Augmenting ESL Teacher Trainee Proficiency: A Case of Primary School Teacher Training in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study sought to explore strategies of improving primary school teacher trainees' proficiency in the English language. A qualitative approach and a case study design were preferred for this research. Samples of twenty lecturers were purposively selected, comprising English language lecturers, English Communication Skills lecturers, and lecturers teaching content disciplines. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews and analysed thematically. Strategies for enhancing the English language proficiency of trainee teachers were suggested, namely the use of a collaborative approach to language

teaching, contextualised teaching/learning, the development of oral language skills, the use of learner-centred methodologies, the integration of information and communication technologies into second-language teaching/learning, and enriching the Communication Skills syllabus content. Recommendations for improvement were made to various stakeholders.

Keywords: *Second Language, English Language Proficiency, Trainee Teachers, Strategies, Training*

Introduction

Teacher training institutions in Zimbabwe have a mandate to train and supply the nation with a competent and proficient workforce for primary and secondary education in order to achieve quality in education. As such, the enrolment and training of suitable teachers become a crucial factor that determines the quality of education in the country. Most critical is the training of primary school teachers, who are expected to lay a firm foundation for the rest of the learners' educational career. Needless to say, teachers' competence in the English language is expected to be of a high standard, so that the mediation of content in the various disciplines of the curriculum will be a success. To ensure successful mediation, primary school teacher training institutions enrol candidates who have obtained a pass in five subjects, including English language, at the Ordinary Level.

Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic is one such national primary school teacher training institution which enrols candidates who have met the criteria described above, to train as primary school teachers for three years. After completion of their three-year training programme, they are deployed countrywide as qualified teachers. Having been instructed in English in the previous levels of education, and having learnt and passed it at the Ordinary Level, trainees are expected to cope with the college curricula and to meaningfully interact with the college academic content. However, the situation is not as it should be. Trainee teachers experience challenges in expressing themselves and communicating effectively in the English language, both orally and in the written form. This is what has prompted the researcher to carry out this study, in order to explore strategies to remedy the situation to ensure quality educational practice in the country. Ngwaru (2013) observes that English as the language of education in Zimbabwe presents a host of challenges as neither teachers

nor learners possess the prerequisite proficiency. In this regard, external examiners' reports from year to year have pointed out the deficiency in the English language proficiency of both students in teaching practice and those in their final residential term. In addition, the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Zimbabwe, which is currently the certificate-awarding body for Teachers' Colleges in the country, has repeatedly raised concern over the matter.

The tertiary education entry requirement of a pass in English language should, under normal circumstances, serve as sufficient foundation for reasonable performance in the English language. However, this is not the case, as is evident in the gross incompetence in both the spoken and written modes of communication in English exhibited by primary school teacher trainees at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic. Researchers have had first-hand experience of the trainees' failure to converse in English as they make blatant grammatical errors. In addition, their assignments are full of all manner of basic mistakes and an assortment of errors which make it extremely difficult to award marks for their essays. These mistakes and errors compromise the quality of their work and have a negative impact on the overall impression created.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper was premised on the sociocultural theory. The sociocultural theory is a framework for human learning and development that is steeped in the facets of how language education is conceptualised as a social process in society. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interaction plays a very fundamental role in the development of human cognition; there is a dynamic interdependence between the social and individual processes in the construction of meaning and knowledge. Vygotsky (cited in Neeta, 2010:57) states that learning occurs at two levels: firstly, through interaction with capable others, where knowledge is integrated into the individual mental structure, and secondly, through a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). The sociocultural perspective on learning points out that learning occurs in specific settings or contexts that influence how it takes place, and these different learning contexts create different potentials for learning (Richards, 2009). Learning can therefore not be separated from social practice. Hence, it is both a cognitive and social process. In second-language learning, learners need direct and numerous opportunities for interaction with individuals who

are fluent in that language (Wong-Fillmore and Snow, 2005). It is through the negotiation of meaning during interaction that English language learners improve their comprehensible input and also expand their productive proficiencies. In English language learning/teaching situations, the more English language learners interact with more proficient and academically capable 'others', the more they are likely to acquire knowledge and skills which are perfected over time.

