

The Role of Rural School Libraries on Children's Exposure to Literacy in the Namibian Context

Simon Lumbu

*University of Namibia
slumbu@unam.na*

ABSTRACT

The link between libraries and reading development has been found to be a determining factor in literacy development by scholars the world over. Based on the findings of a study on the constraints encountered by teachers in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in rural combined schools in the Oshana region, this paper analyses the role of school libraries in rural schools in Namibia. The study made use of the qualitative approach to investigate some of the causes of ineffective teaching and learning in rural schools. Each year, the Directorate of National Examinations and Assessments (DNEA) reveals poor academic performance in the National Senior Secondary Certificate examinations, particularly in the English subject. This study found that poor learner reading skills coupled with learners' limited access to reading materials constrained the teaching of ESL. Although there were libraries at each school that participated in the study, physical set-up of the libraries often did not qualify them to be libraries in a prototypical definition of a library. It is introspection worthy to examine the role of these rural school libraries on children's exposure to literacy in an environment of limited reading materials.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND LITERATURE

This paper is based on a study on the constraints encountered by Grade 10 teachers in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in rural combined schools in the Oshana region. Although library access was not the main focus of study, it emerged as a constraint in the teaching of reading skills. This is thus a perspective on the role of rural school libraries on children's exposure to literacy.

Boucher, Julie, Lance and Keith (1992) argue that, in education, the library provides access to education by teaching information skills, by providing leadership and expertise in the use of information and information technologies, and by participating in networks that enhance access to resources outside the school or community. In addition, the library also equips learners with lifelong learning skills, preparing individuals for productive employment, promoting the enjoyment of reading,



promoting functional literacy among adults, preparing individuals for responsible citizenship.

Education based on the use of library resources is said to help realise important aims of intercultural education. That includes provision of non-segregated education, development of reading engagement and literacy achievement among first and second language learners that exceeds that within traditional literacy programmes, multilingual development, integration of information literacy in content learning, empowerment of students as competent library users, and intercultural education based on diverse content learning within arts, social sciences and natural sciences (Pihl, 2012). However, teachers and principals need to collaborate with librarians to realise these aims. Libraries are also said to be providing students reading opportunities and a stimulant reading environment.

Although it is documented that all schools in Namibia have a library, in a nationwide survey on school libraries, Nengomasha, Uutoni and Yule (2012) found that most of these 'so called libraries' were either a storeroom turned into a room with books on shelves, or a classroom with books on shelves. Learners were often denied access to these libraries although they could borrow books. Nengomasha, Uutoni and Yule's (2012) study concluded that schools that had fully equipped and well managed libraries had a superior pass rate.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The study was carried out to investigate the constraints encountered by Grade 10 teachers in teaching English as a Second Language in rural schools. Since it is generally accepted that reading is a crucial component of literacy development, library access formed part of the investigation into the constraints in ESL teaching in rural schools.

2. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach was used to collect data for the case study. Grix (2004) maintains that qualitative research methods allow for in-depth investigation in search of a better, more meaningful understanding of complex issues through the collection and examination of data from several perspectives and the focus on natural settings which are flexible and sensitive to social context.

The population was the Oshana region and was chosen by means of purposive sampling: it has one of the highest numbers of combined schools and that over a period of ten years (2001 – 2011); the National examination results revealed by the Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment indicated poor performance in ESL by learners, especially in combined schools. The sample was selected using the

convenience sampling technique was used to select a sample of ten schools. Thus, a total of ten ESL teachers, one from each school, and the ESL subject advisor participated in the study.

Data were collected by means of a triangulation of two instruments: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Participating teachers as well as the Subject Advisor, were requested to fill in a questionnaire which was pilot tested beforehand at four combined schools in the Oshikoto region. The collected data were further supplemented by desktop research.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Access to libraries

The participants' access to libraries emerged as a constraint to the teaching of ESL in the Oshana region. Libraries are resource centres that provide both reading environments and materials. The participants were asked whether they had access to library facilities. As Figure 1 illustrates, at least ten of the respondent had access to library facilities; only one participant did not have access to library facilities.

