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Challenges Experienced by Non-English Speaking Congolese Learners From Congo in Former Model C Schools

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Abstract

We are currently living in an era of mass global migration. Therefore, it is a pertinent time to reflect on the challenges and possibilities inherent in educating non-English-speaking immigrant learners. Immigrant learners from DRC Congo have limited or no proficiency in the English language and need a period of adjustment to both the new school and society and an emotionally safe atmosphere, to rapidly learn English, become acculturated and reaffirm their self-esteem. The purpose of the study is to investigate challenges experienced by non-English speaking learners from Congo in former model C schools and how educators communicate with non-English speaking learners and how these learners adapt to teaching and learning. The study utilised a qualitative approach. An interpretive paradigm was used to assess the interaction of immigrant learners with various stakeholders in a school setting. Purposive sampling was used to select 6 learners, 3 educators, 3 principals, and 1 parent. This study will be guided by the Broaden-and-Build theory. The results of this study revealed that learning English as a second language was a painful experience in an environment where educators are busy with their workload and have no time for intervention programs. The study recommended a holistic approach to teaching and learning to assist immigrant learners with better academic achievement.

Key words: Language learning, Acculturation, Xenophobia, Bullying, Discrimination Resilience

Introduction

As a prerequisite for a learner to perform well at school especially where the medium of instruction is not the learner's home language, proficiency in the language of teaching and learning is a requirement. As expressed by Torres (2017) it is our moral, intellectual, and social obligation to achieve a democratic education system in which equity, justice, and equal rights prevail for all learners in our education system. With immigrant learners of Congolese descent, this is a different issue as they leave behind, all they know in their home country and are dropped into a completely new culture. They have no other choice than to learn a strange new language and acclimate to entirely new surroundings. Being thrown into a classroom with no preparation can be one of the most traumatic things an immigrant learner faces. Given the history of language inequality in South Africa, specifically during the apartheid era, preference for some languages like English and Afrikaans was given over other languages (Prinsloo, 2011); it appears the chances of introducing other dominant foreign languages like French and Portuguese are not included as languages of education in most South African public schools. Many countries still prioritise national or official languages as the medium of instruction, which are not languages immigrant learners, particularly of Congolese descent speak at home. Immigrant families value their heritage language and seek to proactively support their heritage language maintenance in home settings (Chan, 2018). The South African Constitution of 1996 and its Bill of Rights protect the rights of all children in the country regardless of their status in the host country. Immigrant learners provide a rich opportunity for educators to create multicultural environments that enhance the learning of all learners. Studies have shown that immigrant learners in general experience challenges in the schooling context, including those related to language barriers, cultural complexity, and social integration (Harju, 2018).

Background of the study

A person's culture and upbringing have a profound effect on how he or she sees the world and process information. Studies done by Killian, Cardona & Hudspeth (2017) revealed that acculturation that alienates a child from his or her own cultural heritage is not ideal and may yield negative results in the socialisation of a child because a healthy cultural identity enhances both educational development and positive view of self. Language is one of the most apparent symbols that indicate an individual's identity. Vanderyar (2019) posits that forming an identity, however, whether a personal or social one, is not a simple task, it involves "negotiation between the self and complex cultural and societal forces. There are many words used to describe how people respond to experiences in new cultural situations, culture shock, acculturation, assimilation, and integration, to name a few. Behind the vocabulary, however, is the reality that adjusting to a new culture is never easy or simple A study done in Finland has shown that although learners of an immigrant background have a positive attitude and high aspirations toward education, they often face learning difficulties (Kalalahti, 2017). The educational performance of immigrant learners does not depend on their attitude towards education alone, but also on the attitude of most of the society and how the receiving country's education system responds to it (OECD, 2015).

