

Lack of reading culture and literacy in the Namibian educational system: Some propositions for social responsibility

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Abstract

The poor level of proficiency in the English language among Namibian learners in tertiary education is sometimes attributed to a lack of reading culture and low literacy levels in the Namibian educational system. This may be partly because literature is not taught and examined as a separate subject in public primary and secondary schools. It could also be due in part to the manner in which English is superimposed on all other languages in the country. Before being taught English, most Namibian learners have already acquired a mastery of their indigenous language and tend to transfer features of their first language to English. Using reading and literacy as theoretical strategies, this paper examines the written language of selected undergraduates with the aim of identifying errors and underlying causes. Findings reveal that students are inadequately prepared in their primary and secondary schools for the demands of academic writing in tertiary education. Analysis also reveals a lack of fundamental language skills which can only be acquired through directed reading, phonemic awareness and knowledge of English phonemic codes. Based on the findings propositions for re-evaluating and altering the teaching and learning of English in public primary and secondary schools are advocated.

An achievement gap

The problem of low levels of English language proficiency among second language learners and teachers is prevalent in countries where English, as an official language, is the second language for the majority of the population and also the language of instruction in the classroom.¹ Nevertheless, teachers of English and undergraduate

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¹ Norma Nel and Helene Müller, "The impact of teachers' limited english proficiency on english second language learners in South African school", *South African Journal of Education*, 30 (4), 2010: 1-17; Job Wilson and Sotco C. Komba, "The link between English language proficiency and academic performance: A pedagogical perspective in Tanzania secondary schools", *World Journal of English Language*, 2 (4), 2012: 1-10; Jacob K. Aina, Alexander G. Ogundele and Shola S. Olanipekun, "Students' proficiency in English language relationship with academic performance in science and technical education", *American Journal of Educational Research*, 1 (9), 2013: 355-358; Rhelda Krugel and Elsa Fourie, "Concerns for the language

students majoring in the English language are expected to exhibit a mastery of the fundamental skills, including spelling and grammatical rules. As a new entrant, in 2012, into Namibia's tertiary education system, I was shocked at the standard of spelling and the number of grammatical errors in the written work of undergraduate students in an English Department and even more shocked to discover that 98% of primary and secondary school teachers failed a 2011 English proficiency test. In an ideal situation, these are the people whose command of English should be exemplary, especially as some of the undergraduates under consideration are English teachers, some will become English teachers and some will enter journalism. Using the errors recorded from the written work of second and third year undergraduates, this paper seeks to identify the causes of poor English usage. This is achieved firstly by examining reading and literacy in broader perspectives in order to foreground their fundamental importance for educational success, secondly by evaluating the challenges faced by public school systems and thirdly by highlighting the lack of reading culture. The error-analysis reveals deep-seated problems and begs the re-evaluation of English language teaching and learning.

The main methods employed are qualitative, analysing the written work of 30 second and third year undergraduates registered for English Morphology and Psycholinguistics in a Bachelor of English Programme in Namibia. The data is based on a full set of observable errors in eight written assignments marked over two years. The assignments consisted on average of four hand written pages. The tasks, which included work by English teachers or aspiring English teachers, were chosen to highlight fundamental problems with phonemic processing caused by the lack of reading experience. The spelling and grammatical errors are separated for analysis into two categories.

Reading and literacy

Levels of literacy, as carried out by UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) and the World Bank Edstart, are conventionally arrived at by simply counting the number of 'yes' or 'no' answers to the question "Can you read and write?" in a household survey or census. The statistics are no doubt useful as a point of reference for measuring global literacy progress but are inadequate as a means of measuring the range of skills associated with a broader conception of literacy.²

For instance, while South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland and Botswana ranked within the first 10 countries in Africa in terms of literacy, the performance of their pupils in primary and secondary schools and students in tertiary education institutions do not reflect the high literacy rates reported. For example, pupils, students and some teachers in public primary and secondary schools in these countries do not have a reading

skills of South African learners and their teachers", *International Journal of Education Science*, 7 (1), 2014: 219-228.

² CIA, *The World Factbook*, 2013. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>> [accessed 3 April, 2015].

culture and the writing proficiency of pupils and students is so weak that so many of them fail to secure admission into tertiary education. Students from public secondary schools who are admitted to tertiary institutions also struggle to cope because of deficient reading and writing skills. This situation is reflected across higher institutions throughout Africa.³

Reading and literacy are rarely defined explicitly. Descriptions of them are generally too limited to cover their true nature, with the result that the complex processes involved are hardly ever given full consideration. While there is no doubt that both reading and literacy are intrinsically connected, they are not the same. The next section demonstrates that the processes involved in reading are largely taken for granted and the deeper levels of literacy are not commonly articulated.