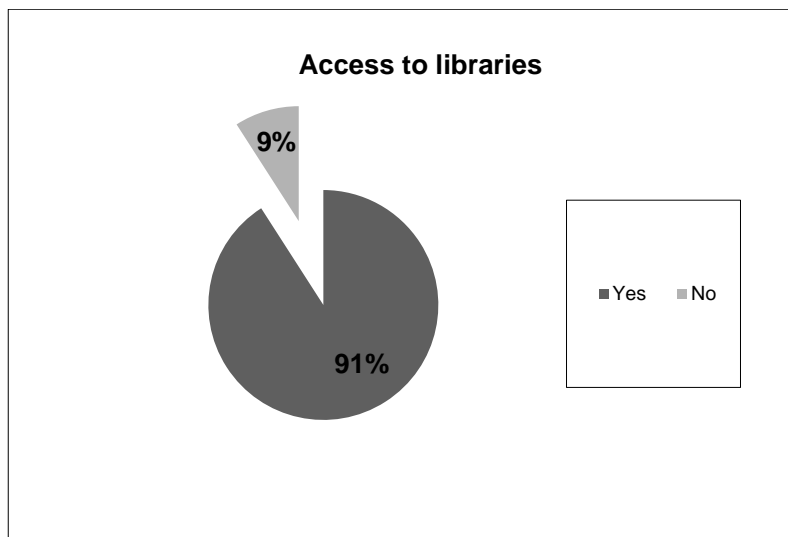


Figure 1: Access to libraries

Moreover, it was found that seven of the participants visited libraries 2 – 3 times a week; three visited the library only once a term/year, while one participant visited the library 4 – 5 times a week. It seemed as if libraries were accessible to the participants. However, when data from questions 24.1 and 24.2 of the questionnaire were triangulated, it appeared that the participants did not have access to full libraries. These were school

libraries.

As Figure 5 shows, the ten participants that had access to library facilities had libraries on their school premises which were not proper libraries. The libraries referred to by the participants were mere store-rooms with old books and prescribed school materials that were no longer in use. It was usually the institutional workers, such as cleaners, who looked after the 'mini-libraries' although teachers monitored the management of the mini-libraries. Learners were not allowed to enter these mini-libraries, although they could borrow books. Newspapers and magazines were absent from the mini-libraries. Due to the schools' distance from towns and tarred roads, daily newspapers and magazines often did not reach the schools.

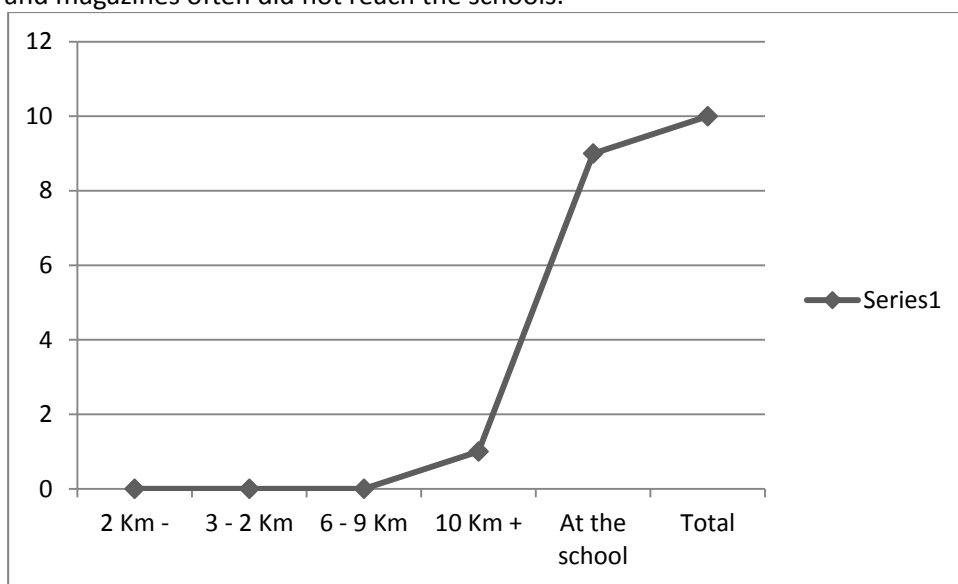


Figure 2: Distance to nearest library

Figure 2 shows the distance participants had to cover to reach a library. Participants sometimes had to travel ten kilometres or more to access the closest library. This is the same distance learners had to cover to access a full library. Distance can be considered to be a limitation to participants' library access considering that not all of them had cars. When the distance from libraries is combined with the working hours of teachers in rural areas, 08h00 to 16h00, it is clear that teachers and learners' access to libraries is constrained.

The lack and inaccessibility of reading and teaching materials are constraints. Teachers and learners do not have access to daily newspapers, magazines or the internet. Only mini-libraries are available in schools. Learners are not allowed inside these libraries which are usually poorly equipped. Fully-equipped normal libraries are more than 10 km from schools. Schools in rural areas had poorly-equipped mini-libraries that were the size of a store-room. These mini-libraries were the closest libraries to learners and

teachers as fully-equipped libraries were more than 10 kilometres away. The lack of library access could have a negative effect on the development of a reading culture among learners and teachers. This is similar to Nengomasha, Uutoni and Yule (2012)'s finding that rural school libraries are both under equipped and poorly managed.

Furthermore, the study found that although almost every school had a library at the school, the library was usually the size of a storeroom. It was also found that books in the libraries were usually out-dated, dirty and constituted mainly old textbooks and old prescribed reading materials that were no longer used. It was the institutional workers, such as cleaners, that took care of these libraries and learners were not allowed inside the libraries. Idbemi (2011) sees a lack of facilities at a school a constraint in teaching. Igbemi's finding is supported by the findings of this study when ESL teachers and their learners are deprived of access to reading materials usually available in a library.

