




Experiences in a tutoring programme for BEd Foundation Phase isiXhosa first-language students



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Background: IsiXhosa students enrolled for the BEd Foundation Phase qualification at a university in South Africa failed their first year in identified at-risk subjects, namely Mathematics in Education, Language in Education and Computer Literacy. The students stated the reasons for failure as not understanding the concepts and terms of the subjects presented to them in English.

Objectives: A tutoring programme was initiated in the home language of the students with the aim of improving their understanding and chances at success.

Method: Semi-structured interviews and reflective journals within a qualitative case study were used to understand how the tutees and tutors as key role players, the programme coordinator, lecturers in the three subjects and the tutor trainer experienced the tutoring programme. The study was framed within social constructivist theory and an interpretative paradigm employed for analysis of data.

Results: The findings suggested that tutoring in their home language grants isiXhosa students an improved understanding of the concepts and terms of the course material, which they had difficulty understanding.

Conclusion: Tutoring in the home language should become a mandatory practice for students whose home language is not the language of learning and teaching in the institution. The study contributes to knowledge on how tutoring in the home language provides isiXhosa students access to the curriculum by assisting them in minimising their struggles with English as the language of learning and teaching.

Keywords: tutoring; tutors; tutees; higher education; language of learning and teaching; under-preparedness.

Introduction

The majority of South African students are, upon entering higher education, academically under-prepared due to historically unequal socio-economic circumstances or under-resourced high schools in disadvantaged communities (Council on Higher Education 2013:15). African students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds are still mostly affected by poor graduation and throughput rates (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013). Under-preparedness, which manifests mainly as difficulty completing the formal curriculum and adjusting to independent study, is a significant contributing factor to student failure (Council on Higher Education 2013). Higher education has to offer well thought-through responses to improve completion rates (Council on Higher Education 2013). As a response, the Education Faculty at a university in the Western Cape, South Africa, initiated a home language tutoring programme for BEd Foundation Phase isiXhosa first-language students who either failed, or were at risk of failing in three identified subjects. Students attributed their failure to often not understanding instructions, terminology and test questions in English, which is the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) at the institution. The expectation was that the support would increase the students' understanding of the terms and concepts as they relate to the subjects of Language in Education, Mathematics in Education and Computer Literacy, and that it would increase their chances of passing the subjects.

This article is based on a study that was conducted towards a master's degree in Education. The tutoring programme under scrutiny was implemented over a period of one academic year, as funding was only awarded for that particular year. The aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of various stakeholders in the tutoring for BEd Foundation Phase isiXhosa students.

The stakeholders in this study included the tutors and tutees as primary role players, as well as the lecturers in the three identified subjects, the programme coordinator, and the tutor trainer.

Literature review

The topics included in this section are germane to the issues surrounding the subject of tutoring, and the opinions and experiences of all the participants in the tutoring programme as described in the introduction above.

Tutoring

In education, tutoring can be defined as an intervention model that aims to improve the academic performance of individuals. The intervention as employed in this article was in response to the tutees' need to understand the concepts and terms in the subjects mentioned. Tutoring is regarded as tuition granted to students by fellow students who have excelled in, or completed, their studies to a higher level than that attained by the students they are tutoring (ed. Goodlad 1995:2). The main aim of this approach to academic intervention is to enable students who receive the support to participate more actively in their own learning in order to gain the cognitive skills necessary to succeed (Arcado-Tirado, Fernández-Martín & Fernández-Balboa 2011).

In a small group, students are often more likely to feel secure enough to ask basic questions that would be awkward to pose in a large lecturing hall. Such a small group setting affords tutees the safe space and opportunity to correct misunderstandings without fear of ridicule. In the process they become more receptive to the views and ideas of others (Loke & Chow 2007). Benefits for tutors include an increase in their confidence levels and a feeling of affirmation about helping others (Carmody & Wood 2009). Arcado-Tirado et al. (2011) report on a substantial difference in metacognitive abilities such as study planning and the effective use of study material between students who have the opportunity to tutor, and those who do not.

