

#### 4. Causes of the underachievement of Grade 12 learners of English: A case study of a rural school in the Oshikoto region, Namibia

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##### Abstract

*This study assessed the causes of the underachievement of Grade 12 learners of English focusing on rural school in the Oshikoto region, Namibia. In January 2016, the Namibian (National) Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary Level (NSSCOL) examination results were announced. The results were slightly decreased in the percentage of graded entries, from 93.9 % in 2014 to 92.9% in 2015. The survey showed that teachers lacked knowledge of subject methodology and knowledge of subject content. Classrooms were overcrowded, creating more challenges for the teachers to assist individual learners. Learners lacked self-motivation and confidence in the subject, as English was stigmatised as a foreign language which was regarded as hard to learn. The school lacked teaching and learning resources. Parental support was not practised as most parents were uneducated. It was recommended that there was a strong need for regular in-service training for teachers, English teaching and learning resources, for emphasising the importance of parental education and awareness sensitisation at all levels. The lower primary curriculum needed to address the second language problems faced by these learners and improve the ways of tackling language difficulties. This included rigid language usage as from primary level (in rural area schools) and, finally, the government needed to build more secondary schools with hostels to accommodate more learners, as this could solve the problem of overcrowding of classrooms.*

**Keywords:** English as a second language (ESL), the monitor hypothesis, rural schools and underachievement

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the study

According to the National Examiners' report for ESL from 2007 to 2011, Namibian students performed poorly in the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary level (NSSCO), ESL examinations. It is of importance for the learners to be proficient in English, the official language, at the end of the seven-year primary school; they should be able to gain access to further education as well as to the language of wider communication in line with the language policy for schools in Namibia.

To address these critical language problems, the Namibian government introduced an English language proficiency test for all its teachers, both in public and private schools. The English language proficiency test was a national initiative which was required to be taken by all school principals and teachers across the country at public and private schools. There were 104 public and 23 private schools in the Khomas region that facilitated the test with a 99.8 % attendance rate, according to the Khomas Region Education Director. The report continued to describe the disappointment of the Director that some principals and teachers performed poorly in the English language test.

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In the report, the Director added that if teachers and principals were not 100% proficient in Namibia's national language and the medium of instruction at schools, they would not be able to transfer the required knowledge and skills at an acceptable standard. The test was aimed at determining the level of mastery of English language by school principals and teachers. The results were used to provide assistance to teachers and school principals to upgrade their skill. The University of Namibia (UNAM) currently runs this training programme. The government initiated the English proficiency test, which was intended to determine the training needs of teachers and place them in their appropriate continuing professional development course. There has been much interest to see the progress of this programme. Will this training programme enhance the language proficiency of the learners in rural Namibia?

## 1.2. Statement of the problem

Despite English being the medium of instruction in the Namibian schools, the country still experiences a high failure rate when it comes to English as a Second Language (ESL) in Grade 12. This has been the main challenge in the rural schools. What is also surprising is that the learners perform exceptionally well in their other subjects except English. As the results, learners who took English as a second language failed each year and this prevented many learners from continuing their tertiary education. They were given a chance to rewrite examination through the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) or The University Centre for Studies in Namibia (TUCSIN,) because Grade 12 cannot be repeated on a fulltime mode.

With the poor passing rates in ESL, this research looked into some of the contributing factors among the Grade 12 ESL learners in a rural school setting. The research also aimed at evaluating whether the poor results were due to the teachers' incompetence, the learners themselves, the socio-economic factors or other unknown factors. Although the decline of the end of year examinations results for the Grade 12 learners was reported in the newspapers, no one has properly justified the main causes of the failure rates thus far. According to The Namibian dated 13 January 2016, the Education Minister announced Grade 12 Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary Level Examinations. It was revealed that results slightly decreased in the percentage of graded entries from 93.9 % in 2014 to 92.9% in 2015. The newspaper reported that if measured against Namibia's fourth National Development Plan (NDP4) desired outcome number two, which aimed for the increase in the percentage of learners meeting admission requirements to universities on 25 points from 29.5% in 2011 to 45.0% in 2016, who did not meet the target. With such information, it's therefore empirical to conduct research that can outline the main contributing factors. In Namibia, the learners begin their education as early as 6 years and can complete their secondary education as early as 17 years. However, due to several factors and circumstances, some learners do not even make it up to Grade 8, which is the first grade of secondary school.

This research aimed to identify the problems that affected the learning process and the subject delivery methods. With the results of the teacher's proficiency test, one can assume that the problem lies with the teachers' capability, because the teachers also did not undergo through the fundamentals of English teaching right during their primary education or it could be that they had been inadequately trained. Are these teachers who are responsible for teaching the language thoroughly trained and equipped to deliver a high standard of learning?

The English language proficiency test that was written by all teachers and school principals country wide in September 2013 was part of the education ministry's strategy to identify further training needs and was aimed at determining the impacts on the learners' results. It has been reported that more than 70% of teachers in senior secondary schools could not read and write at a basic level of English. Among junior secondary teachers, 63% had a poor grasp of English, which was jeopardising their teaching, the report said. What is the situation specifically in rural schools? Against this background, we were motivated to conduct this study.

### 1.3. Research objectives

This research was conducted to determine the major causes of underachievement reflected in the Grade 12 results in ESL in rural schools. Specifically, the research was conducted to:

- identify the major causes of under achievement in ESL in rural schools
- assess the specific English language problems faced by the learners during lessons in rural schools
- evaluate the challenges experienced by English teachers when teaching the subject in rural schools

## 2. Review of literature

Namibia has chosen to use English as the official language and the language is to be used by all Namibians in offices, schools and when conducting business. This small research project lays emphasis on the importance of the English language that is used in Namibia, as well as on how it has developed into the system. It includes the views of scholars and researchers on the impact it has on the education of Namibians, the importance of L2 and the challenges of delivering it effectively in rural schools.

