

GROWING ROOTS AND WINGS: A CASE STUDY ON ENGLISH LITERACY IN NAMIBIA

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1 Background

Namibia, a country in Southern Africa, has had a long history of being dominated by outside forces, as do nearly all African countries. Namibia was first colonized under Germany from 1884 until 1915, a period that was followed by the long reign of South African rule and apartheid from 1915 until 1990. The new educational policies developed by independent Namibia were based on Western curricula (Nekwheva, 1999). English is the language of education beginning in grade 4, though this is a second or third language for nearly all learners.

This study will seek to understand the relationship between social literacy and language practices of a Namibian community on the one hand, and the schooled literacy and language practices and standards that are required of the learners (and the teachers) in the school setting on the other (see also Papen, 2001; 2005). Discussing the importance of strengthening the bond between community and school practices, Robb (1995:22) writes that 'strategies need to be devised and implemented to ensure that each child is enabled to develop both roots and wings'. The *roots* are what learners gain from their culture at home and in the community, and the *wings* are skills and opportunities gained through education. The goal of this study, then, is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between language and literacy uses and attitudes in both community (roots) and school (wings).

In this contribution, the following *research questions* will be highlighted: (1) what are the specific guidelines and policies for the English curriculum in Namibian schools and how are these policies implemented in the classroom? (2) To what extent is English, compared to other languages, used in out of school contexts (home, free time, church)? (3) What literacy practices or events do the students have experience with? (4) What are the students' attitudes with regard to reading and writing and the languages that are in use in the community and school context?

¹ This article is part of a larger case study carried out by Danielle Beckman, who had been working as an English language teacher in Namibia some years before.

2 Context and design of the study

In 1990 independence from South-African rule was won by the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO), which then became the ruling party of Namibia. Being that language policies were very influential in the domination of apartheid, the language policy chosen by SWAPO was a reaction to the oppression enshrined in the language policies of apartheid (Fourie 1997; Haacke 1994). Thus English quickly replaced Afrikaans as the official language of Namibia. The role of indigenous languages in education was greatly minimized also in favor of English after Grade 3, believing that English was the 'language of liberation' (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001: 306).

In the Namibian language policy for education (MBESC, 1993) it was decided that grade 1-3 (lower primary) is taught through one of the languages recognized by the Ministry of Education: nine indigenous languages such as Ojitherero or Khoekhoegowab, and English, Afrikaans and German. In this phase English will be offered as a subject for all learners. In Grades 4-7 (upper primary) English will be used as the medium of instruction for all promotional subjects, i.e. subjects relevant in order to be promoted to the next level.. In grades 8-10, English will be the sole language of instruction.

Against the background of this policy for language and education, a case study was carried out in Gobabis, the regional capital of the Omaheke region, located 200 kilometers east of Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. Gobabis can be divided into two main sections, the 'town' and the 'location'² known as Epako. This structure of town and location is left over from apartheid when the town was reserved for residency of the whites and the location was reserved for the residences of the black population. While this is no longer officially the case, the location is still exclusively black. The location is where this research took place. Gobabis also has quite a large Afrikaner community, though they are not very visible as they spend most of their time on farms outside of the city. The living conditions in Gobabis differ greatly. In town there are primarily modern Western houses and apartments. In the location, there are a number of permanent homes, but also a large number of shacks made of various materials, primarily zinc sheets.

The school studied, Epako Junior Secondary School, is a school for grade 8 – 10 students in Epako. The school has approximately 550 learners. Learners come from various primary schools throughout the Omaheke region, 200 of them staying in the school-hostel throughout the year. There are 6 class sections of grade 8, five of grade 9 and four of grade 10. While English is the medium of instruction throughout the school, language courses are offered in Otjiherero, Khoekhoegowab and Afrikaans. The promotional subjects for all students are English, History, Maths, Physical Science, Life Science, Geography, Language (Otjiherero, Khoekhoegowab or Afrikaans), Entrepreneurship and two of the following group: Agriculture, Accounting, and Home Science. The non-promotional subjects are Religious and Moral Education, Life Skills, Arts, and Physical Education. All students must pay school fees and are responsible for providing their own writing implements (pens, pencils, erasers) and the appropriate school uniform. Each classroom has a chalkboard at the front and a bulletin board at

² Comparable to what is called 'township' in South Africa.

the back. All of the rooms have electricity. There is also a toilet block with running water.

