

# ADVOCATING FOR DIALOGIC TEACHING IN ETHNICALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOMS OF BOTSWANA

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## Abstract

Dialogic approach in teaching involves interaction between learners and their teachers. The absence of this dialogue in ethnic minority classrooms can contribute towards their marginalization. This paper examined the effectiveness of dialogic approach in ethnically and linguistically diverse classrooms in selected primary schools in Botswana. The hypothesis was that language barrier was a challenge to effective dialogic classrooms. Qualitative data were collected from ethnically and linguistically diverse regions using triangulated methods such as classroom observations, open ended questionnaires, interviews and field notes. Paul Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed Philosophy was used as an underpinning framework to justify minimal dialogic situations in classrooms. Findings indicated that dialogue was limited in the ethnically and linguistically diverse classroom due to language hurdle resulting in poor academic performance. The study concluded that, to facilitate dialogue in such a setup, the Language-in-Education Policy should be reviewed to accommodate other indigenous languages at the initial stages of learning.

**Key words:** dialogic approach, marginalised, linguistic diversity, classrooms

## 1.0 Introduction

Increase in the number of learners from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in primary schools demands mechanisms that can promote dialogic activities in classrooms to promote learners' academic development. Early learning is stranded in oral language skills which are built and maintained in subsequent levels of primary education. A dialogic approach in classrooms would therefore reinforce these oral skills. In the dialogic learning process teachers and learners critically interrogate topics from various approaches as learners express their views and at the same time accommodate ideas from their peers (Shor, 1987; Alexander, 2006). Linell (2009) postulates that dialogic situation is contextual and can be influenced by actual practices of various communicative forms such as interpersonal relations, exchange and development of ideas, power, and identities of the learners and teachers. It is therefore the responsibility of teachers to create an environment that stimulates learners' ability to confidently participate in the classroom. Such an environment promotes learning as students are able to answer questions, defend their point of view, speculate, debate issues, reflect on learning experiences as well as comprehend issues beyond classrooms environment (cf. Mullings, 2018). In fact research reveals

that discursive repertoires in the classroom enable learners to gain insight into broader social processes (Halabi, 2017; Wegerif, 2011).

Shor (1987) identifies transformation in social relations in the classrooms as one of the benefits of dialogic teaching. It is also one of the conduits to raising awareness about relations in society at large as it transforms the way pupils learn. As the teacher poses critical problems for inquiry learners participate in knowledge seeking and creation. Mullings (2018) adds that when the language of instruction is familiar to learners, it facilitates confidence in the learners as well as active participation. Learners do not become passive acquirers of knowledge as happens in narrative lecturing. Teachers (would) need to continuously change delivery styles to foster interactive, dialogic and collaborative learning strategies that engage learners (Menninger, 2018).

It should be mentioned that dialogic teaching can be most efficient in languages that learners are competent in (cf. Mullings, 2018). Callander (2013) reports that competency in mother-tongue is reinforced through the social process of interaction and observation. Research also reveals that learners need multiple opportunities to observe language in use and practice. They need an environment with competent speakers of the language in use so that they can assimilate the skills (Callander, 2013).

The above notwithstanding, what currently holds in practice at lower levels of school in Botswana is that Setswana is used in Standard One classes with a switch to English at Standard Two (Revised National Policy on Education, 1994). This situation holds in classes with learners from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and has perpetuated since independence in 1966 (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2000; le Roux 1999; Chebanne, 2002; Bolaane & Saugestad, 2006; Mokibelo, 2014a&b). Learners whose mother-tongues are marginalized in the school system must grapple with the language hurdle at the same time as they try to acquire knowledge. This paper problematizes this situation in the context of advocating for dialogic teaching.

## **2.0 Theoretical framework**

Dialogical approach by Paulo Freire (1976), also called Pedagogy of the Oppressed, is used as the underpinning framework in the study. Although one may argue that Freire's dialogic approach is political as it sought to empower the oppressed to voice their grievances, studies reveal that it can and has been used within education circles to promote participation in the classroom (Wegerif, 2011).

