Poor performance of learners in Grade 12 English as a second language examination: Content analysis of Oshigambo High School Alumni WhatsApp dialogue

Elina T. Ithindi
Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), Namibia
eithindi@nust.na

Abstract

A good pass in English as a subject at Grade 12 level has become a determining factor of one's future success in the Namibian education system. Without a good pass in English as a subject at Grade 12 level, a learner's hope of choosing a good career path is ruined. Thus, English has become a barrier to admission to tertiary institutions as many learners do not pass it with outstanding scores as expected. This closes the doors for many aspiring learners. Following the release of the 2019 Grade 12 examination results at the beginning of 2020, the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary level results, poor performance in English as a subject attracted the attention of affiliates of the Oshigambo High School Alumni Association. This provoked a WhatsApp dialogue in which a social-constructivism approach was employed to brainstorm and identify causes of the persistent poor performance in English as a subject at national level, as well as potential solutions. The WhatsApp dialogue was aimed at answering two main questions of the research project: What are the causes of persistent poor performance in the Grade 12 English examinations in Namibia? and How can the problem of poor performance in English as a subject be addressed in Grade 12 Namibian examinations? The WhatsApp log indicated that thirty-six out of about two-hundred Oshigambo High School Alumni Association members at that time partook in the dialogue that lasted for about one month, twenty-seven days to be specific.

Using a content analysis approach, the WhatsApp dialogue was analysed thematically, giving rise to challenges faced by learners, teachers and the communities at large. These challenges are such as limited opportunities for learners to pursue further studies at tertiary institutions, poorly written official correspondences in other sectors of the economy, and an unconducive learning environment for English as a second language due to mother tongue interference. Challenges related to assessment and teaching methods also emerged from data analysis, such as code switching due to teachers' low level of proficiency in the English language, and insufficient effort by teachers of other subjects to instil the correct command of the English language. Recommendations on how the problem of persistent poor performance could be alleviated also emerged from the study, such as provision of adequate English language learning materials, increased homework in all the English language skills, increased monitoring of English language teachers by subject advisors so that mutual assistance is provided, as well as faster implementation of recommended solutions at curriculum level where many other stakeholders in the education sector should play a role.

Keywords: *performance of learners, English as a second language, Grade 12 examinations, content analysis, WhatsApp dialogue, instructional challenges*

Introduction

A good pass in the English language has become a passport to one's tertiary education programmes and future career opportunities in Namibia where English is used as not only a medium of instruction but also as an official language. Without a good pass in Grade 12 English, many Namibian students are unable to pursue career opportunities in a variety of disciplines, for example in science, engineering, medical field and many others. For example, for a learner to pursue a career in medicine or other careers that are on demand in Namibia, they need to pass Grade 12 English as a Second Language with excellent or very good results, ranging from 70% to 100%. However, very few learners pass English with such very good grades at Grade 12 level. Drawing on Kambowe (2018), there

is consensus that "English is proving to be a barrier to higher education, especially for learners who excel in other subjects" (p. 1). This closes the doors for many young aspiring learners, forcing them to instead opt for unfavourable career opportunities where the English admission requirements are relaxed.

As illustrated by scholars in the field, (Frans, 2016; Kamati & Woldemariam, 2016; Nkandi, 2015), the pass rates in the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary level (NSSCO) English as a Second Language (ESL) examinations have been poor for several years, and this has become a persistent matter of concern. The 2017 Grade 12 NSSCO examination results indicate that only 39.3% of 22 091 full-time candidates qualified for admission to tertiary institutions, and "English as a second language was one of the subjects in which pupils fared poorly" (Kambowe, 2018, p. 1).

Following the release of the 2019 Grade 12 examination results at the beginning of 2020, this predicament, which has become a national concern, became critical among members of the Oshigambo High School Alumni Association (OSHA) and provoked a dialogue aimed at finding a solution to this national dilemma. OSHA comprises a variety of professionals in different sectors of the Namibian economy, including prominent medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, politicians, business personalities, academics, among others, intellectuals able to engage in constructive national debates.

