



The Impact of Linguistic Constituencies on Language Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

This study inquired into whether linguistic constituencies have an impact on learner language proficiency. An appropriate approach that was used encompasses qualitative research methods as they permit extracting valuable information from small samples. Underpinning this qualitative inquiry is Participatory Action Research (PAR) with its added advantage of being considered to have an underlying characteristic of engaging with community members in action. The researchers and study participants collaborated to determine the investigated problem, in this case being learner linguistic constituencies in parallel or divergent to language proficiency. Data was gathered from five purposefully nominated English language teachers from one rurally located institution of higher learning in one of the Eastern Cape Education Districts. Semi-structured interviews generated rich thematically analysed data as they contained open-ended types of items. It was divulged by the study that (i) language policy implementation and (ii) teacher training and professional development were the major findings that resulted in experienced challenges with regard to depreciating language proficiency where learners emanated from diversified cultural backgrounds. This paper recommends and concludes that a review of language policies is a dire exercise for consideration, as being a language-proficient learner is tantamount to academic success.

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INTRODUCTION

Research, as noted by MacSwan, proclaims that the term linguistic constituency normally relates to a consortium of people sharing some common language or dialect and forming a specific linguistic community.¹ For these communities to vary in size, ecological location, racial background and socio-economic factors can surely, in diverse ways, impact language proficiency in learners originating from those surroundings.² This therefore means that some underlying cultural and social context within a linguistic population may be indicators to persuade language proficiency. Be that as it may, Astillero argues that some communities highly value and foster pride in their language component, thereby leading to such inhabitants attaining improved language proficiencies.³ Simultaneously, it is reported that those communities faced with cultural pressures to adapt to dominance in their own language are faced with challenges of declining language proficiencies.⁴

¹ Jeff MacSwan, "A Multilingual Perspective on Translanguaging," *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 167–201, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216683935>.

² Amanda K. Kibler and Guadalupe Valdés, "Conceptualizing Language Learners: Socioinstitutional Mechanisms and Their Consequences," *The Modern Language Journal* 100, no. S1 (January 26, 2016): 96–116, <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12310>.

³ Susan Fresnido Astillero, "Linguistic Schoolscape: Studying the Place of English and Philippine Languages of Irosin Secondary School," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Arts and Sciences* 4, no. 4 (2017): 30–37.

⁴ MacSwan, "A Multilingual Perspective on Translanguaging."

Additionally, other reported encounters become visible due to regional language variations contained by any language considered comprehensive.⁵ This is when some of the inhabitants seem to vary in levels of proficiencies for varying languages. It is therefore such acquaintance to different dialects, coupled with perceptions by individual community members that seem to be imparting towards discrete language proficiencies holistically. Summarily, Ungerer and Hartmann have stated that commercial or economic factors do have an impact on destabilising language proficiency within dialectal constituencies.⁶ The result of such economic factors might as well be linked to loss of access to quality education which would ultimately manipulate proficiency levels in language learning.⁷ Although some studies have been conducted with regard to the impact of linguistic constituency on language learning, there is almost little or nothing noted by literature on growing attitudes among learners whose home backgrounds are dissimilar to others, yet such a critical factor is regarded as equivalent to disrupting academic attainment. As indicated above, these are some of the valuable prospects that aroused interest in undertaking this investigation as a means to explore whether learners emanating from diverse linguistic constituencies are deprived of their learner language proficiency aptitudes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

The theory forming the basis of this inquiry is Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development.⁸ It is argued by this theory that as young children grow there are cognitive development stages they pass through, depending on their diverse abilities. It is further emphasised that it becomes worthwhile to have a clear understanding of each stage to accommodate age variations when teaching and learning as a process is incurred, thereby accommodating how children perceive the world around them.

In a schooling environment, some educational implications are likely to arise owing to traits and linguistic constituency dynamics. It therefore becomes the task of teachers to be sensitive to learner differences.⁹ Varying learning styles, abilities and individual needs should be considered to circumvent making generalizations about learner abilities. In constituencies where bilingualism or multilingualism traits are eminent, instruction is likely to be provided concurrently in recognition of home and additional language.¹⁰ When bilingual education is imparted to learning, there are great prospects of enhanced language proficiency intertwined with academic attainment due to self-motivated learning.

