Multi-ethnicism in a Post-Pandemic Schooling Environment as a Recipient for Language Enhancement: Teacher Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study probed the role of multi-ethnicity, a constituent of a multicultural nation, towards university learners' language development post the COVID-19 pandemic era. Attitudes of learners from diverse backgrounds, hence disbanded social relations as a prerequisite of the current stringent regulations, were investigated to identify how such narcissisms impacted language enhancement. A sample of five English language teachers from a university located in a rural environment of the Eastern Cape Province was purposefully nominated. Semi-structured interviews were administered to obtain data for this qualitative case study. Findings of this inquiry discovered that there are indications of learner segregation where learners discriminate against others from diverse backgrounds. In the same vein, findings divulged distortion in group work where learners from the same linguistic constituency preferred to interact in isolation of learners instigating from a different citizenry. These learner attitudes were observed to undermine others' cultural traits. Such findings were reported to impact negatively on learning languages as those identified to be having problems in pronunciation and reading abilities were prompted by others. Learners with reading and pronunciation problems fill intimidated, which is a serious concern as these aspects are fundamentals in language learning. The study recommends an emphasis on the infusion of the Bill of Rights in all subjects underpinning the curriculum for learners to observe and respect each other's cultural diversities.

Keywords: English language, Language enhancement, Multi-ethnic, Diversity, Teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Multi-ethnic countries are considered as those with mixed nationalities embedded within their societies. As perceived by scholars, these countries acknowledge diverse official languages due to societal diversities. This statement coincides with the views of Akram and Qureshi, who contend that there have been some arguments pertaining to diversity imperatives in most countries around the universe.[1] Hence, this article examines the effects of a multi-ethnic classroom after the COVID-19

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[1] Muhammad Akram and Abrar Hussain Qureshi, "Problems in Learning and Teaching English Pronunciation in Pakistan ," *International Journal of Research in Linguistics & Lexicography* 1, no. 4 (2012): 43–48.

pandemic has brought about some emergent changes towards language development for diverse learners enrolled in one university located in a rural Eastern Cape Province environment. This study probed the role of multi-ethnicity, a constituent of a multicultural nation, towards university learners' language development post the COVID-19 pandemic era. This investigation has its main aim to determine, as perceived by English language teachers, whether teaching and learning in a multi-ethnic environment for learners enrolled at a university located in a rural environment, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic era, has any significant effect in language enhancement.[2] Learners from the institution where this inquiry was administered consume *isiXhosa* as their home language; needless to say, the very same cohort of learners are not inclined in the same dialect as they emanate from constituencies with diverse social, linguistic, and cultural complexities.[3] What raises some alarm bells is that when normalcy in schooling prevailed post the pandemic era, most learners had developed a characteristic of engaging in home languages, which was not the case before.[4] Learners previously believed that the English language was the only prescribed medium for teaching and learning across the greatest percentage of the subjects offered at the varsity curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multi-ethnicity, observed to benefit most communities, needs to be looked at from a broader perspective. Learners' exposure to a multi-ethnic classroom environment is perceived to have a characteristic of language competency when using plenty of diverse languages is measured. Abongdia and Foncha's view resonates that engagements to learn varying languages for individuals defined for a particular society has some added advantages to learning, thereby preceding improved language enhancement.[5] Persons engulfed in a multi-ethnic setting are observed for their efficient and effective creative thinking as they tend to look at the world from distinct perspectives and do not have limitations on other points of view when analysing realities around the world.[6] Be that as it may, due to social distancing constraints brought about by COVID-19 restrictions,[7] learners from particular linguistic complexities and constituencies have since developed some tendencies to isolate themselves from others, claiming to distance themselves from the entire learners with reluctance to mix with learners originating from societies reported to have experienced high death toll as reported by COVID-19 contagion statistics.[8]

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[2] Sarah Van de Velde et al., "The COVID-19 International Student Well-Being Study," *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 49, no. 1 (February 7, 2021): 114–22, https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494820981186; Todd Jennings, "Addressing Diversity in US Teacher Preparation Programs: A Survey of Elementary and Secondary Programs' Priorities and Challenges from across the United States of America," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 23, no. 8 (November 2007): 1258–71, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.05.004.

