to pass different school learning areas. This implies that the language deficiency of many learners is often hidden in everyday conversation. These learners have usually acquired informal, colloquial language or Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), but lack Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Cummins ([1992](#)) asserts that BICS consist of the 'visible' aspects of language, such as pronunciation, basic vocabulary and grammar, which allow learners to participate satisfactorily in undemanding everyday conversations. However, a more refined command of language or CALP is necessary if they are to achieve academic success. Learners with CALP are able to grasp concepts, establish relationships between concepts, and analyse, synthesize, classify, store and retrieve information.

Although Economics has its own "language" or terminology, concepts are explained in English since it is the language of learning. Concepts such as medium of exchange, legal tender, infrastructure and agriculture, albeit Economic concepts, must be comprehended by Grade ten Economics learners through the medium of English. There are, however, learners who lack the English proficiency needed to grasp concepts in content learning areas such as Economics.

Gravelle (1996) claims that almost all learning involves language, whether in written or spoken form. For learners it is the language used in the classroom that will be most demanding. Learners' ability to participate meaningfully in school learning activities is intimately linked to their proficiency in the language of instruction at school. Those who lack this proficiency, stand out as low achievers (Pluddermann, 1997). It is thus imperative for LEP learners to obtain a level of English language skills that will lead to the achievement of their academic goals.

Inadequate language skills in English are a fundamental retarding factor for LEP learners in the subject classroom, because of the difficulty these learners experience in comprehending subject associated concepts (Tharp, 1997). LEP learners therefore have to acquire English language skills to succeed academically.

Method

Data were accumulated by interacting with selected individuals in familiar surroundings and by acquiring documents relevant to the study (Kvale, 1996).

The researcher randomly chose five English-medium secondary schools in the Free State Goldfields area of South Africa. All of these schools are situated in the traditionally Black townships. Almost all of the learners in these schools are not first language English speakers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 LEP Grade ten Economics learners (six LEP learners from each school). The researcher asked the educators of the Grade ten learner population in these schools to assist in randomly selecting the sample group. These educators know the learners and a more accurate sample of LEP learners could be selected for the interviews.

The semi-structured interview was selected because structured questions could be followed up with unstructured, probing questions. By the time the LEP learners were interviewed they had been exposed to seven months of Economics instruction. Economics is first introduced as a subject in Grade ten in South African secondary schools. All interviews were conducted individually with the assistance of a tape recorder. All questions were submitted to five colleagues beforehand to verify the validity and comprehensibility of the questions. No adjustments were proposed to the questions.

The researcher wanted to ascertain whether LEP learners experience serious problems with English as the language of learning in the Economics classroom. All questions were therefore asked in English (their language of learning). The questions asked wanted to establish whether LEP learners in Grade ten comprehend the basic Economic concepts needed at that level, as well as other (non-academic) English words used in the textbooks.

Limitations of the study

As respondents may have had very limited experience with business and commerce, they may lack the experiential base on which educators could build concepts. In addition, English is used by the respondents only as a school language, and not outside the classroom.

This research does not consider educator deficits. Most of the educators, for whom English is a second or third language, may also lack the ability to successfully explain the concepts to their learners.

Instructional systems are not regarded in this study. It is recommended that the effect thereof be investigated in further research.

This research should also be repeated in the other learning areas.

Results

The data from the recorded interviews was analysed and grouped and are reported on descriptively. The first two questions were asked to determine whether respondents experienced language related problems in the Economics classroom and whether the introduction of SeSotho (mother tongue) as language of learning would alleviate some of these problems.

Do you experience problems with English as language of learning in the Economics classroom?

Most of the respondents replied that they do experience problems with English as language of learning. After probing to ascertain the type of problems they experience, it was clear to the researcher that they do not understand the Economic concepts.

The words used by the educator to explain concepts are unfamiliar to them. The researcher observed that many of these respondents had difficulty explaining that they battle with English in the classroom. The majority made statements like the following (researcher's probes in brackets):

"...I do not understand the English."

"Yes, the English.....he is difficult."

"No,....the English words....(What about the words?)...it is difficult."

