

Exploring The Novice Teachers' Experiences Of Teaching In English Across The Curriculum In Rural Schools In South Africa

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Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History</i>	<p><i>This study explores the experiences of novice teachers who are teaching in English across the curriculum in South African rural schools. Their entry period into the profession is vulnerable and makes them novice in practice, characterised by a high rate of attrition, especially during the first five years of their career. Moreover, it becomes worse with some of the novice teachers who are employed in rural areas and have to teach in English across the curriculum. While there is a broad consensus on the importance of using the medium of instruction when teaching, studies that have investigated the experiences of novice teachers in teaching in English across the curriculum are few. This study employed a qualitative research design. Fifteen FET novice teachers were purposively selected for observation and focus group discussion from five high schools located in King Cetshwayo District in KwaZulu-Natal province. Theories of the Skills Acquisition Theory (SAT) and the Second Language (L2) Comprehensible Input through Teacher Talk Theory (CITTT) underpinned this study. Findings revealed that novice teachers face several challenges in curriculum delivery in English. The participants indicated learners' backgrounds as a limitation to the effective use of English as the medium of instructions. Lesson observations affirmed that teachers are comfortable using indigenous languages to teach across the curriculum. It is recommended that pre-service teachers should be prepared and exposed to both rural and urban areas during their teaching practice sessions. English language as a medium of instruction in schools, should be encouraged as a compulsory module for all pre-service students in teacher education.</i></p>
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Introduction

Teaching and learning using English as the second language is becoming more prominent in many countries to enhance learners' comprehension, and to encourage their exposure with their global contemporaries (Nel, 2010; Wong, Indiatsi, & Wong, 2016). Hence, intensive preparation is required for learners whose first language is not English to be accommodated in the use of English as the medium of instructions. This predicament is also affecting even novice teachers because a majority of them were provided with very limited knowledge and skills for dealing with the reality of teaching across the curriculum in English in the rural areas during their pre-service training. Moreover, school communities often fail to provide adequate support to novice teachers who are teaching in rural areas to help them adapt to their new professional environments (Alhamad, 2018). Subsequently, they face the shock of their lives when teaching in English across the curriculum in rural schools. That is why Bunch (2013) emphasises that the development of pedagogical language knowledge across the curriculum is crucial to prepare novice teachers for working with learners to increase their language and literacy expectations. Holguin and Morales (2016) state that most novice teachers in Columbia are reluctant to go and teach in rural areas because they know that they cannot fit into the peculiarities of rural education. They point out that these peculiarities have several causes, including poverty, which is mostly found in rural areas, as they are relatively isolated, and English is rarely used in their people's daily lives. Moreover, the development of policies has mostly focused on urban areas (Holguin & Morales, 2016). Similarly, Early and Norton's (2014) findings in their study conducted in Uganda reveal the difficulties faced by content teachers when using English as a means of instruction in rural African classrooms. They cite the Uganda Minister of Education and Sports when he said that he was concerned that while all subjects in the school curriculum are expected to be taught well, language education has particular importance because it is fundamental to the teaching of any other subject. He stressed that learners who do not have an adequate command of the English language as a medium of instruction cannot do well in any subject.

1. Literature review

In the South African context, the nation is known to be multilingual, with 11 official languages. However, English dominates all the other languages. Dlanga (2011) states that English has colonised all the other languages in South Africa. As a result, most, if not all, of the public schools teach almost all content subjects in English. This is occurring regardless of whether the learners are familiar with the language or not. It becomes worse with rural learners. Most of them are not exposed to the English language for various reasons: illiteracy and poor or non-educational background of parents, lack of exposure, and others. Because of these handicaps, it becomes impossible for them to grasp English easily. Thus, it affects the process of teaching and learning. Most learners who live in urban areas have the advantage of coming into regular contact with English compared to their rural counterparts. English-speaking learners are at an advantage because the language of education is theirs, and their teachers have the same background. This means that they do not struggle to understand what is being taught because they are already fluent in English, and thus they do not encounter challenges when imparting knowledge to their learners.