The world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement. An unprecedented 65,6 million people around the world have been forced out of their home countries leaving all their documents in their home country. Among immigrants are children of school-going ages. South Africa has been an attractive destination for immigrants, refugees, and job seekers because of the favourable conditions created by the new dispensation since 1994, as well as the country's political and economic stability (Hadland, 2008). The Constitution of South Africa promotes multilingualism and the use of eleven official languages. Immigrant learners from Congo (DRC) do not speak or understand any of the prescribed official languages and are thrown into mainstream classrooms where the medium of instruction is English. When these affected learners cannot read, write, or speak the language of instruction, they find learning difficult and academic achievement is affected. The purpose of this study is to investigate and describe the challenges experienced by non-English-speaking Congolese learners who attend former model c schools. The study will provide a detailed description of the challenges experienced by immigrant learners, challenges which inescapably affect their performance, and give educators and the Department of Education suggestions regarding what could be done to cover the gaps. In South Africa, English serves both as a content subject and as the means of pedagogic interactions in classrooms. Language ability is regarded as an important factor in the establishment of friendships and successful interactions.

Language Learning

A study by Baldassar (2017) revealed that learners whose mother tongue is not English encounter challenges in their relations with educators, administration staff, and peers at English-speaking institutions. The above study was confirmed by Ciallo & Hornberger (2017) who inferred that transmission is interrupted by the dominance of the majority language as a result, learners who come from foreign countries where English is not spoken encounter significant cultural barriers in friendships with learners and educators. Lack of familiarity with the education system can set the learner up for ridicule by peers and can also be more complex for non-English speaking immigrant learners to make cross-cultural friendships when they are new arrivals (Stefanek, Strehmeier & Dagmar 2015).

The wide diversity of backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences requires educators to acquire skills in avoiding stereotypes, recognising individual and cultural differences, and developing cross-cultural communication. According to Verbera (2015) cross-cultural friendships can assist immigrant learners in learning a new language and cultural systems. Young & Schartner (2014) in their study affirmed that the inability to communicate effectively with their peers leads to miscommunication, isolation, and solitude. Quality educators are essential in improving English proficiency levels since educators are responsible for implementing English language learning policies and activities on daily basis.

According to Muneeba (2017), the primary role of educators in second or third-language learning is to establish conducive conditions and develop such activities so that learners can practice the language in a meaningful context. Second language acquisition is a process where a second language is learned in addition to having a first language (Muneeba, 2017). Educators as cultural translators and cultural bridge makers should be familiar with the immigrant learner's background so that when educating these learners, some form of reference from their history can be touched upon. A culturally responsive pedagogy aims to link content, from delivery to assessment with learners' ancestral and contemporary cultures. Culturally relevant pedagogues focus on cultural competence, which refers to helping immigrant learners to recognise and honour their own cultural beliefs and practice. Educators' beliefs could be a stumbling block towards partnership formation with immigrant learners and parents.

Xenophobia, bullying and discrimination.

The studies of Cordova & Cervantes (2010) revealed that social support is a basic determinant of health and a conducive school climate is a potential buffer against the negative effects of perceived discrimination. According to Peguero (2008) immigrant learners are subjected to discrimination xenophobia and bullying. Educators who are not biased have a better understanding of the diversity emphasis in the curricula, social norms, and education policies that deal with bullying and discrimination (Hjerm, Seva, & Werner 2018). Munzer, Ganser & Goldbeck (2017) define social support as an individual's perception of general support or specific supportive behaviours available or enacted upon, by people in their social network.

Research findings indicate that bullying, rejection, and isolation by host learners have made some immigrant learners adopt strategies to help gain greater acceptance. These survival strategies comprised an abandonment of an ethos of hard work and self-improvement through education because of their accent (Rutter, 2006). Among the immigrant learners are undocumented learners in a school setting, bringing with them unique emotional, social, and cognitive needs (Morrison, 2013) some were forced out of their countries by war and thus have interrupted schooling. Musuva (2014) cited in his study that xenophobia is perpetrated within the context of crime, poverty, inequality, and unemployment. This is affirmed by the study of Hickel (2014) who describes xenophobia in terms of two causal factors, namely economic and social instability which result in the breakdown in norms and values and causes more interruption in schooling because when there is violence in communities immigrant learners do not come to school. When adolescent immigrants' schooling is severely interrupted, learners miss many years of academic knowledge, cognitive development, and behavioural skills, including cultural expectations and academic content knowledge (Custodio & Loughlin 2017).