Reading

There are different levels of reading. For example, different skills are required for appreciating the meaning of individual words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, essays and books. In order to capture the intricate nature of reading, scholars have defined it in various ways. According to Samuel Unoh:

For the beginner, reading is concerned, for the most part with learning to recognize the printed symbols which represent speech and to respond emotionally or otherwise to the sound and meaning of words, for the more experienced reader [...]. Reading becomes less of a problem of recognizing words and more a matter of reasoning, involving the meaningful interpretations of verbal symbols (such as words, phrases and sentences) and requiring [...] all types of thinking, evaluation, imagining and problem solving.⁴

Bond, Tinker and Watson's definition of reading is quoted by Sybil James:

The recognition of printed or written symbols which serve as stimulus to the recall of meanings built up through the reader's past experiences [...] In short, the reading process involves both the acquisition of meanings intended by the writer and the reader's own contribution in the form of interpretation, evaluation and reflection of these meanings.⁵

The two definitions point to comprehension and individual perspectives as crucial aspects of reading. Diane Leipzig identifies broad areas of reading involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation.⁶ According to her, reading involves recognising meaning and requires one to identify and coordinate written words so that reading is automatic and accurate. Based on these requirements she defines reading in

³ Biodun Jeyifo, "The Thing Caught in Nte's Trap: the Mega-Crises of Education in Nigeria and Africa!", 14th Annual Wole Soyinka Lecture of the National Association of Seadogs. Abuja, 3 August, 2011. <<http://wolesoyinkalecture.org/14th-wole-soyinka-lecture/the-thing-caught-in-ntes-trap-the-mega-crises-of-education-in-nigeria-and-africa/>> [accessed 28 February, 2015].

⁴ Samuel Unoh, *Faster Reading Through Practice*, Ibadan, OUP, 1972: 1.

⁵ Sybil James, *Reading for Academic Purposes*, London, Arnold, 1984: 9.

⁶ Diane Leipzig, "What is reading?", 2001. <<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/what-reading>> [accessed 24 September, 2014].

its fullest sense as weaving together word recognition and comprehension in a fluent manner. It requires the mastery, integration and application of numerous skills and knowledge. It is a primary skill supporting writing, critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, creativity, conceptualization, comprehension and knowledge acquisition. According to Glenn and Diane Davis, reading is the building block of life that provides a fundamental ability to function in society: finding a job, developing the mind, discovering new things, promoting ideas and developing a good self-image.⁷

Reading is therefore vital for the achievement of personal, social and educational goals and, by implication, for being active participants in the economy and politically aware members of society. The impact of not being able to read is eloquently captured in a memoir by John Corcoran.⁸ As an intelligent American teacher who could not read, Corcoran narrates the feelings of shame, loneliness and fear he endured before he succeeded in reading. His story portrays the anguish suffered by illiterates and underscores the life-enhancing role of reading. The technical skills necessary for reading are identified by Miscese Gagen as: phonemic awareness, knowledge of a complete phonetic code, directional tracking, blending and attention to details.⁹

'Phonemic awareness' is the ability to recognize the sound structure of words enabling, for example, someone to realize that the word 'cat' is made up of the sounds /k/ /æ/ and /t/. Thus an ear for sounds is essential for reading and for spelling. 'Knowledge of a complete phonetic code' allows one to recognize the relationship between print and sound. In other words, it is the ability to process words phonetically. This involves learning that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the 26 letters of the English alphabet and the 44 different sounds. Knowing the complete phonetic code involves the learning of consonant digraphs th, sh, ch, wh, ck, ph, wr..., vowel combinations ee, oa, oe, ai, ay, oi, oy, ea, ow, ou, ue, au..., r-controlled vowels ar, or, ore, er, ur, ir, ear, eer, air... and other combinations a+l, w+a, c+e, igh, ough... in addition to the 26 letters. Inadequate mastery of these skills can lead to embarrassing mistakes in reading and speaking. An artificial but very telling example of this, indicative of the difficulty involved, is the text-to-voice programme in some GPS systems in southern Africa in which Kruger is bizarrely pronounced 'crew-jar' while Robert Mugabe is pronounced as Robert 'Moo-gabe' (as in 'babe'). 'Directional tracking' refers to the practice of reading from left to right. The importance of ordering is illustrated by Gagen using the examples: stop-pots-tops, thorn-north, no-on, miles-limes-smile, step-pets-pest, every-very, felt-left.¹⁰ In these examples, all the words contain the same letters but

⁷ Glenn Davis and Diane Davis, "Learn to read now", 2012. <<http://www.learn-to-read-prince-george.com/>> [accessed 20 September, 2014]; cf. also: <<http://www.learn-to-read-prince-george.com/why-is-reading-important.html>> [accessed 20 September, 2014].