Empirical Review

Individuals who obtain sufficient opportunities for language exposure are regarded as capable of having diverse linguistic constituencies around the communities where they reside.¹¹ Being exposed to such linguistic complexities can either bear some advantages or disadvantages likely to impart on decline or rise of language proficiency levels.¹² Be that as it may, it also raises some alarm bells to learn that accessibility of language resources may vary, depending on distinct linguistic constituencies. As argued by Jakonen it is those communities that are regarded as having 'well-developed language resources' that are capable of offering opportunities for learning that are competent, therefore qualifying learners towards enhanced language proficiencies.¹³

However, it is unsurprising that the government prescribes some language policies for application by institutions of learning, that as a factor can significantly hinder and affect language competence within dialectal

⁵ Debra A. Titone and Mehrgol Tiv, "Rethinking Multilingual Experience through a Systems Framework of Bilingualism," *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 26, no. 1 (January 14, 2023): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728921001127>.

⁶ Tobias Ungerer and Stefan Hartmann, "Delineating Extravagance: Assessing Speakers' Perceptions of Imaginative Constructional Patterns," *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 34, no. 1 (2020): 345–56.

⁷ Jonathan Daniel Rosa, "Standardization, Racialization, Languagelessness: Raciolinguistic Ideologies across Communicative Contexts," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2016): 162–83.

⁸ Henry M Wellman, "Reinvigorating Explanations for the Study of Early Cognitive Development," *Child Development Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (2011): 33–38.

⁹ Tracey M Derwing et al., "Second Language Fluency: Judgments on Different Tasks," *Language Learning* 54, no. 4 (2004): 655–79.

¹⁰ Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry, "The Politics of English, Language and Uptake: The Case of International Academic Journal Article Reviews," *Aila Review* 28, no. 1 (2015): 127–50.

¹¹ Andreas Baumann and Lotte Sommerer, "Linguistic Diversification as a Long-Term Effect of Asymmetric Priming: An Adaptive-Dynamics Approach," *Language Dynamics and Change* 8, no. 2 (2018): 253–96.

¹² Sheila Ciria Chung, Xi Chen, and Esther Geva, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Cross-Language Transfer in Bilingual Reading Development: An Interactive Framework," *Journal of Neurolinguistics* 50 (May 2019): 149–61, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneuroling.2018.01.003>.

¹³ Teppo Jakonen, "The Environment of a Bilingual Classroom as an Interactional Resource," *Linguistics and Education* 44 (2018): 20–30.

constituencies.¹⁴ On differing opinions, where bilingual education is promoted by policy, there are underlying advantages for minority languages to be supported, thus leading to preserved language that positively influences language proficiency.¹⁵ It is worth noting that these policies that only focus on preference for dominant language or disband minority language use have indeed disadvantaging effects on linguistic proficiency.

Both teachers and learners experienced challenges when collaborating with the foreign and unfamiliar English language. Further than that, because learners emanated from differing linguistic constituencies, such challenges were reported to be affecting learning for the English language medium is the prescribed medium of teaching for most subjects underpinning the prescribed curriculum.¹⁶ Along the way, some attitudes were reported to have erupted as reported by a study conducted by Pasquarella, Chen, Gottardo and Geva.¹⁷ When such perceptions and attitudes concerning a specific language within a schooling environment are evident, language proficiency becomes affected. Such a challenge might result in a two-way struggle, that of pride fostering high proficiency levels, and that of language stigmatisation, all leading to language proficiency underdevelopment.¹⁸

Therefore, such underlying influences exposed by multiple language use attributable to historical factors may lead to the change of teaching strategies to code-switching. This convergence of language, as Storme, et.al., contend, tends to have an influence on language aspects like grammar, pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary.¹⁹ This implies that teacher training and professional development are necessary notions for capacitation such that English language teachers may become well equipped to tackle diversities when teaching English as an additional and unfamiliar language to learners whose home backgrounds are ruled and governed by varieties of spoken home languages.²⁰

Individual factors such as motivation, aptitude, and personal effort also play a crucial role in language proficiency.²¹ Additionally, proficiency in a language is a complex and multifaceted concept encompassing various skills.²² Therefore, the impact of linguistic constituencies on language proficiency may vary across different language skills and individuals within a given community.