Language of learning and teaching versus mother-tongue education in South Africa

English as the LOLT in classrooms is a barrier because English Additional Language learners find it difficult to express themselves in the additional language (Paxton 2009). This problem, as it relates to South Africa, stems from a large percentage of learners being taught and assessed in a language other than their mother tongue. According to Paxton (2009), previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa are becoming an English foreign language environment, partly due to learners' limited exposure to English. This situation exists as a result of the home language becoming a substitute for the majority of teachers whose first language is an African language. It has become common practice for teachers to switch to the language they themselves and the learners are more conversant in, commonly known as code-switching, when explaining concepts or when teachers notice

that their learners have difficulty in understanding the subject matter the teachers are trying to bring across to them (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir 2004). Teachers often experience difficulty in expressing themselves in English and use the home language for explanations, or transfer poor or the incorrect use of English to their learners. Under these challenging circumstances, the home language becomes a tool to help learners to understand better, improving their chances for success in the subjects they offer (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir 2004).

Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir (2004) argue that empowerment through education can only be meaningful if tuition make sense and for that to happen, it must take place through a medium that the learners understand. According to these researchers the learners became more attentive when the teacher started translating the subject matter into their home language. They report on cases in schools in South Africa where most of the talking in class is generally done in isiXhosa although English is the LOLT of the school and English textbooks are used. This heightened attentiveness of learners when the home language is used in classrooms serves as good grounds for the researchers' encouragement of the practice of code-switching in classrooms.

Interviews conducted with tutees in this study show that most of them attended schools where the use of English was limited and where explanations were often in isiXhosa. This practice seemed to have affected the tutees negatively when they became university students, as the findings later revealed. This situation is indicative of how most African-language students have difficulty in acquiring the knowledge and skills that are supposed to help them advance in life when they are subjected to a medium of instruction that is foreign to them when they reach university. Learning and teaching happens best when it takes place in the language in which the individual student is most proficient. Students at university are quoted as saying that 'it is easy to learn when you are using your home language, but with English you need to start learning language before you get to the concept' (Paxton 2009). It becomes clear that the need for instruction in the home language of students, or at least support in the home language where the LOLT is not their home language, cannot be ignored.

Higher education challenges in South Africa and the need for support

The slow pace of transformation in higher education institutions in South Africa is a contributing factor to the struggles that African students are still experiencing, long after the doors of universities were opened to them (Taylor 2004). Despite reformations in the areas of changes in policy and increase in enrolment (Seabi et al. 2012), higher education institutions still experience disappointing pass rates, with fewer black than white students completing their education programmes (Boughey 2012). After more than two decades of democracy in South Africa, poor quality of education in previously disadvantaged black schools still leads to poorly

equipped students (in this case poor preparation in the English language) who have to cope with academic expectations at higher education institutions.

Jama, Beylefeld and Mapasela (2008) state that the tendency to say that 'students do not study' might not be the only and correct answer to the question of why students do not perform well academically and are at risk of failure or even dropping out. Jama et al. (2008) propose that with a better understanding and consideration of the academic and social constraints that students face, different insights and answers may emerge as to why disadvantaged students do not perform academically well. The need for support for African-language students represented by the tutees in this study is emphasised in the call for the provision of compensatory education or a different support approach from universities in order to close the gap that exists in success between black and white students (Taylor 2004).

Learning should be considered as a socially embedded phenomenon: individuals are shaped by the social contexts into which they are born (Boughey 2012). Given the historical and social contexts of black South Africans, academic interventions for students can be more successfully addressed with calls for accelerated transformation and equity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, rather than looking at deficiencies such as lack of talent, aptitude, motivation and study as arguments why black students fare so badly in South African higher education (Boughey 2012). This contextual approach of greater chances of epistemological access for African-language students should include proper social and linguistic support such as mentorship programmes and increased representation of academic staff who speaks indigenous languages, an approach supported by Seabi et al. (2012). This discussion thus argues for an interrogation of the theory that informs the intervention and support strategies for students from previously disadvantaged schools, and the study suggests that the strategies not be informed by the perceived inadequacies in the individual, but by the social context into which the students have been born and raised.