Some respondents answered that they did not experience any problems with the use of English in the Economics classroom. The researcher was not that sure, because of the hesitation of some of these respondents before answering, as well as the short "no" answers given by some. The researcher was of the opinion that the hesitation could have been a result of not understanding the question or an effort by respondents not to sound unintelligent to the researcher. These responses were then probed further by asking learners whether they understood all the English words used by the educator. All of these respondents then confirmed that they did not understand all the English words used by the educator. They initially replied with statements like:

"...(pause)...no problem..."

"No."

After probing most answers were in the form of:

"...I do not always know the English."

A small number of respondents said that they sometimes had difficulty in understanding the English used by the educator. They understood most of the classroom talk, but occasionally found it difficult to comprehend what the educator says. Responses were in the line of:

"The teacher uses the difficult words."

From the above-mentioned responses it is evident to the researcher that all the respondents interviewed, did experience problems with English as language of learning in the Economics classroom. Even the respondents, who at first answered in the negative, conceded that they do experience problems with English.

Do you think you will perform better in Economics if it can be taught in your mother tongue?

The researcher had to rephrase the question to a number of the respondents, as they were not sure what the question meant. A total lack of understanding the wording of the question was observed. Even a shade of feeling ashamed, because of their lack of understanding, was detected by the researcher. Many of the respondents struggled to elaborate on their answers. Most of them felt content to keep their answers short. Responses were:

"... (silence)...(Do you understand what I ask you?). No. (rephrase the question). Yes, I will understand better."

More than half of the respondents admitted that they thought they would perform better if they could be taught in their mother tongue (Sesotho). With probing, the researcher ascertained that most of these respondents felt that they would understand Economics better. They made the following remark:

"Yes, I think I can do better....she explain in Sesotho I understand."

The rest of the respondents replied that they would not perform better if taught in their mother tongue. Probing for reasons, the researcher learned that many of these respondents felt that Economics should be taught in English for them to be successful in the business world. One summed it up:

"... no...(can you tell me why you say no?)...(struggles to explain)...but I want English...is good."

The following seven questions were asked to determine the understanding of certain selected Economic concepts, as well as general English words found in the Grade ten Economics textbook.

Explain the phrase "medium of exchange"

More than a third of the respondents said that they did not understand the words in the question. The researcher noticed the frustration of the respondents of not being able to grasp the meaning of the words of the question. The researcher did no probing in these cases, as that would in part answer the question for the respondents. They replied with statements like:

"What?... (medium of exchange).....no, I don't understand... (Don't you understand the question?) ...yes."

More than half of the respondents tried to answer the question, but failed in doing so. Most of these respondents struggled to express themselves in English and many gave the impression that they know what was asked, but that they found it difficult to say what they wanted to. The concept, "bartering", formed the basis of most of these answers:

"When you change goods with goods."

"...is difficult to say in English...(can you try?)...is the barter."

The rest of the respondents were able to provide answers which the researcher considered as correct. Respondents seemed proud when realising that they could provide an answer, albeit a short one. The basis of these answers specified that money was involved when buying goods. Although all four respondents answered the question correctly, no elaboration was given. One respondent answered:

"Medium of exchange?... (yes)...is the money you pay."

What does "legal tender" refer to?

Almost two thirds of the respondents did not understand the words. The researcher did not rephrase the question, but repeated it to these respondents. Most of them seemed surprised or stunned that this concept forms part of the Economics syllabus. Their facial expression when the question was asked indicated a total lack of understanding. They responded like this:

"What?... (what does legal tender refer to?)...(silence)... I don't know those words."

All the other respondents answered the question, but incorrectly. The majority of these respondents struggled to find words to express themselves. Responses were short and respondents seemed very unsure of themselves, as if they did not want to expose their inability to express themselves.

"...(struggle to answer)...the results of the money to the people."

"...(struggle to answer)...to buy the goods to another person"

Respondents could not furnish a correct answer for this concept. Those who attempted to answer had immense difficulty in trying to explain the concept. They could not seem to find the vocabulary to express themselves properly.

Explain "agriculture" in your own words.