[3] Bobby K. Cheon and Ying-yi Hong, "Aversive Response Towards Culture Fusion Is Moderated by the Source of Foreign Cultural Inflow," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 51, no. 5 (June 21, 2020): 370–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022120919994.

[4] Crain Soudien and Jaqueline Harvey, "Trouble in Our Consensus about Learning: The Politics of Learning in the Contemporary Period," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 29, no. 2 (March 15, 2021): 247–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1716836.

[5] J.A. Abongdia, E.O. Adu, and J.W. Foncha, "Pre-Service Teachers' Challenges during Teaching Practice in One University in the Eastern Cape, South Africa," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 11, no. 1 (October 25, 2015): 50–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/09751122.2015.11890374.

[6] Rabia Tufail, Ayesha Kanwal, and Sadaf BadarToor, "Urdu Speaking EFL Students Problems in Learning English in Public and Private Schools of Punjab, Pakistan," *Bulletin of Business and Economics (BBE)* 4, no. 1 (2015): 43–47, https://www.bbejournal.com/index.php/BBE/article/view/226.

[7] Bunmi Isaiah Omodan, "Managing the Psycho-Social Vacuum of COVID-19 among Rural Learners through Ubuntu," *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 10, no. 6 (November 18, 2020): 266, https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2020-0125; Bunmi Isaiah Omodan, "The Vindication of Decoloniality and the Reality of COVID-19 as an Emergency of Unknown in Rural Universities," *International Journal of Sociology of Education*, June 20, 2020, 1–26, https://doi.org/10.17583/rise.2020.5495.

[8] Ayman Fouda et al., "The COVID-19 Pandemic in Greece, Iceland, New Zealand, and Singapore: Health Policies and Lessons Learned," *Health Policy and Technology* 9, no. 4 (December 2020): 510–24, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hlpt.2020.08.015.

In addition, Dhillon and Wanjiru correspond that dynamism in a particular community has proven to lead to a multi-ethnic nature.[9] When a culture like this is trending in a schooling environment, societal needs become vital. Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, and Lindsey concur when noting that other countries in the South African context have diverse and plenty of spoken languages.[10] This has an educational implication that, as perceived by the author, such counties are renowned for being prosperous because of their diversity in language and culture. This brings the author to affirm that being multi-ethnic has an added advantage to producing learners who can communicate better in diverse fields and for various purposes, thereby obtaining both fluency and effectiveness. Furthermore, such a cohort of learners would then easily interact with people from diverse cultures, more so since South Africa is well known for its characteristic of diverseness.[11] Henceforth, Norton disputes such statements in that multi-ethnic societies have been reported to negatively impact learning, as engaging in different languages may hinder recognising one's own culture, heritage, and linguistic alignment.[12]

It is further argued that a multi-ethnic learning environment is known to possess some English language learning prime encounters when looked at from a worldwide perspective. As recipients of learning, teachers and learners have been reported to experience challenges emanating from diversity in learners' spoken home languages.[13] Considering learning in a multi-ethnic environment, it is proclaimed that in studies conducted in a Mianwali Education District in Pakistan, English language teachers reported that students at the college level of learning combatted some complications while learning the English language. The stated complications resulted from a lack of properly trained teachers with limited information on policy imperatives. To supplement the notion of learning difficulties, it is argued that learners have been detected to demonstrate limited reading culture due to diverse backgrounds and a lack of reading resources.[14] Therefore, this calls for the author to denote and commit to using the English medium to cater to multi-ethnic classroom environments, recognising that English has since been regarded as the common medium to all.

Henceforth, although post the COVID-19 pandemic era, people from diverse backgrounds anticipated dissociating themselves from other ethnic groups with reasons of how and where the fatal virus had erupted,[15] a multi-ethnic population has some added and underlying advantages to interconnect with its own choice parlances.[16] This is in contrast to some involved in policy-making who disregard language diversity. For those learning institutions which have proved to take into cognisance the diversity of their societies, yet with a specific focus to enhance the English language as known to be a recognised medium, ensure that they consider redefining policies relating to

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[9] Jaswinder K. Dhillon and Jenestar Wanjiru, "Challenges and Strategies for Teachers and Learners of English as a Second Language: The Case of an Urban Primary School in Kenya," *International Journal of English Linguistics* 3, no. 2 (March 25, 2013), https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v3n2p14.

