

Rethinking Educational Transitioning in South African Primary Schools in Grades 3 and 4

Blandina Manditereza

Motheo TVET College, Educare, Department of Business Studies, Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa

* **Corresponding Author:** bmanditereza@yahoo.co.uk

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, Grade 3 learners are taught by a class-teacher who teaches all the subjects in this specific grade, but once they are promoted to Grade 4, they are taught by specialist subject teachers. This implies that the learners suddenly transition from one teacher to being taught by four or five specialist subject teachers; and this adapting to various pedagogical approaches, has disadvantages. Research reveals that Grade 3 learner- performance is usually satisfactory or better as compared to Grade 4 results. In other words, once the learners' transition to Grade 4, their academic performance drops. This study investigates the foundational problems plaguing learner-transitioning from Grade 3 to 4. This study is significant in that it suggests recommendations that may address transitional challenges. The interpretive worldview and the case study method were used in conjunction with the qualitative approach to collect data. For this purpose, 5 ex-Model-C schools were conveniently selected; this included 10 Grade 3 teachers and 10 Grade 4 teachers from these schools. Research instruments such as lesson observation, interviews and document analysis were utilised. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory was adopted as the theoretical lens which explored the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and the learners. Findings in the study indicated that when Grade 3 learners' transition to Grade 4 they fail to navigate this process due to contextual barriers. Possibly, the language barrier precipitated by the Language of learning and Teaching (LOLT), affected the learners' performance. This study recommended changing communication strategies in content subjects as well as re-analysing Grade 4 language pedagogy in curriculum delivery as intervention strategies to solve the issue of poor performance when learners transition from Grade 3 to 4.

keywords: context, culture, curriculum, ecological, transitioning

1. Introduction

Sibanda (2014) states that the Grade 3 to 4 challenges related to transitioning are not a national concern for South Africa alone, but also internationally. Although the phases are labelled differently in different educational contexts around the world, the significance of third to fourth grade transition is internationally recognised (Lesnick, George, Smithgall & Gwynne, 2010). Grade 4 is acknowledged as a critical stage for learners because at this stage we see a decline in performance due to a transitional learning gap. Murasi (2014) and (Bell, 2011) emphasise that the issue of transitioning in education cannot be underestimated.

When learners move from one grade to another, they experience changes within themselves as well as in their learning environment. Grade 4 learners feel the difference in curriculum content as well as by being taught by various subject teachers. This change impacts on the learners' attitude towards school in addition to decreasing motivation levels. Although theories abound concerning the probable causes of the Fourth-Grade slump, there is a dearth of research in South Africa to dissect this worrying phenomenon. Transitioning challenges have led researchers to conclude that this is the period when learners normally experience a drop in academic performance (Ballam, Perry, & Garpelin, 2017). Primary schools in South Africa

comprise of three phases: Grade R to Grade 3 as the Foundational Phase (FP), Grade 4 to Grade 6 represents the Intermediate Phase (IP), and Grade 7 is the Senior Phase (SP).

2. Literature Review

Educational transitions can be regarded as a journey of intensity and uncertainty where elements of familiarity cease to exist giving rise to momentary gaps in grasping content knowledge and skills. According to Jindal-Snape (2010), educational transitions affect learner-ability to adapt to new contexts, new interpersonal relationships, new cultures, new mates, new roles and new rules.

Transitions between grades and phases represent a major shift in daily contexts in which children interact. 'Transition' in this study refers to the period post-Grade 3 and entering Grade 4. Hence, from Grade R to 3, teachers were expected to have laid the foundations of learning. For most Grade 3 learners, the transition to Grade 4 meant changing routines and learning approaches which resulted in decreased academic achievement (Gordon, Peterson, Gdula & Klingbeil, 2011; Mkwanazi, 2014; Pretorius, 2014). Sanaco and Palumbo (2009) cited international literature affirming that transitions can be a very difficult period; hence learners experience a decline in performance. As such, Grade 3 to 4 transitioning is challenging and is exacerbated by language issues. Sibanda (2014:1) confirms that "there are transitional challenges within the South African education system". Although (Pretorius, 2014) posits that Grade 3 teachers are expected to have laid the linguistic and literacy foundations of using English as the LOLT, this seems a challenge because learners still struggle when communicating in English.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework draws from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective which views children's development as being interdependent on contextual relationships. Regarding transitioning, the child's immediate environment influences the quality of interaction (Bell, 2011) which is represented by the microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory dissects the different social environments which influence learners in various learning contexts. For Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26-27), students making the school transition confront an "ecological transition" and that "every ecological transition is both a consequence and an instigator of developmental processes". Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 112) asserts that the child is at the centre of five environmental systems, hence the child's development may be affected by experiences emanating from processes on how the child relates to these systems. Accordingly, Vygotsky (1978), highlights that the teacher is responsible for creating a conducive learning environment within language and cultural frameworks.