### 2.1. Is English an official language of Namibia or the medium of instruction?

It is undeniable that education is the backbone of life and an important aspect to all. Every country strives to develop its education standards. Education is the foundation of any progressive nation, which can only be attained through developing this sector. Therefore, the Namibian government is constantly developing strategies towards the education system and standard.

A language policy for an independent Namibia was formulated in SWAPO's policy document titled *Towards Education for All* (UNIN, 1981). In this policy document, English, which was by that time spoken by only 0.8% of the population (1991 Census), was chosen to be the only official language in Namibia. Usually, the national language is also the official language of a country that is, the language used in government and courts of law, and official business. However, in multilingual nations, there may be more than one official language, and in such cases the term "official language" is often used rather than "national language". In a multilingual country like Namibia, there is not only one "national language".

Mari-nova-Todd (2003) concludes from reviewed studies that the availability of and the access to good L2 input and instruction produce the best outcomes in L2 and ensure native-like proficiency. In addition, Mari-nova-Todd (2003) indicates that the sooner a learner is exposed to the L2 in an environment rich with L2 interaction and input, the more time a learner spends on a task, and the longer the learner is resident in a L2-dominated environment, they are better predictors of L2 acquisition. In our rural area context, learners only engage in English during the English lessons at school and their L2 usage is limited and minimal due to the unavailability of language users in the environment. Mari-nova-Todd (2003) further notes that appropriate circumstances and quality instruction could lead to native-like competence in L2 in both younger and older learners. In addition, modelling is very effective, for example, using strategies to access meaning when reading. The teacher should model the strategies for which the learners eventually need to take themselves responsibility.

On the other hand, Olivier (2011) asserts that the high failure rates of the Grade 12 learners in Namibia are related to the low levels of English proficiency of both teachers and learners in the country.

In the Namibian context, the teachers themselves find the usage of L2 challenging; therefore, they are not capable to deliver this language teaching to the best of their capabilities, which is caused by their poor knowledge. However, research has shown that being taught in one's mother tongue at an early age helps one to make sense of what one is being taught. This enables one to conceptualise better and acquire writing and reading skills, which are best acquired in the early years of learning teaching the mother tongue in schools also helps to promote the language and cultural identity of the learners.

## 2.2. The effect of the national language policy on Grade 12 English as a second learners' language

Previously the language policy of education recommended the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction from Grades 1 to 3, with Grade 4 as a transitional grade, and therefore, a mixed medium grade. English is used as the medium of instruction from Grades 5 to 12. Thirteen national languages are used as media of instruction in the lower primary phase. National languages are taught as subjects from Grade 4 onwards. Only the San languages are not yet fully developed for use in schools in the upper phases.

The Namibian education system has been evolving since independence, although the dream of equal education for all remains tantalisingly distant unreached. Pupils spend their first 7 years at primary school from age 6 where they are promoted from grade to grade on the basis of their competencies. Secondary education takes place in Namibia in two phases, of which the first three years are spent in a middle school environment that culminate in the junior secondary school certificate examination. After that, learners have a choice between continuing with an academic curriculum or focusing on vocational training preparation.

English was never a colonial language in Namibia. However, English was chosen by SWAPO as the official language at independence due to a wish to have a language other than Afrikaans and German, as both these languages were part of Namibia's colonial and apartheid history. This decision was made clear in the 1990 Constitution and also in the language policy for schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993).

Swarts (2002) assumes that the effectiveness of learning and teaching in Namibia is limited by the fact that teachers and learners are working in a second language environment in which exposure to English in the community is low. Swarts (2002) further notes that in the Namibian education system, teachers struggle to give instructions in English, particularly in the remote areas, because of their own limited exposure to the English language. Ninnes (2011) also presents that in order to systematically address the problem, currently Namibia Institute for Educational Development (NIED) is developing L2 literacy materials incorporating readers, grammars, orthographies, glossaries, and literature resources.

## 2.3. Challenges to deliver the subject effectively

Malesky (2007) asserts that the Namibian education system has come under attack for the past 15 years as thousands of learners fail each year, especially in Grades 10 and 12. According to the report, each year around 15, 000 Grade 10 pupils fail and only an estimated 2,000 or so of these return to formal education after completing part-time studies. The Ministry of Education recently launched the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP). This is a multi-billion-dollar plan to overhaul the country's education sector. The first phase ended in 2011, with a total cost of N\$20.3 billion to implement. One retired school teacher and former politician (a respondent to this research) said that the language policy, in place for over 20 years, had failed to deliver widespread competence. The same respondent also said that public figures, such as politicians, struggled with the language themselves and that the limited language skills of teachers had "poisoned thousands of children". Another education commentator said that there was a direct link between the low English language skills of teachers and students' examination results. Nearly 50% of 16-year-olds failed the junior secondary school certificate in 2010. The education commentator called for "drastic" action to be taken in this regard to improve the situation before it is late.

The performance of English L2 learners in Namibian secondary schools is also affected by conditions within both the school environment and the society. Many English L2 learners are subjected to poverty and low parental expectations.

According to Harris (2011), the post-independence adoption of English was a challenging decision because only 8% of Namibians were English speakers, whereas the rest of the population used their home language and Afrikaans as the language of communication in their daily lives.