The main principle of the dialogical approach is that effective and successful teaching and learning takes place by means of dialogic interaction between teacher and student and between learner and learner. The teacher is the the resourceful agent who presents their wealth of knowledge through dialogic interaction rather than lecture method. The teacher creates an environment where learners discover the information by debating, reasoning, speculating,

arguing, asking and so forth. The dialogical approach opines that dialogue can effortlessly happen in the mother-tongue of the learner, since they would not have an additional language hurdle to surmount in the quest to seek for knowledge. Freire (1976) views both learners and teachers as partners who have to work together in the learning space, where dialogue is pivotal in the learning process. Thus successful dialogue brings the learner and the teacher together as equal partners in the learning process.

Another observation made by Freire (1976) is that education is inherently political, and pedagogies needed to factor this in. To a certain extent, the dialogical perspective is that education should be considered as a liberation tool, liberating from ignorance, oppression and suffering. Further, education should promote change and should cultivate critical and intellectual abilities. This thinker believed that learning should have a transformative effect on learners. Freire (1976) stated that:

Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it. ...to the extent that we are communicative beings who communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able to know that we know, which is something more than just knowing... through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality (p.13).

To buttress Freire's point, Wegerif (2011) argued for an interactive class where learners are at liberty to talk face to face with the teachers and fearlessly question and explore ideas that are familiar or unfamiliar to them.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative approach in collecting data from policy implementers in regard to school languages in classrooms with linguistically and culturally diverse learners. The research was conducted in six primary schools selected from various regions that were far apart to avoid bias. The regions were North East, North West, Central, Kgalagadi, South East and Kweneng.

Participants for this study were teachers, school management, and education officers. They were chosen primarily because they are directly or indirectly involved in the implementation of the policy. Convenient sampling was used to identify the participants in schools, especially teachers. Sixty-four teachers participated in this study. The targeted levels were Standards One where the policy is implemented in Setswana, Standard Two where there is a transition from Setswana to English, Standard Four where learners write their national examinations and Standard Seven where learners write their final examinations. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, open ended questionnaires, and field notes.

Data were coded according to key research questions while identifying major and minor themes under each key research question. Emerging key issues and variations and patterns emerging from each school and from the different data collection tools were identified. The results of the study could not be generalized to regions which were not covered in the study because each region was considered unique.

#### 4.0 Findings

Findings of the study indicated that classroom interaction was difficult to achieve in the schools. Verbatim reports from Standard One and Standard Two teachers are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Verbatim reports from Standard One and Two classrooms**

<b>Teachers - Setswana</b>	<b>Teachers - English</b>
It is not possible to teach the Standard One pupils in Setswana because they speak Otjiherero, Shekgalagari and different San languages and those are the only languages they know ( <b>School A</b> )	Some of my students have not been to preschool, therefore, they find it difficult to comprehend and understand English ( <b>School F</b> )
Term one of the school is a real headache because learners come to school speaking different San languages and different dialects of Shekgalagari and we do not understand each other ( <b>School B</b> )	English is an additional problem to what they already have from Standard One, learners are always frozen in class; they cannot utter a single word ( <b>School A</b> ).
Learners are not coping with Setswana because they learn the language as third and fourth language; hence, communication is very difficult ( <b>School A</b> ).	I think English as a medium of instruction drives learners away from school ( <b>School B</b> )
Communicating with learners in my class is a nightmare... I do not speak their languages ( <b>School D</b> ).	I use Setswana to teach English and other subjects that use English because learners do not understand English and again, I know they do not understand Setswana either ( <b>School D</b> )
Subjects such as Mathematics and Science are difficult to teach because of the inadequate vocabulary in Setswana ( <b>School D</b> )	Learners strongly experience difficulties, as when you ask them to read, they struggle to read difficult concepts... ( <b>School E</b> )
There is a high school dropout in Standard One classes attributed to challenges of the languages of instruction ( <b>School C</b> ) Most learners speak a variety of languages here and they do not understand the languages used in school. ( <b>School C</b> )	Learners cannot write anything sensible in English... Our classrooms are silent because learners cannot express themselves in English... Participation is very low... the two languages of instruction are a problem and therefore learners barely write anything ( <b>School B</b> )
Learners do not break through to Setswana at lower primary... ( <b>School A</b> )	I do not understand the language they write, but it is supposed to be English... ( <b>School D</b> )

