

**Factors that determine the choice of instructional strategies in teaching the
SiSwati language in primary schools**

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Abstract: *Classroom instructors have a task to choose the most appropriate strategies for effective teaching to enhance student achievement. The study sought to establish factors that influence classroom instructors to select suitable instructional strategies to use for teaching SiSwati as a first language in primary schools in Eswatini. The study adopted an interpretive paradigm where a qualitative research approach and a multiple case study were used. Schools and teachers were purposively sampled. The study used face to face interviews as a primary research instrument, document analysis and observations supplemented the interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The findings of the study revealed that learners who were highly and responsive to instruction easily comprehend when taught in a variety of complex ways. The study revealed that once learners perform well, teachers used routine instructional methods. The study concluded that most teachers struggle in selecting appropriate teaching strategies when teaching SiSwati. It was recommended that the Ministry of education should engage subject specialists who will assist teachers in selection of appropriate teaching strategies for the types of learners they have. It was also recommended that school administrators should allocate only teachers who are qualified and experienced in teaching the Mother Tongue.*

Key terms: strategies, classroom, instruction, SiSwati.

Introduction

Instructional strategies are techniques teachers use to help learners become independent and strategic. These strategies become learning techniques when students independently select the appropriate ones and use them effectively to accomplish tasks or to meet goals (Kompa, 2012). Thus, there are strategies that best suit the teaching of SiSwati as a first language in primary schools.

Instructional strategies determine the approach a teacher may take to achieve learning objectives. Smith (2012) asserts that the choice of instructional strategies depends on the content, the level of learners and the level of competency expected. Selecting the appropriate instructional strategies provides a teacher with opportunities to strengthen key areas by identifying those aspects of teaching performance that may need improvement (Ganyaupfu, 2013). Research findings by Choutari (2016) on the effects of instructional approaches on students' academic performance indicate that different strategies work better in different circumstances. Hence, there are a number of factors that should be considered when selecting appropriate strategies that could be employed to the teaching of the indigenous language in Eswatini primary schools.

Background to the study

According to Moses, Busetti-Frevert, and Pritchard (2015), language teachers could benefit by assessing the learning styles and the strategy use of their students, because such assessment leads to greater understanding of styles and strategies. Teachers also need to assess their styles and strategies, so that they will be aware of their preferences and of possible biases. Useful means exist to make these assessments, as mentioned earlier. Teachers can learn about assessment options by reading books or journals, attending professional conferences, or taking relevant courses or workshops.

Consequently, the more teachers know about their students' style preferences, the more effectively they can orient their language instruction, as well as the strategy teaching that can be interwoven into language instruction, matched to those style preferences. Some learners might need instruction presented more visually, while others might require more auditory, kinesthetic, or tactile types of instruction. Without adequate knowledge about their individual students' style preferences, teachers cannot systematically provide the needed instructional variety (Goodwin-Jones, 2011).

Additionally, styles and strategies help determine a particular learner's ability and willingness to work within the framework of various instructional methodologies. It is unwise to think that a single methodology could possibly fit an entire class filled with students who have a range of stylistic and strategic preferences. Instead of choosing a specific instructional methodology, teachers would do better to employ a broad instructional approach, notably the

best version of the communicative approach that contains a combined focus on form and fluency. Such an approach allows for deliberate, creative variety to meet the needs of all students in the class (Yankey, 2012).

Level of learner Comprehension

After providing all the support to the language learners, teachers need to check student's comprehension in order to know further steps that need to be taken. Teachers are expected to use assessment for learning to track down student's progress. Teachers can use student reflections (learning journals, concept maps), anecdotal note-taking, conversations with students, peer assessments (Government of Ontario, 2010).

Research states that effective teachers are responsible for ensuring student learning of the language content. Fisher and Frey (2007) argue that important part of the learning process in all content areas is identifying and confronting misconceptions and confusions that can interfere with the learning. The act of checking for understanding is not only corrects misconceptions, it can also improve learning. When the teachers regularly check for understanding, students become increasingly aware of how to monitor their own understanding. A variety of suggested ways to check for understanding include: asking the language students to explain the materials in their own words. And teachers can have students' present information with illustrations, comic strips, or other visual representations (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