⁸ John Corcoran, *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read: One Man's Triumph Over Illiteracy*, New York, Kaplan Publishing, 2008.

⁹ Miscese Gagen, *Back on the Right Track Reading Lessons: An Effective Step-by-Step Reading Remediation Program for Older Students and Adults*, Livingston, Montana, Right Track Reading LLC, 2007.

¹⁰ Ibid.

have different meanings. 'Smooth blending' is also required for developing proficiency in reading. This skill is the ability to harmonise individual sounds into words without pausing between the sounds. 'Attention to detail' refers to paying close attention to all the sounds and letters that make up words. The acquisition, mastery and integration of these are vital to the development of reading.

Reading is, however, more complex than just the ability to process words phonologically. In addition to the five fundamental skills highlighted above, it demands higher level skills such as vocabulary acquisition, competence in handling multi-syllable words, ability to identify themes and comprehension. Comprehension is crucial because, it can be argued, it is the ultimate objective of reading. According to Gabriel Osoba, comprehension may be defined as grasping the meaning underlying a text.¹¹ He further explains that comprehension may take place at the literal, critical or aesthetic level.

Finally, reading is the gateway to the acquisition of other language skills. For example, one is only capable of writing well if one has read extensively. Because of this, extensive higher level reading is regarded as a major element in being literate, in its broadest and highest sense.

Literacy

Literacy is conventionally defined merely as the ability to read and write. Commenting on the definition of literacy, Elizabeth Keffe and Susan Copeland opine that there is no right or wrong way of defining literacy and no one definition captures the gamut of abilities encompassed in the idea of literacy.¹² Christopher Kliever et al. acknowledge changing definitions of literacy with time and place while David Koppenhaver et al. assert that literacy exists on a continuum and develops across an individual's lifetime.¹³ Christopher Kliever with Douglas Biklen and June Downing reject the notion of a literate/non-literate dichotomy which they claim excludes certain groups within society and violates their human rights.¹⁴

The definition of literacy has evolved to a more inclusive and broader perspective influenced, according to Julia Scherba de Valenzuela by researchers exploring literacy

¹¹ Gabriel Osoba, "Reading skills and strategies", in: O. Odugbemi, K. Balogun, A. Adebajo and S. Adedoyin, (eds.), *Essential of General Studies*, Ogun State University, Centre for Sandwich Programmes, 1997: 66-92 (67).

¹² Elizabeth Keffe and Susan Copeland, "What is literacy? The power of a definition", *Research and Practice for Persons with Disabilities*, 36 (3-4), 2011: 92-99 (92).

¹³ Christopher Kliever, Linda Fitzgerald, Jodi Meyer-Mork, Patresa Hartman, Pat English-Sand and Donna Raschke, "Citizenship for all in the literate community: An ethnography of young children with significant disabilities inclusive early childhood settings", *Harvard Educational Review*, 74, 2004: 373-403; David A. Koppenhaver, Pierce Patsy and David Yoder, "AAC, FC, and the ABCs: Issues and relationships", *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 4 (4), 1995: 5-14.

¹⁴ Christopher Kliever and Douglas Biklen, "Enacting literacy: Local understanding, significant disability, and a new frame for educational opportunity", *Teachers College Record*, 109, 2007: 2579-2600; June Downing, *Teaching Literacy to Students with Significant Disabilities*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Corwin Press, 2005.

among diverse populations and across cultural, political or socioeconomic boundaries.¹⁵

Fraida Dubin and Natalie Kuhlman discuss the changing definition of literacy:

the 'literacy' part of our title has taken on meanings that go beyond the simple definition of 'reading and writing' as we had conceived of it in 1984 [...] we acknowledge that the word literacy itself has come to mean competence, knowledge and skills. Take, for example, common expressions such as 'computer literacy', 'civic literacy', 'health literacy', and a score of other usages in which literacy stands for know-how and awareness of the first word in the expression.¹⁶

Elfrieda Hiebert views literacy from a constructivist perspective when she states:

For some time now, a new perspective on literacy, and the learning processes through which literacy is acquired, has been emerging. This new perspective does not consist of old ideas with a new name, but rather it represents a profound shift from a text-driven definition of literacy to a view of literacy as active transformation of texts. In the old view, meaning was assumed to reside primarily within text, whereas, in the new view, meaning is created through an interaction of reader and text.¹⁷

