

# Academic Performance Among the Disadvantaged Remote Dweller Learners: A Question of English as a Medium of Instruction

Baamphatlha Dinama<sup>1</sup>, Hannah Mahamotho<sup>2</sup> & Gaone Vivian Olesitse<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Botswana, Botswana

<sup>2</sup> Mahalapye Junior Secondary School, Botswana

Correspondence: Gaone Vivian Olesitse, University of Botswana, Botswana.

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## Abstract

This study explored how English as a medium of instruction can impact students' academic performance using the qualitative methodology so as to gain insights and explore the depth and richness of data on the phenomenon under study. Through the analysis of interviews, observations, and document reviews, three predominant themes were determined; use of mother tongue during lessons, low self-esteem on the part of students, and detachment from communities of origin. The paper recommends the need for a review of the language policies to solve communication problems that are visible in Botswana's education system, especially among dwellers of remote rural areas.

**Keywords:** second language, language proficiency, academic performance, mother tongue

## 1. Introduction

In Botswana two sets of language relationships play out in the education system, these are English which is an official language, and Setswana a national language. The Revised National Policy on Education (Botswana Government, 1994) emphasized that English should be used as a medium of instruction from Standard 2 to upper levels of schooling. The first challenge is the historical tension between Setswana, which is a language spoken by the main eight ethnic Tswana communities, and the languages of non-Tswana speaking communities; this tension is evidenced by the choice of Setswana as an endorsed language of schooling (Alimi, 2016). This has remained the same ever since Botswana gained independence

in 1966 whereby English was declared an official language and a medium of instruction in schools while ignoring other languages (Kamwendo, Mooko & Moumakwa, 2009). Matimela (2016) states that for the transmission of knowledge, culture, and ideas to occur from one generation to the other, there is a need to understand the most significant instrument which is language. However, for learning to be appreciated, there is a need to bridge the gap between languages spoken at home and the formal instructional language they hear at school.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

In various remote villages in Botswana, most of the student's first language is not Setswana which is the national language, yet when they

start school, they are expected to learn the primary school curriculum using the medium of instruction of Setswana at Standard One and English at Standard Two and beyond as per the recommendations of the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 (Botswana Government, 1994). These students must battle with the language barrier to clearly understand the primary school curriculum. In this way, language becomes a hindrance to teaching and learning, hence poor performance in the final primary school leaving examinations and a high dropout rate because they are taught foreign systems of knowledge in alien languages other than their own (Mokibelo & Moumakwa, 2006; Matimela, 2016). Furthermore, Nyathi-Ramahobo (2006) observes that students learn better in their mother tongue and that children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in their early years of schooling at primary school are more likely to drop out of school or fail because the mother tongue is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary schooling (Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2006).

Despite the growing evidence of poor academic results of primary school leaving examinations in Botswana and the world over, many educational systems and language policies around the globe insist on the exclusive use of one or more privileged languages (Pansiri, 2011; Begi, 2014; Marumo & Pansiri, 2016; Makwinja, 2017). In the long run, when expected to use the privileged languages, children whose first language is not the privileged one, run the risk of losing the ability to connect with their cultural heritage and they become linguistically incompetent to fit well in their families and communities (Batibo, 2004). Notably, policymakers have not done much in assessing the effects that the language policy which promotes English in primary schools might have on the students' academic performance. Therefore, this study sets out to find the impact of English as a medium of instruction on the academic performance of students at primary schools in the remote areas of Botswana who use foreign language as a medium of instruction during the early years of their schooling at the primary school level.

### 3. Research Questions

1) What impact does English as a medium of instruction have on students' academic success at the primary school level among remote area

dwellers?

2) How do learners respond to the use of English as a medium of instruction at the primary school level among remote area dwellers?

### 4. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Critical Race Theory (CRT) whose focus is that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011). In environments where racism is rife, it has been observed that racism was not and has never been eradicated from laws, policies, or institutions, and is still woven into the fabric of their existence such as the language policy which has always been an impediment to learning (Crump, 2014).