2.2. Research Questions

- What learning challenges do Grade 4s experience after transitioning from Grade 3?
- Explain whether teachers' pedagogical practices affect learning.
- What is the relationship between LOLT and academic achievement during learner-transition?
- Do teachers integrate language and content?
- What possible intervention strategies could be implemented to circumvent transitioning challenges?

3. Research Methodology

This study used the interpretive worldviews (Kuhn, 1962) combined with the qualitative approach (Creswell, 2017). Open ended questions posed at face-to-face interviews, lesson observations and document analysis were adopted as instruments for data collection. A descriptive case study approach (Yin, 2014) was applied to study selected cases (Creswell, 2017).

To control interacting variables, the study purposefully selected 5 ex- Model-C schools which were similar in that English was adopted as the LOLT from Grade 1 to Grade 7. Twenty (20) participants were purposefully selected from both Grade 3 and 4. The study was restricted to ex-Model-C schools because the inclusion of public schools would create confounding variables since the schools' characteristics differ. For example, whilst ex-Model-C schools use English as the LOLT from Grade R upwards, public schools only use English as the LOLT from Grade 4 upwards, thus creating multiple variables.

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews and document analysis techniques were utilised (Creswell, 2003). The interviews comprised of non-standardised open-ended questions. These were based on a list of key themes from which questions were drawn. As part of document analysis, a comparison between Grade 3 and 4 books was done to assess the depth of vocabulary between the two grades. In addition, the aspect of the LOLT, as dictated by the curriculum, was explored. The sources of data for the research included 10 Grade 3 teachers and 10 Grade 4 teachers.

Additionally, the Grade 3 and 4 National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), and textbooks provided by the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2010) were compared and used to determine the depth and appropriateness of information covered in both grades. Purposive sampling was utilised because it empowers the researcher in using his/her own discretion in participant- selection based on the research questions (Creswell, 2009).

4. Findings from interview questions

4.1. How would you describe learner transition experiences from Grade 3 to Grade 4?

Responses from Grade 3 teachers confirmed that the Grade 3 learners perform better than Grade 4. It was noted that once the same learners move to Grade 4, they begin to experience frustrations. On the other hand, from Grade 4 teachers, one participant gave a contentious response by claiming that learners are passed without meeting necessary requirements, since Grade 4 content is beyond most learners understanding. The study confirmed the allegation by probing other participants and they too claimed that indeed, it is an open secret that undeserving learners get pushed through the system. Furthermore, most participant teachers concurred that it seems there is a pattern that is observed in Grade 4 learners. The achievement begins to drop just after transitioning into Grade 4. Resultantly, learners fail and their failure seems magnified by LOLT challenges which they experience once in Grade 4 as well. The use of English as a medium of instruction affects learner transition and learner adjustment. From teachers' claims this seems to indicate that there is a noticeable learning gap from grade 4 since Grade 3 work and vocabulary seem easy and manageable compared to too difficult Grade 4 vocabulary and the steep and dense subject matter.

4.2. Do teachers' practices affect learning?

In responding to the question on teacher practices and learning the interview findings indicate that there is a mismatch between teacher practices and the intensions of the curriculum versus other contextual issues resulting in poor student performance. We should bear in mind that teachers' practices determine student-quality; a weak teacher produces weak students. The other complex issue that is detrimental to Grade 4 learner performance lies in the teachers' ability to translate the intensions of the curriculum using English LOLT even though the

majority of teachers are not L1 speakers of English. The concerns seem to indicate that the non-native English speakers may adopt wrong language rules thereby creating further tension between the learner and the content.

4.3. *What is the connection between performance and English LOLT?*

The interview responses seem to indicate a connection between learner performance and the tension caused by English LOLT. Since language is at the heart of Education, without ability in language then no learning and understanding can be experienced.