Table 1 suggests that there was limited dialogue caused by language problems. Teachers lamented that learners were unable to communicate in class using the language of instruction or the national language, Setswana. As a result, teachers were unable to provide the needed dialogic environment; and technical subjects like Mathematics and Science compounded the problem because of vocabulary challenges where learners could not comprehend English words. Teachers could not find the age-appropriate vocabulary in English to express and explain technical concepts to learners; they thus resorted to using Setswana or other mother-tongues as bridging languages. In some instances lack of conversations and/or dialogue led to disengagement from school on the part of learners.

Findings further indicated that the literacy programme of Breaking Through to Setswana was not effective to a large extent, especially at lower levels. This was even more profound when the structure of the mother-tongue differed with Setswana, as in the case of San languages and other languages like OtjiHerero. In some, if not most cases, teachers ended up writing notes on the board for the learners to copy even when they did not understand since effective dialogue could not take place in the classroom, In this way teachers became ‘depositors’ of knowledge rather than facilitators of knowledge acquisition (Freire, 1976).

Respondents reported that where dialogic approach was attempted, it was impeded by the policy regarding school languages. To make the situation more challenging, some teachers in semi urban and urban preferred the ‘English only policy’ which they even applied to Standard One because most of their learners were from preschools where the medium of instruction was English. The school management felt that teaching learners in Setswana was a drawback and delayed transition to and acquisition of English. The twist however was that some learners in some of these schools did not attend preschool and had problems understanding English. The overall effect was that interactive dialogic teaching became a serious challenge; the teachers were frustrated in that they could not facilitate learning and the learners were frustrated because they could not learn.

## **5.0 Discussion**

The findings pointed to language problems which hindered dialogic situations in the classrooms. The problem hinges on languages used in the school environment in and outside the classroom versus the mother-tongues of learners. As already indicated, the dialogic approach can only be effectively used where learners are competent in the languages used. At lower levels of learning such as Standard One, young learners are unable to express themselves and comprehend concepts in a language used only at school. As Freire (1976) points out, learners can never be full participants in a democratic dialogue because although they have a language, they need a preferred language in the education system to be participatory. One of the respondents indicated that “our classrooms are silent because learners cannot express themselves in English...

participation is very low... the two languages of instruction are a problem and therefore learners barely write anything” (**School B**).

Treff and Earnest (2016) add that lack of participation does not reinforce cognitive development which is also central to education. Silence and dormancy in the classroom are counter to absorption of content and improvement of communication skills. The achievement of educational and learning outcomes outlined in Bloom’s Taxonomy such as creating, understanding, analysing, evaluating, applying and remembering becomes difficult, and these need to be developed at early learning through dialoguing in the classrooms.

School dropout was also directly linked to the issue of language, which gives birth to lack of interaction in the classrooms. One respondent noted “there is a high school dropout in Standard One classes contributed by the languages of instruction, we lose between 20-25 learners annually” (School C). Research indicates that San participants dropped out of school because they have difficulties learning and understanding English as the language of instruction (Mokibelo, 2014a&b). Chebanne (2002) observed that English acted as a significant barrier for San students because of structural distance between it and San languages. For example, some of the characters used in San languages do not appear in a common computer keyboard. Hence, the English language present a challenge to the learners’ literacy, it only fostered illiteracy in the classrooms. In this regard, languages of instruction contributed towards learners’ disengagement from school.