Academic performance

Learning and acquiring a foreign language employs certain mental processing abilities that might be partially or fully affected by the emotional state or attitude of learners. Educators must promote social cohesion between immigrant learners and host learners as a study by Coetzee Van Rooy (2020) infers that it builds relationships. Language educators and staff members need to be vigilant and be sure to keep an eye on and identify or detect any immigrant learners who are experiencing stress in their lives (Hwang & Myers, 2007). We concur with Hwang & Myers (2007) educators that language educators can detect learners who have stress as they tend to relate their stories when writing essays. To support the findings, studies conducted by Acunia & Escudo (2015) revealed that immigrant learners have got various stories to tell about their migration therefore it is imperative to note that a sub-group of these learners may be experiencing the effects of trauma. An immigrant's reception and their process of integration into the host community constitute important factors that affect the migrant's health and well-being (Brydsten, Rostila & Dunlavy (2019). The study by Ortega (2018) reveals that when educators remain blind to any understanding of language but those that fit with notions of an idealised target system, unfamiliar forms of multilingual competencies are easily eradicated from the system.

Brown & Mistry (2019), in their study revealed that immigrant learners encounter academic challenges including academic achievement gaps between them and host learners. Learner and educator proficiency in the medium of instruction largely determines academic success (Cummins, 2012). Educators should use code-switching to a minimum or not at all as immigrant learners perceive this as some form of discrimination, also educators code-switch because of lack of proficiency. The goals of a language in education are often linked to unity and identity with the suppression or failure to recognise and support other linguistic varieties granting a voice to the majority ethnic cultural group (Lewis, 2015). Most, educators use English as a measure of intelligence and forgetting that given a chance that immigrant learners are taught in their home language, they can achieve better outcomes. The above statement is true because one of the interviewed principals alluded to the fact that once these immigrant learners are proficient in the language of teaching and learning they achieve better results. Educators have a key role to play in helping immigrant learners adjust in their classrooms and society. Educators should be offered more support and training to deal with increasingly multicultural classrooms, tackle discrimination, bullying, and xenophobic attitudes, and engage with parents of immigrant learners. Bullying, marginalisation in overcrowded secondary school classrooms is a dramatic period for immigrant learners. Adolescents who are in lowprejudice peer networks become less prejudiced over time while those in high-prejudice networks become more prejudiced over time (Hjerm, Eger & Dannell 2018).

Learners with an immigrant background should also be offered language training after the screening. Screening for language proficiency not only informs educators about individual learners' needs but also District and Provincial officials and can be used to identify schools that need additional support in terms of teaching non-English speaking immigrant learners. Research in Spain on immigrant learners' drive to succeed by Esteban & Marti (2014) revealed that even immigrant learners once they acquire proficiency can develop unique strategies to enable academic success. The most glaring results from PISA (2015) indicated that immigrants in British Columbia outperformed their non-immigrant counterparts. Immigrant learners tend to perform well when they are provided with appropriate school resources and accommodated, as much as possible, within mainstream educational settings. Learners who had high academic self-concept were perceived to be having a high degree of resilience. In a culture where assimilation is still the goal, schools must create spaces where anyone can feel safe, and where all learners can be truly who they are and fulfill their potential. A welcoming and supportive school climate is key to success. The schooling success of immigrant children has a direct impact on human capital accumulation in the host country. The future of the host societies depends on how immigrant children perform at school. Research has contributed that children with highly motivated parents tend to outperform host children. Highly motivated immigrant parents are more likely to have skilled children, thereby positively contributing to the future human capital of their host country.

Problem statement

Since the birth of Democracy in South Africa, immigrant parents from Congo (DRC) have increasingly enrolled their children in former model C schools in Gauteng. The abrupt change from being taught in their

home language to the English language has created a challenging environment for both learners and educators. From discussions we had with fellow educators, it became evident that educators are struggling to prepare non-English speaking immigrant learners for quicker assimilation into the South African education system and adjust to the language of teaching and learning. The learner's language deficiencies were reported as being a major obstacle. Educators' feelings of frustration because they have, to follow the annual teaching plans within the time frames provided by the department of education which leaves no room for intervention to assist immigrant learners. Educators were also concerned about immigrant learners' academic performances and future. Educators are pleading for serious intervention guidelines for the initial English language introduction to adolescent immigrant learners. From the conversations with our colleagues, it was evident that immigrant learners experienced challenges on various levels namely vocabulary (both receptive and expressive), communicative skills etcetera. The exploration of the role of English language specialists and the department of education officials in the teaching and learning of immigrant learners is necessary to guide the training of language educators in introducing the English language to immigrant learners of Congolese descent.