Methodology and Data Analysis

A qualitative approach and a case study were preferred for this study. The approach enabled the researchers to carry out the research in a natural setting, where trainee teachers are experiencing the mentioned English proficiency challenges, thus providing a richer and a more in-depth understanding of the problem. The case study was also advantageous in that it allowed the researchers to become part and parcel of the research context as they captured the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the participants. Open-ended questionnaires were administered to lecturers and were ideal because these do not suggest possible responses, but rather allowed the respondents to be open-minded and to express their opinions using their own descriptions. Tavakoli (2012) says that, since open-ended questions are primarily exploratory, they are usually associated with qualitative research, and particularly the case study, and that they often complement observations and interviews. In this study, the questionnaires were self-administered, that is, they were hand-delivered to respondents, which increased the return rate. Interviews were used to complement the questionnaires. Interviewing is a window through which people's perceptions and feelings can be explored. Zohrabi (2013:255) explains that, as the researcher cannot observe the informants' feelings and attitudes, it is through interviewing that the researcher can obtain an understanding of what people perceive and how they interpret the world around them.

Through purposive sampling, a participant sample of 20 lecturers teaching English Communication Skills, English language and content disciplines were selected. Cohen, Manion and Morrison(2006) explain that, in purposive sampling, researchers handpick the cases to comprise the sample, based on the judgement of their typicality. The strength of purposive sampling, therefore, lies in its ability to select information-rich study cases, that is, cases from which the researchers can learn the most

about the phenomenon under study. A thematic approach was employed in analysing the data. The data were presented, interpreted and analysed descriptively using patterns, themes, issues and relationships that emerged from both the questionnaires and interviews. Permission and consent were sought from the relevant authorities before commencing the research, that is, from the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development, from the principal of the institution, as well as from the participants.

Findings

To explore the objective of this paper, data from the lecturers' questionnaires and interviews were analysed. The themes that emerged are discussed below.

A Collaborative Approach Tosecond-Language Teaching

In both the questionnaires and interviews the respondents alluded to the important role of a collaborative approach towards language teaching. The argument is that, since every lecturer teaches in English, this makes themlanguageteachers. No subject within the college curriculum is language-free, because all content is conveyed through language. The respondents proposed that all lecturers should correct language errors such as tenses, spelling, grammar and punctuation as they mark students', work or as they read through their teaching practice documents. Lecturers expressed the need to encourage each other to identify and correct the language errors student teachers make and discuss those errors with them, so that they are conscious of English language usage in all their documents. In other words, it is every lecturer's role to take responsibility and ensure correct language usage in both the spoken and written form. They emphasised the need for student teachers to be corrected even when they converse with lecturers because, at times, they do not even realise that they are making mistakes. These way trainees are likely to become more conscious of language in their daily engagement with the language. One respondent had this to say:

> (A)s much as the students should take it upon themselves to improve their language proficiency … lecturers should also take the responsibility of possibly identifying or diagnosing students for errors

and try to remedy so that there is effective communication in both
written and oral form.

These suggestions seem to imply that lecturers' roles extend beyond that
of delivering content in their disciplines. The use of English language
across the curriculum renders every lecturer a language lecturer. The
teaching of English is, therefore, not the English language lecturer's
burden alone, but it is that of all lecturers in the faculty, regardless of the
discipline they teach. Respondents raised the concern that if the language
problem was being ignored in other subjects, it will be perceived as the
problem of the English Department alone, whereas it is everybody's
problem, and one which should be solved collaboratively. Closely related
to the above, is the issue of oral language practice raised by interviewees,
who suggested that students must be encouraged to adopt a culture of
speaking the English language even outside English language classes, in
order to adequately develop their conversational and academic language
proficiency. Both parties – students and lecturers – therefore have a
crucial role to play in the development of language proficiency.