Nonetheless, it becomes a prerequisite to note that although language proficiency among learners is influenced by linguistic constituencies, there are factors that need to be made functional as they play a crucial role in language development.²³ These might include consistent workshopping of teachers, re-inventing language policies, as well as motivating and supporting all recipients involved in teaching and learning additional languages.²⁴ Regardless of the argument one may unfold, it remains a complex factor that language learning with its fundamental skills including speaking, listening, reading, and writing, is a multifaceted concept.²⁵

¹⁴ Sarah Bernolet, Robert J. Hartsuiker, and Martin J. Pickering, "From Language-Specific to Shared Syntactic Representations: The Influence of Second Language Proficiency on Syntactic Sharing in Bilinguals," *Cognition* 127, no. 3 (June 2013): 287–306, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2013.02.005>.

¹⁵ K. Bialik, A. Scheller, and K. Walker, "6 Facts about English Language Learners in U.S. Public Schools," Pew Research Center, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/25/6-facts-about-englishlanguage-learners-in-u-s-public-schools/>.

¹⁶ W. Grabe, *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Adrian Pasquarella et al., "Cross-Language Transfer of Word Reading Accuracy and Word Reading Fluency in Spanish-English and Chinese-English Bilinguals: Script-Universal and Script-Specific Processes.," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 107, no. 1 (February 2015): 96–110, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036966>.

¹⁸ S. Hélène Deacon et al., "Beyond Language Borders: Orthographic Processing and Word Reading in Spanish-English Bilinguals," *Journal of Research in Reading* 36, no. 1 (January 2013): 58–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9817.2011.01490.x>.

¹⁹ Martin Storme et al., "The Effect of Forced Language Switching during Divergent Thinking: A Study on Bilinguals' Originality of Ideas," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (December 5, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02086>.

²⁰ Irene Cadime et al., "The Role of Word Recognition, Oral Reading Fluency and Listening Comprehension in the Simple View of Reading: A Study in an Intermediate Depth Orthography," *Reading and Writing* 30, no. 3 (March 10, 2017): 591–611, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-016-9691-3>.

²¹ Youyi Liu et al., "Contribution of Cognitive and Linguistic Skills to Word-Reading Accuracy and Fluency in Chinese," *International Journal of Educational Research* 82 (2017): 75–90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.12.005>.

²² Young-Suk Kim, "Language and Cognitive Predictors of Text Comprehension: Evidence From Multivariate Analysis," *Child Development* 86, no. 1 (January 30, 2015): 128–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12293>.

²³ Anita M.-Y. Wong et al., "Reading Comprehension, Working Memory and Higher-Level Language Skills in Children with SLI and/or Dyslexia," *Reading and Writing* 30, no. 2 (February 25, 2017): 337–61, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-016-9678-0>.

²⁴ Astillero, "Linguistic Schoolscape: Studying the Place of English and Philippine Languages of Irosin Secondary School."

²⁵ Danielle Brimo, Emily Lund, and Alysha Sapp, "Syntax and Reading Comprehension: A Meta-analysis of Different Spoken-syntax Assessments," *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders* 53, no. 3 (May 18, 2018): 431–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12362>.

METHODOLOGY

For this research study, a qualitative approach was employed as non-numerical data was gathered to obtain some understanding and experiences of individuals in their social realities.²⁶ The researchers felt it was imperative to conduct a qualitative investigation to better understand the impact caused by diverse linguistic constituencies and complexities in the schooling environment.

Embedded in this qualitative research approach was Participatory Action Research (PAR).²⁷ This type of research design is considered for its characteristic to engage with community members in action, thus creating chances of consistent collaboration between the researcher and study participants to determine the investigated problem.

As data informants, five English language teachers were identified as relevant participants purposely in this investigation.²⁸ They offered services in a rurally located institution of higher learning where the learner component was composed of inhabitants from diverse regions across the country. For learner home backgrounds to vary to this extent, such reasons led to a decline in language proficiencies as learners emanated from assorted communities with differing linguistic constituencies. Therefore, as this cohort of teachers has taught the English language for many years, they were reported to have experienced challenges of depreciating language proficiency for the subject they offer. As a means to gather data, there were robust engagements between participants and researchers through the administration of semi-structured interviews. The interview schedule contained a set of open-ended question types. This allowed for prolonged engagements as participants were allowed opportunities to elaborate and clarify as much as they perceived necessary.²⁹ This method of interviewing resulted in the researchers also posing some follow-up questions as subordinates to the questions primarily contained by the interview schedule. As this crucial process was carried out, interviewer and interviewee engagements were recorded, and at the same time field notes were taken.