Research Question

What are the challenges experienced by non-English speaking Congolese learners in former model C schools?

The answer to the above question provides a direction for more effective English language teaching and learning. The question was addressed in consideration of the theoretical framework of the study.

Research Methodology

To address the main research question above, the study utilised a qualitative research approach using interviews. The purpose of utilising a qualitative approach was to unearth the meaning immigrant learners attach to their schooling experience in multicultural diverse classrooms of South Africa where educators are not trained or prepared to deal constructively with the cultural diversity of learners. Because McMillan & Schumacher (2010:323) indicate that inductive inquiry is emphasised during qualitative research studies, this interpretive study gathered a large data set from several sources. All interviews featured a set of semistructured questions. Immigrant learners' well-being, particularly education, was at the centre of most of the discussions. Life stories were collected for this study. We have drawn on the data from immigrant learners of Congolese descent, educators, principals, and a parent. This approach enabled all participants to present their experiences based on their own reality.

After ethical clearance for the study had been granted by the relevant committee at Tshwane University of Technology three former model C schools in Ekurhuleni District in Gauteng Province were selected for participation in our study.

Theoretical Framework

This study will be guided by the Broaden-and-Build theory of Fredrickson (2004) in second language learning. The experiences of positive emotions have the ability, to produce profound effects on language learners' motivation, learning, and achievement. The Broaden-and-Build, theory highlights the contributing role of positive emotions, giving new directions for working toward generating positive emotions within learners. Hence English language educators should go beyond a focus on the reduction of negative emotions such as language anxiety, towards a focus on the enhancement of positive emotions among language learners. Fredrickson (2004), believes that "experiences of positive emotions fuel psychological resilience and facilitate recovery from stressful situations (Fredrickson 2004). In order, for educators to develop resiliency in language learners, MacIntrye & Gregerson (2012) stated that by modelling in their own discourse they can create flourishing groups by using language that is overtly supportive, encouraging, and appreciative, and avoid negativity and disapproval. Drawing on the tenets of Broaden-and-Build theory, one primary focus in the field of English language teaching is on interventions, either at the level of material



development or teaching strategies and learning tasks, aimed at not only fostering positive emotions in language learners but also preventing negative emotions.

The study focused on the challenges experienced by non-English speaking immigrant learners in former model C schools. The study was an attempt to unearth the barriers to effective teaching and learning. As indicated above the teaching and learning of language are interpreted within the Broaden and Build theory of positive emotions using the concept of language learning, xenophobia, bullying, and discrimination, as well as academic performance as theoretical lenses. Finally, the results of this study are discussed within the same concepts.

Discussions and Findings

The analysis of narratives involved listening to the recorded interviews identifying themes and coding these for each story. While a range of experiences was identified, for the purpose of this paper the experiences will be discussed under the following themes: language learning, xenophobia, bullying, discrimination, and academic performance of learners. The themes are used for the purpose of critical discussion and the narratives of the experiences are intended to be heard from the voices of all participants.

Language learning

The findings revealed that the immigrant learners are enthusiastic and inspired to learn, and most of the learners opined that education is important; but it was apparent that the educators were not ready to teach immigrant learners, as there was an apparent communication breakdown, not forgetting the two important or main roles of educators: Firstly, to facilitate the communicative process between all the participants in the classroom and between these participants and the various, learning and teaching activities and texts.

To speed up assimilation, educators should speak to immigrant learners and listen to their diverse stories and keep an interest in their individual issues. It is not possible that immigrant learners can banish their language totally. Playing in the classrooms can assist educators to learn the language that immigrant learners speak; this is in the spirit of "Each one teaches one," instead of being self-conceited. If an educator knows a learner well, he or she will be able to recognise the manifestations of a problematic, emotional life.