The Namibian newspaper dated 29 February 2016, titled "On the job training for teachers", mentioned that the government spent N\$15 million on the reintroduction of a diploma programme for under and unqualified teachers at junior primary school level which started in May 2016. There were around 4208 unqualified and under qualified teachers from all the regions in Namibia. This programme catered for 1000 student-teachers in the first year which would be offered as an in-service programme under the Faculty of Education at the University of Namibia. The Minister of Education said that the shortage of qualified teachers, especially at the foundation level of the education system, was seen as one of the factors preventing pupils from achieving the expected level of literacy and numeracy in the early years. In addition, the Minister of Higher Education said that the recently the Faculty of Education at UNAM conducted a research in 28 schools in Namibia, which revealed a number of issues impacting the low quality of education, such as low content knowledge by teachers, difficulty with the implementation of the lower primary literacy and numeracy curriculum, poor knowledge of various teaching and assessment strategies and finally a lack of instructional materials, among others.

The World Bank (2005) reported that economic factors have also hindered the progress of ESL in Namibia. The major factors include poverty and child and female-headed households. William (2004) suggests that learners, who are hungry, depressed, stressed and living in a hostile environment, usually fail to perform optimally to their best levels; hence it has resulted in these learners performing poorly in English L2. Van Avermaet (2006) also argues that socio-economic disparities influence children's English L2 learning.

Conteh-Morgan (2002) indicates that the learners experienced several problems when writing ESL examination papers. Some of these problems included the learners' inability to understand basic instructions contained in the L2 examination papers, their failure to recognise the demands of L2 items used in the examination, difficulties in the interpretation of resources provided in questions, inadequate English language proficiency and communication skills, limited knowledge of subject matter and difficulties associated with investigative skills.

In a report of the Namibian newspaper dated April 15, 2016, titled "Poor language proficiency and language in school," Mule (2016) wrote that schools needed to provide good English language skills from primary through to secondary level. Reading requires a systematic approach and proper reading is the key to academic and learning success. Mule (2016) suggested that the insufficient English language proficiency and poor reading skills in English are the major contributing factors to poor academic performance in many rural area schools, mainly Grade 10 and Grade 12. He put the blame on the undeveloped phonological process often not developed in learners. Mule emphasised that language is the essential precondition for knowing, a process whereby experience becomes knowledge. It forms a structural continuity throughout the process of learning. He expressed his concern that, it was a norm in the rural and remote junior primary schools that learners were introduced to the English language only during the English lessons and this is where it ended. There is no high thinking order skill taught in remote and rural secondary schools; the teaching context is well above the learners' knowledge.

#### **2.4. Causes of poor performance in English among Namibian students**

Sibanda (2016) argues that language is one of the most powerful tools we have as humans. Without it, we cannot have thoughts expressible to others, generate ideas comprehensible to

others nor could we engage in activities that commonly take place in the society we build ourselves. Language is very important in education and for the future of this nation. Education is carried out largely through the medium of language, thus language is very significant in the education process. Language is not everything in education, but without language, everything is nothing in education. Language plays a crucial role in learning, and if the learner is handicapped in the language of instruction, then learning may not take place at all as the instructor or teacher and learner will not be effectively communicating.

The English language is the instrument of communication in the Namibian post-primary institutions, higher institutions of learning as well as being the official language. Therefore, secondary school students need effective English language skills to function properly or perform better at school. A person is functionally literate when they acquire the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable them to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in the culture or group. It is the medium of instruction in our schools and a compulsory school subject that must be passed at all levels of education in Namibia. Having difficulty in grasping fully the contents and concepts of the various subjects of the curriculum taught in the target language seems to be one of the most serious problems that English second language students face in their particular course of study. This might be due to their poor performance in English language, which may have negative consequences on students' overall performance.

The dominance of the mother tongue is regarded as one of the causes of poor performance in the English language. Namibian students are surrounded by a complex linguistic situation that enable them to learn their first indigenous language and they are required to have a good command of the English language. The Namibian policy on education stresses the use of the immediate language of the community in instruction at the lower level of primary education and a combination of English and the language of the immediate community at the upper primary education.

In other words, the policy recommends the use of the mother tongue in teaching at primary level. This situation contributes immensely to the poor learning of English language right from primary school and it extends to secondary school. Therefore, the major cause of errors in English used by Namibians can be attributed to the interference of the mother tongue with the English language. Students often use their mother tongue in all their interactions, and English is only used within the four walls of the classroom.

Another important cause of poor performance in the English language is the negative attitudes of students towards the learning of English students, particularly in secondary and primary school, often have a negative attitude towards learning the English language because they consider it foreign or not theirs. Mohammed (2002) is of the view that most students had a negative attitude towards leaning and they were making their teacher's task a difficult one. It is obvious that for any student to be proficient in the English language, the mastering the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing is necessary, and it requires hard work and dedication from the students.

Marsh (2000) indicated that inappropriate volume or articulation in English by both teachers and learners will inevitably hamper good learning performance. Spoken language, particularly in large classes, must be pitched to an appropriate level in order that everyone can hear as clearly as possible what is said. Marsh (2000) continues to argue that interference in English speech production resulting from the characteristics of first languages requires special attention. For example, in Oshiwambo, the Kwambi speakers have a strong 'r' sound whereas the Oshindonga speakers have a problem producing 'r', and particularly in differentiating 'r' and 'l' as in mixing 'red and led.' This type of interference is cited as a common reason for mockery in the classroom context that may be highly intimidating for certain learners. Correct models of English language usage

should not be perceived and projected as being those of first language environments such as that of UK or USA. Although these may be considered good models of usage, Namibian variants of English should be viewed as carrying equal status as to other variants of English, not as substandard.