The above assertions support that there is a strong relationship between the extent of exposure to English and proficiency in acquiring the language (Dixon & Dixon, 2012; Bedore, Pena, Griffin & Hixon, 2016). Although some may say that success in acquiring the language depends on the qualifications and effectiveness of the teachers who are teaching in English across the curriculum, urban learners are better at English than rural learners. The reason is that learners' relative proficiency in languages is in some sense a function of the amount of those languages to which they are exposed (Santau, Maerten-Rivera & Huggins, 2011). Urban learners, therefore, have some advantages in learning English and become more proficient bilinguals than their rural counterparts. Most of the teachers who teach these learners are also the product of the same environment. It becomes worse with the Further Education and Training (FET) novice teachers who are teaching in rural areas.

Probyn (2010) concurs that both novice teachers and learners in rural schools struggle to express themselves freely through the medium of instruction, which is English. She states that this inability to communicate freely in English has unfortunate consequences in teaching and learning. That is why Nel (2010) stresses that most teachers, in general, are responsible for inadequate language input because they have limited English proficiency. Thus, the reason for this study is to explore the experiences of FET novice teachers who are teaching through the medium of English across the curricula in rural schools in one of the districts in South Africa (SA), experiences which remain relatively underexplored.

The study conducted by Masitoh (2015) in Indonesia found that schools, where English is used as a medium of instruction for all subjects, seem to be successful. However, this success is costly. Conversely, Campbell (2014) highlights that in Kenya they have a challenge where all subjects in the curriculum are taught in English irrespective of the learners' socio-economic status. This means that in Indonesia most people can afford their education, whereas in Kenya most people are in rural areas and cannot afford the expense. Zamel and Spack (2006) stress that in the context of learning English as an additional language, it takes three to five years for students to become fluent and ready to be taught in English across the curriculum. This ground-breaking revelation is affirmed by Mashayi (2011) when he emphasises that educational policies are clear about the use of the English language, but they are not uniformly enforced in rural areas as they are in urban areas. The conclusion is that there is a mismatch between a teacher's home language (HL) and that of the learners (Zamel & Spack, 2006).

Mathole (2016: 62) emphasises that the recently published African languages school policy, known as the Incremental Introduction of African Languages (IIAL) policy, states three main aims of multilingual education:

- To improve proficiency in and utilisation of African languages at the home language level, so that learners can use their home language proficiently.
- To increase access to languages for all learners, beyond English and Afrikaans, by requiring all non-African home language speakers to learn an African language.
- To promote social cohesion and economic empowerment and expand opportunities for the development of African languages as a significant way of preserving heritage and cultures. (DBE 2013: 6)

When one looks at the African languages (IIAL) school policy one notices that the challenges faced by the FET novice teachers who are teaching in English across the curriculum in the rural schools would have been solved a long time ago if it had been implemented then.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by two theories: The Skills Acquisition Theory (SAT) and the Second Language (L2) Comprehensible Input through Teacher Talk Theory (CITTT). Dekeyser (2007:76) states that the SAT is "the learning of a wide variety of skills which shows a remarkable similarity in development from the initial representation of knowledge through initial changes in behaviour to eventual fluent, spontaneous, largely effortless, and highly skilled behaviour." Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2012) explain that this theory is not only concerned with the development of a language, but it is also the theory of learning ranging from

cognitive to psychomotor skills. Hence Dekeyser (2007) emphasises that learning in the SAT entails a progression from an attentive to an automatic mode. Therefore, this theory is deemed relevant to this study because both teachers in training and learners are expected to develop in their acquisition of a language, and eventually be able to understand all subjects taught in English. Nel (2010) states that the L2CITTT, which was founded by Krashen, stresses that teachers have to talk on a learner's level of understanding so that learners can understand the lesson taught, or whatever the teacher is conveying to the learner. For instance, when a person is taught in his or her indigenous language s/he does not struggle to understand the language first before understanding what is being taught (content). It all happens automatically. Similarly, when one has acquired the skill of knowing a second language, one does not panic when being taught in that language. In other words, comprehension of that language becomes easier.