Background of the study
The Oshigambo High School Alumni Association (OSHA) was launched in 2010. The main objective of the association is to provide networking opportunities among the alumni, but the Association also aims to assist Oshigambo High School (OHS) in the Oshikoto region in different ways, especially by initiating and promoting fundraising activities to raise money that can be used to cater for different needs of the school. The members of the alumni association are former OHS students and teachers, but honorary membership is also available for any individual who is deemed worthy of OSHA membership by the OSHA Executive Committee. Advancement in technology has brought along

mediating artefacts that can be used to not only communicate but also to enhance the quality of education. One such innovation is the WhatsApp tool. In the recent times, the WhatsApp application has emerged as not only a source of entertainment but also an indispensable communication tool for learners and professionals alike. In support of this statement is Barhoumi (2015) who lists several benefits of WhatsApp as an instant messaging tool, including enabling students and professionals to construct and share knowledge and information. Likewise, in March 2016 a WhatsApp group was created to facilitate communication among the OSHA alumni on matters pertaining to OHS. The platform is also used to communicate constructive ideas regarding various issues of national concern, the education sector inclusive. WhatsApp has consequently strengthened communication among the Association's members and has afforded a platform in which professionals deliberate and share constructive viewpoints pertaining to issues of national interest.

One topic of national interest that emerged from the OSHA WhatsApp conversations was poor performance of Grade 12 learners in English as a Second Language (ESL). The dialogue emanated from poor performance of Grade 12 learners in the 2019 Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary (NSSCO) ESL national examinations and was analysed to provide answers to the research questions of this project as listed in one of the subsequent sections: the causes of persistent poor performance in the Grade 12 English examinations in Namibia, and how the problem of poor performance in English as a subject can be addressed in Grade 12 Namibian examinations. The discussions mainly focused on the root causes of the problem, as well as recommendations on what could be done to deliver quality teaching and learning pertaining to English as a subject at high school level in Namibia.

Theoretical considerations
This research was guided by social constructivist paradigm. Social constructivism originates from the work of Lev S. Vygotsky (1896-1943) who is the mastermind behind the socio-cultural approach to teaching and learning. One of the key tenets of the socio-

cultural approach to teaching and learning is that social interaction has a key role to play in the teaching and learning process as a learner can do more in collaboration with others as opposed to when working independently (Vygotsky, 1978). This illustrates the interconnection of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge. Social constructivism is more suitable as it is more contemporary when compared with other learning theories, and it takes into account the context and the role interaction with others play in the process of creating new knowledge (Li, 2013). Another key tenet of socio-constructivism is that learning is a process that is mediated by tools, as indicated by Zhou and Brown (2015), "development depends on interaction with people and the tools that the culture provides to help form their own view of the world" (p. 30). Likewise, it is the WhatsApp tool that facilitated an opportunity for interaction and creation of new knowledge in this research.

Problem statement and research questions
Poor performance of learners in the NSSCO English examinations has been a persistent state of affairs in Namibia (Frans, 2016; Kamati & Woldemariam, 2016; Nkandi, 2015; Simasiku, Kasanda & Smit, 2014). Poor performance in English as a subject is a major concern as it affects learners' opportunities to get admitted at institutions of higher learning, despite outstanding performance in other subjects. Although a study was conducted at a certain school in Oshikoto region in 2016 to identify the causes of underachievement of learners in the NSSCO English examinations (Kamati & Woldemariam, 2016), poor passing rates in NSSCO English examinations remain a constant challenge. The poor performance of learners in English in the 2019 NSSCO examinations resulted in the call for stakeholders in education to discuss and find ways to address the challenge of persistent poor performance in English as a subject (Iikela & Oliveira, 2020). After the release of the 2019 NSSCO examination results, the government of the Republic of Namibia had a plan to host a national conference to discuss solutions to persistent poor performance in English as a subject, but this idea has never materialised. It is on this basis that this research aimed to find answers to the following key questions:

1. What are the causes of persistent poor performance in the Grade 12 English examinations in Namibia?
2. How can the problem of poor performance in English as a subject be addressed in Grade 12 Namibian examinations?