According to Shikongo (2002), the conference on Language and Development held at NIED in Okahandja in April 2000, proposed that teacher education institutions should start using 'Language Sensitive Methodologies' in order to enhance English medium education. The paper was timely because much of what was said proved to be true and overdue in Namibia (Clegg, 2000). It can be pointed out that:

1. Many teachers and learners in rural areas, especially in Ondangwa (East and West), have experienced considerable problems in teaching and learning through the medium of English.
2. There is a need to introduce content and language integrated learning (CLIL) at teacher training institutions in Namibia so that both language and subject teachers could nurture the linguistic development of the learners.
3. Trainees should be made aware of the importance of first language (L1) and how to use it to enhance the learning and teaching of a second language (L2).

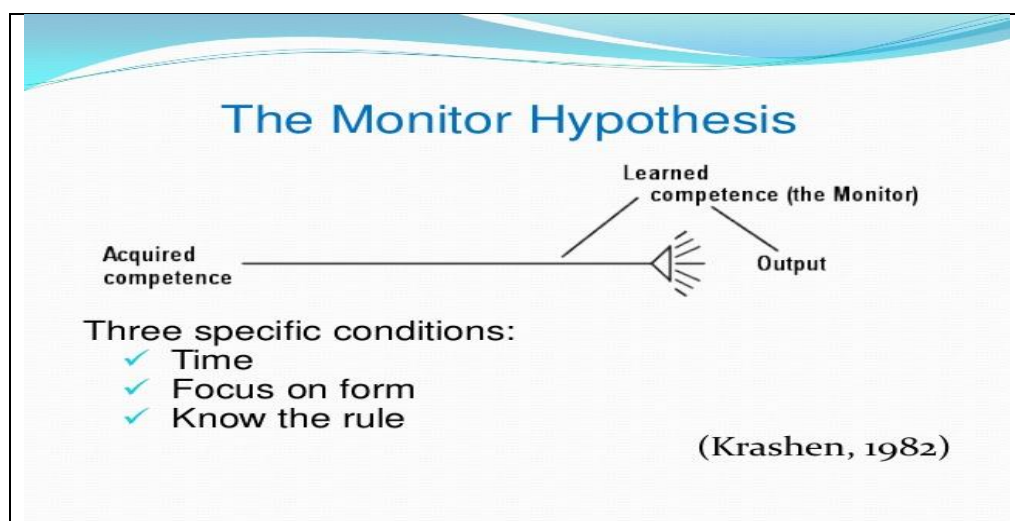
Many teachers and learners face problems in using English as a medium of instruction in rural upper primary schools in Namibia. This is because many teachers have limited exposure to English and lack knowledge for using this second language for teaching and learning. Many teachers are afraid of using the L1 in the classroom, because they have no training on how bilingualism goes hand in hand with L2 medium teaching.

Teacher education institutions in Namibia need to introduce prospective teachers to ways of teaching that are sensitive to language, and at the same time help teachers with limited English language proficiency to function effectively in a bilingual education context. They need to use the types of language-sensitive pedagogy which Clegg (2000) describes, in practice.

All in all, with this review of literature in the background, this research followed the monitor hypothesis as its roadmap.

### **3. *The monitor hypothesis as a theoretical framework***

For Krashen (1981), the monitor hypothesis supports the acquisition-learning hypothesis. He claims that the only function of learning within second language acquisition is as an editor or monitor, for language use produced by the acquired system as well as to produce grammatical forms not yet acquired. Krashen (1981) further argues that acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. The best methods are, therefore, those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations. These are the informal interactions, day-to-day situations, and messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are ready, recognising that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production. Krashen (1981) argues that in the real world, conversations with sympathetic native speakers who are willing to help the acquirer understand are very helpful. In general, the monitor hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning. The three specific conditions of the theory include time, focusing on form and knowing the rule (Krashen, 1982). The acquisition is the utterance initiator, while the learning system performs the role of the "monitor" or the "editor." ([www.sk.com.br/sk-krash.html](http://www.sk.com.br/sk-krash.html)).



According to Krashen, the role of the monitor is or should be minor. Over-users are learners who attempt to “monitor” all the time. Monitor under-users are learners who prefer not to use their conscious knowledge. Optimal monitor users are learners who use the “monitor” appropriately (Krashen, 1982). The pertinent theory informing this study found that the essential ingredient for L2 acquisition is comprehensible input through teacher talk. The teacher should talk on a learner’s level of comprehension, that is, the learner should be able to understand what the teacher is saying (Richards & Lockhart, 1994, p. 184). Transference from one speaker’s use of language to another speaker’s use of language can be viewed as a contamination factor in the use of the L2. Where teachers’ own L2 knowledge is not on an acceptable standard for the use of English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), their poor usage and knowledge of the language are transferred to the learners (Stander, 2001).

According to Krashen, language acquisition is very similar to the process children use in acquiring first and second languages. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language and natural communication in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. Conscious language learning, on the other hand, is thought to gain a great deal by error correction and the presentation of explicit rules (Krashen & Seliger, 1975).

Our “formal” knowledge of the second language, our conscious learning, may be used to alter the output of the acquired system, sometimes before and sometimes after the utterance is produced. We make these changes to improve accuracy, and the use of the Monitor often has this effect. The Monitor theory differs somewhat from these points of view, in that it makes some very specific hypotheses about the interrelation between acquisition and learning in the adult.