Other authors have argued for the inclusion of people with disabilities when considering literacy.¹⁸ A broad definition taking this into account is provided by Christopher Kliever, who defines literacy as "the construction (which includes interpretation) of meaning through visually or tactually crafted symbols that compose various forms of text".¹⁹

The state of public educational systems

Namibia is one of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the Southern African region which invests heavily in education. Since independence in 1990, the government has allocated 20-25% of its annual budget to education.²⁰ However, this huge financial investment has yielded little as many young people leaving primary schools are unable to access secondary schooling, while many who finish secondary schooling are unable to

¹⁵ Julia Scherba de Valenzuela, "Definitions of Literacy", 2002. <<http://www.unm.edu/~devalenz/handouts/literacy.html>> [accessed 29 January, 2015].

¹⁶ Fraida Dubin and Natalie A. Kuhlman, "The dimensions of cross-cultural literacy", in: eadem, (eds.), *Cross-cultural Literacy: Global Perspectives on Reading and Writing*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Regents/Prentice Hall, 1992: v-x (vi-vii).

¹⁷ Elfrieda Hiebert, "Introduction", in: idem, (ed.), *Literacy for a Diverse Society: Perspectives, Practices, and Policies*, New York, Teachers College Press, 1991: 1-6 (1).

¹⁸ David Katims, "Emergence of literacy in preschool children with disabilities", *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 17, 1994: 58-69; Pat Mirenda, "'He's not really a reader': Perspectives on literacy development in students with autism", *Topics in Language Disorders*, 23, 2003: 270-281; Susan Copeland and Elizabeth Keefe, *Effective Literacy Instruction*, Baltimore, Brookes, 2007; Kliever and Biklen, "Enacting literacy"; Keefe and Copeland, "What is literacy?"

¹⁹ Christopher Kliever, "Joining the literacy flow: Fostering symbol and written language learning in young children with significant developmental disabilities through the four currents of literacy", *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 33, 2008: 103-121 (106).

²⁰ Government of the Republic of Namibia, *Education for All (EPA) National Plan of Action 2002–2015*, Windhoek, Ministry of Basic Education, Sports and Culture, 2002.

access tertiary education. For example, only 30% of all learners who enroll in primary schools complete secondary school, there is a 20% repetition rate for pupils in Grade 5 and 50% of Grade 10 pupils fail their exams.²¹ Only 33% of young Namibians meet the requirements, including English, for admission to tertiary education.²²

Why the poor quality in the standard of education? Namibia inherited an apartheid educational system in which the majority of the population was educated differently from the privileged whites. After independence there was a total change in the educational system. English replaced Afrikaans as the sole official language, curricula were rewritten and learner-centred teaching methodologies were adopted. These drastic changes came as a shock to the educational system. The sudden and abrupt shift from Afrikaans to English without any thorough transition plan for teachers meant they had to teach in a language of instruction they could barely speak or write. Their situation was compounded by changes to curricula: literature as a separate subject was taken out of the syllabus in primary and secondary schools; teaching was based on the communicative approach with no recourse to grammatical rules and little attention was paid to reading, composition, comprehension and essay writing. Literature was incorporated as part of English language teaching and is taught only at secondary grades 11 and 12 to students who take English as a first language option. The quality of instruction plummeted across the whole curriculum. A telling example is found in the results of English proficiency tests taken by teachers in primary and secondary schools in September 2011, twenty years after introducing English as the language of instruction. Almost all (98%), of those tested, failed and were described as being insufficiently proficient. This prompted an intervention in which teachers are now being trained in basic English.²³ Schools, despite significant government spending, still lack adequate resources. For example, textbooks are short in supply, few schools have library facilities and where these do exist they have limited stock. According to a report on reading among children in Namibia, only 47% of schools have a functioning library and 36% have less than 1000 books.²⁴

Of course, language interference between the different indigenous languages and English, socio-economic factors such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, violence within the family, child abuse and lack of proper nutrition also impact negatively, in complex and interconnected ways, on education. However, the middle classes are much less affected

²¹ Nathalie Houlou, "Equitable access to quality education: Challenges in Namibia", 2012. <<http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/>> [accessed 28 February, 2015].

²² Josephine Ola-Busari, "The state of English language teaching and learning in Nigeria and Namibia: Implication for national development", *International Journal of Innovative Research and Studies*, 3 (4), 2014: 219-249 (241).

²³ Denver Kisting, "Namibia's language policy is 'poisoning' its children", *The Guardian*, 10 January, 2012. <<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/jan/10/namibia-english-crisis>> [accessed 29 January, 2015].

