

## **The influence of English in the Namibian examination context**

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### **Abstract**

Firstly, background information on the history of Namibian education since Independence with the implementation of the new Language Policy that prescribes the use English as medium of instruction from Grade 4. The examination system where candidates write the first of end of Basic Education examination in Grade 10 and how they progress from there to Grades 11 and 12 will then shortly be explained. The standard of the English language proficiency of teachers according to a survey will be brought in to explain what the situation regarding the use of English as medium of instruction in the classroom is. Also, the use of mother tongue instead of English as medium of instruction and the reasons for that will be dealt with. It is important to understand this in the light of the background information to see what is eventually expected in the examinations of Grade 10 and 12. Comments made by Chief Examiners in their annual Examiner's Reports in Grade 10 will help to understand the level of proficiency of candidates. Their English language proficiency makes it very difficult for candidates to understand the questions in the papers and to be able to answer the examination papers successfully. The most important part will deal with the results of a tracer study (2003) that compared the relation of results in Grade 10 to those achieved in Grade 12, the final school examination. It will be discussed with regard to the drop in English language marks, marks of home languages and the relation of the English marks to the candidates' overall performance in Grade 12. The implications of these findings with regard to the Language Policy will be brought in line. Possible reasons for these results and recommendations in the light of the language policy will be touched on.

### **Key words**

Language policy - Medium of instruction - Language proficiency - Examination results - Tracer Study

### **Introduction**

After Namibia became independent from South Africa in 1990, the ruling

party, SWAPO (Southwest Africa People's Organisation), chose English as the official language. Although a mere 0,8% of the population are in fact first language speakers of English this was overall not an unpopular choice. This decision was outlined Article 3 (Language) in the Constitution (MIB 1990:3).

The new Ministry of Basic Education realised that a new language policy for schools was urgently needed. This policy had to promote the use of the mother tongue and English in schools. As a result, the document *The language policy for schools: 1992 - 1996 and beyond* (MEC 1993) was formulated and implemented. The national language policy for schools in Namibia (MEC 1993) stipulates that the medium of instruction in Grades 1 - 3, the Junior Primary phase, should be the mother tongue and English will be taught as a subject and from Grade 4 onwards the medium of instruction should change to solely English.

The Namibian language policy as published (MEC 1993) is a combination of an additive and subtractive model of language in education policy. During the initial implementation, the policy followed a gradual transition or late-exit language programme. Currently, it is a subtractive or early-exit language programme.

Although the language policy states that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction in Grades 1 to 3 there is a provision that allows schools to opt out, if the necessary resources are not available. Some education planners and parents adhered to the assumption that the earlier a child is confronted with a foreign language (English), the sooner the language will be mastered and therefore many Namibian primary schools opted for English as medium of instruction from Grade 1.

Many learners fail to attain the minimum language proficiency in English before the introduction of linguistically (and thereby cognitively) more demanding, English-medium subjects in Grade 4. It is often the case that they do not reach the minimum level of English language proficiency required when they enter the Junior Secondary phase of school, at which time they should really be functioning at an intermediate level. As a result of problems beginning at primary school, learners continue to lag behind their required level of language proficiency and the majority never really reach the language proficiency in English which their age and school level demand (Jones 1996:285).

In a recent investigation at one of the schools in Windhoek where 204 Grade 8 learners' literacy and numeracy skills level were tested, shocking figures came to light. It was found that 22,4% of those learners were not functionally literate in English and only marginally skilled to a Grade 6 level.

Furthermore, 49,2% learners' numeracy skills were lower than Grade 7 level. An interesting fact is that these learners whom did not achieve the required literacy or numeracy level for Grade 8, come from schools where English and not the mother tongue was chosen as the medium of instruction from Grade 1.

Many parents have changed their home language to English because they believe it is to the benefit of their children. Yet English is the first language of only 0,8% of the population of Namibia. This means that teachers, who are not native speakers of English, teach the language in schools in Namibia. Therefore the English proficiency acquired by Namibians is in fact at a second language level. Alexander (2000: 11 & 12) argues that in order to support an education system based on English as medium of instruction, a teaching corps of native English speaking or proficient second-language speakers of the global language is needed. Conversely, this means that, as in the past, learners who are not taught by teachers proficient in English will not have the necessary foundation on which to build their English language skills. Indeed, Alexander (2000:12) is of the opinion that if learners from their first school year are taught in English by teachers not proficient in English, they will have problems in reading and writing either their home language or the language of teaching, and will therefore emerge as semilinguals.