The best methods are therefore those that supply comprehensible input in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are ready, recognising that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and nor from forcing and correcting production (Krashen, 1982, p. 22).

Krashen (1982) argues that the best language lessons might be those in which real communication takes place, in which one can acquire and understand what the speaker is trying to say. Similarly, a reading passage is appropriate for a student if he or she understands the message. Finally, the teacher-talk that surrounds the exercises may be far more valuable than the exercise



itself. We teach language best when we use it for what it was designed for, and that is for communication. Generally, the hypothesis outlined above was employed to design the research methods and instruments and finally conduct the field work.

#### 4. Research methods

According to Neshuku (2009), the research design should show how all the major parts of the research work together to address the central research question, from the planning of the inquiry to designing the strategy for data collection and analysis. This study consistently followed the mixed methods approach. The qualitative method examined the causes of and hindrances to achieving positive result in regards to the English L2 in Grade 12. A qualitative research methodology was followed to describe the thoughts and views of the respondents on the causes of the underperformance of Grade 12 learners of English as a second language following interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. The qualitative method was more appealing to this research because of its empirical nature. It helped to explore attitudes, behaviours and experiences through interviews and focus ground discussions. This was done so that an in-depth understanding of the problem could be gained of the participants' opinions and their personal views.

The main key players of this research were the teachers and learners who were directly affected by the Grade 12 English results. Conversely, the quantitative method was used because statistics of the data collected was analysed and presented in graphs.

Nehale Senior Secondary School is a public secondary school in Onayena, in the Oshikoto region. The school has 869 learners from Grade 8 to Grade 12 and 35 staff members - of which four are English Grade 12 teachers and one is the school principal. There are seven Grade 12 classes (A-G) with 297 learners in all the Grade 12 classes, making it about 42 learners per class.

A systematic sampling method was chosen to select a total sample size of 80 out of a total study population of 297. This is almost 30% of the total number of all Grade 12 learners. All four Grade 12 English teachers were part of the research. This was to give all of them an opportunity to share their views and experiences. From a sampling frame of 297 learners, every 4<sup>th</sup> learner was selected. The research included all four Grade 12 English teachers at the school. The school principal was a part of the research because he was able to give his personal observations as a school manager and he viewed the situation from a different perspective. Only 7 Grade 12 parents were willing to participate in this project. We managed to locate three former Grade 12 learners from the school who lived locally, and formed part of the research.

##### Summary of Participants

1. Number of Learners	80
2. Number of Teachers	4
3. Number of Parents	7
4. Number of previous Learners	3
5. Principal	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>

#### 5. Major findings

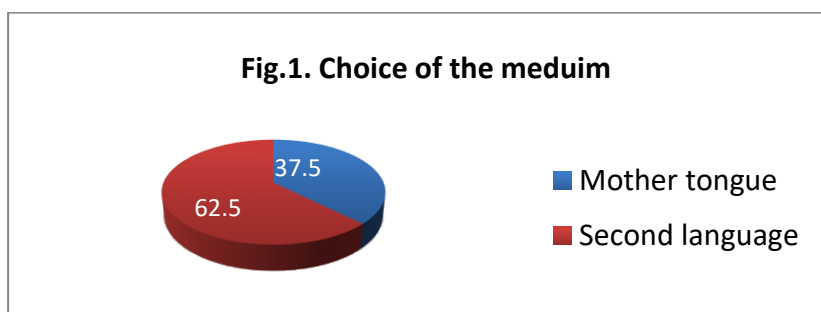
##### 5.1. Learners' responses

Eighty Grade 12 learners were asked about their perception of using English as a second language, as the researchers wanted to know if learners had a preferred language of communication. They were asked why they found it very hard to achieve their targets in L2. They were asked about ways to improve their English skills. An additional question was asked about their favourite subject. All 80 learners studied Oshindonga as their first language and English as the second language.

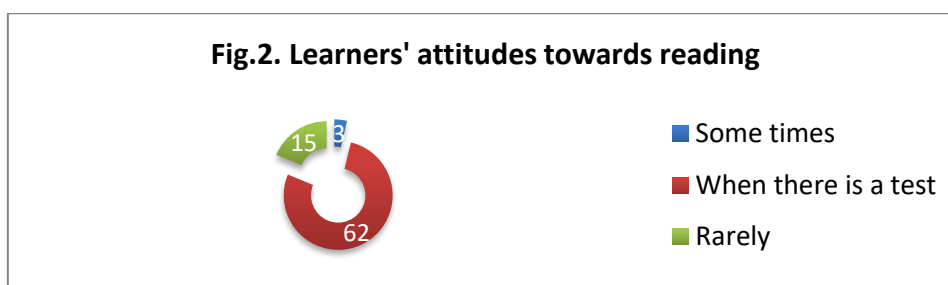
Out of 80 learners, only 50 (62.5%) preferred to be taught in English, whilst 30 (37.5%) preferred to be taught in their mother tongue. They gave reasons such as English should be used

because it is the language used in the universities worldwide and also in the labour market. Some additional reasons were: learning English was imperative because it enabled positive communication in the future and enhanced the students' and their chances of advancing in life. Others mentioned that they would like to travel abroad and further their education; they felt that English was their key to success. The 30 learners who preferred to be taught in their mother-tongue gave reasons such as: English was a very hard subject and they did not understand the activities taught, they felt there was less time and periods allocated to cover the contents in English in order for them to fully understand and grasp the language concepts.