4.1 Research methodology

The study is a case study that adopted a qualitative research design whereby it purposively sampled 15 FET novice teachers who had less than five years of teaching experience, teaching in English across the curriculum. They were selected from five rural secondary schools in King Cetshwayo District. Observation and focus group discussion served as instruments for data collection from FET novice teachers. An audio recorder was also used to complement what was observed by the researchers to ensure that all the required information was captured. The participants were later interviewed through focus group discussion. Data were arranged thematically after they were collected. Javadi and Zarea (2016) state that there are many different ways to approach thematic analysis. However, this study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, which recommends that the themes have to be selected, coded, categorised, compared, synthesised, and interpreted.

4.2 Ethical considerations

The researchers sought the ethical approval of the participating schools from the Department of Basic Education, KwaZulu-Natal province, to safeguard the rights and wishes of the participants. After permission was granted, the participants were informed of the main purpose of the study and its voluntary nature – their right to participate or not and to withdraw anytime they wished. Pseudonyms were used to protect their anonymity. Those used in this study were FG1 (focus group 1), FG2 (focus group 2), FG3 (focus group 3), FG4 (focus group 4), and FG5 (focus group 5). It was also the duty of the researchers to inform participants about how data from the study would be stored, disseminated, and used solely to achieve the purpose of this study, which is to inform and educate.

5. Results

In this paper, the results fall into three sections. The first section presents the views of participants about their roles and responsibilities as they are expected to teach in English across the curriculum. These views include what they think are the skills and competencies of participants when teaching English in schools in a deprived community. The second section presents the success and failure of these participants as they teach in English across the curriculum in the rural context. The third section delves deeper into the experiences of these participants in their first five years of experience teaching English across the curriculum.

Theme 1: Roles and responsibilities of novice teachers

It was noted that the responses of the FET novice teachers concurred with what was observed by the researchers. One of the participating FG3 reflected on this situation, stating that:

As novice teachers, we are expected to teach in English across the curriculum to students from a disadvantaged English background. These learners converse and socialise in their vernacular in schools, while the language of teaching and learning is English.

The researchers in their observation realised that FET novice teachers who are teaching subjects like mathematics, science, and history encountered challenges when unfolding their lessons. Learners were not understanding them even if they incorporated different teaching and learning strategies. This sentiment was also shared by teachers in FG1 who teach both mathematics and natural science in Grades 6 and 7.

This group was convinced that when one first introduces subjects like mathematics and science at the beginning of the year, most learners are occasionally lost and confused. This was to be expected because some concepts are new, but as time goes on most of them get the confidence to voice their displeasure at being taught in English subjects like mathematics and science.

The researchers' observation recognised the general bias of senior teachers and learners towards code-switching, which exerts undue pressure on the ability to teach in English across the curriculum. FG5 reiterated a certain level of frustration towards the attitude of senior teachers towards such teaching:

The experienced teachers find it normal to deliver a lesson ... in both the vernacular and English as an alternative approach to teaching English across the curriculum. This approach puts more pressure on the recruits, who now wish to implement the policy of teaching in English across the curriculum.

Theme 2: Deficiency in comprehension skills

The role of a teacher became clear in the curriculum when the novice teachers began to reflect broadly on their skills. Teaching across the curriculum implies that teachers can sustain teaching with developed comprehension skills. In this regard, the participants identified these noble skills as their most fundamental barrier to implementing the language of teaching and learning (LoTL). Three FGs believed that the policy of teaching in English across the curriculum (EAC) is a fiction rather than a reality. The fact that most of these teachers struggle with comprehension suggests that their attitude towards English is questionable. It became clear from FG3 that all teachers who teach content subjects other than English struggle with comprehension:

The university training prepared us to face large classes, but during implementation in schools, no one is prepared to provide the professional leadership of infusing comprehension skills owing to lack of exposure to English ... which informed us that we have to constantly develop and mature.

It was apparent from FG4 that science teachers need to ask scientific questions which require learners to package their responses systematically. FG4 felt that most learners are not prepared to deal with this demanding task as their vocabulary is compromised in most of these grades.

It is an open secret that most of the learners are not ready to be taught in English across the curriculum, simple issues like vocabulary, simple sentence construction with meaning. English teachers have a serious task ahead of them to develop basic comprehension skills that can be used in our classes. It is sometimes difficult to imagine that learners show determination, however, explore the language as a deterrent.