Almost half of the respondents answered that they did not understand the word. These respondents did not try to answer, but immediately said that they did not know or understand the word. A reason might be that most of these respondents had difficulty understanding previous questions as well, and seemed content now to accept defeat. Responses to this effect were given:

"...I think I do not know that word."

"No...I don't know that one."

Almost a third incorrect responses were given. Many of the responses dealt with the market or marketing. They seemed to link agriculture to the produce sold at the market. Most responses stated the following:

"To make plans...to work in the market."

Almost another third of the responses given were considered to be partly correct by the researcher. Most of these responses had the farmer and farming as the basis thereof. These respondents were eager to answer - as if they became different people the moment they recognise a word or concept. Respondents seemed satisfied though to provide short answers, and not to attempt any elaboration.

"...when you want to be a farmer."

Not one thorough explanation could be given for this concept.

What is the difference between the public and the private sector?

A few respondents said that they did not understand. The researcher then wanted to know from them what it is they did not understand. Most answered that they did not understand the words in the question. Respondents seemed agitated when realising that they did not understand what was asked to them. Responses were like:

"...(silence)...what?... (repeat the question) (respondent frowning) ...no... I don't understand those words."

Almost two thirds of the respondents provided an incorrect answer. Many of these respondents were of the opinion that in the private sector, people did things on their own and that in the public sector, people did things in public. The abbreviations, LTD and (PTY) LTD, were also given as answers. Many respondents struggled to explain their answers in English, due to the fact

that a comparison had to be made. This forced respondents to use longer sentences. Many were hesitant, mostly because they did not seem to know how to start explaining the difference. Responses were made like:

"... Uhhh ...public sector is in the area you areand private sector is... when you want something ...outside to another place."

"The public sector is...(struggles)...when you buy outside the shop... and private sector... is when you buy in the market."

"The private sector is the business of the private people and the public sector is the state people."

Only a few respondents gave answers which the researcher took as partly correct. Most of these respondents answered that the state has a big influence on the public sector, but failed to explain the private sector correctly. Elaboration lacked in all the responses. Respondents seemed not to be interested to ensure that they explain their answers. They seemed to lack that confidence in their ability to use English. They replied with statements like:

"Uhhh....public is the...where the state is boss...and private is in your office alone"

Only a couple of the respondents answered correctly. These answers included the involvement of the state and private people in their respective sectors. The answers, however, were short and respondents did not venture into any elaboration. Even when they provided correct answers, did the respondents seem indecisive and without confidence. Answers like the following were given:

"Public... is the state...and private is the business"

"I think is the public is the ... (struggle to find word) ...government ...and the private is the market."

Although more partly correct and correct answers were given for this question than any other, respondents still struggled to express their views in English. This demonstrated that respondents might know the answer to a question, but that their ability to express it in English was not sound.

The next three questions were asked to establish the listening and speaking skills of respondents when asked to explain general English words. These words were taken from the Grade ten Economics textbook used by respondents. The rationale for asking these questions was to establish whether LEP learners only struggle with Economic concepts, or were other English words aggravating the situation.

What does the word "allocation" mean?

More than two thirds of the respondents did not know the meaning of the word. Most of these respondents did not even try to explain, but immediately said that they do not know or understand the word. Others frowned and indicated that they have not heard it before.

They told the researcher that:

"What?...(allocation)...I do not know that word."

The rest of the respondents did answer the question, but all answers were incorrect. A few answered confidently, and the researcher is of the opinion that it was most probably because they thought they were correct. Most, however, seemed to have no idea what this word meant, as was reflected in the attempted answers:

"Allocation? ... (yes) ... is when ... is when ... you search for something."

"Is the location...(explain what you mean?)...is where we live."

None of the respondents could explain the meaning of this word.

What does the word "alternatives" mean?

Almost two thirds of the respondents replied that they did not understand this word. From their responses (frowns, total silence) the researcher observed that the word was totally unfamiliar to them. This seemed to be the reason why respondents made no attempt to try and answer the question. They responded as follows:

"...(silence)...(do you know this word?)...no."

"Uuhhh...I don't heard it...(what do you mean?)... I don't heard this word...I don't understand."