They felt they performed better in their mother tongue because it was explained to them clearly. The teachers were confident and had subject knowledge unlike in English subject teachers who seemed to struggle with the contents and they failed to give the students adequate content and examples to simplify the work. They discovered that the mother tongue was the foundation of learning and of acquiring other languages.



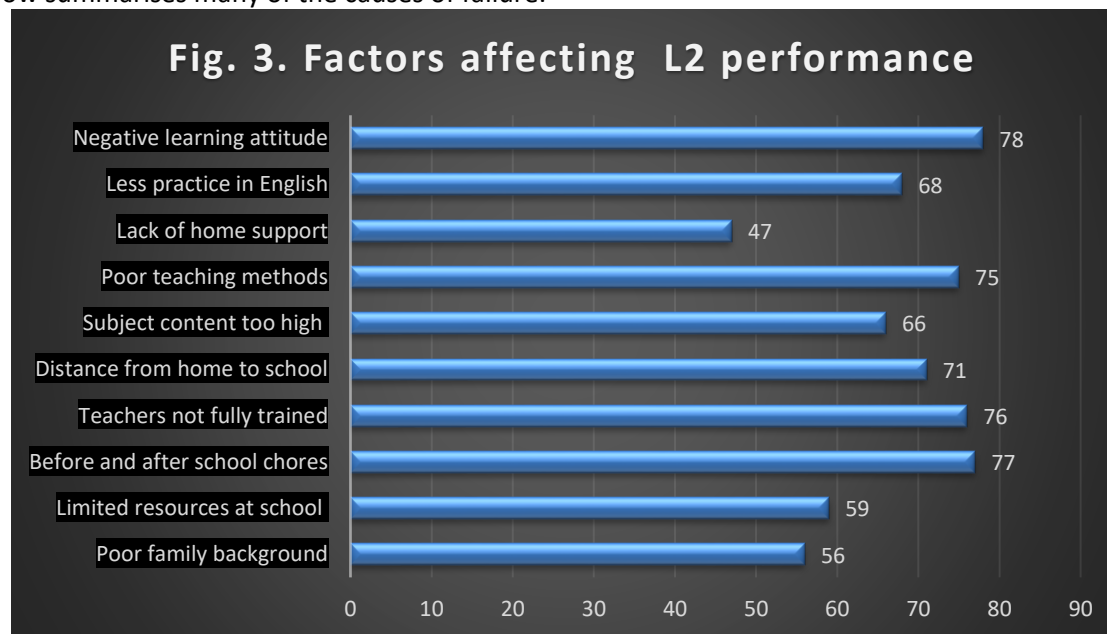
The learners' attitude towards reading English books was also assessed. Sixty-two learners only read English when there was a test, 15 of them rarely took an English book to read and only 3 learners read sometimes for leisure. Sixty-two learners said they did not enjoy reading English books and instead preferred reading books in their mother tongue, whilst 5 learners did not like reading at all and found reading boring and unentertaining - this applied to books even in the mother tongue. Only 3 of the learners enjoyed reading for leisure and they all liked English as a subject; they said they wished they had many books in the school library to enrich their knowledge.



Learners were asked to list what they thought were the causes of English L2 failure. Seventy-seven learners felt that they did not get sufficient time at home to do their studies and homework, because they usually went home and cooked, looked after cattle and did other household chores after school. Some learners did not have anyone to assist them when doing their homework because their parents did not even understand the subjects, nor spoke English, as reported by 47 learners. Seventy-one learners mentioned that the time they took to walk home from school affected their performance in their homework because they arrived home late and tired.

Some of the causes of the underachievement focused on the learning environment. Fifty-six of the learners did not have electricity at home. If it is dark, they cannot study at all. Fifty-nine learners said that school resources were also one of the factors that contributed to their failure. Most learners felt that their schools needed a functioning library where they could go and read. Seventy-six learners felt their teachers were not adequately trained in the field of their subject. They

felt this way because when they asked teachers for explanations or examples, sometimes teachers ignored their questions. In most of the cases, the teachers answered and explained complex topics in the mother tongue. A total of 68 learners mentioned that the time allocated for English lessons was insufficient for practice to take place during the lessons. Sixty-six of the learners felt that the English as a subject was very hard, especially reading and comprehension, whilst 75 learners said teachers lacked the subject delivery skills and did not fully explain the subject clearly. The graph below summarises many of the causes of failure:



The graph above depicts some of the factors learners experienced as contributing factors towards underachievement in English L2.

A whopping 98% of the learners felt that English is a foreign language and very hard to learn, therefore it is unlikely to yield positive results. With this data one can already see the stigma surrounding this subject. This limits the learning process and it has created a barrier that leads to a negative learning attitude towards the subject. Out of the 80 learners who participated in the study, only 5 of them knew about the national language policy of Namibia, but with no in-depth understanding of what it entailed. With this data, it is a clear indication that learners are not well informed about issues regarding their education and why certain things happen the way they do; in this case, the reason why they have to be taught in English instead of the mother tongue.

## 5.2. Teachers' responses: Interviews

All four Grade 12 English teachers took part in the research. They all felt that it would be best if all teachers conducted their lessons fully in English instead of alternating it with the mother tongue since they were reluctant to use English. All schools should build a strong English language command as early as Grade 1 and this can only be achieved through a solid foundation from early primary school. They all felt that much could be done to improve the English command through regular training. Half of them (50%) mentioned that the number of learners in class is a setback; in this case, they each taught 44 learners in a group and there were seven Grade 12 classes, which translates into all 297 Grade 12 learners catered by 4 English teachers; meaning if we divided the ration  $297/4$  we got around 74 learners for each teacher with a ratio of 1:74.