Classroom management

One necessary component in a highly-effective classroom is the implementation of strong classroom management. Classroom management to beginning teachers is often viewed as the rules put in place to make students behave. More veteran educators understand classroom management as being a two-fold concept, which consists of classroom rules and procedures. Classroom rules are used to define general expectations or standards regarding student behavior, and classroom procedures are used to define behavior for specific tasks (Marzano, 2007). For instance, a classroom rule could be that when the teacher is providing instruction, no one should get out of their seat to sharpen a pencil. A procedure might be a morning routine of coming into the classroom, hanging up coats and book bags, sharpening two pencils, and beginning morning work. Strong classroom management is a way to increase student time on task. With more time on task, teachers have more time to provide small group

or individualized instruction. Anderson, Everston, and Brophy (1979) stated, “Good classroom management that keeps students involved and prevents problems is essential if achievement gains are to occur” (p. 216). In a classroom where classroom management is very effective, it is so good that there is rarely a disciplinary event and the class functions so smoothly that it is often difficult to know what the management plan is (Bohn, 2004). Conversely, in a poorly managed classroom, routines change frequently, routines are not completed, and the classrooms feel chaotic (Marzano, 2007).

The researchers are in support of Bohn (2004) in that a class that is not properly management makes it very difficult to teach as the teach struggles to discipline the learners even before embarking on the engagement of learners on any new topics of language set for the day.

There is a connection between more time on task and student achievement (Troia, Lin, Cohen, & Monroe, 2011). Teachers who are highly skilled in classroom management are able to manage not only student behaviour but all of the other distractions that can take time away from instruction. These teachers have the ability to manage students and resource people, time, supplies, transitions, etc. Teachers accomplish this by modelling their expectations and practicing these expectations with students.

Student engagement

Classroom management leads to another necessary foundational teaching component of an effective classroom—student engagement. One way student engagement can be operationalized in a classroom is by observing student participation. In order to foster the participation that leads to engagement, a teacher must create an environment where students understand the expectations for participation and also create a safe space for students to be willing to answer or ask questions. In a case study by Mahiri and Maniates (2013), a first grade teacher combined her teaching perspectives, instructional strategies, and dispositional strategies to create a learning environment that provided her students the foundation they needed to become engaged readers. Her belief that all students can learn, that she needed to create a safe environment, and that she needed to carefully structure participation were the beginning steps in creating a classroom with engaged students. Building on that foundation, the teacher then shared her expectations with students and worked with them to meet those expectations which increased their stamina for periods of learning.

Finally, the teacher selected materials and student groups to be able to put all of these components together. At first glance, this sounds like a great deal of work to develop engaged learners. However, many of these strategies are not different than what most effective teachers do every day. The difference is in the deliberate nature in which all of the strategies were brought together. When considering engagement as it relates specifically to reading, engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to read for a variety of personal goals, strategic in their reading behaviors, knowledgeable in their construction of new understandings from text, and socially interactive about the reading of text (Gambrell, 2011). Gambrell provided rules for engagement during reading which included making reading relevant to their lives, providing a wide array of reading materials to choose from, providing opportunities for interacting with others about the text students are reading, and offering incentives that demonstrate the importance of reading in the classroom. Highly-effective teachers need to know when it is necessary to change the routine to capture a teachable moment in order to enrich a lesson (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). They also need to organize an efficient learning environment where activities and transitions run smoothly (Lenski, 2012).

Statement of the problem

Teachers have challenges in selecting the appropriate instructional strategies fit for siSwati language as learners still fail to use enriched SiSwati vocabulary correctly to construct sentences in composition writing (SPC SiSwati ECOS report, 2016). A number of policies have been put in place by the government of Eswatini to speed up the development of siSwati, which is the mother tongue of emaSwati. The latest policy is the MOET Language in Education Policy (2011) which stipulates that SiSwati is the medium of instruction in the lower grades of primary education. All the numerous efforts by the Eswatini government in the development of SiSwati as an official language seem to be futile. Experience and observation still show that in most primary schools, there seem to be some hindrances in determining the appropriate instructional strategies for teaching SiSwati as a first language. Learners still lack proficiency in the command of the SiSwati language (SPC SiSwati ECOS report, 2015). Based on the foregoing, it appears that the development of SiSwati as a subject is still lagging behind in Eswatini schools (Magagula 2016). This ultimately brings to question the factors to consider when selecting appropriate instructional strategies for delivering this critical subject in primary school of Swaziland.

Objective of the study

To establish factors that determine the choice of instructional strategies in the teaching of Siswati as a first language.