In addition to the roles of lecturers and trainee-teachers in enhancing
English language proficiency, interviewees also highlighted the
importance of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education as an
important stakeholder, because of its position in supplying candidates for
teacher training. One interviewee suggested that:

> … the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should ensure
> that the teaching process is closely monitored and evaluated… Such
> measures will ensure that properly equipped learners proceed to tertiary
> level because that is supposed to be the cream of the country.

This view suggests that checks and balances should be put in place by the
feeder Ministry, so that incompetent learners receive attention before
proceeding to tertiary institutions such as teacher training colleges. There
is, thus, a need for all stakeholders to play their part so that proficient
teachers are trained and appointed at schools to lay a firm foundation at
primary school level.

Development of oral language skills

Respondents alluded to the importance of appropriate language role
models so that teacher trainees could practise the English language and

subsequently develop a culture of speaking it. This way, the development of second-language competencies would be guaranteed. The questionnaire respondents proposed that all lecturers use the English language throughout when lecturing and even outside class, suggesting that the trainee teachers will then follow suit. One respondent expressed this by saying:

> If all lecturers could teach using English as a medium of instruction because if they do not do so, we may continue to have challenges in the way our student teachers will speak or write the English language. If we all teach in English across the curriculum, this can assist our students to perform, express themselves and communicate better.

This means that lecturers need to model the English language to trainee teachers, whether in the spoken or written form, so that students can emulate them. These way trainees are likely to get reasonable English language modelling to sustain them out there. Respondents even went to the extent of proposing that English should be made mandatory on campus.The point being made here by the respondents is that lecturers should play a primary role in modelling the language to their students, because oral language skills are important for the development of the other macro skills; in fact, oral language skills are a prerequisite for effective reading and writing. Making spoken English mandatory could, however, be difficult to enforce because of the constitutional recognition of indigenous languages which learners need to learn like they do English. However, efforts should be made to enforce oral language practice as a starting point towards the development of the rest of the other English language competencies.

Learner-centred Methodologies

Closely tied to the development of oral language skills is the use of participatory methodologies, which were also suggested as a solution by both questionnaire and interview respondents. Oral language skills can hardly be developed through the use of the traditional lecture method. Excerpts from questionnaires thus read as follows:

> The large numbers hinder one-to-one interaction during teaching. If lecturers could engage trainee teachers in activities that improve their listening and speaking skills such as peer-teaching, oral presentations,

group discussions, demonstrations, debate, role play, public speaking, and dramatisation and so on, this challenge could probably be resolved.

Respondents expressed the need to be encouraged to work in smaller groups, to do presentations more often and to be actively involved in peer teaching throughout the term. Participatory methodologies would allow for meaningful engagement and interaction both in and outside class, which would improve second-language competencies amongst trainee teachers. For instance, they suggested that trainees be given opportunities to research and present certain topics within a given time frame. This would help them to have the confidence to speak and they could actually learn the correct vocabulary as they communicate with their peers. It is also important for them to be engaged in oral presentations, where the lecturer can design a checklist to assess their speaking skills such as confidence, articulation, paralinguistic features and so on. Other proposals included that lecturers record their own lessons and watch them later to see themselves in action, in order to check if their own actions cannot be improved. One could also encourage class visits where lecturers can learn from how others teach. If the lecturers agree to it, demonstration lessons can be done, where they can learn from each other as English language lecturers.

The above responses suggest that, before lecturers can encourage student teachers to engage in participatory learning, lecturers themselves should do peer evaluation among themselves as a way of ensuring high standards and encouraging students to follow suit. The lecturers need to improve themselves before they can improve their students. This is a recommendation for a shift from traditional methodologies to more interactive ones, where lecturer-student and student-student interactions are made possible to enhance the development of English language competencies.