The previous sections highlight the challenges that black South African students face upon entering higher education institutions. The sections allude to the difficulties the students face with the English LOLT of the institutions and the continued educational disadvantages they face long after an equal political ideology was introduced. This next section highlights the value of tutoring as a support measure in both the academic and non-academic spheres of student life.

Tutoring as academic and non-academic support at higher education institutions

In addition to mastering the academic course content, higher education students are required to learn to think independently and question established truths (Karp 2011).

Although course material and lectures may support students to acquire such skills, the individual should still be able to synthesise a personal mode of autonomy and maturity. Pearson and Naug (2013), as well as the Department of Higher Education and Training (2013), argue for higher education to take responsibility for the provision of a learning environment which promotes the transitional needs of all commencing students, but especially those who have been disadvantaged educationally and socially, and are at risk of failure or withdrawal. The ideal support programmes for at-risk students are designed to nurture and supplement the necessary academic and life skills that will enable such disadvantaged and confused students to integrate more quickly, be successful and persevere beyond their first year (Ginty & Harding 2014). An integrated support approach would be a fair compensation for students who have been denied a sound preparation for university: such an approach would include both academic and non-academic factors to form a socially inclusive environment that addresses the social, emotional and academic needs of students (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth 2004).

Through peer-assisted learning and tutoring, at-risk students are offered meaningful engagement opportunities for skill practice, social interaction and improvement of confidence; the one can even be viewed as a form of the other (Ginty & Harding 2014). According to Spark et al. (2017), engagement, motivation and self-confidence will automatically increase when students are brought together for the purpose of mentoring and support. Peer-assisted learning and tutoring as learning and teaching techniques make it possible to involve students actively in the learning process, a view that is supported by Arcadio-Tirado et al. (2011) as stipulated above. Student engagement in the form of peer-assisted learning and tutoring can successfully be used as a key strategy to address the challenges that higher education in South Africa faces (Farao 2017).

While it can be argued that the above-mentioned benefits are common to any tutoring programme, this article emphasises the added value of such a programme in which the tutees can verbalise their struggles in a language that they are most comfortable with. The interpersonal support that happens during social integration through engagement in support programmes, such as peer-assisted learning and tutoring, can be regarded as among the most important types of assistance for university students (Spark et al. 2017). The collaborative and interactive nature of small-group settings, such as peer-assisted learning and tutoring, fosters a deeper understanding of subject matter and the development of competencies such as critical thinking, communication skills, interpersonal relations and self-assessment, which are crucial for success in higher education (Qureshi & Stormyhr 2012). All of the competencies mentioned in this section have been described by tutees as benefits that they received from interacting with a tutor who understood and could converse with them in their home language.

Methodology and research design

Paradigm framework, theoretical framework and method of inquiry

An interpretive position was chosen as a paradigm framework because of its philosophy which states that research is influenced and shaped by the worldview of the researcher and the group or the person being studied (Willis 2007:96). Willis (2007:96) holds the view that each individual participating in the research, whether the researcher or the person or group being studied, possesses a peculiar understanding of the world, which was gradually built up through experiences. As individuals in a sample group share their own understanding with each other, meaning is constructed and a new or different reality about the topic being studied is created as these individuals interact with each other socially.

Interpretivist researchers search for understanding of context; thus, the purpose of such studies is primarily to understand the particular context or situation of the person or group that lives the experience. The knowledge or reality constructed through the lived experience of the person or group is often referred to as contextual knowledge or local knowledge (Willis 2007:99). The home language of the student and tutor participants in this study is isiXhosa, while the LOLT of the institution is English. In contrast to other tutoring programmes in which the language used is the LOLT of the institution, this tutoring programme offered support in the home language of the students, isiXhosa. The difference in language could be perceived as a different context to other tutoring programmes, and could suggest a different experience to the participants, which may result in the findings of this study being significantly different to tutoring programmes in another context.