To address the specific research questions of this study, a socio-linguistic ethnographic case study³ was carried out in which document-analysis (research question 1) was combined with interviews and observations (research questions 2-4). The case study was carried out in 2007.

Interviews were conducted in both the school and community context. In the school contexts, interviews were held with 24 students. For these interviews an interview guideline (Wright, 2002) was constructed to cover four main areas: language uses, language attitudes, literacy uses, and literacy attitudes. All of these interviews were held on the school premises after school or during free periods. All interviews were conducted individually in English and recorded with a digital voice recorder. Two of the intended interviews had to be cancelled because the students could not understand any English. Six community members were interviewed individually as well. Nine teachers answered a written questionnaire about languages and literacy in education.

Observations took place during a three-week period at the school and in the community. Eighth-grade classroom observations took place with the consent of the subject teacher. Three different lessons were observed, English, Math and Entrepreneurship, in which relevant occurrences relating to language and literacy, either in the activities or in the written materials that were present in the classroom were noted and occasionally recorded. Observations were also made of the learners in more informal contexts during break periods, study time and in between classes. Also noted was the use of written language outside of the classrooms and in the administrative buildings.

3 *Current English curriculum*

Each subject in Namibian schools is given a specific syllabus, which spells out the specific skills and information that must be taught, how one should teach these skills, and the standards by which this work should be evaluated.

The syllabus notes the important role that language and literacy play in education: 'Language, literacy, and communication are regarded as inherent facets of human development and forms the basis of lifelong learning' (NIED 2006: 1). The syllabus also makes clear that English is an important language for these learners to master in interest of the 'multi-lingual and multicultural' society that they live in. The syllabus recognizes that English is not the mother tongue of these learners, but points out that even though English is their second language 'it has the same potential as any other language to act as a catalyst for personal growth and to assist in the development of broad general knowledge, positive attitudes, critical thinking abilities, moral values and aesthetic sensibilities' (NIED 2006: 1).

The syllabus encourages teachers, then, to have lessons over topics such as culture and diversity, equality and HIV/AIDS, fostering a connection between the cultural

³ The term case study refers to the type of naturalistic research in which a specific real-life situation is investigated – in this case the community around the grade 8 pupils in Epako junior secondary school.

identities and the English classroom (NIED, 2006). Teachers are encouraged to practice learner-centered education, to use various teaching methods in order to cater to the needs of individual learners and to involve the learners in all aspects of their education, from planning to evaluation.

In addition to being a learner-centered environment, the syllabus notes that the classroom must be a language-rich environment, particularly in terms of print, saying that every classroom should have a reading corner with a variety of texts, including examples of students own creative writing. Teachers are also encouraged to make learners aware of current information technology (i.e. computers). In order to assure that the English classes are centered on the learners and their experiences, there is no longer an English textbook assigned by the syllabus. Rather teachers are encouraged to create their own lesson modules based on topics relevant to their learners. The teachers then must go seek out relevant texts and make these available to the learners, as well designing assignments and activities for this specific topic.

The development of language skills in the junior primary phase is divided by the syllabus into three separate sections: listening and responding in speech and writing, reading and responding in speech and writing and grammar and usage. For the reading and writing skills, learners are expected to learn to read silently and to read out loud. Learners must also learn to read for information and enjoyment and to use reference materials. Learners must be able to read and write a variety of different genres and text types. In the grammar and usage category, the learners are expected to learn to write using proper spelling, structures and punctuation, as well as show a command of idioms and vocabulary.