Literature review
The use of English as a medium of instruction
As English has become a global unifying language, teaching and learning English has become significant, including using English as medium of instruction. With insight from Dearden (2015), the use of English as a medium of instruction has become an increasing global phenomenon in primary, secondary and tertiary education phases to equip learners with language skills that are essential in the global economy. Drawing on Dearden (2015), English medium can be understood as "the use of the English language to teach other school subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (p. 4). This definition is also suitable for Namibia, with its multiple first languages. Like in many other countries in the world, English has been the medium of instruction in Namibia since independence in 1991. However, in a study that was conducted at two secondary schools in Omusati educational region in Namibia regarding factors that influence the performance of learners in ESL, Nkandi (2015) concluded that using English as a medium of instruction was one of the factors that had a significant impact on the poor performance of the learners. Similarly, Simasiku et al. (2014) share the same sentiment by echoing in their study on teaching subjects' content through English as the medium of instruction in the Namibian classrooms that "as long as English remains the official medium of instruction in Namibian classrooms, learners will fail to achieve the desired results" (p. 323). Thus, although English has been the medium of instruction since Namibia's independence in 1991, the fact that learners have limited or no opportunities to use English outside the ESL classroom, especially in the rural settings,

contributes to poor proficiency in the English language.

Likewise, Dearden (2015) explains how a study that was conducted by the Centre for Research and Development in English Medium Instruction at the University of Oxford illustrates how the use of English as a medium of instruction poses challenges in many other countries globally. Some of the issues emerging from teaching and learning through English medium of instruction include lack of competent teachers in the English language, insufficient resources, lack of clear educational policies, challenges regarding assessment and ambiguity regarding whether English should be used alone or if it could be mixed with vernaculars (Dearden, 2015). This scenario illustrates how issues surrounding the use of English as a medium of instruction are a common anomaly in many educational contexts, yet it does not mean that it is a matter that should be taken for granted and be regarded as common practice. It is an issue that is still open for educational debates.

Among recent debates on English as a medium of instruction, it is worth pointing out Nekondo (2021) who advocates for a review of admission of learners at universities based on their results in English as a subject rather than on English as a medium of instruction. His argument is that "basic competence in the medium of instruction is essential to higher education success; grammatical awareness of the language is not" (Nekondo, 2021, p. 7), yet priority is given to English as a subject. In other words, his argument is that if a student was able to pass other subjects that are taught in the English medium exceptionally well, this should serve as an indication that such a student will be able to cope with the demands of university education and should not be held back by poor performance in English as a subject. This provides food for thought.

Challenges encountered in the process of teaching and learning English as a second language
There is a variety of challenges that learners encounter in efforts to become proficient in the English language which for some might not only be a second language but rather a third or even fourth language. Creating a balance between native languages and English is one of such challenges (Abdullah, 2015). Especially in Namibia, some native languages are on the verge of abandonment as a result of the English language that the young learners find more appealing in comparison with their first languages. With reference to Nepolo (2020), there is widespread apathy that our indigenous languages are of poor value compared to English, consequently undermining our cultural identity. However, little is known whether fluency in one's native language is a pre-requisite to success in any given second language. For example, Sultana (2018, p. 3) substantiates this assumption by explaining that "L2 learners who have strong linguistic backgrounds in their L1, overcome frustrating experiences in their L2 development". Similarly, in a study that was conducted in the Zambezi region in Namibia by Simasiku et al. (2014), the teacher participants found the Namibian language to be rigid, compelling them to advocate for code switching so that they are not only limited to English. This is one strategy that could be used to create a balance between English and the indigenous languages.