[10] Randall B. Lindsey et al., *Cultural Proficiency : A Manual for School Leaders* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2018).

[11] Vitaliy Popov, Dine Brinkman, and Jan Pieter van Oudenhoven, "Becoming Globally Competent through Student Mobility," 2017, 1007–28, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-41713-4_47.

[12] Bonny Norton, "Digital Stories Could Hold the Key to Multilingual Literacy for African Children," The Conversation, 2015, https://theconversation.com/digital-stories-could-hold-the-key-to-multilingual-literacy-for-african-children-40405.

[13] Akram, and Qureshi, "Problems in learning and teaching English pronunciation in Pakistan."

[14] Muhammad Zeeshan, "Pakistani Government Secondary Schools Students' Attitudes towards Communicative Language Teaching and Grammar Translation in Quetta, Balochistan.," *English Language Teaching* 9, no. 3 (2016): 258–70, https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n3p258.

[15] Shabir Ahmad Lone and Aijaz Ahmad, "COVID-19 Pandemic – an African Perspective," *Emerging Microbes & Infections* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 1300–1308, https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2020.1775132; Bunmi Omodan, "Deconstructing the Challenges of COVID-19 on First-Year Rural University Students in South Africa," *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 3, no. 1 (2021): 229–42, https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v3i1.930.

[16] Ashley Simpson and Fred Dervin, "Global and Intercultural Competences for Whom? By Whom? For What Purpose? : An Example from the Asia Society and the OECD," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, March 6, 2019, 1–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2019.1586194.

languages.[17] As these recipients to learning engage in this process, they ensure they exchange their participation by using the English language for communication purposes. One cannot run away from engaging in an identified common language as communicating both nationally and internationally in these globalised eras with vibrant collaborations across entire countries has come to erode the stereotype attitudes of undermining one's cultures and identities.[18] As alleged by the author, on noting that some studies have been conducted on issues of multicultural education, with little mention by literature on how some languages' learning aspects have been negatively affected by multi-ethnicism societal logistics, it became imperative for a study to be conducted, thereby identifying the possible influence of multi-ethnic learning towards the English language development as this is the language of instruction for the greatest percentage of the subjects underpinning the South African schools' curriculum. Furthermore, the same language is a nationally and internationally recognised communication medium.

The Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) Theory by Cummins underpins this inquiry.[19] BICS denotes competencies required for daily social face-to-face interactions. This relates to embedding language in the context of regular social interactions, extending to the essential language used for learning content and classroom discussions. BICS is a vital theory that assists learning and teaching in changing timelines to address challenges by second language learners. Encounters addressed by BICS can include but are not limited to, pronunciation, speaking, fluency and writing logistics. In this theory, learning is perceived as a cohesive procedure with both multi-ethnicity and mono-ethnicity as a pillar to each other. Educationally, this theory implies that language teachers, during teaching and learning processes, need to consider facets of language enhancement to avoid a decline in learner academic attainment. This study transcribes that although learners communicate with ease when using the English language, there is a tendency to develop some reluctance and lowered self-esteem when engaging in multi-ethnic learning situations.[20] Hence, the author saw some necessity to examine and divulge whether multi-ethnicism, as a recipient of learning, has any significant impact on language enhancement.

RESEARCH METHOD

For this investigation, the interpretivist approach was administered based on the naturalistic approach to the phenomenon under investigation.[21] In this approach, as the researcher is a communal actor, it therefore becomes vital to understand and appreciate people's differences because, as people are diverse, they also perceive issues differently.[22] The author thought it prudent to share meanings and instruments as a way of deeply understanding the underlying problems people within a multi-ethnic society are faced with, as well as how they perceive issues affecting them. This, therefore, probed the author to study cross-cultural differences in groups of people at a much greater level of depth, thereby associating the study findings with high trustworthiness and validity levels.[23]

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[17] Bryant Pui Hung Hui et al., "Facilitating Adaptation and Intercultural Contact: The Role of Integration and Multicultural Ideology in Dominant and Non-Dominant Groups," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 45 (March 2015): 70–84, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.01.002.

[18] Åsta Haukås, "Teachers' Beliefs about Multilingualism and a Multilingual Pedagogical Approach," *International Journal of Multilingualism* 13, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2015.1041960.