²⁴ Andree-Jeanne Totemeyer, Susan Alexander and Emma Kirchner, "Are children reading out there? First results of a Namibian study", paper presented at the University of Namibia Humanities and Social Sciences 5th Annual Research Conference, 26-27 September, 2013.

by these factors and can afford to send their children to private independent schools where the quality of teaching is better and pass rates are higher.

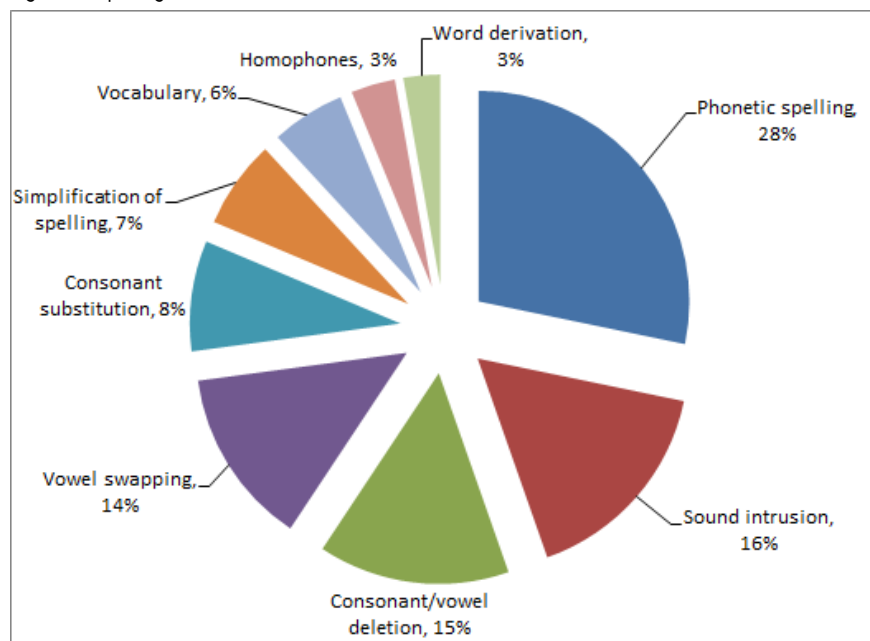
What do written errors reveal about the standard of English?

An error analysis of the written tasks of the undergraduates involved was carried out in order to gain a better understanding of their writing. As mentioned earlier, these are students whose English one would ideally expect to be impeccable but as the analysis reveals, they lack fundamental skills in spelling and grammar.

Spelling errors

A total of 177 errors were identified from 167 misspelled words. The errors were analysed in nine sub-categories as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Spelling errors



The errors in the first category have been labelled phonetic spelling and constitute 28% of the total, where words were written as pronounced. Some typical examples of this type of errors:

1. Crucial spelled as crusial
2. Different as diffrent
3. Pronunciation as prnciation, pronurciation and prnuation

4. Recurrence as reoccurrence and reaccurrence
5. Slightly as slidely
6. Trial as trier
7. Varying as varieng
8. Phatic as fatigue
9. Syntactical as syntantical
10. Sentence as sence
11. Conscious as concious

Errors in the second subcategory were labelled errors of intrusion because unnecessary or incorrect letters were included. Some of the 29 errors in this category relate to adding a superfluous letter towards the end such as spelling 'famous' as 'famouse', 'equips' as 'equipts', 'focus' as 'focuse', 'phonetics' as 'phonetix' and 'anything' as 'anythin'. Other examples include the use of double /l/ and /t/ in 'below' and 'writer'.

The third category involves the deletion of a consonant or vowel sound. This error type affects words such as:

12. Create spelled as creat
13. Definite as definit
14. Whether as wether
15. Decrease as decreas
16. Which as wich
17. Indigenous as idegenous

Other misspelled words show the omission of letters, often letters that become silent when pronounced, as can be seen in examples 13, 14, 15 and 16. There were 26 errors of this type.

The fourth, fifth and sixth sub-categories are vowel swapping, consonant substitution and simplification of spelling including:

18. Indigenous spelled as either indiginouse or indegenous
19. Affective as effective
20. Definitely as definetly
21. Linguistic as languistic
22. Revive as rivive
23. Because as becouse

There were 18 other such errors. The 15 errors under the fifth category show the substitution of one consonant sound for another. This substitution can affect meaning:

24. Alveolar spelled as alveoral
25. Titles as littles
26. Regularly as regurary
27. Connotation as gonotation
28. Plural as prural
29. Deliver as deriver

The sixth category is named simplification of spelling:

30. Are as a
31. Dead as ded
32. Even though as even thou
33. Field as fied
34. Formal as fomal
35. Syllables as sillables
36. Months as moths
37. Known as knwn

There were four more examples of such spellings, involving deletion of consonants or vowels sounds, clearly influenced by smses and social media.