Integrating Information Technologies into Second-Language Teaching

Closely linked to the previous point is the use of information technologies to improve second-language teaching. Responses from the interviews pointed to this as a strategy that could possibly enhance second-language proficiency for lecturers and students alike. Interviewees indicated that, through the use of information technologies, they manage to add value and variety to their teaching. Likewise, trainees should be

encouraged to make use of the interactive platforms that are available on the internet. These platforms provide opportunities for the development of second-language competencies. Once the lecturers and student teachers are fully equipped, there should be an improvement in teacher trainees' English language abilities. Simple procedures, like doing a spell-check, checking the meanings of words, punctuation and so on, can easily be utilised to improve proficiency. Also, software, such as *turn it in,* can be used to improve content output. Videos accessed through the internet can also aid English language teaching. Both lecturers and students have access to a variety of materials on the internet. This can go a long way toward enhancing the language proficiency of teacher trainees. Respondents explained that, in the absence of information technologies, theyrun the risk of becoming redundant. Apart from adding variety to their teaching, these technologies can help them keep abreast of current trends in second-language teaching and teaching in general. One respondent emphasised the usefulness of information technologies when he said:

> I rely mostly on the internet. I do not enjoy teaching using the same notes over and over again without upgrading them. The challenges we have with today's generation of trainee teachers is that they are exposed to a variety of information sources, so it is easy for them to gauge the lecturer's competence. I sometimes employ PowerPoint teaching presentations to add variety and make my teaching enjoyable.

The findings above demonstrate the usefulness of technologies in student teaching/learning. There is no doubt that, if both lecturers and students were better equipped with knowledge on how technology can be employed in second-language teaching/learning, language competencies can be developed. Adequate provision and exposure are necessary, especially since the internet generally employs English as the medium of communication on its various platforms.

Contextualising Second-language Learning

The respondents indicated that contextualising content is useful in second-language teaching. As one interviewee explained:

> Normally when I teach, I draw teaching and learning content from the various college disciplines so that I do not teach English structures in isolation, but in context.

Respondents proposed that lecturers teaching English language can make learning more real by making an effort to incorporate appropriate content from other subjects within the college curriculum. Apart from encouraging subject integration, language exercises will be more meaningful to trainee teachers, because they will reflect real communication contexts.

This implies that lecturers should take advantage of the huge body of content from the various disciplines, since all of this content is written in English. Drawing teaching/learning content from these disciplines makes much more sense, because the language is used in context. In fact, the use of real and familiar content enhances conceptualisation. Respondents also suggested that second-language activities could include activities lined up in the college calendar, because they are familiar to students and most of the students would already have taken part in them. This way, language activities will make more sense, because they will be within students' fields of experience. Moreover, once student teachers realise the importance and benefits of contextualising content, they are likely to employ the very same strategy when they go out into schools. In this manner, teachers will be able to use the content of any subject to teach the English language, thus making the development of language competencies attainable. The fact that English is taught across the curriculum makes this entirely possible and would prevent students from using language structures in isolation.

Enriching the English Communication Skills Content

Responses from both questionnaire and interview respondents indicated that, although there is a communication skills programme in the college curriculum, it needs to be enriched. Respondents are of the view that different stakeholders need to collaboratively make inputs and enrich its content, so that it can meaningfully serve trainee teachers to acquire the desired English language competencies and thus empower them. They proposed that trainees be given some locally designed English language proficiency tests as part of their verbal interviews done at enrolment.In addition, the Communication Skills team can test trainees during orientation, so that students' limitations can become teaching content. These sentiments suggest the need for testing trainee teachers for English language proficiency as part of the enrolment criteria, or as soon as the teacher trainees commence the programme. Respondents

suggested enriching the content of the communication skills syllabus to include basic grammatical aspects like spelling, punctuation, pronunciation, sentence construction, tenses and so on. They emphasised the need to thoroughly teach grammar by subjecting teacher trainees to regular vigorous grammatical language exercises, in order to enhance their proficiency before they go out to practise in schools. One questionnaire respondent added that:

> English language competencies can be enhanced through giving more exercises on a regular basis. It could also be helpful if lecturers from other disciplines could make a collection of students' errors and submit these to the Communication Skills team as feedback, so that syllabus content can be reviewed periodically.