A third of the respondents answered the question incorrectly. These respondents, although they tried, had no idea what this word meant. Their answers were not relevant to the question at all. The researcher got the impression that some of these respondents actually thought they answered correctly. It was either that, or they felt that they were obliged to answer, whether correct or not. They made statements like:

"...Is the..is things ...you really need."

"When they sell the products overseas."

A couple of the respondents said that they knew what the word meant, but that they did not know how to explain it. Upon probing these respondents, the researcher came to the conclusion that they might know the meaning of the word, but that they did not have the English vocabulary to explain themselves properly. They seemed frustrated not to be able to answer in English. One said:

"I know...but I cannot explain in English...(can you try?)...yes... is...(struggles)...is too difficult in English."

Not one of the respondents was able to answer this question correctly.

What does the word "disposal" mean?

Most of the respondents commented that they did not understand this word. They did not attempt to answer and seemed distraught at their inability to answer. One respondent asked whether the word was English. Responses were

"Tsk...no...not that one...I don't know."

"What? ..(disposal)...no, I don't know this word, is it English?"

The other respondents answered the question, but incorrectly. Answers not applicable to this question were given. These respondents tried to answer, but most clearly did not know the meaning of the word. Others linked it to the Accounting term "asset disposal". They made statements like the following:

"Is ...when you do assets...(how do you mean?)...is on credit."

"What?... (disposal)...oohh, is the journal and double entry."

None of the respondents could give a correct answer to this question.

Not one of the last three questions could be answered correctly by the respondents. As these words were taken from the Grade ten Economics textbook, it is the opinion of the researcher that respondents will find it very difficult to understand what they read from the textbook.

It is thus evident from the interviews that respondents had difficulty expressing themselves in English. Not only could the majority of respondents not explain the Economic concepts asked, they had major problems explaining general English words. It is the opinion of the researcher that respondents did not have the ability to use English to convey their thoughts and to explain the Economic concepts. Respondents were not confident to use English, because of their lack of CALP. The researcher intentionally did not explain the questions beforehand to the respondents. The rationale for this was that listening to and understanding of questions by respondents was seen as part of the research. Respondents had been exposed to seven months of Economics instruction at the time when the interviews were conducted.

Discussion

The recommendations are discussed against the background of information obtained from the data collected through interviews and literature.

- It is of vital importance that LEP learners learn through their mother tongue for a prolonged period at school. Respondents in the research affirmed that a better understanding of Economics as a subject will be the result.
- The level of English proficiency of LEP learner entering the secondary school needs to be on the CALP level to enable them to comprehend subject language. The alternative would be for these learners to receive instruction in their mother tongue, but that will mean a transformation of the Economic curriculum into the mother tongue, and with 11 official languages in South Africa that may be a costly undertaking.

- Educators have to realise that the teaching of English language skills is not the sole responsibility of the English subject educators. All teachers in multilingual settings have to receive training to enable them to assist LEP learners in the classroom.
- Respondents in this study often struggled to express themselves in English. LEP learners will gain substantially in classrooms where oral and written activities are regarded as integral to the process of negotiating knowledge, thoughts and experiences.
- The language used in subject textbooks needs to be on par with the reading comprehension level of the all the learners who are supposed to use them.

Conclusion

LEP learners are a group, at risk of academic failure. Educators hold the key to the academic achievement of these learners. Not only English subject educators should strive to develop the English proficiency of LEP learners, but all educators have to realise that their input towards English proficiency is essential. When LEP learners speak English, they will learn English.

If these learners are to realise their full potential, a strong commitment must be made to their educational needs, especially towards educator awareness, language programmes and teaching methodology.

It is imperative for LEP learners to acquire English proficiency on the CALP level. Learners must first acquire CALP in their first language before learning through a second language. The central role of the mother tongue should be recognised and supported, particularly in the early stages of cognitive development. The ideal is thus that LEP learners should study through their mother tongue for as long as possible. Through education in their first language, LEP learners continue to acquire academic and cognitive skills, while they acquire the necessary language skills in English. The advantage is that while they engage in the task of learning another language, their linguistic and cognitive development is not neglected.

LEP learners are part of the educational system and are to be nurtured and encouraged to attain their maximum level of achievement, just like all other learners in the education system.

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