Theoretical Framework Gagne's model of instructional design

The study was guided by Robert Gagne's model of instructional design. Gagne (1986) is considered to be one of the foremost contributors to the systematic approach to instructional design and his theory has provided a great number of valuable ideas for trainers and teachers. Gagne's model of instructional design is based on the information processing model of the mental events that occur when adults are presented with various stimuli and focuses on the learning outcomes and how to arrange specific instructional events to achieve those outcomes. Gagne's theories have been applied to the design of instruction in several domains. Essential to Gagne's ideas of instruction are what he calls "conditions of learning": internal conditions deal with what the learner knows prior to the instruction, external conditions deal with the stimuli that are presented to the learner, e.g. instructions provided by the teacher (Gagne, 1986).

The first step in Gagne's theory is specifying the kind of outcomes to be achieved. He categorized these outcomes into five types: verbal information, intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, attitudes, and motor skills. The second step is to organise appropriate instructional events. Gagne's "Events of Instruction" consist of the following: Gaining attention; Informing the learner of the objective; Stimulating recall of prerequisite learning; Presenting the stimulus material; Providing learning guidance; Eliciting the performance; Providing feedback; Assessing the performance; Enhancing retention and transfer.

The first event of instruction that Gagne (1986) suggests is gaining attention. When students arrive in class, their attention can be directed toward many other things, so in order for any learning to take place, first their attention must be captured and their interest should be aroused. In teaching the mother tongue therefore, teachers may grab the attention of learners by an abrupt stimulus change, such as gesturing or speaking loudly or even starting the lesson with a thought-provoking question or interesting fact providing an interesting visual or sound stimulus.

Another important event of instruction is informing the learner of the objective. Early in each lesson students should encounter a list of learning objectives. This initiates the internal process of expectancy and helps motivate the learner to complete the lesson. In this regard it is critical for a teacher of SiSwati to draw up learning objectives and share with the learners at the beginning of the class such that learners will be excited as to whether or not they have achieve the learning objectives.

Stimulating recall of prerequisite learnt knowledge is also one of Gagne's events of instruction. According to Gagne (1986) associating new information with prior knowledge and personal experience and getting the learners to think about what they already know can facilitate the learning process. It will be critical therefore for the teacher of language to probe about previous observations and experiences about key language components of SiSwati before demonstrating the new learning objectives. If a teacher's instructional strategies fail to connect the needed dots from previous the current learning objectives, it will continue to be difficult for learners to master the language concepts efficiently.

The teacher also has to present the stimulus material to the learners. This event is where the new content is actually presented to the learner. Content should be organised meaningfully, and explained and demonstrated using a variety of media (Gagne, 1986). It is up to the teacher to choose the best method to present the new language concepts being prepared for the day. This even is key to ensuring learners do not get confused and the teacher must not rush through the new content. Due to the fact that the pace if learning in a single class may be different, it is essential that the teacher address the needs of every individual learner and awards time for learners to master content.

Providing learning guidance is also vital in Gagne's events of instruction. This event means showing what appropriate actions constitute correct performance, plus additional suggestions, including use of examples, case studies and graphical representations to help learners encode information for long-term storage, or in simple terms, "make the stimulus as meaningful as possible. In the teacher of language, this stage becomes a very practical procedure hence if learners first observe the procedure they are in a better position to perform it themselves. The teacher shows the correct way of constructing sentences, for instance and provide several examples in different contexts before giving the learners an opportunity to practice what is learnt.

In addition, eliciting the performance (practice) is also important in the teaching process. Gagne (1985) indicates that at this stage the action now turns to learners. In this event, the learner is required to practice the new skill or behaviour. Eliciting performance provides an opportunity for learners to confirm their correct understanding, and the repetition further increases the likelihood of retention. In language instruction this describes a situation where the teacher gives a number of exercises of different formats to give learners an opportunity to practice what they have learnt. Providing feedback is also necessary in presenting instruction to learners. While observing each learner performing the procedure, individual and immediate feedback and guidance can be provided and any questions can be answered. In addition, feedback from other learners observing the performance is very helpful.

Assessing the performance is another strategy which helps the teacher to find out if learning was really taking place. At this point, the students demonstrate what they have learned without receiving additional coaching or hints. However, a single performance does not ensure that the new capability has been reliably stored and additional practice is needed. If there is enough time the teacher can ensure an additional session is organized to ensure that learners have mastered the objective of learning sufficiently.

Finally, enhancing retention and transfer of learnt material is significant. Once we are reasonably sure that the new capabilities are reliably stored, it becomes possible to increase the likelihood that they will be retained over a long time period by providing practice and spaced reviews. The repetition of learned concepts is an effective mean of enhancing retention, although often disliked by students. Additionally, transfer of knowledge and skills to new problems and situations is a goal of most instruction, but classroom time constraint makes it more difficult to achieve. The teacher over time can therefore test learners on the key languages concepts learnt to ensure that the concepts are truly retained and can be transferred seamless in other areas and activities of the student's learning progress.