### **English language proficiency of teachers**

With English as official language and medium of instruction, it is important to investigate the teachers' English language proficiency, since most teachers in Namibia went through the old system in the pre-independence era when the medium of instruction was Afrikaans. Before independence, Afrikaans was the official language, and therefore Namibians did not have to use English in their everyday life, as is the case today, especially in urban centres, such as Windhoek.

The English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP 1999) conducted a national survey on the English Language proficiency of Namibian teachers in the three phases, junior primary, senior primary and junior secondary.

The results across the three phases show that the junior secondary teachers performed better than their upper primary counterparts, who in turn performed better than their lower primary colleagues.

With regard to the general language proficiency of Namibia's teachers, it appears that Reading and Usage (Grammar) are the two weakest areas. Many of the teachers do not have a sufficiently high proficiency in reading skills to

enable them to study further at a diploma or higher level. When learners are taught through the medium of an English of which the use of grammar is incorrect, it is potentially detrimental to the learners' development.

In addition, many teachers, especially those teaching in the rural areas, have poor teaching qualifications, and they hardly ever hear or use English in their communities. Therefore, it is not uncommon, more the practice, that teacher revert back to the mother tongue as medium of instruction when explaining new concepts to the learners.

One must remember that teachers in the lower primary phase whose English language proficiency are believed to be the worst, have to prepare learners for English as medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards.

Language proficiency appears to affect examination results. Again, as is the case with other problematic components of the system, language proficiency shows up as the factor bedevilling the achievement of satisfactory outcomes.

### **Examination system and results**

#### **Junior Secondary Certificate Examination**

The first external examination for certification purposes takes place after 10 years in Grade 10, the Junior Secondary Certificate Examination (JSC), when the candidates will be approximately 16 years of age. According the Pilot Curriculum for the Junior Secondary Phase (MEC 1996) each candidate write examination in 9 subjects. For admission to Grade 11 the number of points scored in their six best subjects, which must include English Second or First language are taken into account. Points are awarded for subject grades as follows: A=7; B=6; C=5; D=4; E=3; F=2; G=1 and Ungraded score no points.

The Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture decide each year what the minimum required points would be. The ideal is 27 points, in 1993 the minimum required points were 19 and it has gradually increase until 2003 when it was 23 points.

The first 22 752 full time Grade 10 candidates sat for this examination in 1993 and that number has now risen to 29 056 in 2003. Roughly, 50% of these candidates achieve the minimum points to proceed to Grade 11.

When looking at the examination results they in fact show that, except for the languages, where the average percentage is relatively high, the results of the past five years are in fact alarming. The reason why the averages for the home languages are so high, can be attributed to the fact that candidates

are instructed in a language they know best and feel comfortable with.

There is indeed something to be said about the differences in average percentages of the first languages and the content subjects, where learners are taught through the medium of English. In some of the key subjects, the Grade 10 Examiners' Reports of 2002 (MBEC 2002) touch on the issue that language is a stumbling block for learners when answering the question papers. One sometimes wonders whether learners have really not mastered the work, or whether they simply do not understand what the examination questions require of them. We consider a few comments made by examiners in this regard:

History: "The majority of candidates especially those in the rural areas did not encounter problems in the paper. A large total did however have problems with English which brought about that they could not express themselves properly and could not understand what was required of them."

Geography Paper 1: "Possible reasons for the poorer performances are:

- Poor command of English with subsequent poor understanding of questions, instructions and an inability to express themselves sufficiently."

"Poor command of English resulted in candidates not being able to write coherent, sensible sentences where they were lead (sic) to 'explain' or 'suggest'.

Geography Paper 2: "Another contributing factor was the poor comprehension/interpretation of the questions and information and/or ignoring of instructions. This made it very difficult for the learners to express themselves, resulting in answers being completely off the point or irrelevant."

The point of this section, however, is that language proficiency also appears to affect examination results. Though there may be other possible explanations, the subtractive language policy seems at least to be compounding the problems in what is already a difficult context.

Higher/International General Certificate for Secondary Examination (H/IGCSE)

At the moment this examination is still the Cambridge International Examination (CIE) that is used as the final year examination, Grade 12. Namibia is in the process of localizing this examination and by the year 2007 the Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment will be responsible for this examination.

Although most of the papers are at the moment still set at CIE, the local languages and Technology subjects have been set and marked in Namibia since 1995. Gradually, due to the localization process, CIE trainers have been training Namibian examiners to mark the internationally set papers locally.

In the H/IGCSE examination learners do not need an average to pass, but receive grades A to G. There are two benchmarks used to determine whether candidates are successful or not in Grade 12. The minimum points required to apply for a job in government is 20 points and to enter for tertiary studies at the University of Namibia (UNAM), Polytechnic and Teacher Training Colleges it is 25 points. In both cases an E in IGCSE English in Grade 12 is required.