CRT calls for a radical new vision of education that supports equality and social justice within schools while aiming at emancipating disadvantaged minority students (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011). The thrust of the theory stresses the struggle for social justice and racial inequality in education, which in this case is the remote area dwellers that are denied education by not incorporating their native language in the process of teaching and learning. CRT further seeks to affirm students' ethnic and racial backgrounds and is intellectually rigorous in its aim to help students identify and critique the causes of social inequality in their own lives (Crump, 2014), in the Botswana context, the remote area dwellers are being denied the right to an appropriate and relevant education using their first language.

CRT seeks to liberate people from circumstances of domination and oppression to a more reflective and changed society where individuals interpret situations and make their own decisions (Zhu, Peng, Hu & Qiu, 2019). The language policy in education in Botswana does not emphasize this. If this practice continues and is ignored, in the long run, children run the risk of losing the ability to connect with their cultural heritage, while in the same vein being linguistically incompetent to fit well in their families and their communities (Batibo, 2004). Hence CRT ensures that marginalized individuals are treated according to their social constructs while benefitting from the education system.

## 5. Literature Review

### 5.1 Introduction

Ball (1990) raises a central issue regarding how learners at primary and secondary school levels can be adequately and appropriately prepared in order to survive in a global society. Therefore, determinants such as the language of instruction, problems of access, retention rate, resources, the relationship between the educational system and qualification of teachers as well as curriculum development and training of primary teachers are to be taken into consideration (Tabulawa, 2009).

### 5.2 Language of Instruction in Botswana Primary Schools

The language of instruction in Botswana affects children from ethnic minority groups negatively as they are the ones who have the highest failure rate in Primary School Leaving Examinations (Molosiwa, 2009). They are denied the right to be different, to identify with their mother tongue, to learn it, and to access education through it and use it in official domains (Kishindo, 2010). Therefore, student-centered, non-discriminatory, standards-based curriculum structures are pivotal in achieving quality education for all (Jotia & Pansiri, 2013).

While the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2005) emphasizes language policy as one of the six policy issues which directly impact learning and teaching (Mokibelo, 2016), the language of instruction is a policy choice affecting curriculum, content, and pedagogy. A balance needs to be struck between enabling people to use local languages in learning and ensuring that they have access to global languages.

### 5.3 The Role of English in the School Curriculum

Due to globalization and technological development, English has become a prominent language of communication (Johnson, 2009). It has gained significance and relevance in economic development, and national and individual wealth to the extent that it is the common global language that serves as the main vehicle of communication among speakers who do not share a common tongue (Rao, 2019). For this reason, Botswana has not been left behind, in addition to being a former colony of Britain. English is viewed as an important learning vehicle and incentive to learn, and also as an essential part of the school culture through which it imparts the acquisition of knowledge,

skills, values, and behaviors that guide students in the process of learning (Qorro, 2006). While this is the case, students in the remote areas are being left out since the English language is a foreign language to them (Pansiri, 2011). Furthermore, Freire (1996) contends that education has two major aspects to it, liberation and oppression. For example, on the one hand, education can be used by the powerful authorities to perpetuate their own agenda of oppression and dominance (Dinama, 2015), while on the other, it can be used to conscientious students about their existing material situation. However, Nyati-Ramahobo, (2006) and Molosiwa (2009) highlight that the language policy in Botswana affects children from ethnic minority groups negatively in primary schools and does not serve as a liberating tool but rather one of oppression, as they are the ones who have the highest failure rate in Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and the highest dropout rates. Furthermore, Pansiri (2011) observes that the language policy in Botswana disadvantages rural minority learners because they find it difficult to cope with Setswana and English as a medium of instruction and consequently leading to poor academic performance and dropping out of school.