The excerpt above suggests the need for interaction and collaboration between the Communication Skills team and their colleagues in the other disciplines. Making particular reference to the development of student teachers' discourse competence, respondents suggested that *students need to be exposed once again to the idea of topic, sentence, developers and terminators in paragraphing.* Respondents raised the need to employ strategies such as signposting to improve the flow of trainees' work, because most of them just throw in a lot of ideas in one paragraph and developing the idea to its conclusion is rarely done. This implies that student teachers are unable to use discourse markers, connectors, or linking devices and phrases to create a sense of cohesion and coherence in their academic work. This results in a significantly high number of run-on sentences. Trainees find it difficult to link their ideas, which lead to a lack of unity and harmony in their communication.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed the need for all stakeholders to actively play their part in order to improve trainee teachers' English language proficiency. It emerged that, while trainees should take it upon themselves to improve their language proficiency, teacher educators also have a role to play, regardless of the discipline they teach, because all curriculum content is mediated through the English language. The identification and rectification of language errors should be the responsibility of all lecturers. Lecturers also need to appropriately model the English language for their students, so that they can emulate them in

both conversation and the written form of the language. In other words, the problem should be collectively owned and resolved. To this end, all lecturers need to be knowledgeable on the English used in their various disciplines, so that they will be equipped with the tools required in their respective disciplines. Because every lecturer is a language teacher, the utmost effort should be made by all to ensure that content is written and presented meaningfully, rather than focusing on imparting course content without giving attention to how trainee teachers use the language in the presentation of their work.

The challenge of language proficiency among trainee teachers cannot be considered the burden of English language lecturers alone. Lecturers' roles, therefore, extend beyond the content of their disciplines to that of being English language instructors because, apart from the attention they give to the subject content, they also give attention to how the language is used to express meaning. The status accorded to the English language in the curriculum as a medium of instruction means that every lecturer is a language lecturer. For this reason, both content and language are of equal importance and therefore have to be treated as such. Lecturers, when teaching the content of their subjects, thus need to be thoroughly grounded in professional knowledge, so that learners can be successfully led towards attaining the comprehensible input.

The findings of this study also identified the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education as an important stakeholder in the collaborative process. Respondents alluded to the need for this ministry to establish checks and balances to ensure that competent learners are admitted to institutions of higher learning. Measures should be put in place to regularly monitor the teaching/learning process, rather than only the outcome. As part of such monitoring, second-language teachers should be thoroughly equipped and constantly updated or receive in-service training on trends in second-language teaching.

The respondents in this study proposed the use of contextualised learning as a useful intervention for enhancing the English language proficiency of trainee teachers. They argued that the English language should not be taught in isolation, but that it should be taught through actual/real situations, such as through content disciplines. This approach integrates content and second-language learning through the use of various methodologies and models. Moltz (2010) describes contextualisation as a form of "deep learning" that comes as a result of the linking of ideas and concepts across the various courses of a

curriculum**.** Contextualised learning is embraced in the concept of the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach (CLIL), which is sometimes referred to as embedded instruction, situated cognition, the integrative curriculum, or infused instruction. The chief components of contextualised learning are interdisciplinary learning, active student learning, student collaboration, teacher collaboration and professional development. The CLIL characteristics manifest the various advantages it brings into the second-language classroom. Its collaborative nature results in active interaction between the various stakeholders. In this scenario, learning becomes a network of social interactions rather than a purely cognitive process, as each party actively participates in the teaching/learning process. The collaboration can occur in three dimensions. Firstly, teacher educators from different disciplines can collaborate in the creation of learning tasks, thus making learning interdisciplinary. Secondly, students can work collaboratively in the classroom to carry out tasks assigned by the teacher. Thirdly, the integration of the learning process of a second language and specific topics of content subjects is facilitated.

In teaching/learning situations where the target language is the means of learning content, students usually become highly motivated and language acquisition is integrated in the learning process. In this way, the second language is taught, not as isolated language structures, but as part of actual communicative contexts. Banegas (2014:114) explains that, through this approach**,** "a lesson can be enriched if students do not only identify tenses and how grammar patterns work, but also simultaneously put those grammatical items to meaningful use through learning content of the other school subjects". Both components of the integration, that is, content and the second language, stand to benefit from each other. In the absence of such a balance, poor language development eventually blocks content learning. This approach allows both content teachers and language teachers to integrate their teaching and to channel their efforts towards a common goal, namely that of obtaining better learning outcomes from their learners. Second-language teachers should, therefore, exploit all the available dimensions of contextualised learning to enhance the English language proficiency of trainee teachers. Swain (cited in Stanely, 2013:48) emphasises that "collaborative tasks are the best way to get students to produce comprehensible output because, as they work together, they negotiate meaning and, as a result, are

supported in producing comprehensible output beyond their own individual level of competence".