In recognition that ethical approval is regarded essential when research is undertaken, such a stance was also considered important for this investigation. Upon unpacking ethical issues to be observed which were not only limited to non-disclosure of their identities and that when needed they would be permitted to withdraw from the investigation, all participants willingly agreed to take part in this investigation. In accordance, all participants willingly agreed to give consent for the entire research process.³⁰

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Below, findings have been discussed as guided by the revealed themes when data was analysed.

Language Policy Implementation

It emanated as one of the major findings that policy imperatives have an effect on and greatly contribute to language proficiency development. When Participant One was questioned about how learners from diverse linguistic complexities contributed to the investigated challenge, the argument was:

In the institution where I serve as an English lecturer, we are obliged to adhere to the prescribed language policy. Further than that, as a team of language lecturers, we are currently held up with transforming the curriculum so that it serves the needs of the communities. As such, in the designed learner module guides, prospectuses and graduation handbooks, the infusion of home languages is a work in progress. Therefore, if there may be effective implementation of language policies for a certain linguistic constituency, I anticipate great changes and an unswerving impact on language proficiency.

In line with the statement above, Participant 2 stated:

As this is not the first university where I offered courses related to language learning, I have noticed that for policies to make provisions to support language learning yet encourage that language be used in diverse domains, such factors are likely to contribute towards proficiency development.

Participant Three also had a similar argument:

When at the lecture hall I normally allow robust discussions between pairs and among groups of learners. As I monitor the process by moving around, I have since noticed that discussions are limitedly done using the English medium.

²⁶ Michael D Myers, "Qualitative Research in Business and Management," *Qualitative Research in Business and Management*, 2019, 1–364.

²⁷ S. Mckenney and T. L. Reeves, *Conducting Educational Design Research* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²⁸ D. A. Freedman, "Sampling," 2014, <http://www.stat.berkeley.edu/~census/sample.pdf>.

²⁹ A. M. Galleta, *Mastering the Semi- Structured Interview and Beyond* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

³⁰ J. W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015).

This is further concurred by Participant Four who claims:

When some groups invite me to join them for clarities and elaboration, I previously used to lay out my contributions specifically in English medium. Nonetheless, I have since embarked on infusing my home language upon noticing that when the time comes for reporting back, the greatest percentage of learners would seek permission to relay their reports and share their views through using their home languages.

With the arguments above, it is worth mentioning that for language policy and planning, it becomes a necessity to explore the functions of language policies and forecasting in linguistic constituencies. This projection could be done by scrutinizing how policies in language learning affect language proficiency in a way that would help to enhance language recovery efforts, rights to language of choice, and education that fosters bilingualism as such factors could lead to linguistic diversity preservation. However, language learning needs to be maintained over generations in order to influence language proficiency standards. It is revealed by literature that those communities that make it a priority to maintain language through intergenerational transmission and language policies are renowned for their characteristic to attain proficiency levels that are higher among their members.³¹ As one might recall, the factors argued above have some interconnectedness with varying influences on specified linguistic constituencies due to individual circumstances.

Accordingly, for cultural inclusion, there is a need for educational practises that are inclusive and by so doing such practises are likely to embrace and respect variation in cultures and languages. As such, in a schooling environment where those variations are well recognised, both learners and teachers would be forced and bound to learn to respect each other's background language and human dignity. A learning environment that is inclusive and considers learners' home languages and cultures is equated to promoting a sense of belonging, ownership, and supported language learning. With the highlighted educational implications, researchers, teachers, policymakers and curriculum developers could be guided to design learning programs that are effective to cater for inclusion with regard to diverse linguistic constituencies.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

To curb the impact caused by linguistic constituencies on language proficiency, training and workshopping teachers to develop them professionally and holistically proved to be another core finding for this investigation. To acknowledge this finding, Participant Four posited:

Handling learners from diversified communities with various background languages is a real hassle that at times results in inefficient performance for most learners in language learning. As teachers who offer English language teaching to learners from specific linguistic constituencies, we really need to be equipped to have broader perspectives on linguistic knowledge and strategies that are instructional. If these are seriously considered they could lead to supported language learning that would positively work towards reconsideration of cultural sensitivity among learners we teach.

Participant Five confirmed this assertion by stating:

Indeed, as I was never trained to offer tuition in bilingual or multilingual contexts, I experience difficulties as I am expected to be a champion with the English language that I teach, yet it seems as if it is disregarded that to offer an unfamiliar language for learners coming from varying home learner backgrounds with varying home languages, is not a child's play. Specialised training and professional developmental programs seem to be a necessity to tackle those linguistic constituencies which have unique dialectal characteristics.