For example, Table 1 demonstrates the skills learners are supposed to master in each grade regarding spelling and punctuation. The grade 8 learners must exercise 'reasonable accuracy', the grade 9 learners 'increasing accuracy' and the grade 10 learners 'accuracy'. These terms are not further elaborated upon, so the definition of what could be considered reasonably accurate, increasingly accurate or mostly accurate is left up to the individual teacher. This pattern of defining the required competency can be seen in the other expected competencies as well.

Table 1: Objectives for spelling in the syllabus

at the end of ..., learners should be able to:			
	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10
1. Use spelling and punctuation correctly and properly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exercise reasonable accuracy in phonics and spelling - Use generalizations to spell difficult and unfamiliar words - Use a variety of resources to confirm spelling - Use basic punctuation marks effectively and correctly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exercise increasing accuracy in phonics, spelling and punctuation - Use generalizations to spell difficult and unfamiliar words - Use a variety of resources to confirm spelling - Use a wider variety of punctuation marks effectively and correctly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exercise accuracy in phonics, spelling and punctuation - Demonstrate an established confidence in using different resources to confirm spelling of difficult and less frequently used words - Use most punctuation marks effectively and correctly

The syllabus also provides teachers with tools to use in order to provide a shared standard in marking among the various schools. There are guidelines for teachers in marking, as well as specific rubrics to assist the teachers in their marking of the writing assignments of the learners. The syllabus also provides the grading scale that is to be used and explains what each grade should represent in terms of students competency. The grade scale uses the letters A-G and U(ungraded) as possible marks for the learners, A (90-100% correct scores on the tests used) being the highest grade, G (30-40% correct) and U (0-29% correct) the lowest two. In the final grade for the year, a learner can be considered to pass English with any mark over a G. That means, that a learner only needs to master 30% of the basic competencies in order to be promoted to the next level.

A very interesting feature of this syllabus is the inclusion of a glossary for the teacher to explain terms used throughout the syllabus. The terms described in this glossary are not only to explain terminology specific to the structures of the curriculum, but also to give definitions to English words that are, presumably, unknown or unfamiliar to the teachers. Examples of the words included in this glossary are: *categorizing, communicative, debate, extensively, humorous, imaginary, scan, skim, and syntax.*

4 Languages in the school and the community

As the observations showed, the main area in which English was spoken was the school. Inside the formal classroom setting nearly all the communication teacher and learners was in English. The entire lesson period was carried out in English. In the classroom, the teacher did most of the speaking. Often the teachers either had a summary on the board, which they would introduce at length, or they would read through a text or textbook with the learners, stopping to explain important sections as they went along. All of the texts and written work of the learners was also completed in English. Apart from occasional whispers amongst two students, in the classroom setting not any regular interactions in either mother tongue (or Afrikaans) between the learners and the teachers were heard.

The teachers seemed to recognize that the vocabulary of the learners is often low. Two different methods were observed in which the teachers tried to explain a new English word or concept to the learners: translation and elaboration on students' reactions. In one class the teacher wanted the learners to build a tower out of materials that she had provided them with. As she was explaining the rules of the activity to them, the learners told her that they didn't know what a tower was. After trying to explain the concept further in English, to no avail, she said *toring*, the Afrikaans word for tower, which seemed to give a better understanding to most of the students. In another class a teacher was trying to get her learners to understand the concept of expanding. She asked if the learners knew what expanding was. They said that they didn't know. She asked them to make some guesses as to what it might be. The answers continued to be more precise until the teacher was more or less satisfied with their answer, at which time she gave them the official definition of the word.

In *informal* settings and outside of the classroom, English was hardly used. During break time or in between classes, for example, it would be very rare to hear learners

conversing together in English. For the teachers this also holds true. It seemed that if English was spoken informally between the teachers it was for the most part due to the fact that they did not share a mother tongue or did not speak Afrikaans. In this way for both teachers and learners, exclusive English use was for the most part limited to the formal classroom.