One participant asserted that "Language is like the engine that drives the car; so, a car without an engine will not move, and a car with a broken engine cannot move" This highlights the importance of language within the classroom.

4.4. *LOLT skills in your Content subjects*

Content / Subject teachers were asked whether they attend to English skills when teaching. The majority of subject teachers indicated that they only concern themselves with their subject content since they lack expertise in English as a subject. Another barrier cited was lack of time to attend to language problems. The teachers bemoaned having to deal with an overcrowded curriculum which makes it difficult for them to concern themselves with issues outside their subject allocation since the teaching time is too limited.

The NTS (Natural Science and Technology teachers expressed frustration over the vocabulary they have to deal with in their subject. They claimed that the subject terminology is too deep and the content involves lots of new terms which thereby frustrate the learners who engage with content in English as L2 or L3. The teacher's perceptions are that Science becomes difficult since it is being delivered in a second language. Some teachers complained that their teaching is hampered by syllabus, content and administration work overload. They further claim that the Government pursues a lot of paper work at the expense of action within the classroom.

4.5. *Document analysis*

For document analysis, Grade 3 and Grade 4 CAPS books were compared to clarify distinctions. It is important to note that in South Africa, Grade 3 learners study the following 4 subjects: English or Afrikaans as LOLT depending on schools' locations, then Afrikaans or English as the first additional language (FAL), followed by Mathematics and life skills [creative arts, visual arts and music] (DBE, 2010). The Grade 4 curriculum encompasses a home language, a second language (FAL), mathematics, natural science and technology, social sciences, and life skills.

Further, the vocabulary progression in Grade 4 is overloaded; for example, a typical week involving vocabulary acquisition from *Platinum Mathematics Grade 4* (prescribed text) page 5, unit 1:2 is day one tasks which involve new terms like **rounding off**, **ascending**, and **descending**; then unit 1:4 which will be covered the following day includes terms such as digit, **place-value**, **expand**, and **expanded notation**. Then in social science unit 1, the teacher introduces new words for the week which include **settlement**, **farm**, **crops**, **village**, **town**, and **city**. Regarding natural science and technology Unit 1, new words include **bread**, **mound**, **germs**, **reproducing**, **excreting**, **environment** and **sensing**; then activity 3 introduces new words like **germinate**, **organism**, and **hatch**. The vocabulary of the week from *English Platinum*, Unit 1, requires that the learners understand words like **venomously**, **terrorising**, **spurs**, **sorrowfully**, **bewildered**, **furiously** and **ungrateful**. Lastly, life skills unit 1 includes words like **strength**, **weakness**, **successful** and **experience**.

Learners must learn how to spell, understand the meaning of about 30 words, and use these words contextually or sententially. Though English and mathematics are easily comparable

subjects, the list of vocabulary given to learners of English L2 as LOLT is mammoth and thus frustrates the learner who has to adapt academically, socially, and to new physical surroundings.

In sum, analysing the presented documents conscientised me of the teaching-learning challenges in content-related matters, the structure of the curriculum, and the extent of vocabulary progression.

4.6. Generated Themes

Themes were generated from the data analysis. The link between the LOLT and learner-academic-performance, and the level of teachers' language proficiency were significant aspects to consider. It was established that non-native English teachers teach using LOLT (English) as L1, yet they are English L2 speakers. These teachers speak English conversationally yet they have to teach using L1 proficiency. Content subject teachers also indicated that due to time constraints and lack of knowledge of the LOLT, they do not teach grammar since they mainly concentrate on covering the syllabus of content subjects. Overall, findings indicated learners' lack of sufficient practice due to the influence of teacher pedagogy.

The following themes were generated:

- i. LOLT influences performance
- ii. Learners struggle in grade 4
- iii. Content teachers not teaching LOLT skills
- iv. Teachers practice in LOLT consequential to learning

4.7. What possible intervention strategies could be implemented to circumvent transitioning challenges?

Table 1.