Participant One also argued along the same route:

For me, to be allocated various subjects to offer, besides English language teaching, and in dissimilar grades, is a real hassle that I have long been complaining about, only to be told of human resource shortages by my line manager. This really strains me because teaching an additional and foreign language to speakers who have diverse mother tongue languages is a very difficult task because language teaching has various aspects that make the subject very wide and time-consuming.

With the assertions above, language teachers are therefore faced with challenges to be conversant with exploring language contact situations coupled with multilingualism dynamics within constituencies who have been proven to have linguistics variations. Teachers offering languages should therefore consider teaching strategies like

³¹ Cristina Flores, Ayşe Gürel, and Michael T. Putnam, "Different Perspectives on Critical Factors in Heritage Language Development and Maintenance," *Language Learning* 70, no. S1 (March 18, 2020): 5–14, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12367>.

patterns on code-switching in order to successfully maintain multilingual repertoires.³² When workshops are conducted to equip language teachers, education programmes offered could also focus on heritage linguistic education as this would help to retain learner language proficiencies and cultural identity.³³

Further than that, another vital factor for consideration centres around the assessment of languages that are considered appropriate and efficient. Learners who own dialects that are different are likely to require specific considerations to assess language proficiency in an accurate manner.³⁴ If such a practice is taken care of, this would lead to an essential evaluation in language learning which is considered fair, reasonable and valid. This aspect of assessment goes hand-in-glove with ensuring that in a schooling environment, there is a supply of readily available instructional materials to enhance processes of teaching and learning. Research has proven that well-resourced institutions of learners have the added advantage of having access to a vast range of learning and teaching support material (LTSM) as compared to constituencies with limited quality materials, thus having some impact on language learning consequences.³⁵

The findings of this investigation correspond with Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development as it proposes that there is a fundamental need to consider varying cognitive development stages, diverse learner abilities as well as differing learner home linguistic backgrounds.³⁶ Galante concedes that in a schooling environment recipients of teaching and learning should consider individual factors including but not limited to sociocultural and ecological context as these significantly have a huge impact on language acquisition.³⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper therefore recommends that for further action, research investigations might explore contributing factors to language maintenance, variations of language within a specified linguistic constituency and impact on language proficiency thereof. Sociolinguistic factors influence language acquisition, as well as the viability of language policies currently implemented. Conversely, it is a vibrant notion to consider these recommendations on language learning as they are already perceived to detour declining language development and proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an inquiry into whether linguistic constituencies have an impact on learner language proficiency. As data was analysed, it emerged as findings that language policy implementation together with teacher training and professional development are fundamentals to experienced challenges of depreciating language proficiency in instances where learners originated from diverse cultural backgrounds. This paper concludes that intervention strategies targeted to support and safeguard language learning challenges experienced need to be put in place as this would re-enhance language proficiencies among learners, irrespective of diverse home backgrounds. To overcome language barriers and excel in academic success, programs for remedial assistance can be of benefit to both teachers and learners.

³² Peter Nyakundi Mose, "Bilingualizing Linguistically Homogeneous Classrooms in Kenya: Implications on Policy, Second Language Learning, and Literacy," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 22, no. 4 (May 19, 2019): 459–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2016.1268567>.

³³ Lena V. Kremin et al., "The Effects of Spanish Heritage Language Literacy on English Reading for Spanish–English Bilingual Children in the US," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 22, no. 2 (February 17, 2019): 192–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2016.1239692>.

³⁴ Brimo, Lund, and Sapp, "Syntax and Reading Comprehension: A Meta-analysis of Different Spoken-syntax Assessments."

³⁵ Gabriela Meier and Jean Conteh, "Conclusion: The Multilingual Turn in Language Education," *The Multilingual Turn in Languages Education: Opportunities and Challenges. Bristol: Multilingual Matters*, 2014, 292–99; Chung, Chen, and Geva, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Cross-Language Transfer in Bilingual Reading Development: An Interactive Framework."

³⁶ Wellman, "Reinvigorating Explanations for the Study of Early Cognitive Development."

³⁷ Angelica Galante, "Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence (PPC) Scale: The Inseparability of Language and Culture," *International Journal of Multilingualism* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 477–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2020.1753747>.

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