Contextualised or integrated instruction is indeed a significant departure from traditional basic skills instruction, where reading and writing are taught in the abstract, in the absence of real communicative contexts. In the contextualised approach, learning becomes situated, hence easy to conceptualise. This approach is in line with the sociocultural perspective, which holds that learning takes place in specific settings or contexts that shape how learning takes place, and that these different learning contexts create different potentials for learning. Contextualised learning, therefore, allows second-language learning to be integrated in everyday activities and to be seen as a practical tool for communication in learners' immediate and external environments. Use of this language teaching strategy by teacher educators allows for second-language learning to be incorporated into learner's daily experiences, avoiding having to teach it through drills. It therefore becomes a mediating practical tool for communication within learners' immediate and external environments.

Perin et al. (2009) note that contextualised approaches have also been successfully used in teacher education to equip pre-service teachers to be able to infuse literacy into content area instruction and to increase sensitivity to students' real-life situations. In view of this proven success with pre-service teachers elsewhere, this approach can also be recommended for pre-service teacher education programmes in Zimbabwe. Apart from its success with pre-service teachers, scholars like Banegas (2014) have indicated that the approach has gained popularity over the last two decades in most parts of the world.

Respondents in this study have pointed to the need to develop oral language skills if trainee teachers are to improve their English language proficiency. They have also suggested that all lecturers maintain the target language throughout their lectures, as well as outside the classroom, so that the language is appropriately modelled to trainees, and to encourage them to follow suit. Generally, students learn to speak in the second language through interaction. Communicative language teaching and collaborative learning therefore come in handy in this regard. The respondents alluded to time constraints and large classes as hindering factors. In such teaching/learning conditions, speaking skill are usually neglected because language drills and the memorisation of dialogue take centre stage. These methods are not likely to yield any

fruitful outcomes, because it is only when learners practically learn to use the target language in different interactive and real communicative contexts that they become fluent and accurate in it. In addition to fluency and accuracy, when learners are given such opportunities, they develop other skills like confidence, tone, stress, improved pronunciation and many more, all of which improve their proficiency. The goal of teaching speaking should be to enhance learners' communicative skills because, only in that way, can learners express themselves and learn the social and cultural rules that apply in different communication circumstances. Creating opportunities for learners to orally communicate their knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes reinforces the development of literacy and also provides them with an ongoing opportunity to improve their skills in the target language. Given these benefits of oral communication skills, second-language lecturers should strive to create learning environments that are conducive to the development of these skills.

The respondents in this study suggested that learner-centred methodologies are useful strategies that could possibly enhance the English language proficiency of trainee teachers. The key factor is that learners need to be at the centre of all learning and to actively participate and interact, as opposed to the current situation where trainee teachers are subjected to the teacher-dominated lecture method. Respondents identified activities like peer-teaching, oral presentations, group discussions, demonstrations, public speaking, role play, debate, dramatisation, simulation, dialogues, and group and pair work. Such activities could improve trainees' listening and speaking skills, which are essential in the development of second-language competencies. They suggested that main college activities, like peer teaching, should be extended throughout the initial residential phase, so that the trainees are thoroughly prepared for teaching practice. In such activities, trainees could be encouraged to work in smaller groups, so that they can have the opportunity to build their confidence to speak and learn the correct vocabulary as they communicate with peers. Respondents also suggested that some of these peer teaching sessions must be recorded and played back later to encourage reflective teaching, as well as to identify and rectify errors made by trainees.