Gagne's theories provide a great deal of valuable information to teachers. Applying Gagne's nine-step model is an excellent way to ensure an effective and systematic learning program as it gives structure to the lesson plans and a holistic view to the teaching. It is critical to keep in mind that the exact form of these events is not something that can be specified in general for all lessons, but rather must be decided for each learning objective.

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Empirical Studies

In Romania, Mata (2013) conducted a study entitled: Pedagogical Competencies for Mother-Tongue Teacher Education . This study aims to elaborate a framework for both the foundation and application of professional standards for mother-tongue teachers. The main issue with which this study is concerned constitutes the lack of a set of clear standards for the initial training of mother-tongue teachers. In agreement with current approaches, an innovative approach for the training of pre-service mother-tongue teachers with the goal of developing pedagogical standards has been elaborated in this study. The results of the questionnaire research highlight the openness of subjects toward a new perspective of forming professional standards for pre-service mother-tongue teacher education. The results obtained after interpreting the results of the research, while giving specific reference to categories of professional standards for mother-tongue teachers, indicate the fact that language education teachers indicated through their choices a greater necessity of certain pedagogical competences over others. According to the assessment of the expert-respondents, the three most important subcategories are as follows: using classroom and extra-classroom learning experiences and activities to practice using the first language and culture in real-world situations, designing a plan for different types of lessons of first language learning, and using specific methods of teaching and learning the Mother Tongue.

Krishnasammy (2016) in Malaysia conducted a survey on “Approaches Employed by Teachers in Teaching the English Language in Malaysia”. The study utilized questionnaires, classroom observations, interviews and expert checklist. The participants were teachers of English. The main aim was to analyze the extent at which teacher’s approaches in teaching literature. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It used a triangulation method where data collection and information were based on the questionnaire as the primary instrument and classroom observations and semi – structured interviews as secondary instruments. Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively and descriptive statistics was used for the quantitative data. In this study, the mixed approach to research was used, but my study used the qualitative research method.

Chen (2012) in Kenya, shed light on problematic aspects that faced by language students. The researcher summarized the problems that faced learners which are related to their cultural knowledge, lack of vocabulary and failure to use words they already have. The researcher also proposed a solution for such problems. First, extensive reading of authentic

materials and various patterns might provide input of every type, lexical, syntactic and rhetorical to learners. Using integrated activities of reading and writing in language learning classrooms increase both students' lexical inventory and knowledge of syntactical variations.

Mkhonta (2017) conducted a relevant study in Eswatini in which she was analyzing the teaching approaches in Senior Secondary SiSwati Prose Instructional Activities. The study utilized the mixed method design. The instruments used were questionnaires, observations, face to face interview schedules and focus group interviews. The findings revealed that teachers usually use open – ended questions and answer, reading word for word in class, brief and shallow class discussions and frequent lecturing or direct instruction. Problem solving was never used at all. While debates, extensive learner dominated discussions, role playing and dramatization, group tasks, probing, using direct instruction for clarification purposes and sense making challenging reading were rarely used.

The focus of Mkhonta (2017) research was on the teaching strategies used when teaching Siswati literature and the activities used in the lesson development or presentation phase and the explanation of how the teachers intend to use those activities during instruction. Furthermore, the focus group of the study unearthed the challenges in enhancing higher order thinking skills. The studies reviewed showed change of roles from teaching and imparting knowledge to that of facilitating knowledge and promoting higher – order thinking skills or abilities in learners. It involves processes of learning and performing tasks that promote higher forms such as analyzing, comparing, formulating, creating, justifying, critiquing and evaluating rather than just teaching students to remember or rote learning.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach. A research approach is a plan and procedure that consist of the steps of broad assumptions to detailed method of data collection, data analysis and interpretations (Creswell, 2007). The study used a multiple case study research design by Yin (2014). The researcher was directly involved with the participants through face to face interviews, and observations. This triggered a lot of contributions as participants described their experience.