Contrary to what was observed in the classrooms, in the community mainly other languages such as Otjiherero, Khoekhoegowab or Afrikaans were used in conversations, in shops or at the radio. All students reported they spoke another language than English at home. On the radios, that could be heard everywhere on the streets and through the walls of the buildings: mainly languages other than English were used. The only exception outside of school is the television with mainly English programs such as *The Bold and the Beautiful*. The Namibian news is broadcast in English and in various Namibian languages (a different language every day). In government offices English is the official language, but people may and do use their mother tongue or Afrikaans if they are unable to communicate well in English.

Table 2 presents the main outcomes of the questions about how the students and the community members valued the use of English.

Table 2: *Language attitudes of learners and community members*

	Yes	No	Total
Like to speak English?	27	1	28
English important to speak?	28	0	28
English preferred language of education?	27	1	28

Nearly all participants felt a very strong and positive attitude toward English. All but one of the respondents liked to speak English, and all felt that it was important to speak it. The responses can be grouped into three main reasons why the speakers see English as being an important or valuable resource: local communication, international access, and success (compare Juffermans, this volume).

Many expressed English is important for communication with people from different language groups. One participant said, *'When you are at some place people are not speaking your language, you must speak English'*. Others were looking at the international context instead of the local: *'If you not speak English you can't communicate with the people out of the country.'* Another respondent argued *'It is important because I can go even to America. I can get water and accommodation there.'* The third group of respondents was more interested in the success that English would give them accesses to: *'If you do not speak English, you will not get some work.'* Another participant had more lofty ambitions, stating, *'One day if I grow up I want to be a president and I have to know how to speak English.'*

When asked if they liked the idea of having in their mother tongue, or perhaps in Afrikaans, the student and community members feelings toward this topic was overwhelmingly in favor of keeping English as the language of education. One learner even identified learning English as the main reason for going to school: *'You are coming to school to learn English'*.

The teachers also, for the most part, believed that education should be carried out in English, while many also could see the benefits that could come from additional

education in mother tongue. Six of the teachers acknowledge, however, that while they felt that English should remain the language of education, they can see how learning in the mother tongue could have benefits for the learners. One teacher wrote *'English is an international language they need to be taught in English to be able to one day use English wherever they might find themselves'* but she also admitted that if school was in the mother tongue it would be easier for the learners, *'since there is no barriers of a second language to overcome before they can understand the context of a certain subject.'* There was only one teacher who felt that it was not at all beneficial to receive an education in English. He wrote, *'It is better if they [the learners] receive their education in their mother tongue. They will understand the work easier than in English.'* He thought it to be very difficult to learn in one language, but think and reason in another. No teachers thought that education should be offered in Afrikaans, although the older generation is fluent in it and it is still, also, used as a lingua franca between speakers of different language groups. One student sums up quite nicely the sentiments towards Afrikaans: *'It was the language of the people, and now it's out.'*

5 Literacy in the community and at school

5.1 Literacy practices in the community

While the instances of visible literacy were quite limited in Epako, there were a few notable occurrences, namely a large mural, signs on shops and buildings and billboards. The mural is located in a very prominent position in the community, on the main street by the entrance of Epako. On the other side of the wall, there are a series of shorter murals. Some of these paintings are simply images relating to HIV/AIDS, others also include text (see Figure1).

Another use of visible literacy is in the signs painted on local shops, bars clubs, churches and schools, mainly names of the shops and advertisements. And there are the billboards on the highway. All visible literacy in Epako was in English. While written language may not be overly visible in the community, it does still play a role in community practices, albeit to a limited extent.



Figure 1: *'Counseling (counseling) can help you to except (accept) your status'*

The most common text in the homes and community of Gobabis was the bible. Gobabis, and Namibia as a whole, is very religious, with most people calling themselves Christians. On Sunday mornings many people in Gobabis go to one of the churches, of which there are many. Also, many people also attend bible studies throughout the week. In fact, the bible is really the only actual book to be found for sale in all of Gobabis, being sold in many different shops, even in the supermarkets.