Theme 3: Insufficient reading materials during lesson preparation

The reliance of teachers on textbooks only, without any innovation when teaching, was observed by the researchers, and one of the FGs responded like this:

Our schools struggle to source good, relevant reading material that exposes learners and teachers to reading and writing, especially to boost the confidence of novice teachers. We only rely on the prescribed textbook, workbooks, and the internet to a limited extent to prepare lessons. You can imagine how tedious the process and the outcome are from our effort.

FG5 was adamant that EAC represents the notion that the majority of learners should be taught through the medium of English as a second/additional language. While most participants in this group spoke of their willingness to explore a variety of resources available to improve English competence, the rules have lately been relaxed:

The rules of the language are relaxed in our view. This is because most of the learners in our classes struggle to understand the language. In essence, they are not exposed to reading because of the shortage of reading material.

Theme 4: Novice teachers' understanding of language acquisition

FG2 reiterated the point that it is common for both teachers and learners to acquire language facility with some aspect of language or literacy.

As we teach mathematics across the curriculum, it might be possible to learn to become competent with the language used in your subject....

The researchers' observation corroborated FG2 as far as the acquisition of language facility with some aspect of language or literacy was concerned. Some of them reported as follows:

Conducting an activity-based lesson helps towards the development of a particular language consistent with the official language used in class, which gives learners confidence and a reason to understand its significance during the teaching of a content subject. We always get praised by learners when they are exposed to activities that empower their language facility linked to their content subjects. Given the amount of work needed to read and write the language, it significantly influences our teaching to harness the required level of English across all subjects.

This argument was consistent with FG1's assertion that when learners write an assignment in social science, reading and writing become central in their learning. Teachers need to know how to present their work to learners in a logical sense while encouraging them to appreciate language conventions. Surprisingly, participants from all the FGs painted a very complex scenario about the impact of reading and writing, as captured succinctly here:

It is rare to work with learners who speak and write as expected. In most cases, our learners in recent times fail to appreciate the difference between academic writing and everyday language.

Theme 5: Teaching and learning strategies

Each FG revealed teaching and learning strategies that are unique to their environment. One of those strategies includes mentoring and support from experienced teachers like HoDs, subject advisers, and the series of workshops organised by the DBE and cluster workshops. FG2 had this to say:

Different topics or lessons require different teaching and learning. As new teachers in the profession, we always struggle to decide, design and utilise different approaches using English to effectively teach.

While another participant FG5 declared that teaching and learning is best delivered in indigenous languages.

For me, I think we feel comfortable teaching in our native languages. The learners tend to understand better than when we use English. Their backgrounds in native languages are helpful in teaching and learning.

Participants affirmed that environment of the schools determine the use of English as medium of instructions.

FG4: *If you teach in the urban schools, teaching across the curriculum is done through English. This is because schools in urban areas are populated by multicultural learners, and it will be difficult to use indigenous languages to teach them.*

FG1: *English is home language in most urban schools, while it is a second language in other schools. In some schools, it is not even offered as a subject. In such schools, using English across the curriculum will be difficult.*

Theme 6: Mentoring support from experienced teachers including HoDs

FG2 reported that there is a need to understand the environment very well as they come from rural areas. The complicated nature of school culture and the resistance to learning a new language are the biggest challenges. In their group, they prefer to work with more experienced educators to improve comprehension, reading, and writing skills which help to improve their confidence when teaching.

In our subject as FG2, it is compulsory to communicate in English regularly, particularly when it's a period for natural science. This allows for the effective development of science concepts, vocabulary, and expression.

The work of experienced teachers in this regard appears to be the main glue that can capacitate novice teachers. Working with HoDs seems to undercut all other stakeholders who can add more impetus to language development.

It helps to have HoDs, according to FG3, who are proactive and willing to share their ideas about the best approach available for us as novice teachers to deal with those isolated cases in our class.

6. Discussion

The findings revealed that FET novice teachers understand their roles and responsibility, which is to teach their subjects in English across the curriculum. However, they find this role very daunting and challenging. They cite

several areas of concern that raise their ire and how it hinders progress during implementation, raising questions about their competence in their subjects. For instance, most FET novice teachers in this study teach black African learners who come from traditional, poor family backgrounds with very little exposure to English. The daily conversation and socialisation at school take place in their mother tongue. The fact that FET novice teachers come from the same culture compounds the problem even further, which means that these participants have to double their effort in class.