Recommendations made against noted challenges

Grade 3	Grade 4	Recommendations
One teacher	4-6 teachers	Reduce teachers in Grade 4
One class	More classes	Teachers must move instead
Do not struggle very much	Challenges in transitioning	Check on content outline
Child centered approach	Teacher centered approach	Merge teaching approaches
Interactive	Dominating due to time limit	Use a mixture of these
Active learning	Passive learning	Involve learners
Suitable curriculum load	Curriculum overload	Reduce curriculum load
4 learning areas	7 learning areas	Simplify text
LOLT content manageable	Vocabulary too deep	Re analyse curriculum

5. Discussion

Most participants concurred that Grade 4 teaching-learning becomes more difficult, and this is caused by the challenges of LOLT. The language teacher explained that he teaches about 6 classes (a total of 165 students). The challenge was insufficient time to teach all the LOLT language skills. The teacher indicated that the language teacher must access students on a one-on-one basis. Language teaching requires much time with students since language involves a plethora of skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing. Under present circumstances, this is impossible. Participants concurred that the way a learner understands the content of a subject will determine the academic results. They mentioned that it is not only cognitive factors which affect learner-performance, but also LOLT issues. However, some teachers cited low academic performance as being a result of learners' attitude towards a subject. Some participants agreed that teachers' practices also affected teaching-learning processes, and this may be linked to learner-attitudes towards a subject. What the teachers did not clarify was

whether learners pass Grade 3 after being provided with adequate foundational skills and knowledge.

From data analysed from interview transcriptions, the results indicate that Grade 4 subject teachers mostly focus on the content of their subject - not the practice and proficiency in LOLT. In addition, the teachers are interested in covering the syllabus instead of helping the language teacher. These teachers do not see how language can negatively result in low achievement in their subjects. Another secondary problem is whether teachers are proficient in the rules of a second language since they are likely to be affected by 'language determinism' which draws from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1956). Hence, teachers may fail to differentiate language rules in relation to the LOLT. Therefore, the teacher's personal foundational knowledge-based affects the approach to LOLT pedagogy.

6. Recommendations

Curriculum designers and the Department of Education (DoE) need to reconsider LOLT policies in terms of the identified challenges gleaned from this study. For example, there are 12 story sentences in Grade 3, but 33 sentences in Grade 4 which include understanding dense vocabulary. Hence, textbooks need revising and should include shorter stories related to the level of education in South Africa. We can't aspire to match content to international standards as learners struggle with grasping the content in a meaningful way. Since English is the international language of communication, should we introduce the LOLT (English) from Grade R so that learners cope with the demands of content subjects in future grades? This is a topic for further research.

Learners get demotivated when reading longer texts especially if they are already struggling with reading. Further, there is need to assist both the learners and the teachers regarding the LOLT (English). Learner-performance can be negatively affected by the mismatch between pedagogy and teacher-knowledge regarding L2. Findings also revealed the need for more visible teacher interactive action in subjects taught at Grade 4 level. Lastly, the teachers need to be skilled and alert in identifying individual learner literacy challenges to continue from where the Foundation Phase teachers left off.

7. Conclusion

The study gave rise to several possibilities. Firstly, learners use L2 or L3 as the LOLT depending on the location of the school (DBE, 2010). Hence, teachers must be trained or re-trained in English LOLT pedagogy. Content or subject teachers need to reassess their roles as well as be reminded that LOLT must not be divorced from content since learners learn content through LOLT. Every teacher should attend to the improvement of their language skills since LOLT impacts performance; in other words, every teacher is a language teacher (English). Pinnock (2016) asserts that the quality of language pedagogy in curriculum delivery affects student academic achievement. This implies that teacher-pedagogy is significant in terms of the LOLT acquisition. Hence, (Pinnock and Vijaykumar 2009) confirm that the language used in the school can threaten learner achievement.

For authentic learning and teaching to take place, advice on the need to attend to language issues must be sought from experts, possibly at in-service training sessions (Myburg, Poggenpoel & Van Rensburg, 2004). Hence, subject teachers need to set aside time to work on language skills since LOLT is a critical educational input. The researcher also suggests looking into the issue of departmentalisation at Grade 4 level because having many teachers and many new subjects at once may result in distracting variables.

Lastly, this study poses many questions concerning LOLT and the current teacher-training system; one being, how can South Africa train teachers in English proficiency to foster LOLT to pedagogically assist L2 and L3 learners in content subjects. One solution, in addition to

attitudinal changes, is to implement intervention strategies in the form of regular workshops in the LOLT to prepare different subject teachers to attend to different linguistic demands in their specific content areas.

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