Shortage of qualified teachers of the English language which results in poor delivery of lesson content is another challenge (Ganaprakasam & Karunaharan, 2020). Pandiyan, Maasu and Albert's (2017) study in Ghana identified lack of qualified English language teachers to be a barrier to the performance of high school learners in English. In the Namibian context, in an earlier study on the subject, Kamati and Woldemariam (2016) explain how poor performance in English as a subject could be attributed to both teachers' and learners' low levels of proficiency in the English language. In short, debates surrounding this issue imply that some English language teachers are not equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach the subject. This complicates the matter, because one cannot have high expectations for the learners to perform exceptionally well in the examinations when even the teachers are struggling with the second language. Negative attitudes toward learning the English language is another obstacle (Dhillon & Wanjiru, 2013; Ganaprakasam & Karunaharan, 2020). Students' attitudes toward what they are learning has a key role to play in shaping

successful learning. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a role in students' second language learning and acquisition. In the Namibian context, Kamati and Woldemariam (2016) observe that in the rural area where their study was conducted learners at primary and secondary school levels had negative attitudes toward learning English, which they regarded to be a foreign language. This impedes the efforts of the teachers to produce proficient users of the English language at Grade 12 level.

Another issue that complicates teaching ESL is the minimal effort by teachers of other subjects to inculcate the correct command of the English language. "Every teacher who teaches any subject matter in English to ESL students is not only a teacher of the content area but also is a teacher of English as well" (Abdullah, 2015, p. 371). Ganaprakasam and Karunaharan (2020) share the same sentiment, that teachers of other subjects should maximise opportunities for learners of ESL to improve their use of the English language. Hence, instilling the correct command of the English language in learners is not an undertaking that should solely rest on the shoulders of the English teachers; it should be a collective responsibility. Language load, as per Abdullah (2015), is another challenge, in the sense that learners of English are loaded with many unfamiliar and complex English syntax. This could be a challenge to some learners for whom English might not only be a second but rather a third or even fourth language. This concern calls for curriculum developers to be mindful when determining English lessons content, so that it is tuned to the cognitive level of the learners, thus facilitating mental flexibility.

The list of challenges encountered in the process of teaching and learning English as a second language is infinite. Nekondo (2021) presents a comprehensive list of reasons behind the poor performance of learners in English as a subject, such as "English teachers' pedagogic content knowledge and assessment practices, a lack of English teaching and learning resources, as well as pupils' love or fear of English as a subject" (p. 7). Hence, the following section shifts the focus on how these challenges could be alleviated.

Strategies to alleviate drawbacks regarding poor performance in English as a second language

Scholars in the field have proposed a variety of strategies that can be considered to alleviate drawbacks that school communities experience in teaching and learning ESL. As there is consensus among scholars that the environmental context has a key role to play in the learning process as per socio-constructivist thinking, creating opportunities for English language learning outside the classroom is one of the proposed strategies (Ganaprakasam & Karunaharan, 2020). Learning the English language in the classroom setting alone is insufficient to optimise learning and acquisition, especially in environments where learners do not have any exposure to the English language at home. There are many learners in contexts where English is used as a second language, with minimal exposure to the language outside the classroom. Other scholars propose increased group activities to enhance interaction among the learners during the language learning process (Dhillon & Wanjiru, 2013; Pandiyan et al., 2017). Group activities facilitate a scaffolding element that is also essential in the learning process, especially in environments where learners who are struggling can learn from others who are doing well. Dhillon and Wanjiru (2013) recommend group activities such as group vocabulary games, debating clubs and essay writing competitions. Likewise, Pandiyan et al. (2017) share the same sentiment, advocating for senior high school debates. The fun element in these types of activities makes the learning process interesting. Also, Abdullah (2015) explains how positive social interaction makes learners feel comfortable to use new language skills, and they develop intrinsic motivation to use the English language.

When the focus is shifted on the teachers, exceptional understanding of subject content, English in this regard is also a pre-requisite to successful teaching of English as a second language. Drawing on Ganaprakasam and Karunaharan (2020), "teaching language cannot be fruitful without content" (p. 180). Considering the need of competent English language teachers, researchers in the field advise that subject teachers be advised to encourage learners to use proper English when

teaching other subjects (Dhillon & Wanjiru, 2013; Ganaprakasam & Karunaharan, 2020). The situation at hand illustrates how the English language teachers need a helping hand. Thus, it should be a concerted effort, yet good understanding of the subject matter is pivotal to attaining this goal. Using proper English language teaching methods is another strategy that should not be overlooked. Drawing on Pandiyan et al. (2017), there is delusion that any person who speaks the English language can teach it. This is a distorted statement as not everyone who is able to use English has mastered the skills to impart knowledge and skills to the learners. English language teachers should be up to date with theoretical aspects of the English language that inform the selection and application of fitting pedagogy.