The language barrier and communication problems have been identified by scholars for decades (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999, 2004; le Roux, 1999; Chebanne, 2002; Bolaane & Saugestad, 2006; Motshabi, 2006; Mokibelo, 2014a&b) but there still has been no review of the policy in regard to school languages and learners who speak languages other than Setswana as mother-tongues. This is despite the promulgations of the long-term vision of the country encapsulated in Vision 2016 (Republic of Botswana, 1997) which avered that no one would be disadvantaged in school because of their mother-tongue. What is needed is a strong political will to reflect on and revise educational policies and programs that disadvantage marginalised ethnic groups to give them a voice in the classroom. Freire (1976) advocates for learners to be empowered by policy so that they can express themselves in the languages of their competencies.

Bagwasi (2016) also argues that classrooms should accommodate translanguaging where pedagogical codeswitching and translation are allowed. This would go a long way to developing various cognitive skills that are required to process speaking, reading, listening or reading in more than one language. This point also calls for political intervention in that the teacher would need to be able to facilitate teaching in a linguistically heterogeneous class as well as be competent in or at least understand the home languages of the students. There may be need for reposting of teachers to regions where they can speak and understand learners’ home languages.

Another concept that is of interest in this study is the aspect of acculturation. Acculturation refers to changes that take place as a result of contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences (Brown, 1980). Dialogic teaching and learning is based on cultural interchange and therefore, as learners become active participants, language should be used to communicate speech acts, culture and knowledge (Frijters, Dam & Rijlaarsdam, 2008). This concept is relevant to this paper because learners from diverse cultural background bring their cultures to the school environment; however, the school systems rather integrates them into a predominantly Tswana culture. Brown (1980) argued that second language learners should internalize all four steps of period of excitement, culture shock, culture stress and full recovery, one by one, in order to acquire target languages. What Brown meant by full recovery was expressed by Shuman (1975) as “the learner’s ability to partially and temporarily [give] up his separateness of identity from the speakers of the target language and to incorporate a new identity so essential to bilingualism” (p. 231). Acculturation means no exchange of the diverse histories and cultures of the learners, but a one-dimensional acquisition of another, foreign culture. On the other hand, Norton (1997) opines that second language learners could keep their own identities and home languages, but still acquire a second language in order to exchange information with target language speakers.

Another point to consider is that of assimilation. Assimilation refers to the process through which individuals and groups of differing heritages acquire the habits, attitudes, and mode of life of an embracing culture. In this study, ethnic minority learners acquire and embrace the culture of the main group—Setswana speakers (Shuman, 1975). Shuman (1975) argued that in a case where the learner preferred his or her own culture over that of the target culture, this could affect success or failure in language learning. In the process of assimilation where marginalized communities give up their cultural heritage and identities to adjust to the dominant community, learners may not effectively adjust because of the lack of understanding and comprehension. Consequently, teachers can avoid the dialogic approach and impose their views on passive learners for who the classroom language is a barrier to communication (Freire, 1976). Although learners were still at the initial stages of learning, they probably noted that their language and culture were suppressed by Setswana language and culture. In that case they would feel isolated and alienated from their own cultures and language and they may thus become disengaged from school.

In essence, the findings showed that dialogic approach is challenged where learners are caged from using their home languages in classrooms and are unable to use the target languages. The key principles of the dialogic approach by Freire (1976) and Wegerif (2011) did not converge anywhere with the classroom practices of selected schools to enable dialogic approach to be realized. Learners’ own languages became a problem in the classrooms because they were

not wanted for classroom interaction. The lack of the dialogic approach brewed other problems that impeded learners' academic development, including school dropout.

## 6.0 Conclusion

The dialogic approach has proven to be problematic and compromised quality education in some regions of Botswana where there is ethnic and linguistic diversity in the class. The lack of vocabulary, the lack of linguistic competence to express themselves and the lack of basic languages skills in English and Setswana impede smooth dialogic situations in classrooms. In a culture of silence, learners are 'muted', that is, they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformation of learning in an educative space. This study makes a contribution to the education system as it reveals the need for a review of language use as a vital aspect in the process of teaching and learning. The study proposes adoption of the dialogic approach to teaching as it increases subject knowledge, promotes personal and social transformation as well as cultural intelligence. It also enables teachers to be instrumental in assisting learners to negotiate meanings and build knowledge.

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