One of the educators said, "I really feel sorry for these learners. They are always quiet in class, and you can see that they are lost in this education system, where they are introduced to a new language. Hmm! Sometimes, they just break down and cry in class, and I cannot comfort them, because they don't understand a thing." From the interview responses, the necessity of involving bilingual or trilingual educators to bridge this divide was opined by a learner when she said that she wished that they had educators who could speak their language so that they could interpret for them.

A similar view was shared by a parent, who said, "I am sorry for my child. I know (that) she is a clever child. But, here, she is like a fool, because she cannot speak the language that they teach them in. I tell her to use a phone and translate, but phones are not allowed at school, and this is a problem because she is now always depressed. But I encourage him to study English."

Xenophobia, bullying, and discrimination

Robson & Kanyata (2007) revealed that vulnerable children are being bullied and harassed in schools, leading to poor performance and dropouts.

An analysis of the data from the interviews has revealed that immigrant learners were also bullied, and a confirmation of this was shared by a learner, who said, "Sometimes, yes. Sometimes, no. It depends... There is a lot of bullying going on. They like to steal my pens, and when I report to the teacher, they laugh at me, and tease me and call me names.

Discrimination is a silent stressor. At school, discrimination expressed by educators and learners is a significant source of exclusion; therefore, educators, as well as all staff members, must be vigilant, keep an eye on and identify immigrant learners who are experiencing extreme stress in their lives (Hwang & Myers, 2007).

As the researchers were analysing the data further, it was revealed from the interviews that the immigrant learners were discriminated against as can be deduced from a learner's comment:

"My classmates are not getting used to our presence. They still treat us badly. But I have one good friend, (and) he protects me. I know my accent sells me out, but for them to laugh and make fun of us in front of the teachers... (Shaking her head in disagreement) I don't feel good, and I will never feel good".

In addition to the challenges discussed above non-English speaking immigrant learners face barriers in making friendships with host learners. Lack of social support emerges as a barrier to their assimilation of the language of teaching and learning.

Academic Performance of Immigrant Learners

The responses of the interviewed school principals revealed that the immigrant learners performed very well after they had acquired proficiency in the language of teaching and learning and that the educators had a contrasting view. When the principals and the educators were asked if they were satisfied with the performances of the immigrant learners, below is how educators answered:

"These learners are thrown right in the deep end of a swimming pool; (and) they have to find their way. When (the) facilitators visit, we tell them about this problem, (and) they do not have answers for us except that we must apply for accommodations. Even if we apply (for accommodations), these learners still write the same examination as the host learners,

One of the educators had this to share: "Wait until these immigrant learners grasp the language of instruction and see how they fly.

From the above responses, the researchers could deduce that nothing much is done in some of the schools in terms of supporting immigrant learners. Calculating how much teaching is needed to move a learner with no English experience to a reasonable level of fluency and literacy skills, is nerve-racking.

Conclusion

Although it may be claimed immigrant learners from DRC Congo in any context face academic difficulties; there is a need for studies that go beyond this generalisation, by examining these academic difficulties. It emerged that educators do not know where to start regarding teaching non-English speaking immigrant learners, because of the language barrier. Internal support is very minimal, and the educators have the problem of adapting the curriculum, as they are somewhat constrained by the annual teaching plan that they receive from the Department of Education. Not all educators are positive and welcoming to teaching immigrant learners. The findings have also revealed that the new arrivals were subjected to bullying, discrimination, and name-calling. What was positive is that once the immigrant learners began to grasp the language of teaching and learning because of their resilience, they started to perform even better than the host learners. Educators need professional development, specifically in addressing the needs of non-English speaking immigrant learners.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made, based on the findings of this study:

All the schools where immigrant learners are admitted should be given posts of a clinical psychologist and a social worker for support services to learners. Districts should provide workshops and training for all educators to prepare them to work with diverse learners to reduce discrimination. The learning, and teaching support materials, especially reading books and textbooks should include accommodating human and compassionate depictions of immigrant learners. Schools to recruit foreign educators who are linguists.

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