Monaka (2007) observes that the language situation in Botswana schools is undemocratic because the languages of the minority peoples are not recognized nor are they incorporated into the educational system hence alienating them from their culture, the very means by which they build their self-esteem and identity. For example, Basarwa who are also known derogatorily as the Bushmen serves as an example since learners from this ethnic group become frustrated and leave school before completion leading to high illiteracy levels among their communities and this is a clear indication that the system excludes them (Mokibelo & Moumakwa, 2006; Pansiri, 2011; Sekere, 2011).

## 6. Methodology and Research Design

The researchers adopted a qualitative methodology that provides deeper meaning and understanding of the phenomena and explores behaviors, perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people and what lies at the core of their lives (Anderson, 2003; Chilisa, 2012). The methodology attempts to clarify the impact of English as a medium of instruction on students'

academic performance in the early years of schooling. Interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations were used to collect data from the participants concerning the phenomena under study.

The research design chosen to address the phenomena under study was a case study which was conducted at Finah primary school. The case study provided the researcher to get as close as possible to the participants in their natural environment. The design allows the participants to provide rich answers to questions posed to them. In that way, the researcher would gain valuable insights which could be missed when using other methods (Opie, 2004).

#### 6.1 Population and Sampling Procedures

The study took place in a remote area dwelling in Botswana namely Finah primary school and comprised a total of thirteen purposively sampled participants and these were three teachers, five current students ranging from Standard 2 to 7, and five former students. Since the researchers desired to discover if there is any mastery of the concepts while the delivery of the curriculum is in English only, the selection of participants was based on their experiences on how it has affected them during classroom delivery. In this way, relevant data were provided which aided the current study to achieve its objectives.

#### 6.2 Data Collection Instruments

The researchers used semi-structured interview questions, focus group discussions, and lesson observations to collect information for the phenomenon under study. Interviews were chosen because they help to probe deeply into the thoughts and responses of the participants as well as to uncover previously unknown details since the participants are encouraged to talk freely (Dinama, 2010). In addition, a scheduled guide of interview questions was prepared to help direct the proceedings of each interview session with teachers and students. For the teachers, the interview sessions took almost thirty minutes, while the focus group discussions ran for about 40 minutes. Data were also collected through lesson observation whereby the researchers attended the lesson to watch all the proceedings that were to do with the participation of students when instructed in English in the classroom.

### 7. Findings and Discussion

The analyzed data for this study were based on interviews, focus group discussions, and lesson observations. Analysis of data proved that English as a medium of instruction is a stumbling block towards desired academic achievement. The emerging themes were: the language of interaction among students and teachers, students' participation in the classroom, English as a medium of instruction on students' academic performance, and the challenges faced by teachers in using English as a medium of instruction during the teaching and learning process.

#### 7.1 Language of Interaction Among Students and Teachers

Interviews were conducted with both teachers and students about the commonly used language by students during students' interaction, teachers during teacher interaction, and the language of interaction between teachers and students. The participants' responses indicated that students used their first language which is Sesarwa to interact with their colleagues while employing a little bit of Setswana when interacting with either their teachers or other students whose first language is not Sesarwa. This is an indication that English has not been prioritized as a language of communication among students in school, especially those whose first language is not Sesarwa.

Tebogo in Standard 6 said, *"I speak Sesarwa, but my teachers address me in Setswana, the language that I learned here at school, I struggle a lot to understand them, but I do really try. I get completely lost when they communicate with me in English."* This was emphasized by one of the teachers Ms. Maano who said, *"The fact that our school is in Finah, students of Basarwa descent use Sesarwa most of the time while communicating to each other, and only use Setswana to non-Sesarwa speakers"*. Furthermore, she said, *"The only language that they both use to communicate is Setswana. English is just a waste of time because teachers would give instructions in English, and will still have to translate what they were saying to Setswana since they cannot speak Sesarwa"*. In addition to this, one of the students, Zimba, indicated that, *"I don't understand Setswana, my teacher would say something in English, then express it again in Setswana because she knows that I don't understand Setswana, and I don't like speaking Setswana."*