All the suggestions above call for the utilisation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches, which place the learner at the centre of all learning and encourage active learner participation in real

communication contexts. More meaningful learning takes place when learners are engaged in communicative and interactive tasks within a dynamic learner-centred environment, rather than the traditional teacher-led one. Because communicative language teaching revolves around real-life situations, it creates vast opportunities for students to communicate with each other in the target language. It develops competence in communication and capacitates the learner to be fluent, accurate and proficient in the target language. Its dictates are also in tandem with Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, which is premised on social interaction as a significant factor in language learning. The participatory nature of this approach allows learners to gain confidence in the target language, as they do most of the speaking and participate actively in tasks set by the teacher. The teacher talks less, listens more and becomes an active facilitator, guide and monitor. In this approach, the teaching/learning materials are task-based and authentic materials drawn from real life. This may come as a relief for teacher educators who are using the traditional and teacher-dominated methodologies like the lecture method which, according to respondents, are still very prevalent. The communicative approach provides an alternative to learning through repetition and habit formation, which have dominated many second-language classrooms.

In this approach, learning is the result of cooperation rather than individualistic exercises. The ultimate goal of learning then is being able to use the target language accurately and fluently, although it is acknowledged that errors are a normal product of learning. Richards (2011) concludes that teaching should be learner-dominated with learners directing and shaping learning, as well as actively participating and interacting with each other and the subject matter. In fact, the classroom should become a laboratory in which learners actively interact in search of solutions to the learning tasks. This is the direction that lecturers should consider taking if trainee teachers are to improve their English language proficiency in particular, and their overall performance in general.

The findings of this study further revealed a need on the part of lecturers and trainee teachers alike to embrace technological innovations in their teaching and learning. Apart from adding variety, technology is a versatile tool which has the capacity of unlocking learner potential if lecturers and trainees regularly receive adequate exposure and training. Richards (2005) states that technology has revolutionised second-

language teaching, has given rise to significant changes in classroom practices, and has brought with it new responsibilities for language teachers. The integration of technologies into second-language teaching facilitates the use of effective learning approaches such as the blended approach where learners can learn both through online and face-to-face delivery, thus accommodating a diverse student population, while curbing passive learning.

Research has shown that training in information communication technology skills is critical when implementing ICT in the teaching and learning of English (Samuel and Zitun, 2007). The use of computers in supporting learning in teacher training plays a significant role in determining learner success. For this reason, it is absolutely essential that the institution should make concerted efforts to constantly equip both staff and trainees technologically, so as to improve both lecturer competence and learner outcomes. E-learning tools facilitate language practice and are increasingly becoming popular vehicles for stimulating language learning in second-language classrooms. For instance, teachers and learners can exploit synchronous activities such as video conferencing and face-to-face interaction using online virtual worlds.

Technology, therefore, provides that much-needed learning ingredient, namely interaction, which is instrumental in student-centred learning. The benefits of using technology for language learning include enhancing accessibility to learning and immediacy in the learning process, facilitating wide exposure to authentic language, accessing a broad range of sources of information, and offering opportunities for communication, increased interaction and greater learner participation. In addition, technology affords students the opportunity to record themselves, which will help them with the identification of grammatical errors and inaccuracy in pronunciation when they play back the recording later on. This encourages self-improvement in the different aspects of language. The internet is indeed a rich source of authentic oral models such as recorded songs, talking electronic books, podcasts and video clips that can assist learners with pronunciation and reinforce new vocabulary. It also provides plenty of authentic materials such as texts, audio, video and interactive whiteboards, as well as free applications such as Skype, iChat and Face Time. These platforms provide endless opportunities for knowledge sharing and significantly enhancing different language skills, thereby improving second-language proficiency. Both

educators and trainees can therefore benefit immensely from these language-enriched environments.

Spodark (2005) and Li (2006) assert that students now value their teachers more if they are reasonably competent users of technology, especially if they incorporate effective and enjoyable computer-mediated activities in the teaching/learning process. This means that teachers who are able to embrace technology in their teaching, not only enhance their competencies, but also earn themselves increased standing among their students. This, and the immense value it has for learners, should be enough reason for lecturers to strive towards computer-mediated learning. Apart from enriching their language-learning environment, such technological engagements also prepare trainees for the increasingly technologically advanced global society. Educators have the responsibility to demonstrate these shifting technological trends by adapting their teaching practices. Embracing technology in second-language teaching/learning is, therefore, the way to go if trainee teachers are to improve their language proficiency.