[19] J David Cummins, *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* (Ontario, California: California Association for Bilingual Education, 1996).

[20] Akram, and Qureshi, "Problems in learning and teaching English pronunciation in Pakistan."

[21] Mark N. K. Saunders, Philip Lewis, and Adrian Thornhil, *Research Methods for Business Students* (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2012), https://www.worldcat.org/title/research-methods-for-business-students/oclc/768041915.

[22] Jere Brophy, *Motivating Students to Learn* (Madison Avenue, NY: Routledge, 2010), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203858318.

[23] Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (Eighth edition. | New York: Routledge, 2018.: Routledge, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539.

This qualitative inquiry embedded in a case study design was undertaken to study real schooling situations engulfed in multi-ethnicism with regard to language enhancement.[24] The study participants were five purposefully nominated English language teachers from a rural university in one of the Eastern Cape Education Districts. They were the ones experiencing the challenges in their multi-ethic classrooms; therefore, they were identified and selected as the most relevant cohort to supply the phenomenon investigated with rich data. Additionally, findings from this form of sampling do not need to be statistically representative of a larger number of participants. Semi-structured interviews as a qualitative data collection instrument were used to generate responses from the participants.[25] A wide and rich range of responses were gathered due to the nature of the instrument as it is composed of open-ended items.[26] As ethical issues were considered,[27] more so that participants were informed prior to the examination that their responses would be kept confidential, yet anonymous, frank responses were generated. Data collected were analysed by scrutinising a lot of responses from all participants. After that, units of analysis were constructed, leading to the formation of codes and categories, thereby grouping similar responses. This exercise led to the formation of themes as findings of the investigation.[28]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part presents an argument of findings in relation to teacher participants' responses regarding teacher perceptions of multi-ethnicism as a recipient of language enhancement. The main research question to which participants responded was: What is the role of multi-ethnicity towards university learners' language development post the COVID-19 pandemic era? Discussion of results has been laid out in line with the evolving themes from the examined data. Two themes discussed as findings in this section are: learner segregation and distorted group work.

Learner segregation

With regards to the findings of this examination, when participants were asked about their perception of learner segregation versus learner groupings, Participant One (S1) responded:

> *Whenever I assign some tasks to be discussed as groups during the information sharing session, it has come to my notice that learners whose home background is of a common or relating area have developed a tendency to clomp themselves as a singular group. As I further interrogate this uncalled-for habit from learners, they pronounce in firmness that they were reluctant to mix with learners from societies reported to have experienced a high toll of COVID-19 deaths.*

Similar to the first participant, this is how the second participant (S2) responded:

> *As we engage in robust discussions during the process of teaching and learning, I have been observing that a vast number of learners in my class display some reluctance to engage in class discussions because other classmates laugh at their language and pronunciation. This habit has also been noticed to expand teasing one another, with utterances that those who performed less were aligned with stress obtained from COVID-19 family bereavements. As their subject teacher, I perceive such habits to be detrimental not only to the classroom environment and expanded*

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[24] Kobus Maree, *First Steps in Research* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2007), https://worldcat.org/title/155837980.

[25] Maree, *First steps in action research.*

[26] Martin Rich, "Learning Research Methods: How Personalised Should We Be?," *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods* 12, no. 2 (November 1, 2014): 131–38, https://academic-publishing.org/index.php/ejbrm/article/view/1322.

[27] Brophy, *Motivating Students to Learn.*

[28] Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, *Research methods in education.*

communal relations but also to enhance language barriers. For learners at university to tease one another is equivalent to immaturity and yet a demotivating effect.

In addition to that, Participant Three (S3) argues:
For effectiveness intertwined with efficiency during classroom deliberations, be it online or in a face-to-face mode of interaction, I allow for contributions by all irrespective of whatever home language and whatever experiences exhibited from varying environments, although this hassle hits hard when assessments are administered because only one language becomes functional by then, this being the English language as the prescribed medium of teaching and learning.