The researchers observed an English lesson,

where they noticed that most of the time students and teachers communicate in Setswana. In one class, students were given group work, where they were expected to discuss sentence construction using the English words written on the board. For the entire period, the group discussions were done mainly in Setswana. The researchers could hear them speak both Setswana and Sesarwa. This was evident when Ms. Botlhe gave an instruction stated that *"in our lesson today, re tlaa bo re bopa diele, sentences, re dirisa mafoko a tlaa kwalang fa. One ke a a latelang: Mme, Malome, Dikgomo"* which means the teacher was asking students to make sentences using the words she wrote on the board, being; Mother, Uncle, Cows. In response to this, Xhere asked, *"teacher a re re dire eng, ga ke mo utlwe"?* Meaning he did not understand the instruction because it was a mixture of English and Setswana.

This interaction between teachers and students is highly influenced by the fact that Sesarwa is the commonly used language in Finah. This means that most of the time students listen and speak the same indigenous language. It is thus, very difficult for them to change to English as a medium of instruction which is only used in the classroom situation.

### 7.2 Students' Participation in the Classroom

The use of English during classroom interaction is a challenge to both teachers and students since they are struggling to understand each other. This leads to poor performance during the internal and national primary school leaving examinations because questions are asked in English and expected to be answered in English. This was expressed by Mr. Kgaile during the interview when he pointed out that during the administration of end-of-month tests, *"my students keep raising up their hands to alert me that they don't understand the question, but I would know that it is because of the English language use. They experience difficulty in reading words written in English. Some of them would even say they want to go home while the test is ongoing"*. He narrated that there was one student who quit school and the school made a follow-up on the child's whereabouts. Upon the teachers' visit, they got to interview her and she answered;

*"golo kwa gatwe re bue sekgoa, mme rona ga re se itse. Ga ke boele ko o' (loosely translated, 'there at school, we are asked to speak English, but we do not know that language, so I am not going back there)'"*.

Similarly, a teacher, Ms. Maano once experienced a situation where one student refused to write the test. The student said to Ms. Maano *"Teacher, I am not writing the test because I don't understand all the questions in the paper, please write them in Sesarwa"*, this is the first language of the students. Another teacher Ms Botlhe also noted, *"our students in Finah are very clear about their dislike of the English language and they will never write any test written in English"*. One of the current students in Standard 4, Nakana indicated that *"teachers are not using English throughout classes because we do not understand their English, and they also don't want to learn our Sesarwa"*. Another student, Ximona lamented that *when my teacher uses English, I do not learn anything*. He further said, *"I also fear participating in class because I cannot express myself well"*. Mpho in standard 7 added by saying that *"going to school and spending the whole day there listening to teachers speaking in a language that I do not understand is a complete waste of my time, I would rather stay at home"*.

From the student's and teachers' interviews, it is clear that using English as a medium of interaction hinders students from asking and answering questions during their lessons and end-of-month tests. All the participating teachers testified that students do not participate in class if the teacher uses English, but they partly participate if teaching is done in Setswana. A Standard 5 teacher, Mr Botlhe said, *"if I use English, the silence in class would be as silent as a graveyard. It would be like I'm alone. They do not speak throughout the lesson, but outside the classroom, they would be speaking very loud in their own language. When I use English only, the class becomes quiet but when you say they can use their Sesarwa language, everybody contributes, and the class becomes lively, while in the process of that I become detached from the classroom proceedings since I do not speak their language. In this way, learning does not take place between the teacher and the students"*.

This was confirmed by the researchers because, during classroom observations, they realized that it was difficult for students to participate in class using the English language. Teachers also struggled to give instructions in English during lessons. Another observation was that some of the teachers too are not competent in English and that every now and then they would be tempted to speak in Setswana which students also struggle to grasp.

### 7.3 English as a Medium of Instruction and Students' Academic Performance

All the teachers, former students, and current students who participated in the study were of the view that English strongly affects students' academic performance. Teachers indicated that students' academic performance is closely tied to how they express themselves in English. Thus, mastery of the language of instruction corresponds to academic performance. Mr. Kgaile lamented, *"sometimes it is demoralizing; when you use the English language to teach them, and when you ask a question they cannot answer because they do not understand what you said in English. So you need to say the whole thing in their native language, which poses a challenge to us as teachers. It wastes a lot of time in the teaching and learning process. The painful part about this is that, tests and examinations are written in English except for Setswana. The performance too is not pleasing"*.