Monitoring English language teachers' work is another strategy that some researchers in the field recommend. For example, Pandiyan et al. (2017) recommended supervision of English teachers by administrators, to ensure that the teachers are doing what is supposed to be done. In short, before moving on with the empirical study, this is what researchers in English language teaching and learning advice regarding alleviation of the predicament of poor performance in English as a subject.

Research design

In efforts to investigate the problem of persistent poor performance in English as a subject at Grade 12 level, the researcher adopted a qualitative research approach that Creswell (2014) defines as "an approach for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). The participants and the data collection methods were all purposively selected due to their likelihood to provide relevant information pertaining to the research questions. As Harding (2013) explains, in purposive sampling the researcher chooses participants deliberately, choosing those who will best fit the purpose of the research. Consequently, among other debates and issues that featured in the OSHA WhatsApp group during the research period, only conversations related directly to poor performance of learners in Grade 12 English examinations were deliberately selected for

further analysis. The procedure that was employed to collect data is described at length next in the subsequent section.

Data collection method

Thirty-seven members of the OSHA that had about two hundred memberships by then participated in the conversation regarding poor performance of Grade 12 learners in the 2019 ESL national examination. The conversation took place for about a month, from the 19th of December 2019 to the 14th of January 2020. The discussion topic was opened by one of the alumni who expressed discontent with the performance of the Grade 12 learners in the HIGSCE examination results that were just released. Then, the discussions overflowed to the Grade 12 IGSCE examination results that were later released, and the focus was on poor performance of learners in ESL. The WhatsApp log indicated that thirty-six alumni out of a total of about 200 OSHA members at that time partook in the conversation. The conversation lasted for twenty-seven days, taking place day and night. The researcher who doubles as an OSHA alumnus played the role of a non-participant observer during the discussions that were posted to the WhatsApp platform, thus available in the public domain. A few of the postings were in *Oshiwambo* (one of the local languages) as many of OSHA members were *Oshiwambo* speaking, but the researcher was able to translate these postings into English. At the end of the discussions, with permission of fellow alumni the researcher volunteered to analyse and synthesize the views that were expressed. The main objective was to sensitise a wider audience on the challenges of English as a subject that teachers, learners and other stakeholders in the Namibian education sector were facing at Grade 12 level, and how some of these challenges could be alleviated.

Data analysis

Thematic or content analysis was employed to analyse data. Drawing on Luo (2019), content analysis is applied to systematically collected data from a set of texts, such as interviews, web content, social media posts and photographs. Hence, this study employed content analysis of social media posts, in particular WhatsApp conversations. The

findings from content analysis were categorised into themes, and then the results were analysed using narrative summaries. The researcher adopted Roulston's (2014) approach to data analysis that entails three steps: the reduction of data, re-organisation, and representation of data. The researcher started by initially colour-coding and memoing key issues emerging from the WhatsApp conversations, issues that were worth exploring further at a later stage of data analysis. This enabled the researcher to arrive at emerging themes that were further analysed and then interpreted in narrative summaries.

Presentation of findings

The analysis of conversations data facilitated emergence of the following key themes: challenges faced by learners, challenges faced by teachers, teaching and assessment methods in use, as well as suggestions for improved practice in teaching and learning English as a subject in Grade 12 in Namibia. These themes are explained in the narrative summary below.