The words in sub-category seven were misspelled because of poor vocabulary, thereby leading to a situation where two different words are confused, sometimes because of associated meaning. Such examples include using:

38. The word 'not' when the word 'no' would have been appropriate within the context of usage
39. Conversation when the word intended is conversion
40. Using 'then' when intending 'than'
41. Confusing the use of 'they' and 'their' and vice versa
42. Using the word 'the' while 'there' is implied.

In sub-category eight, we see spelling errors arising from homophones. For instance, 'weather' is spelled either as 'whether' or 'whither' while 'whether' is spelled as 'weather'. Other examples are spelling the word 'where' as 'were' and vice versa, 'lose' as 'loose', 'themselves' as 'theselves'. The errors described in sub-category nine as the inability to discern the different spellings that words assume through derivation, included:

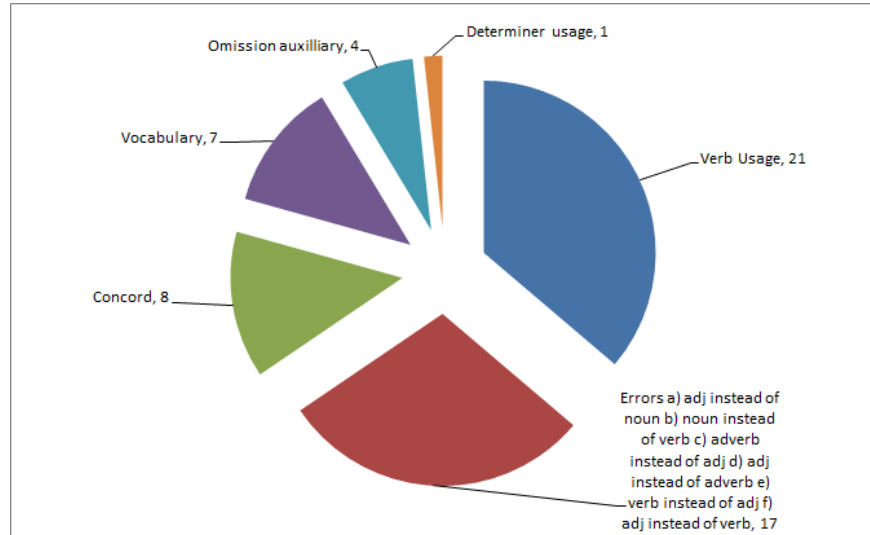
43. Attractive as attraction
44. Believes as beliefs
45. Sexist as sexiest
46. Emphasis as emphasise
47. Universal as universe

The contexts in which these words are used clearly showed that they have been wrongly selected.

Grammatical errors

Figure 2 shows the analysis of 50 errors divided into 6 categories. The first category involves the inappropriate use of verb forms, with the 21 errors divided into five sub-types. The first consists of seven errors where an inflected form of the verb was used after 'to', instead of the infinitive.

Figure 2: Grammatical errors



Errors include:

48. They are using language to communication
49. It is also a language to shows
50. Language acquisition is a term used to refers
51. To shows that human could not or will never

In the second type, verbs were inflected after modal auxiliaries as in:

52. The food will comes out
53. At 6-10 months the infant can babbling
54. There are no other species that can made use of language for communication purposes

In the third type the simple form of the verb was used where the progressive form is appropriate. Examples are:

55. Language production is a process in which human beings by follow [...] different stages learn how to produce words in a specific language
56. She or he can have more practice in differentiate and pronounce /r/ and //

The two errors in the fourth type show the wrong use of the progressive form of the verb:

57. During acquiring process
58. Learning a language meaning that a speaker would learn the different sounds of the language

Only one error is identified in the fifth type and this has to do with the wrong usage of 'is' where 'does' is the appropriate verb to select as in:

- 59. ... and the language is not need to be taught

The second relates to the inability to differentiate the different parts of speech that words belong to. The errors here include:

- 60. Language articulatory is a process ...
- 61. The interconnected of the brain and language
- 62. The nurture theory beliefs that every human being ...
- 63. If a child can put three words together it will soon development into more
- 64. Language comprehension is based on the fully understanding
- 65. ... and to produce naturally language
- 66. Language learning is the process of learning the language conscious ...
- 67. Both processes involved information processing, but they are differ in the sense of where the information came from
- 68. So, those natural abilities you have will help you to excellent in acquiring language.