The teachers felt the classes were immensely overcrowded. They found it very challenging to render personalised assistance to all learners individually. All learners differed in learning styles and abilities. With the overcrowded classes, the quality of education was compromised and the chances

of giving attention to an individual learner were impossible or minimal.

Three of the teachers said that they preferred to teach in both English and their home language; the reasons were that learners did not understand fully unless teachers used the mother tongue. Only one teacher, who was evenly divided between teaching in English or mother tongue, said that both methods had pros and cons. Teaching solely in English will be fruitless because the majority of the learners did not fully understand English. However, if they were to explain the subject in the mother tongue, it would ease understanding. Equally there would be a better chance of improving their skills if teachers were strict about instilling English usage as early as primary school, but sadly most teachers mixed English with the mother tongue which is dominant and this affected the results.

### **5.3. Teachers' responses: Focus group discussion (FGD)**

A focus group discussion was held with the Grade 12 English teachers. They also answered the questionnaires. They were given the questionnaire beforehand and the group discussion feedback supported the notes that were derived from the questionnaire. The discussion was fruitful and it was interesting to hear different views and opinions. Teachers mentioned many issues impeding the achievements of set targets.

- The teachers felt there was not sufficient time to complete the subject as stated in the curriculum. Learners took time to grasp the concepts and found themselves in conducting classes during the weekends and holidays. Factors such as overcrowded classrooms affected the pass rates.
- Lack of resources that would enhance positive learning was also mentioned as negative factors, e.g. learners were forced to share textbooks because the government failed to provide enough textbooks for the learners and not all parents could afford to buy textbooks.
- There was a critical shortage of relevant textbooks and visual aids such as computers, overhead projectors, and books for references.
- The school was the only place where learners get motivated and had no role models to look up to. Learners' home environment played a negative role as their parents/guardians could not assist their children academically.
- There was a lack of positive home support and some learners came to school hungry and tired. This led to an unprepared mind in an impoverished school environment.
- The language barrier was the main concern; teachers were not sufficiently self-assured to teach the language and the learners got confused between the mother tongue and L2. Skills such as spelling, grammar and comprehension were poorly performed.
- Learners found the listening examination very difficult because the tapes used were recorded by English L1 speakers and the examples used were not culturally appropriate meaning some of the examples and scenarios were foreign to learners. For these learners, examples like the cinema, shopping mall, escalators and theme parks - to mention a few - were entirely foreign. The subject content did not equate with the knowledge and experiences of the learners.
- Learners thought in their mother tongue when writing and translated directly whole sentences into L2. With their limited vocabulary, the original sentence could become distorted. There were visible gaps between the speaking and the writing skills. Learners actively participated during the speaking lessons, but when it came to writing and reading learners struggled.

In line with the arguments above, Tylor (2002) asserts that teachers' positive attitudes towards English L2 can create positive attitudes and enthusiasm in learners toward English L2; subsequently this makes learners perform better in English L2. Furthermore, a positive attitude opens the mind and expands it to explore new opportunities and growth to achieve success.

#### 5.4. Responses of parents

Putz (2002) argues that parental involvement is rooted in the belief that in order for schools to educate all English L2 youth effectively, parents and families should become fully involved in the process. All 7 parents who took part in this study were from the village and they were all really pleased that their children attended school. Parents that were involved in this study were in low-income jobs and were poorly educated. 78% of them had no school or very little education. Another 15% passed grade 10 which was Standard 8 during the apartheid era, and only a fraction of 7% were Grade 12 school leavers with some sort of education. Therefore, it was somehow challenging to obtain relevant information regarding the language learning problems among the Grade 12 learners from their parents.

- They all believed in the importance of the mother tongue and said that culture was an important part of a language. They wanted their children to be educated first in the mother tongue, because they viewed this as part of their cultural identity.
- They believed that urban English-medium schools were the best and had a high academic standard and more qualified English L2 teachers. Four of the parents who had grandchildren attending schools in Windhoek supported this view and they were impressed that their children spoke several languages such as Nama and Herero apart from their mother tongues and English. According to Otaala (2001), some rural parents tended to send their children to English medium schools that were situated in urban areas.
- Most parents mentioned that their financial position prevented them from attending meetings because they resided far from the school.
- Four of the parents simply said they didn't attend because they were usually busy working in the field.

Parents were all aware of the underperformance of their children in English as a subject when it comes to final examination.

- Three parents felt the learners were given a lot of work to do and at the end of the year they did not get time to finish revising, hence the school initiated holiday classes.
- Two parents mentioned that it could be due to the subject content, which learners did not understand and they had little time to concentrate on their schoolwork.
- The other 2 felt that learners came home and did household chores after school, which took up their reading time and they did not have access to electricity to study after sunset.

The findings further seemed to imply that most parents lacked education and therefore lacked knowledge of English to guide and support their children in learning and in doing English L2 exercises at home.

#### 5.5. Responses of previous Grade 12 learners

The researchers managed to incorporate the views of three graduates of the school. All 3 Grade 12 graduates went to Nehale SSS the previous year. None of them continued with their tertiary education because of poor English marks, which prevented them from qualifying. Their age ranged between 17 and 19 years. None of these learners lived in the school hostel because they lived in the nearby villages. One of them obtained an F symbol in English and the other two obtained an E symbol. However, they obtained good marks in other subjects such as Mathematics, biology, Oshindonga L1, Physical Science and Geography. Both learners reached the required admission points of 25 but their English symbols disqualified them. They were all going to rewriting their English through The Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) with high hopes to improve their

results for the next academic year in 2017. They all felt that the English lessons were not adequate and that they needed more time to be taught in class.