Challenges faced by learners

There was consensus that poor performance in English prevented young people from accessing tertiary education; yet, admitting students with poor English language skills would pose a challenge to the nation. The participants in the WhatsApp dialogue argued that the problem of poorly written English did not stop in the education sector. It was widespread in offices as well as in business where correspondence was poor. The poorly written reports and other documents gave bad examples to learners. Also, when these learners will start working in future, language errors in official documents would be enormous, and colleagues would spend much time correcting language errors in official correspondences which was a waste of time and resources. This challenge is illustrated in the following excerpt by a certain OSHA alumnus:

"If we allow learners who fail English to be admitted to institutions of higher learning, these are the quality of graduates we envisage to see in the world of work in the future."

However, a counter argument emerged, that it was unfair for learners to be prevented to attend tertiary institutions because of English, especially when they were not majoring in English. Such restrictions should only apply to those who intended to major in English and communication studies. It is thus an issue that calls for further research and debates. It was also observed that social media has an influence on the young readers. The English language used in social media is poorly written; it is grammatically poor, and the spelling is poor as well. The young readers do not realise these differences, and some find such style of writing "cool". Without having sound knowledge of written and spoken English language the young readers get confused. The challenge that is described here is illustrated in the excerpt below by an OSHA alumnus:

"If learners do not observe correct spelling and expression, they won't acquire a good command of the English language."

Also, speaking or practising English out of class is regarded as showing off, especially in rural settings, and this discourages the learners to continue practicing. This observation concurs with Abdullah (2015) who narrates how learners withdraw from trying to speak English when others make fun of them, leading to hindered learning and achievement. A related challenge is lack of a conducive learning environment because of mother language (L1) interference. In the same vein, Abdullah (2015) explains how ESL learners are usually unable to interact with English speaking peers academically or socially. On the other hand, some of the alumni contended that acquisition of L1 plays an important role in second language learning. They argued how the use of indigenous languages was fading in African households, yet to do your best in a foreign language, one needs to understand L1 first. Also, while English has economic value, local languages have also cultural value and should thus be preserved. These debates call for reconsideration of the Namibian language policy so that a balance is created between English and the indigenous languages. The current situation is a tug of war.

Challenges faced by teachers

The OSHA alumni also indicated that some English teachers were struggling with the English language themselves, thus unable to teach learners in English. An example is the excerpt by an OSHA alumnus below:

"I have seen some English teachers who are struggling with English themselves and I was wondering how they teach the learners in classes."

As it was stated earlier, Kamati and Woldemariam (2016) revealed in their study how poor performance in English as a subject could be attributed to both teachers' and learners' low levels of proficiency in the English language. This challenge flows from L1 interference as teachers speak to learners in local languages in the classroom settings. Drawing on Dearden (2015, p. 25), codeswitching is "a contested area in the EMI (English Medium Instruction) content classroom", meaning that this is a widespread issue of concern in ESL teaching and learning. Hence, the teaching or delivery methods used by some teachers need to be revisited as they might have a negative impact on the learners' performance.

Another concern that featured during the OSHA WhatsApp dialogue was that learners were only guided to write correctly in English classes. Teachers of other subjects hardly attend to English language errors in students' written work, as one OSHA alumnus claims below:

"Learners are only guided to write correctly during English classes. It is very bad indeed. If they are allowed to write street English in for example History or Biology and not observe the correct spelling and phrasing, they won't acquire a good command of English."

This problem becomes a stumbling block in the process of acquiring a good command of the English language. As it was mentioned earlier, Ganaprakasam and Karunaharan (2020) share the same sentiment, and they are of the opinion that instilling the correct command of the English language in learners should not solely rest on the shoulders of the English teachers; it should be a concerted effort.

Assessment and teaching methods in use

It emerged also from the OSHA WhatsApp dialogue that the way Grade 12 English language examinations were set in Namibia was problematic. Some learners who passed English first language with flying colours got low marks in English as a 2nd language. Another related observation was that the learner-centred approach and the communicative approach per se were not applied effectively at schools, and critical thinking was not also emphasised. The concerned alumni asserted that the learner-centred approach was meant to encourage learners to take initiative through self-expression as it inculcates values of personal responsibility, including problem solving strategies, self-actualization and independent thinking as opposed to memorization of facts without understanding. On the other hand, some alumni said that the communicative language might not be suitable for learners in rural settings whereby they were unable to express themselves in the English language, as illustrated in the quote below:

"There is no foreign language environment in rural Namibia! Hence, the need for creativity in English language teaching."