In a Catholic Church service, representative for the church environment in Gobabis, many people brought their own bibles with them. The church service was in Afrikaans; most of the bibles were as well. For the singing there were songbooks provided, also in Afrikaans. The service in a Jehovah's Witness church was run, and in large part attended by white Western Jehovah's Witness missionaries. This service was carried out in both Afrikaans and English. There was no translation going on. The songbooks were also available in both English and Afrikaans and people sang the song in whatever language they felt more comfortable with. In the second part of the service, they went over the weekly lesson in the study guide. This lesson consisted of a text, which was read aloud, paragraph by paragraph, with questions being answered by the attendants.

While the bible seemed to be the text that was read most popularly, the most common use of writing seemed to be to write notes or letters to family, acquaintances or friends. With telephone communication still being a luxury, writing a letter can be the quickest and most efficient way of getting a message to someone you do not have time to visit in person. One learner said to me *'When you want to tell him or her something you must write, if they are staying on the farm'*. Some of the letters are indeed written to parents or siblings or friends who stay in another town. Many people, particularly the learners, said that they liked to write letters to tell how they were doing, but also to ask for money in order to buy food or supplies for themselves. These letters are sent most of the time not by post, but rather they send it along with someone who they know that is heading to that area or from the location to Gobabis.

A number of the learners (n: 15) reported that they had storybooks at home and that they loved to read these books in their free time. This did not seem to match up with the observations, however, as in all observations throughout the community no book but the bible had been seen. The teachers confirmed this. One teacher supposed the kids wished they had storybooks at home, but it was not the case. She had asked all of the learners to bring a storybook from home or from the library in town. Barely any learners actually came to class with any kind of book at all. They told her that they didn't have any books at home and did not have time to go to the library. Most of the learners, who did come with reading materials, came with either old textbooks or some kind of technical manuals. Only a few learners actually came with some kind of storybook.

Several learners (n: 13) also said that they had magazines at home. Many mentioned either *'Huisgenoot'*, a ladies magazine in Afrikaans, celebrity magazines like *'Star'* or sport magazines about football. Parts of these magazines could be seen at the posters the students had to make at school. These magazines are not often the most recent edition. In some cases they can be a number of years old, being passed around throughout the community. The word 'magazine' had a broad meaning for the participants. Community members would also call a brochure on HIV/AIDS or a booklet with advertisements a magazine.

The percentage of children who actually have appropriate reading materials at home is probably very small, indicating that the reading that occurs outside of the school context is greatly limited by the lack of reading texts accessible to these learners.

5.2 Literacy practices at school

A number of different written signs and posters can be seen throughout the school environment. On the walls of the school there are three separate murals painted. One is their school slogan, saying Epako JSS 'Success our pride'. Inside the classroom there are also a number of visible texts. The most notable comes in the form of posters, some printed, about for example education or HIV/AIDS prevention, some made by students themselves. These posters mostly involve images cut out of magazines, which are pasted to poster board with some writing at the top (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Poster in the front of a class about 'exesive' (exercise)

Inside the classroom there can also be seen various lists such as class lists or timetables, and posters meant to serve as educational aids, for example where they point out specific grammar rules. There are little to no others texts in the classroom. There are no books available to the learners outside of the textbooks and writing books that they have been provided with at school.

Literacy is a major component of what occurs within the classroom. The textbooks and workbooks are the main literacy tools used by the learners in the classroom. Textbooks are for the most part in good supply at the school. Each subject has its own textbook, approved by the Ministry of Basic Education. However, as mentioned earlier, per the new English syllabus issued in 2007 there is no official textbook for English.

In the Maths class, the teacher wrote a number of questions on the chalkboard that the students were instructed to copy down in their workbooks. Since there was not

enough room on the board, the teacher erased the first questions, telling the students who had not yet finished these, to copy from their neighbors. After all the copying was finished, learners who felt they knew the right answer were invited to the board in order to work out the answer. The other learners were expected to solve the problem in their workbooks. Before the end of class, the teacher reminded the learners that their poster projects (about topics such as lowest common denominator, or prime numbers) were due the next day.