Apart from visiting these mini-libraries, some teachers travelled more than ten kilometres to access a fully-equipped library. Libraries were in towns, such as Ondangwa, Ongwediva and Oshakati, where learners went only in the rarest cases. From the findings, it is thus clear that since it was costly for teachers to go to these fully-equipped libraries, they seldom went there. Teachers and learners in rural areas have, therefore, little benefit from the advantages of libraries, a possible contribution to the poor reading culture among learners in rural areas. The establishment of fully-equipped community or school libraries might help improve the reading culture in both teachers and learners, which could ultimately reduce reading as a constraint in ESL teaching.

3.2 Reading Culture

One of the major constraints teachers encountered was low reading levels of learners. Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with what they referred to as 'below-grade' reading ability of most of their learners. Teachers commented on learners' reading culture as presented verbatim below:

- "Most learners are not fully developed in reading skills. They do not have a culture of reading. They do not like to use during and after lessons.
- "Reading, some learners can read but in most cases not all of them."
- "Reading with understanding is lacking."
- "Another thing our learners are not interesting in reading most of the time are at cuca-chops, no magazines or tv to help them, don't like to speak English."
- "Learners come to grade 10 without knowing what they were supposed to know at primary and upper primary phases. E.g. not knowing the basics of English, reading, writing and even listening."
- "Through reading different medias like newspapers, magazines, borrow books from the library, established reading corner, although learners at deep remote areas destroyed everything (books disappeared) – using



dictionaries and of down meanings of words, do debating, have debating club at school, drama society too. But still learners show lack of vocabulary. The way forward: continue to speak, read many English books and others for the sake of improvement.”

Possible reasons for the low levels of reading ability and the apparent lack of a reading culture could be associated with the nature of available reading materials and / or the unavailability of reading materials – including newspapers. As discussed earlier, the school libraries were found to be the size a storeroom and contained only old textbooks, which suggests that these were the reading materials available to learners. It is generally accepted that children’s reading is captivated by the provision of reading materials that are within their interests. It is thus not surprising that learners’ reading skills were considered ‘below-grade’. Krashen (2004) argues that better school libraries result in increased reading opportunities which favour reading development.

3.3 Exposure and Interaction

The absence of fully equipped libraries suggests that learners [and teachers] have opportunities for reading. Consequently, due to the nature of the available reading materials, teachers have limited opportunities to not only provide reading support but also to expose learners to wider reading. Reading is thus confined to textbooks, classrooms and school premises.

3.4 Parental Modelling

The socio-economic make-up of communities in rural areas of the Oshana region is such that the literacy level of the majority of the people is low. Few people, especially the elderly (guardians of most learners), have significant reading ability. It is thus unlikely that parents would buy newspapers or other reading materials. As such, reading cannot be regarded as a social activity which children and adults can share; it is rather regarded as an activity that is engaged in a ‘necessary’ basis. Parents and children are likely to read only when they have to and almost never for pleasure.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Due to the small size of the school libraries in rural areas, learners are not allowed to enter. The room usually does not have chairs or desks and is cared for by either a teacher or an institutional worker (cleaner). While the provision of libraries in schools is necessary, the structure of current school libraries in rural schools is inhibiting negative perceptions of libraries by learners. Learners do not have access to a normal library and learn to know a library as a room equivalent to their school library which is ‘teacher-access only’. They are also likely to perceive a library as a ‘not so useful’ centre.

As a result, even when the opportunity arises, learners are less likely to enter a library.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is thus recommended that a study be carried out to determine the reading levels of Grade 10 learners and the relationship between library access and reading ability. There is also a need to establish more community libraries to maximise reading opportunities for learners. Finally, the present school libraries, as described in this paper, do not qualify to be referred to as school libraries – hence the term storeroom could be more appropriate.



REFERENCES

- Ambrowatti, S. (2009). *Some constraints in the English teaching and learning process at S D Muhammadiyah Girikerto*. Master's Thesis. Yogyakarta State University: Indonesia
- Boucher, J. J. & Lance, K. C. (1992). The Roles of Libraries in Education. *ERIC Journal* {<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED354919>} {Retrieved on 30/08/2014}
- Grix, J. (2004). *The Foundations of Research*. Birmingham: Macmillan.
- Igbemi, M. J. (2011). Constraints in teacher education and effects on teaching and learning of home economics in primary schools. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*. Vol. 1(3): p. 2240-0524.
- Krashen, S. (2004). *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Portsmouth: Heineman
- Nengomasha, C., Uutoni, W. E., & Yule (2012). School libraries and their role in promoting a reading culture: a case study of Caprivi, Omusati, Omaheke, Karas and Khomas regions in Namibia. *Journal of Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1.