In examples 60 and 61, adjectives have been used instead of nouns, in 62 and 63 nouns have been used when verbs are needed, in 64 and 65 adverbs have been used when adjectives would have been appropriate, in 66 an adjective is used when an adverb is appropriate, in 67 a verb is used when an adjective is needed and in 68 an adjective is used when a verb is the appropriate.

The third category involves the lack of concord between grammatical expressions as in:

- 69. As language stand- to be a complex aspects of the human existance
- 70. LAD act as a memory to create ...
- 71. They produce high vowel sound-. For example /i/ and /u/
- 72. The brain has a huge tasks

The fourth category relates to lack of knowledge about vocabulary. Examples are:

- 73. There would be a certain time where the light ...
- 74. The brain is therefore unseparable to the language
- 75. There is not literally meaning relations
- 76. The fact is, these children can hear and see what is spoken but could not conversate back
- 77. Patients with aphasia either suffered from stroke or an accident and they unfortunately loosed their ability to comprehend or produce language
- 78. Intentional and utterance meaning are more or less the same but there is a subtle distinct
- 79. ... and we learn it unconsciousless

In the fifth category, auxiliary verbs were omitted where they are mandatory. The examples include:

- 80. If an infant .. exposed to the television ...
- 81. If an infant is there only to listen he or she problely will not .. able to interpreted some of the words
- 82. Language .. genetically inherited and the language ...
- 83. Since we cannot .. able to identify ...

The sixth category consists of one error. This has to do with the wrong use of the determiner 'their' where the word 'there' is intended. The example is:

- 84. All over the world their is language

Discussion

The analysis is disturbing because the errors have been made by teachers or would-be teachers of English in public primary and secondary schools. The errors reflect serious weaknesses in word-formation, the morphological nature of multi-syllabic words and spelling conventions. A critical examination of the errors points to a fundamental lack of the skills associated with advanced proficiency in reading and literacy. Some of the errors have also exhibited interference phenomena between features of the students' indigenous languages and English.

The errors categorised under phonetic spelling demonstrate a lack of phonemic awareness or recognition that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters, or the skill to go beyond this. There is also a lack of knowledge of the phonetic code. Phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonetic codes are skills developed in early childhood education, pre-primary and primary school. In high quality, modern private schools, both skills would be developed in pre-school and at the latest by the end of primary school. The errors described under vowel swapping, substitution of consonants and deletion of vowels and consonants can be attributed partly to these two factors and partly to the influence of the learners' indigenous languages. This is particularly so for errors in the fifth category. It is commonly observed that some speakers of a dialect of the Oshinbambo language always substitute /l/ for /r/ and vice versa. However, the proper development of skills at the appropriate age would have helped to differentiate the sounds being substituted for one another, even if those sounds are not present in the learners' indigenous language. This in turn would have minimised phonological interference. Examples of errors with silent sounds or letters can also be explained in terms of the failure to recognize that the silent sound or letter does not imply deletion in spelling. Swapping one vowel for another is also a demonstration of poor phonemic awareness and a lack of familiarity with the nature of words in relation to sounds and letters. Several studies have shown that difficulty with phoneme awareness and other phonological skills are associated with poor reading and spelling.²⁵ Readers

²⁵ G. Reid Lyon, "Why reading is not a natural process", 1997. < <http://www.reidlyon.com/edpolicy/4-WHY-READING-IS-NOT-A-NATURAL-PROCESS.pdf>> [accessed 19 January, 2015]; Louisa Moats and Carol

with phonological processing weaknesses also tend to be the poorest spellers, according to Marie Cassar et al.²⁶

One important factor underlies all of these errors: the lack of reading. For instance, after 14 years of exposure to English, being in an English language department and studying morphology, syntax and general linguistics, many undergraduates still fail to comprehend verb usage, cannot distinguish between one part of speech and another and cannot appreciate spelling conventions. A telling testimony to the lack of a reading culture is in some of the vocabulary used:

- 85. Conversate
- 86. Existance
- 87. Beliefs when believes is intended
- 88. unconsciousless
- 89. 'not' when 'no' is intended.

The inability to differentiate between 'the, their and there', 'than and then' or 'where and were', different forms of verbs and different parts of speech, reveal limited attention to detail during reading, lack of comprehension and inability to blend sounds to achieve fluency.

The negative impact of technology is also evident in the errors analysed and described in the sixth category as simplifications of spelling. Technology may also be partly responsible for errors involving deletion or intrusion of sounds. The inability to appreciate that the spelling conventions of smses, facebook, twitter and other social networking sites are not sufficient for academic writing is a concern, as to be literate includes the ability to utilise an appropriate form of communication according to context. While technology has widened access to information, opened up life-long and distance learning and has even helped to preserve indigenous languages, it has encouraged casual approaches to spelling, reading and writing. For example, reading an anonymous blog can all too easily become a misguided substitute for reading an article or book. The challenges, then, for the public educational system, are massive.