They all mentioned the overcrowding of the classrooms, which became unbearable especially during the summer, i.e. from September to November. Teachers were not motivated to teach and this took a toll on them as learners. Some of the learners in class were not as committed as others and they tended to disrupt classes. They also mentioned the lesson contents that were beyond their understanding. At times teachers did not explain the subject clearly.

They recommended that English should be used as early as Grade 1 in all schools in order to strengthen their language skills and improve their self-esteem.

### **5.6. Responses of the school principal**

The school principal had a few additional observations on the contributing factors to failure and the impact of the national language policy on the achievement of rural learners. In his opinion, the language policy did not cater for all learners' country wide the reasons being that learners in the rural areas were not exposed to technologies like the learners in the urban areas. When it came to end of the year examination, all learners despite their circumstances and environment had to write the same examination. He mentioned that in rural areas, there were critical shortages of resources and technology which were part of the examinations. Learners were asked to write an essay about their first day to the cinema. These learners had never been to any cinema. The testing did not reflect all the learners' experiences countrywide and this made it a challenge for them to succeed. He suggested that it would be better if end of the year examinations were set regionally. This way examples and work content would reflect the learners' knowledge and environment. Learners depended only on the notes provided by the teachers and some shared textbooks. This finding seems to support Kizilbash (2006) who noted that the provision of ESL materials remained limited across regions and schools, and as such the ESL examination results remained low.

Kizilbash (2006) added that learners travelled long distances to come to school daily and go back home in the afternoon; not even mentioning the scorching sun they had to endure. Some parents did not understand the value of parental involvement in the education of their children. Some parents maintained that they did not attend parents meetings or class visits due to either distance or simply because they did not have money for transport. Strategies that the school used to improve results include: daily after school study from 3 pm-4 pm which was compulsory to all learners; the school also hosted extra holiday classes for a week during the April and May holiday each year. The principal mentioned that during the holidays, teachers tried to complete the subject as stipulated / set out in the curriculum and still get time to revise for the examination.

### **Conclusions**

These findings sum up the strongly linked causes of underachievement such as the socio-economic factors, poor teacher training, subject content, lack of the latest teaching methods, learner self-esteem and lack of motivation. The results of urban area schools are significantly different to that of rural area schools in the ESL subject. Teaching and learning did not take place equally take place. This could be due to the geographical area of the school. Some of the schools were in remote areas with little or no clean water, sanitary provisions and electricity. We constantly read in newspapers that some learners were still taught under trees. These learning environments were contributing to the failure rates. The government is aware of the shortcomings of the teachers. Resources were limited and planning strategies needed to be revised in order to cater for learners in all regions of the country as Matjila (2004) argues that unequal distribution of resources

to schools contributes negatively to poor performance and that resource allocation in Namibia favours some schools in the country.

The language policy for schools in Namibia (Namibia Ministry of Education, 2003) further emphasises that in order to be literate, one should not only speak well, but also know the written language, as language is the system of human expression by means of words. In other words, the language policy recognises the critical role of language in facilitating the acquisition of new knowledge and experience in particular in the context of this study.

This research demonstrates what learners, teachers, and parents thought about the second language learning and factors contributing to its ineffectiveness. The report also shows the importance of L2 learning. We concur with Matjila (2004) that teachers in rural areas are more frustrated than those in urban areas because of their working conditions and their relatively poor living standards. The poor motivation of English L2 teachers leads to poor commitment to service delivery and as a result, learners end up performing poorly in their English L2 national examinations.

Learners needed to grasp the importance of education, especially the mastering of the official language. Contributing factors such as overcrowding of classrooms, under qualified teachers, lack of teaching and learning resources, a negative attitude towards the subject and its stigma, socio-economic factors and learners' environment; all these were major obstacles.

The findings indicated that parents did not assist their children with L2 homework and other L2 related activities given to the learners. Parents did not consider it to be vital to discuss matters that affect their children in L2 and to find ways to solve them. Classrooms were too crowded for the teachers to assist all the learners during L2 lessons.

## **Recommendations**

Undertaking this research has brought to light any issues that need to be addressed in order to minimise the underachievement amongst students in rural areas in ESL in Namibia.

- Currently L2 teachers need regular in-service training
- Teaching and learning resources should be distributed fairly and where needed most.
- The lower primary curriculum needs to address the second language usage/use and develop strategies to solve ways on how this could be tackled.
- Parents should be sensitised regarding the importance of second language learning and its effect on the learners' school performance as well as improving language skills.
- Government needs to build more secondary schools with boarding facilities, to ease the learners' burden of walking daily to and from school and to enable learners to concentrate on their school work.

There are a number of areas where new information could be gathered. This could be researched further. Research should be conducted to gather information from the leaders of this country. This information will be formative because it will help improve the system and drafting policies. The policymakers should plan and decide on better and more realistic teaching and learning methods that will address the underperformance in ESL learners' rural area schools.

Research should further be conducted to establish the current and past capital and materials expenditure on the implementation of the current language policy and this should be an ongoing process. These statistics will help give an outlook of the results. This research could be a cost analyst research that will provide evidence of quality education taken from well performing schools. This will

show the number of learners who did not qualify for tertiary education and the ones that qualified ones. This cost analysis should highlight the burdens these underachievement created and the impact it has on the attainment of vision 2030.

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