In the English lesson the subject was writing a summary. The teacher first gave a brief explanation of what summaries are before giving the class a definition and writing it on the board, 'A short version of a long text.' She then went on to write some of the key components of summary writing on the board, giving examples of how one could write a summary using the key components of HIV/AIDS as an example. Some of the learners were writing this information in their exercise books while others were not. She then went handing out and reading aloud a sample text (an African folktale) and a summary of the tale. The teacher next passed out another text about the dangers of smoking. The teacher told the learners to write a one-paragraph summary of no more than 100 words about the dangerous effects of smoking. The teacher then read the entire text out loud for the learners. She encouraged the students to first use a rough piece of paper before starting to write in their exercise books. This was homework to be completed for the next class.

In the Entrepreneurship class, the teacher had already written a 'summary' on the board. At the end of the summary, there were a number of questions relating to the topic. The students were told to copy the summary and questions into their exercise books and then answer the questions for the next day. The rest of the period the learners were copying the work off of the board and trying to answer the questions. The majority of the learners finished this work well before the end of the period.

6 *Conclusions: Bridging the gap*

In Gobabis English is, for the most part, restricted to being used within the classroom walls. While English does have status in the country, and this status trickles down into the favorable attitudes toward English, it does not affect the language use within the homes and social settings of these learners. The mastery of English for these learners is also seemingly hindered in some ways by the current curriculum and policies concerning language in education. The current English syllabus, while promoting good and progressive educational practices, seems in many ways to be oblivious to the actual English situation in most Namibian schools.

While English is one skill that learners need to master in education, literacy is perhaps even more crucial for these learners to develop in order to succeed. As has also been discovered by earlier research (Heath, 1983; Prinloo and Breier, 1996; Street, 1998; 1996; 1984) the literacy views and practices employed by communities are different from the standard literacy, which is taught in the schools. A large part of this problem can be attributed to the large rift between the literacy practices used and employed in the classroom and those of the community (Liebowitz, 2005). A main cause for this seems to be the emphasis on Western literacy standards in the curriculum. As demanded by the syllabus, the focus at school is placed on Western literacy standards:

reading formal texts, and producing and understanding how to structure texts, essays, formal letters, and the like. These are literacies that these learners do not encounter outside of the classroom. In grade 8 for example, where many of these learners are still obviously struggling with the ability to understand and interpret the texts they read, more emphasis could be given to teaching how to read a text, or what the function of a text is. Reading for understanding is a literacy skill that these learners do not employ in their literacy practices at home, as there is barely any reading or access to texts outside of the classroom at all. The common letter writing, to give another example, is completely different from the 'proper' letter format these learners are asked to write at school. Instruction in letter writing might start with encouraging learners to write a letter like they would write if they were at home, gradually introducing alternatives and explaining the situations in which such a letter might be used.

Another issue in school literacy is again related to the current English curriculum. The syllabus does not provide any textbooks for the language classes at the junior secondary level. The very classes that are supposed to be improving the literacy skills of the learners are now devoid of the main literacy resource available to the students: textbooks. While the intentions of the syllabus were good, attempting to get the teachers to seek out texts that would be of interest and relevant to their learners, there are major practical shortcomings. First of all, there is a great lack of any text in the community, let alone texts that will be of interest and relevance to teenage learners. Secondly, given the relatively large class sizes at the school, the high cost and unreliable supply of resources like paper and ink, and the limited access to a functioning copy machine, this places an unreasonable demand on the teacher.

As Western discourse norms continue to pervade the rapidly globalizing world, the ability to achieve success is measured by and large by the ability to adapt to these Western standards. Research into understanding local discourses (like in this Namibian case) is important not only for preserving local culture, but also for making these foreign standards accessible, attainable and relevant to the local community and to allow students to strengthen their roots while growing their wings.

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