An overarching and worrying reality, based on conversations with the undergraduates, is the lack of motivation to read. There may be a number of reasons for this including socio-economic problems, access to books, poor teaching or simply the lack of a

Tolman, *Why phonological awareness is important for reading and spelling. Excerpted from Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS): The Speech Sounds of English: Phonetics, Phonology, and Phoneme Awareness (Module 2)*, Boston, Sopris West, 2009; Linnea Ehri, "Teaching phonemic awareness and phonics", in: Peggy McCardle and Vinita Chhabra, (eds.), *The Voice of Evidence in Reading Research*, Baltimore, Brookes Publishing Company, 2004: 153-186; James Rath, "Teachers' beliefs and teaching beliefs", 2001. <<http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n1/raths.html>> [accessed 23 January, 2015]; Gary Troia, "Phonological processing and its influence on literacy learning", in: In C. Stone, E. Silliman, B. Ehren and K. Appel, (eds.), *Handbook of Language and Literacy: Development and Disorders*, New York, The Guilford Press, 2004: 271-301.

²⁶ Marie Cassar, Rebecca Treiman, Louisa Moats, Tatiana Pollo and Brett Kessler, "How do the spellings of children with dyslexia compare with those of nondyslexic children?", *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 18, 2005: 27-49.

reading culture. The alarming realities revealed in the errors have implications for pedagogy and national development. The most fundamental is that educated but partially illiterate graduates are being churned out by the tertiary institution systems, even by English departments.

Some propositions for social responsibility

Tertiary educators are saddled with redressing the achievement gaps in the performance of undergraduates. An important measure has been the introduction of service courses to enhance first year students' language and communication skills. These courses have, however, had limited success because they come too late to correct fundamental errors. Earlier intervention is needed to address the foundational problems at primary and secondary school levels.

Given that learning depends on the quality of teaching, teachers must be trained and qualified to meet the challenges and needs of learners. A first step would be to evaluate teacher training in terms of whether the curriculum prepares teachers to deal with the language needs of learners. This should be informed by the understanding of weaknesses in undergraduate performance highlighted earlier. On this basis, tertiary educators should collaborate with teacher trainers to fashion courses. In particular, teachers involved in early childhood education should be given a thorough grounding in the theory of emergent literacy as well as in the skills needed to develop the ability of pre-school children to engage with reading. According to Marilyn Adams what happens before primary school makes a huge difference.²⁷ Trainee teachers should fully understand the centrality of reading and good use of English and be imbued with the knowledge to teach reading proficiently, fluently and comprehensively. This includes schooling in phonemic awareness and the complex phonemic code of English as well as the ability to teach all phonograms to their learners. For teachers who are already in the system, efforts should be made to develop and reinforce such skills through in-service training. Targeted, strategic instruction in speech-sound awareness has particular relevance here as it has the potential to reduce and alleviate reading problems and, by extension, spelling errors.²⁸

Another significant way in which social responsibility can be exercised is in the development of strategic reading and literacy programmes throughout primary and secondary schools. This would mean reintroducing different genres of literature into the curriculum. Specifically, English Literature should be taught as a separate subject, be

²⁷ Marilyn Adams, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1990.

²⁸ Marilyn Adams, Barbara Foorman, Ingvar Lundberg and Terri Beeler, *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children: A Classroom Curriculum*, Baltimore, Brookes, 1998; Gail Gillon, *Phonological Awareness: From Research to Practice*, New York, Guilford Press, 2004; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction: Reports of the Subgroups*, Washington DC, National Institutes of Health Publication 00-4654, 2000; Rath, "Teachers' beliefs".

available to both first and second language learners and be examined at every level of national examinations. The current practice in which literature is merely seen as an appendage to English language is too narrowly focused, especially for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who can only engage with written texts through literature in school. The teaching of reading through literature is particularly critical if learners are to broaden their horizons and develop inquiring and critical minds. The introduction of literature would also help to promote the many complex and multi-faceted skills and benefits associated with reading and literacy in their broader and higher senses.

The introduction of literature has the additional advantage of developing the students' comprehension ability while at the same time increasing their vocabulary and boosting their confidence in speaking and writing fluently with less grammatical and spelling errors. More importantly, it would help to reduce the disparity between the quality of education received in private and public schools. Public confidence in the educational system would be restored, pass rates would improve and the students entering into tertiary education would be better prepared to face the rigour of academic engagement.

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