These considerations add to the difficulties of teaching and learning; indeed, the majority of participants believe that learning to converse in English is challenging. In theory, most of the participants understood their roles, but implementing this approach had proved more complex (Ajani, 2020). That is why all the FG participants revealed that teaching their class in English proved fruitless as most learners kept on asking for the repeat of the lesson. The role of an educator is to empower learners with knowledge using language as a medium of instruction. The preferred language of teaching and learning across the curriculum is English, and it takes time to develop this language in rural schools.

The majority of participants raised their concerns about the heavy reliance on the English language as a LoTL. For instance, their sentiments seemed to undercut the central argument that only the English language can impart knowledge. This argument was based on the curriculum design flaws which dictate that all subjects be taught and assessed in the LoTL, which happens to be English. This argument is more compelling for most subjects in the sciences, which need to be taught in English as the vernacular is not developed to cater for adequate learning. Though they well understand their role, the majority of FET novice teachers do not agree that most lessons should be taught in English, and an alternative approach like code-switching is preferred by senior educators as a teaching and learning strategy.

Code-switching, which was used by the experienced teachers when teaching the subjects which were supposed to be taught in English, only raises alarm amongst FET novice teachers. Most FET novice teachers are likely to encounter challenges when it comes to implementing the policy of teaching in English across the curriculum. The pressure comes from learners who constantly express concern to HoDs about their difficulties in understanding lessons taught when English is used as the LoTL. Mathole (2016) stresses that during teaching and learning, even most of the experienced teachers resort to code-switching from English to the learners' mother tongue to bridge the gap of understanding what is being taught. In certain instances, most HoDs succumb to learners' pressure on novice teachers to consider code-switching. The inconvenient reality, though, is that both FET novice teachers and learners hail from the same community. Thus, making it extremely difficult to achieve different outcomes from what is intended.

All the participants acknowledged the role played by efficient comprehension of information during the teaching of all the subjects across the curriculum. The lack of this critical skill undermines the ability of novice teachers to deliver lessons effectively. This argument is advanced by Jordaan, Welman, and Stephen (2004), who state that poor comprehension of any subject matter handicaps second-language speakers – an assertion that is borne out when novice teachers begin to ask serious questions to assess learners' level of understanding before the lessons delivered.

In terms of resources, both the researchers and the FET novice teachers acknowledged that most schools in rural areas do not have adequate reading material to assist novice teachers to prepare lessons for the 21st century. For instance, participants from all five FGs argued that a teacher who has had limited exposure to reading material like books while preparing a lesson influences learners to do less reading and writing. Thus the school environment puts more pressure on the participants to be less motivated to continue to teach their lessons in English, which goes against the heart of the profession. Ajani (2019) posits that the training they received from their institution of higher learning prepared them to improvise, but their limited exposure to reading material frustrates this effort.

The total neglect faced by these rural schools in terms of resources leaves novice teachers with limited options to pursue during the teaching and learning process. It, therefore, proves very challenging to improve teaching in certain schools. This view is consistent with the assertion made by Mupa and Chinooneka (2015) that the availability of textbooks and other LTSMs appears to be the most consistent factor in predicting teacher effectiveness in teaching in English across the curriculum. Studies in different countries show a correlation between exposing learners to reading textbooks and proficiency in the English language, which ultimately improves educational achievement (Chingos & West, 2012; Fernandez-Guerra, 2014 & Bordal, 2016). The analyses indicate that participants' lack of access to reading material stifles their ability to stimulate discursive practices, and subsequently, lowers their chance to be exposed to a critical review of written text and problem-solving techniques.

The researchers for this study realise that most teachers in rural areas teach in a very strenuous and under-resourced environment to produce miraculous results that are consistent with the needs of the community. According to the participants, it takes time to adapt to an environment very different from what they were

promised during their training. Maddock and Marouun (2018) enjoin that the novice teachers have to acclimatise quickly to the change of language and accept the language of teaching and learning found in schools, which is a new normal for them owing to the resistance from learners and the surrounding community.