The population of the study was comprised of SiSwati teachers who were purposively selected from four primary schools located in the Manzini region, one teacher from each

school will participate in the study. The Manzini region is ideal because it is the most central and has the largest population in Swaziland (Dlamini, 2012). Although the schools are from the same region, they differ from each other in many ways. For instance; the type of learners, number of streams, management styles and learners' early childhood education background. School A was selected because it was a large public school which serves multicultural learners from medium to a higher socio economic background. So in such a school there is a special selection criteria for beginner learners on top of the one stipulated in the school guide and regulations. School B was the largest in the region with four streams. It is also a large semi-urban government-aided school located next to Matsapa industrial site which consist of learners from the locations supplying the industrial site with labour. School C is a semi-rural school which serve children with low-medium socio-economic status. The selection yardstick for beginner learners is age only. School D is a rural community situated in one of the remote areas where the community strives to have an upper hand in governing the school. It was conveniently located for the researcher to access, because she is employed in the same region

In this study data was obtained through the use of suitable data collection methods for qualitative research. These include the interviews, observation and document analysis. Using these data collection methods produce data that enabled me to use thick descriptions of the phenomenon being studied and also help me to gain insight by interacting with the participants in their natural setting (Bisman & Highfield 2012). The use of the different data collection methods allowed me to triangulate the data collected. According to Mushoriwa (2009), triangulation involves multiple and different data collection methods, participants and theories to obtain corroborating evidence.

The study used thematic analysis to analyse data obtained from the teachers on the teaching methods employed by primary school level SiSwati teachers in teaching the SiSwati language. Thematic analysis by Braun & Clark (2006) is a widely used qualitative data analysis method. It is one of a cluster of methods that focus on identifying patterned meaning across data set. The purpose of thematic analysis was to identify patterns of meaning across a data set that provides an answer to the research question being addressed (Babbie, 2013).

Results of the study

The study sought to find out the factors that influence teachers in the selection of specific instructional structures when teaching the SiSwati subject. In this regard, two key themes

were dominant among the participants. These were learner performance, learner engagement and learner comprehension.

Learner performance

It was revealed by the majority of the teachers that learner performance was a key factor in influencing the kind instructional strategy used. In this regard teacher number 5 from school D explained the following:

To me it's quite obvious, my choice of instruction strategy will depend on performance of learners on the concept being taught. Explicit instruction, group work and differentiation are all determined by progress of learners in class. In my case I use differentiation only when some learners are falling behind do not seem to be par with the rest of the class (Participant #5: School D).

The issues of learner performance was also confirmed by head teacher number 2 from school B who shared this in an individual interview:

Teachers tend to use learner performance as a barometer of checking the best strategy they can maintain to get the best of the learners. Once a specific method is found to be producing results, the teacher will not change it easily.

Learner engagement

Learner engagement was also viewed by teachers as one of the key determinants of the choice of instructional management among teachers. Teacher number 1 from school A raised the following point:

In order for learners to perform well, it is imperative that they are well engaged in the class room. Engaged learners pay attention to detail and are able to cope with the method used for instruction SiSwati. With engaged learners, I don't struggle to teach my learners even with two complementing strategies.

The concern of learner engagement was also collaborated by subject inspector number 2 through an individual interview:

Multiple strategies are essential for the comprehensive teaching of the SiSwati language, however the teacher need to ensure that learners are well engaged and they tend to follow the teacher's instructional tools of choice (Inspector #2).

Learner Comprehension

Learner's level of comprehension is another factor which determine the selection of appropriate teaching strategies. This was suggested by teacher number 2 from school B.

The more learners understand the subject content, the better the performance in that lesson. On the contrary, learners who have a high affective filter struggle in retaining learnt information(Teacher #2: School B).

Findings of the study

The findings of the study revealed that learner performance was the most predominant yardstick in the selection of effective instructional strategy. The study revealed that teachers repeatedly use a strategy that yields positive results in order to get the best out of their learners. On the contrary, if teachers use a specific strategy that results in deteriorating learner performance teachers tend to refrain from using that particular strategy. In the context of this study, explicit instruction and group work were determined by the progress of learners in the classroom. There is a close correlation between learner achievement and the choice of instructional strategy. This is in line with Yankey (2012), who points out that the selection of meaningful experiences requires a teacher who is fully committed and an expert in that particular field. Someone who knows what works and what does not depending on the nature of the situation.

The findings of the study further revealed that learner engagement is one of the determinants of the choice of instructional strategies. The findings reflect that learners who are highly engaged pay attention to most details in the taught subject matter and they also cope with most strategies employed by their teacher. As a result, teachers do not struggle in employing any of the main strategies if learners are actively involved in their own learning. Lenski (2012), adds that highly effective teachers need to know how to organize an efficient learning environment where activities and transitions run smoothly in order to catch teachable moments.

Conclusions of the study

Based on the findings of the study, it is conclusive that learner engagement highly determines the choice of instructional strategies. Learners who are highly engaged pay attention to most details in the taught concept. The study also concludes that teachers repeatedly use a strategies that yields positive results in order to get the best out of their learners.

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