### **Tracer study**

In 2003 a tracer study was conducted to determine the performance of Grade 12 candidates who achieved the minimum required points in Grade 10 as determined by the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture. Candidates who achieved the minimum required points were traced to Grade 12.

Schools in all seven regions were selected to ensure that all regions were equally represented. In the end 103 schools (91,4%), including government and private schools, out of a possible 113 schools were included in the survey.

### **Results Of The Tracer Study**

#### **(a) Performance in English Second Language**

The performance of a sample of 250 candidates from 61 schools in JSC English Second Language was compared with their performance in English Second Language IGCSE in Grade 12.

According to the results the majority of candidates, 89% of the sample, dropped two grades or more in English from Grade 10 to Grade 12. Only 10% of the candidates retained the same grade.

Two factors must be kept in mind; one is that 50% of the marks are contributed by continuous assessment (CASS) in Grade 10, whereas in Grade 12 there is only the examination mark. The second factor is that the better candidates have enrolled for HIGCSE English Second Language.

This shows that candidates are assessed only on an independent external examination they are not able to perform in English that is also the official language and the medium of instruction.

#### **(b) Performance in subjects**

The Grade 12 results in English and six other subjects show that most of the candidates achieved Grades E to G. This is even more apparent in content subjects such as Life Science, Geography and History. Once again, the

difference between the results of Grade 10 and 12 is obvious and as said before in Grade 10 a total of 50% of the mark is a contribution from the CASS mark.

In the content subjects good language skills are required to express thoughts and arguments and this is where the candidate's language proficiency, or lack thereof, fails them.

### **(c) English Language performance linked to Grade 12 performance**

After realising the tendency that most candidates dropped, on average, two grades from Grade 10 to Grade 12 in English Second Language it was deemed important to investigate the role English plays in the results in relation to the achievements of candidates' overall performance in Grade 12.

The sample comprised 500 candidates from 85 schools. When looking at Table 3 one must keep in mind that the majority of candidates dropped two or more grades as explained earlier.

#### **F GRADE**

A sample of 200 Grade 12 candidates who achieved an F-grade in English Second Language IGCSE in Grade 12 (probably a D or E in Grade 10), only a mere 6% were able to achieve more than 20 points in their six subjects in Grade 12 and thereby qualify for a job in government. An alarming total of 94% of the sample were not able to achieve the minimum benchmark of 20 points in Grade 12.

#### **E GRADE**

It seems as if candidates who achieve an E-grade and better in English Second Language IGCSE in Grade 12 (probably a C or D in Grade 10) are better equipped to complete the IGCSE examination successfully.

A total of 12% of the sample of 150 Grade 12 candidates were able to achieve more points than the bench mark of 25 points and thereby qualified to be enrolled at a tertiary institution in Namibia.

61% of the sample (including the 12% mentioned above) was able to achieve more than the first benchmark of 20 points and thereby qualify for a job in government. But still, 39% were not able to achieve a minimum of 20 points in Grade 12.

#### **C and D-GRADES**

Only 11% of the sample of 75 candidates who achieved a D-grade in Grade 12 achieved fewer points than the benchmark of 20 points, but 42%

were successful in achieving the 25-point benchmark.

All the candidates receiving a C-grade in English Second Language IGCSE in Grade 12 were successful in achieving either the 20 or 25 points benchmark; in fact 69% achieved the 25-point benchmark.

These results of the survey enforce the notion that the grades achieved by candidates in Grade 12 are influenced by their English language ability. It seems obvious that the current requirement of a F-grade to be achieved English Second Language in Grade 10, is not good enough to be successful in five or more subjects in Grade 12.

### **Conclusion**

The facts? English is the official language of Namibia. The Language Policy enforces that the sole medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards shall be English. The Namibian teachers' English language proficiency, especially in the Upper Primary phase, is not up to standard. The examiners of Grade 10 complain that English is playing a role in the candidates' results. The Continuous Assessment mark (CASS) that contributes 50% of the final examination mark in Grade 10 does not reflect the true picture. The results of the tracer study clearly show the effect English plays in the overall performance of Grade 12 candidates.

These are the facts. Who suffers the most? That answer is obvious. The reason? A subtractive or early-exit language policy can only be implemented successfully if all the necessary resources, manpower (i.e. teachers with good English language proficiency), support structures and enough funds are available and utilised effectively. The big question remains: Will the Namibian government accept that their policy is not successful and make the necessary changes?

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