Recommendations
Recommendations for challenges encountered by learners

With the intention of alleviating some of the challenges faced by learners, the alumni who participated in the dialogue recommended adequate learning materials on the English language to be provided for schools to deliver quality teaching that might improve the examination results. This is because a student with poor English, even if gifted in other subjects, might not be able to cope with thesis writing at tertiary level. Thus, a good pass in the English language was still essential for tertiary studies. The alumni also felt that the homework given to learners, especially in rural settings, was insufficient to improve their English language skills. It was thus recommended that learners should be given increased homework in all the English language skills to improve their language proficiency. Poor exposure to a foreign language environment (English) in the rural

areas points to the need for creativity in English language teaching. The aspect of language use in social media should also be considered by alerting those who were still learning the language to be vigilant of the type of English used in social media which was often poorly written and grammatically poor.

Recommendations for teacher-related challenges

The concerned alumni recommended that educators need to seriously relook at English language pedagogical methods and the way learners were prepared for examinations. Since code-switching was common among some teachers, there was consensus among the alumni that only English should be used in class for teaching, learning and interactions among learners and teachers. However, when communicating for example in school yards and hostels, both English and L1 should be used as both are equally important. English should not be dominant to the vernacular languages; vernacular languages should also be promoted to their fullest out of classrooms, whether at school or at home. For mutual assistance, English language teachers need more monitoring and regular visits by advisory officers to ensure fruitful end of year examination results. Pandiyan et al. (2017) share the same sentiment.

Recommendations for curriculum and instructional challenges

The OSHA alumni who participated in the WhatsApp dialogue suggested that there was an urgent need for a review of the learning outcomes of the English language curriculum, to produce a good curriculum with well-articulated learning outcomes. Good examples can be learned from some private schools that produce very competent users of the English language, and their curricula could thus be exemplary. As the alumni were concerned about the slow implementation of recommended solutions over years, they noted that action needed to be taken as soon as planning was done, and the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) interventions needed to be intensified. Correct English should be enforced in all subjects by correcting writing errors in both English and other subjects that are taught in the English

language. The writing must be correct in all aspects of grammar and language usage. Reading, summarising and report writing should be encouraged by reading and citing many novels of learners' choices, from the libraries. The more a person likes reading with understanding, the more their knowledge is broadened.

Recommended changes at community level

The OSHA alumni expressed the need of parental involvement in the education of their children by instilling discipline in learners to be responsible for their own learning. The concerned alumni concurred that some learners were not serious with their studies these days and did not pay attention in class, and teachers were forced to beg them to study. Schools should also partner with newspaper publishers to receive old copies of newspapers and use them for language teaching, such as interpreting a newspaper article, disputing its contents, looking beyond the story, and studying the writing style and diction. There was consensus among the OSHA alumni that the problem of poorly written English flows to other sectors of the economy; and was also a widespread problem in offices and in businesses. Educating learners should thus be a concerted effort among stakeholders, such as parents and other community members, English language teachers and teachers of other subjects. It is on this basis that it is critical for further research to be conducted to identify specific areas of learners' weaknesses in the English language, such as whether it is grammar, reading comprehension, spelling and so forth.

Conclusion

Considering that the problem of poor passing rates in the NSSCO English examinations has been consistent over the years, it is of utmost importance for stakeholders in education to make it a concerted effort to find a lasting solution to this problem. It is thus high time that teachers of other subjects also make it a priority to inculcate a good command of the English language in the learners so that they are well equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to tackle the English examinations with ease. As advocated in this paper, collaborative learning should also be

emphasised to promote connections among the learners, the communities, as well as with learning resources, as this method has potential to develop certain English language skills. If one does not have a good command of the English language, they will struggle to understand complex reports, documents and correspondences in offices, and valuable time will be spent on correction of simple but urgent official correspondences.

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