The study further confirmed that the linguistic knowledge of trainee teachers has to be thoroughly grounded in grammar. Grammar should be an integral part of the English Communication Skills syllabus. The respondents suggested that basic language aspects, such as spelling, punctuation, pronunciation, sentence construction and tenses, must be thoroughly taught because, more than anything else, trainee teachers displayed a lack of grammatical competence. They also felt that some discourse components, like cohesion and coherence, should receive special attention. These are the areas where students' weaknesses were noted most. It stands to reason that grammar plays a crucial role in laying a solid foundation for the development of communicative competence. Conversely, in the absence of the proper teaching of grammar, poor foundations are laid for communicative competence. The respondents said that trainee teachers exhibited a very low competence in grammar and that both their written and spoken modes of communication revealed an assortment of grammatical errors, which respondents feared would eventually transfer to learners in the classrooms.

The study also identified the need to test the English proficiency of trainee teachers as part of their enrolment criteria, or as soon as they are enrolled, so that their deficiencies can be used to formulate the teaching content. Respondents also recommended that the English language errors made by student teachers should be noted by lecturers teaching

content disciplines, so that they can be factored into the English Communication Skills teaching content. These findings are consistent with a study by Nel and Muller (2010), who proposed that student teachers' L1 and L2 proficiency, as well as the academic language proficiency they will need to accomplish their learning tasks, must be analysed at entry level. They argued that this will assist in designing suitable course materials. The current study confirmed that trainees' language deficiencies need to be identified at the entry point of their studies, so that interventions can be made. Such proficiency tests will assist in determining students' level of English proficiency and their ability to employ their second language in the four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Because English language learners vary significantly in their level of English language proficiency, they may have varying degrees of oral and written English proficiency. Testing their proficiency will assist in establishing these varying levels, so that appropriate interventions can be made to assist every student. Knowledge of students' grammatical ability will also be useful in determining what gaps exist. This will help them to receive attention in the necessary areas of grammar. If trainee teachers are not tested, their difficulties will go undetected and will remain unattended, making it extremely difficult for them to meet the academic demands of the course and the teaching profession in general. Mutambwa, Takavarasha and Kahari(2014) emphasise that communication skills must be regarded as a crucial component in quality assurance in education – especially in teacher training institutions, because they hold the future of the country's education in their hands. Trainee teachers, therefore, must be properly trained so that they are ready to empower the next generation of the country's workforce.

Conclusion

The study has established various strategies for enhancing the English language proficiency of trainee teachers, namely the use of a collaborative approach to language teaching, contextualised teaching/learning, the development of oral language skills, the use of learner-centred methodologies, the integration of information and communication technologies into second-language teaching, and enriching the content of the English Communication Skills syllabus.

Recommendations

The recommendations for different stakeholders are as follows:

- English language lecturers have to collaborate with lecturers teaching content disciplines and they should collectively embark on error-elimination strategies. Since grammar lays the foundation for communication competence in the second language, lecturers should teach it thoroughly and ensure that it forms an important component of the syllabus.
- Learner-centred approaches, such as the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching, and collaborative approaches, such as Content Language Integrated Learning, which encourage active interaction between the various stakeholders are immensely beneficial. Lecturers should therefore employ them as far as possible, to enhance teacher trainee competency.
- Lecturers should provide appropriate language role models for trainees to emulate, because learners who are exposed to proper language role models have increased chances of improving their language competencies.
- Trainees need to develop a professional culture of practising speaking the English language, so that they will develop confidence and the rest of the other competencies.
- Embracing technological innovations is key for both trainers and trainees, because, apart from adding variety, technology will provide them with numerous means to apply and improve their English language competencies.
- Training institutions should consider including language proficiency as part of the interview criteria for enrolment. If teacher trainee errors/difficulties are identified at the enrolment stage, they can be incorporated into the English Communication Skills learning content.

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