The researchers observed that some of the FET novice teachers were convinced that teaching in English across the curriculum appeals to most people in South Africa. However, the strategy was not adequate for the poor rural community where these schools are found. Integrating the English language during the teaching of content subjects is a thorn in the flesh for most novice teachers. They have to contend with this strategy for the rest of their professional teaching career. This persistent difficulty in their teaching is consistent with the policy document of the Department of Basic Education. Govender (2018) avows that novice teachers are to teach content subjects in English leaves them more room to relax or neglect policy imperatives. In essence, participants agree that the environment in schools is the breeding ground for the potential use of indigenous knowledge to compensate for the lack of English language command and usage. One can only deduce that most of these participants find solace in their vernacular as their defence should they encounter resistance from both their peers and their learners.

The general understanding of participants regarding language acquisition was that language is not a decontextualised skill that is learned once and for all solely based on studying only English subjects. It is rather a product of the continuous acquisition of language and academic literacy (Zamel & Spack, 2006). Given the diverse literacies they teach, participants in the FG seem to have a common belief that teaching their subjects in the English language is a deliberate process that allows learners to continue to formulate and test out a certain hypothesis about the language of teaching and learning. Azano, Downey and Brenner (2019) opine that this conception underscores the notion that learners can learn any language teachers are willing to impart to them.

This study also found that language acquisition through writing plays an important role in the teaching process. Most participants noted the impact of integrating written activity in their subject content. However, the conversation between teacher and learner is marked by a high level of suspicion and fear when this is pursued. This fear is triggered by learners' poor comprehension and low self-esteem as evident during teaching and learning, which in turn suggests that most learners treat English as their second or third language. Participants in all five FGs have acknowledged the growing resentment in recent times shown by learners in rural schools towards the LoTL which is used in all their subjects. Probyn (2010) states that most learners prefer to be taught in their mother tongue or an indigenous language to compensate for the deficiency of comprehension skills in a language that is unfamiliar to them.

There was a consensus among participants and the researchers on the issue of reading and writing. The participants highlighted that their learners fail to write simple and logical sentences when learners are engaged in academic activities. They attributed this deficiency to learners' failure to follow language protocol and the breakdown required when reconstructing an obscure sentence to clarify its meaning. The views expressed in this analysis corroborate Sosibo's (2015) assertion that a person who communicates logically in speaking tends to write logically as well.

From the assertions gathered above, it is evident that although most of the FET novice teachers get assistance from the more experienced teachers, they still encounter challenges when teaching content subjects in English (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). For instance, they suggest that to enhance professional skills, they need to perform the following: teach according to the policy and prepare lessons with experienced teachers to tap into their innovations. However, it all depends on the willingness and expertise of these experienced teachers (Seabi, Montle & Mogoboya, 2020). The novice teachers suggest that experienced teachers have to accommodate them in their planning process. Mafunganyika and Nkambule (2018) posit that mentoring involves various activities such as reviewing teaching strategies suitable for integrating language into the teaching of the content subjects across the curriculum, concept development, academic writing, reading, and oral presentation.

7. Recommendations

The study recommends that rural schools should not be left in isolation as they live in the global world. Therefore, when the curriculum is designed, it has to cater for rural teachers and learners because it seems they are isolated. Besides, the medium of instruction that is used in schools, which is English, has to be a compulsory module for all the pre-service teachers who register to study Education in higher education institutions. Intensive training for FET novice teachers in the use of English through continuous professional development projects can also assist these teachers. This will enhance them acquired adequate knowledge to deliver the subject matter using English fluently, thereby minimizing their hardship in teaching. Refresher courses/training should also be organized for the experienced teachers. The training of pre-service teachers should be tailor-made

for teaching in English across the curriculum which can be strengthened through teaching practice sessions. By so doing they will not have the shock of their lives when they are employed in rural schools. The Department of Basic Education should strengthen its intervention programmes. Novice teachers should be adequately mentored by the experienced teachers and be regularly supported with all necessary teaching and learning materials, content-knowledge and pedagogical skills.

Contribution/Originality: The primary contribution of this study is to encourage policy makers, educational planners and the South African Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training, to adopt proactive and practical measures to enhance teacher education. Furthermore, the findings hint at the contingent global educational trends and suggest how Education policymakers should make decisions from an informed perspective.

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