All three participants were of the same accord that disparities in learner-home-linguistic backgrounds result in being the key finding in multi-ethnic classrooms more so that, despite arguments by learners wanting to segregate themselves from others with influences of social distancing logistics, teaching and learning for language enhancement needs to be administered and delivered in congruently to all at once.[29] Participants perceived some learners to be experiencing difficulties in comprehending texts written in the English language. Learner shyness at using the English language in cases was expected to do so, making it eminent that the language barrier could be a deterrent to enhancing the English language. The study observed that learners in such a dilemma are the ones whose home background was composed of alliterating siblings more so that the English language is unfamiliar and not in consistent use. Such learners only come into direct contact with this unfamiliar language in a schooling environment, specifically during English period contact time. The study findings also revealed that language diversity seems to influence teacher-learner interactions.[30] To curb the situation, both teachers and learners were noted for their tact of resorting to code-switching as dynamism to cater to all learners, irrespective of differences in home languages, as well as respecting other learners' languages. As English language teachers embark on code-switching from English to vernacular languages, they perceive this strategy to be somehow assisting, as most learners observed their eagerness to participate when granted access to engaging in home languages.[31]

Distorted group work
With regards to group work imperatives as one of the study findings, Participant Four (S4) coincided with the previous three participants (S1, S2, S3) with an accord that:
Shyness of some learners to engage in class discussions and in responding to questions asked, due to limited English proficiency levels, hence the medium used for teaching and learning, really causes great tension, thus imparting on teacher-learner relations towards improved language specifications.

Henceforth, the fifth participant (S5) harmonises by declaring:
Learner groupings in my English language class are not formulated as I would have anticipated as those learners emanating from the same linguistic constituency feel to have some sense of security when they are grouped as one.

From the analysed data, it emerged that learners from the same linguistic constituency preferred to interact in isolation from learners instigating from a different constituency. As alleged by teacher participants, this single-sidedness is tantamount to isolation logistics, yet leads to lacking confidence

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[29] Labby Ramrathan, "School Curriculum in South Africa in the Covid-19 Context: An Opportunity for Education for Relevance," *Prospects* 51, no. 1–3 (October 6, 2021): 383–92, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09490-1.

[30] Takeshi Hamamura, "Social Identity and Attitudes Toward Cultural Diversity," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 48, no. 2 (February 1, 2017): 184–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022116681845.

[31] Hongfei Du et al., "Person-Culture Fit Boosts National Pride: A Cross-Cultural Study among 78 Societies," *Journal of Research in Personality* 81 (August 2019): 108–17, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2019.05.008.

among learners held in predicaments of multi-ethnicity. As this habit by some learners leads to some inaccuracy in work done per group, teachers recognise this finding to be a result of limited English language background. Such distortion in group work was noted to cause stress and nervousness towards language learning with its diverse and compound aspects. When an exclusive subject or course is administered, Svalberg argues that distortion in the subject learned is likely to arise due to limited recognition caused by tensions about learning an unfamiliar subject.[32] This has been the case in this current investigation as some learners were observed to have limitations in expressing themselves in English as a language of instruction, more so that learners in the studied site had developed uncalled-for tendencies to uniquely categorise themselves according to background constituencies post the pandemic period.[33] To curb this inaccuracy in language learning, especially when learners study in groups formed diversly, it seems eminent that both teachers and learners need to embed some motivation strategies in learning as a process striving towards enhanced language learning, thereby leading to excelled academic attainment.[34]

CONCLUSION

This investigation examined English language teachers' experiences engaging in multi-ethnic classroom environments. The study found that teaching an unfamiliar yet unusual language is no mean task, especially in multi-ethnic settings. For learners to be overwhelmed because of speaking, reading and pronunciation glitches raise some alarm bells for language development with its fundamental aspects. This paper, therefore, advocates for thoughtful recognition of all other languages granted as official. As South Africa is a country with its prominent characteristic of being a rainbow nation, this calls for cultivating learner self-esteem by uplifting vernacular language learning, thereby sustaining immigrant languages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended by this paper that teachers need to rethink accommodative strategies as a way of considering learners' unique cultures coupled with diversity in home languages. It is further recommended that language teachers have to plant that sense of respecting and appreciating each other's native language, irrespective of differing linguistic constituencies. There is a need to enact motivation factors for both teachers and learners as recipients of teaching and learning in such multi-ethnic environments. The paper further proposes revised language policies in schools to implant values of Ubuntu and multi-ethnicity observance by all stakeholders involved in the schooling sector. As each country depends on each other for improved economic stability, so is each person dependent on one another, meaning and a multi-ethnic nation paves the way for an economically affluent country.

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