Teachers are of the view that the use of English as a medium of instruction is a stumbling block to students' academic achievement. This was emphasized by Ms. Maano when she said; *"English language as a medium of instruction for teaching and learning is a major contributing factor to poor academic performance in this school when teaching, I have to keep on translating what I am saying into English even though it is also a challenge. That is the only way they can understand, otherwise, it will be just a futile exercise"*.

During the focus group discussion, students admitted that they are not doing well during tests and examinations as one of the former students shared his views on the PSLE results in 2020. He said *"all the years that I was in school, I did not like school at all because my teacher taught us in the English language. I knew that I was going to fail, and I never scored any good marks during my time in school, so a grade D was not a surprise to me"*. Mr. Botlhe expressed disappointment to the policymakers who are not making efforts to find out more why students in rural areas are not doing well in PSLE. He went on to say that *"I have been in this school for 9 years now, we have never had a good pass, it was only in 2018 when we managed to do better than all the other years. So, it is time that the policymakers tour the rural areas to appreciate how things are there. We can work together with them to find the solution to this problem and until then, our students are going to continue failing their PSLE"*.

### 7.4 Challenges Faced by Teachers in Using English as

### a Medium of Instruction

#### Cultural Practices

Based on the responses from the interviews, there are several cultural practices that have an impact on students use and mastery of the English language. These practices include, among others, the use of the mother tongue both in and out of school. The three teachers interviewed believed that since students do not use English when communicating in school and at home, this could be affecting their understanding of English when taught in the classroom. Mr. Kgaile indicated that learners underrate the value of English in school. Still, in connection with learners' attitude towards English, Ms. Maano said *"they see English as a foreign language in their society, and its use at home is viewed to be a sign of pride and disrespect. With this kind of belief system and attitude, Basarwa would not be committed to putting any effort in learning English. While Mr Botlhe concluded that students in Finah will forever view English as an unnecessary language and this negative attitude shows that they will never do well in PSLE"*.

#### Lack of frequent practice in the use of English by students

Ms. Maano pointed out that, *"my students lack practice as they do not communicate in English either when in school or at home. That in itself is a clear indication that they do not have much interest in either learning the language or using it to learn, and this impacts negatively on their learning and academic performance."* Ms, Maano further stressed that *"attending classes thus, becomes a pass time because the use of English as the medium of instruction impedes their learning"*. Even if the teacher could scream themselves out, the students will not achieve anything as English stands threateningly tall like the biblical walls of Jericho.

Furthermore, Mr. Botho claimed that *"learners encounter problems in reading, speaking, listening to and writing in English which then impacts on their attitudes towards English. This language presents itself as a scary monster and that makes learners resent it"*. It is clear from the views held by teachers that if students continue to use Sesarwa at home and in school, good PSLE results remain a dream yet to be realized. However, participants feel that by having frequent practice in communicating in English, there is a likelihood of an improvement in academic performance and the use of English during

school hours. Even though he did not elaborate, Mr. Kgaile was of the opinion that “*there is a need to promote speaking, listening, reading and writing of English in and outside the classroom*”. Furthermore, he stressed that “*parents should be invited to frequent meetings with teachers to ensure that their children attend classes as well as have contact with the teacher so that there is close monitoring and shared responsibility on students’ academic performance*”.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that students at Finah primary school will go a long way to improve their academic performance because the use of English as the medium of instruction during classroom delivery impedes their learning. Furthermore, teachers are also not academically skilled enough to deliver content in a linguistically pluralistic environment. This contributes to poor academic performance among the learners, thus resulting in poor quality education and no achievement of the millennium goals as well as the country’s vision of an informed and educated nation.

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