Challenges Faced by Grade 10 Learners in Sepedi Essay Writing in Mankweng Circuit, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT:
The study is navigated to not only find the challenges faced by grade 10 learners in Sepedi concerning essay writing, but also solutions towards barriers that accompany writing. The study used the qualitative approach, which involved methodology and sampled audience or participants from a sampled school, covering the notion of exploring the implications that come with writing skills among Sepedi home language learners. The study's findings reveal that learners have difficulties or challenges in essay writing because writing requires higher cognitive skills, such as organizing thoughts, grammar, spelling, and sentence construction. Furthermore, the findings point out that learners are not taught or exposed to structured writing activities, and most learners have difficulty in processing thoughts and putting them in writing. The study recommends that teaching and learning should encourage enough time for reflective writing. Majority teaching time is spent focused on grammar and comprehension.

Keywords: Sepedi home language, FET, GET, Essay writing (writing).

Introduction

Sepedi is a language that is widely spoken in the areas of Turfloop Mankweng, covering the Mankweng circuit and Kgakotlou circuit. However, learners are facing extreme obstacles and barriers when it comes to essay writing in their home language. Sepedi is one language that stands to promote culture, and it is one language that is rooted deep in the history of Bapedi. Therefore, looking at the school context, learners are expected to develop both spoken and written fluency in Sepedi, but it is usually not the case. A Limpopo–based study highlighted that dialectal variation, for example, Khelobedu, interferes with learners' ability to write in standard Sepedi, emphasizing the cultural and educational importance of mastering written language alongside spoken fluency (Ramothwala, 2021). The purpose of this article is to delve into the challenges of essay writing and propose empirical and pragmatic interventions that can further improve the quality of teaching and learning. The basics of writing skills lie in the foundation of essay writing, which is where various essays stand to clearly indicate how learners struggle to jot down a structured and well-organized essay. This is because of obstacles or barriers such as a lack of exposure to Sepedi literature, followed by poor language proficiency and limited vocabulary, the influence of English and code-switching, as well

as the socio-economic factors and educational level of parents and guardians. The majority of the rural and semi-urban teachers delve into the use of code-switching between English and Sepedi in their teaching, because they try to use a strategic way of simplifying learning for the learners' understanding. Therefore, code-switching results in various effects in the Sepedi home language classroom, such as language interference, weak vocabulary development in Sepedi, confused language identity, and assessment penalties. Kaleem (2020) and Songxaba (2016) state that "learners often struggle to maintain standard language forms in writing, which leads to inconsistent tone and register, as assessment rubrics typically penalize code-switching. Learners' mixed-language essays may receive lower marks, even though their ideas are sound. Code-switching leads to code-mixing, and learners influenced by code-switching struggle with effective writing in their home language and are more involved with the use of slang language (Lwangale & Mochacha, 2020). Soylu (2017) stresses that for learners, writing is considered passive. It is regarded as a task so external to perform in class, and most learners have not yet comprehended the idea that writing skills go beyond the classroom environment. It is a skill to carry right through all levels of education. Relatively, Smedt (2018) points out that cognitive and motivational challenges are at the root of the basic level of elementary learners' writing performance. CAPS is an education policy that is built as a one-size-fits-all policy. In these contexts, this does not account for rural and socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, because "learners have limited exposure to written Sepedi outside the classroom and parents often lack literacy in Sepedi and cannot assist with homework" (Cilir & Bloch, 2018). Cekiso (2022) highlights in his research that "the majority of these learners' parents have no formal schooling and are illiterate, preventing them from helping with reading or writing tasks". For example, in the research findings, one learner explained that "No, sir, my parents cannot read or write". Most African parents believe that teaching and learning are for the classroom, and therefore, it is basically up to the educators to see to it that learners are taught. Research proves that native norms, culture, and parental educational level negatively put a starch on writing abilities of many learners. Although learners experience writing struggles, studies have shown that two barriers stand to affect essay writing and are as follows: "teaching essay to second language learners, lack of time for explicit instruction, no strategies in place on the part of learners, lack of parental support, and lack of essay structures on the part of the teachers" (Placencia, 2023). Lopres (2023) notes that strategies such as traffic light color coding and planning using an informal outline, as well as framed paragraphs, are found to be more effective for essay writing. According to Putrayasa and Ramendra (2021), along the same lines, they concur that sentences written in types of essays can vary according to the division of sentences, including the number of clauses, compound sentences, internal structure of the main clause, and complete sentences in line with the essay structure. Ro'ufiyati and Mahbub (2023) stress the notion that teachers' insufficient and inconsistent feedback fosters writing anxiety in learners: "writing anxiety is a result of educators' insufficient feedback to learners, low self-esteem or self-doubts, as well as lack of creativity in teaching writing". Studies indicate that feedback stands to guide learners' writing, performance, and help them overcome writing difficulties.

Although Sepedi language is standardized as a home language to be taught in school, its application does not adequately serve or board with rural realities like dialect variation, poor home literacy support, as well as the lack of reading and writing. Consequently, learners in rural areas such as the Mankweng Circuit are systematically marginalized regarding developing writing skills and capabilities in their home language.

Aim Of The Study

The study aims to find a solution towards essay writing, as well as uncovering the core challenges of writing and presenting solutions to learning challenges experienced by Sepedi home language learners and teachers regarding essay writing

skills. The study aims at preventing the promotion and progression of less qualified and overlooked learners to further grades. According to the South African education system and department of education, "South African public-school learners are regularly promoted or progressed to the next grade or to high school despite having or portraying serious writing challenges, and this is because of policy decisions, social concerns, and systematic challenge (Chisholm 2005).

Research Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research approach, which gave the researcher the allowance to visit participants and collect data from them in their various authentic setups. This research followed an interpretivist paradigm where the researcher presented phenomena that happen in people's lives, such as learners and teachers. The methodology was also used to assess events and issues that arose on all sides of the sampled participants.

Participants

The research focused on 635 learners and selected 52 pupils from Grade 10 to represent the selected school. The school had 14 teachers, and out of the 14, five (5) teachers were teaching Sepedi home language, from the five (5), 2 Sepedi educators were chosen to represent the home language committee. Classification by intention was applied in the study. The nomination was appropriate because six pupils and two teachers were required for the study. The Sepedi HL teacher assisted the researcher in selecting the six learners according to their cognitive levels, i.e., upper-level, middle-level, and lower-order level learners.

Data Collection

Interviews were used to interview both learners and teachers. The researcher used various methods of data collection, such as the planning conflict, report, document review, and observation, where teachers took part in planning dialogue, which assisted the researcher in asking the right questions and getting the right answers. The tools used to help the researcher with the study were a dissertation planner, a dictionary, an event recorder, and field notes. In the case of document review, the researcher gave learners an activity to write a narrative essay, to assess the learners' skills and determine their shortcomings in terms of word formation and paragraph structure. The assessment also investigated learners' errors regarding syntax, spelling, and paragraph formation. The interview and observation guidelines were developed to make sure that the interview process was thoroughly followed.

Analysis Of Data

The researcher used the thematic approach to analyze data. Through this approach, the researcher was able to successfully present facts and results logically using themes such as guidelines for what to discuss in response to research questions.

Findings

Teachers and learners were given a questionnaire in order to be able to evaluate their respective responses. The questionnaires included questions about the essays. Through this, the researcher was able to gain experience regarding the obstacles that teachers and learners encounter in their classrooms pertaining to the teaching and learning of essay writing in Sepedi home language.

Teachers' perspectives on the standard and process of writing essays in SEPEDI classrooms

Teacher 1: "The essay writing process is not very difficult. The problem is how I, as a teacher, teach the essay points. As a teacher, I arrive in the classroom and show the learners the types of essays without going into details."

Teacher 2: "I am looking at the curriculum; I mean the (district) curriculum and assessment policy statement, since it outlines the steps that each essay has to follow. But as a teacher, I give learners a variety of essays besides presenting measures that explain each type."

Both teachers are not teaching essay writing and essay types in-depth. It is believed by teachers

that essay writing does not require detailed explanation when taught, and that not every learning subject or matter needs attention. The number of different types of essays was not explained to the learners, nor was the difference between different essays. "During the process of writing, learners show major writing challenges such as grammatical, cohesive, and coherence terms. In addition, it is also realized that learners have issues such as paragraph organization, diction, and vocabulary misspelling" (Salaxiddinovna, 2022). This study found that insufficient teaching time, analyzing the topics, and learning steps of writing seemed to be problematic for learners when it comes to writing essays.

Learners' perspectives on the challenges they face when writing essays in Sepedi Home Language

Learner A: "The challenges I face as a learner are punctuation, spelling, lack of information according to the needs of the topic, as well as structure and sequence."

Learner B: "For me as a learner, the challenges I face are punctuation, repetition of words, pressure, and word order."

Learner C: "The challenges I face are spelling of words, I cannot write proper words in Sepedi, plot or details from beginning to end, and the elegance of language is a problem for me."

Learner D: "The challenges or difficulties I have are spelling and word order. I cannot write moderate words; I write overly long words."

Learner E: "As a learner, when I write any essay, I have difficulty drawing a proper mind map and spelling many words in the Sepedi language. Another major challenge for me is to write stories according to the given essay topic, even if it is my own choice."

Learner F: "I am confused about how to fix the punctuation when I write words, as well as to follow my affairs in the right way. I encounter problems like organizing when I write essays."

Learners A and B indicated that their challenges are based on punctuation, spelling, improper sequence of words, repetition of words, and order of words. Learners C, D, E, and F portrayed that planning is a major challenge for them, as well as drawing mind maps and organizing essay writing. Ibili (2020) indicates that applying mind maps in writing can improve learners' essay writing skills and make the learning atmosphere more enjoyable. Thus, when teaching essay writing, educators need to focus on addressing the challenges that arise after assessments. Learners can be engaged in activities covering scenarios of inputting punctuation and paragraphing, and word ordering, to improve and channel their writing foundations.

Conclusion

According to the feedback from the educators and learners, the researchers obtained a realization that in schools, learners may be experiencing obstacles when it comes to essay writing. The fundamental problem lies with teachers and parents. Most educators are no longer invested in deep and appropriate standardized teaching. This is because of overcrowded classrooms, bullying in the workplace, particularly from the management, limited resources, and a lack of language writing training workshops. The department has prioritized content training workshops, especially maths and physical science, over languages, and particularly the Sepedi Home Language. Parental involvement is something that is overlooked, which can help boost the writing skills and performance of learners. According to Roux (2015), "writing is a complex skill that requires regular practice, encouragement and feedback, which in most households' literacy is the missing element". The provided evidence from both learners and educators continues to outline that essay writing can pave the way for many learners' writing skills, as it is an open-ended way of writing for learners. It can be a key element that structures writing quality for all subject areas.

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