This research project depended upon constructivism as a learning theory. Proponents of constructivism contend that the cognitive development of individuals, also referred to as their learning, is constructed as they have particular experiences in the situations they find themselves in, and as their thinking takes place in these situations. In these situations, knowledge is formed inside a person, as opposed to it being imposed from outside of them (Schunk 2012:230–231). While some learning theories place the emphasis of learning upon the learners' information processing abilities, constructivism places the emphasis on the active participation of the learner in the learning process and couples this emphasis with the importance of social interaction for knowledge construction (Phillips 1995).

Constructivists, however, differ on the factors that affect learning and learners' cognitive processes as these factors are represented in the two variants of constructivism, namely cognitive constructivism and social constructivism (Liu & Matthews 2005; Schunk 2012:229). For this study, the focus was on the social constructivist tradition, which highlights the role of the social environment and the social factors that

influence learning, and is often said to be derived from the work of Vygotsky (Liu & Matthews 2005). Bruning et al. (2004:193–194) contend that the Vygotskian social constructivist view of teaching and learning highlights social activities: an individual's learning takes place through interaction with adults or peers who have greater knowledge. This view of learning as a profoundly social activity during interaction with the support of more experienced partners in building students' knowledge is supported by Vygotsky's description of learning as a socially mediated process (Schunk 2012:274). Bruning et al. (2004:195) claim that a constructivist approach manifests itself in many ways, some of which are the use of cooperative learning and guided discussions in tutoring classes.

Dialectical constructivism within the social constructivism variant proposes that knowledge construction takes place from both the workings of the individual's mind, as well as external influences such as presented information in the form of teaching and exposure to models or the environment in which the individual finds themselves (Bruning et al. 2004:196; Schunk 2012:232). From this perspective, the personal interactions during collaborative situations such as tutoring are emphasised and it highlights the stimulation these personal interactions provide during developmental processes and the fostering of cognitive growth (Schunk 2012:242). The theory holds that knowledge is co-constructed between two or more people, with language as the most important tool in the construction of knowledge during such interactions. The dialectical constructivist view was a relevant and useful perspective to consider in this particular study: through the use of a common dialect the effectiveness of social interactions in a peer-assisted instructional process were explored and both tutee and tutor became active agents in the learning process (Schunk 2012:270).

In addition to dialectical constructivism, Vygotsky offers the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which he describes as the difference between what a person is able to do independently and what that same person can potentially accomplish with the support of others (Bruning et al. 2004:197). In the ZPD, called a space or process, a person interacting with an adult or a more capable peer develops potential and can attempt tasks that they previously could not do. In the ZPD, the adult, or more capable peer, shares knowledge or skill that makes the task easier for the person attempting a new task (Schunk 2012:242).

The two concepts within the social constructivist perspective, namely dialectical constructivism and ZPD, were useful concepts to use as a framework in analysing the data derived from the experiences of the tutors and tutees. The tutees in this study averred that lack of understanding of the additional language-taught concepts and terminology contributed to their failure in the subjects. The tutoring offered to them in this study was provided in their home language with the aim of increasing their chances of better understanding and sense-making of the subject matter. The mediation process of

tutoring provided by a more capable person thus holds a promising potential of support to a less capable person in developing a better understanding of the subject matter.

The qualitative method of inquiry was adopted as it facilitated the process of understanding the individuals' perspectives on their experiences in the tutoring programme (Mouton & Marais 1996:169). A qualitative approach was suitable, since the goal of the study was to hear and make meaning, or interpret the views of the participants (Creswell 2014:37). The choice of a qualitative inquiry was suitable as we were interested in finding out what was happening, why it was happening and how it was happening the way it did (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004:3). The qualitative choice also gave voice to the participants and provided opportunity to probe in-depth and detailed understanding of meanings, attitudes and intentions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011:219; Patton 2015:22).

From an interpretive perspective it made sense to use a case study research design because it provided a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of a particular situation (Nieuwenhuis 2010:75). The emphasis of the case study is on what specifically can be learned about the single case (Stake 2005:443). The observation of Wiersma and Jurs (2005:202) that the findings of a case study represent a detailed examination of a specific event or programme, of which a tutoring programme is an example, gives credence to Patton's (2015:262) conclusion that the individuals, and the event or the programme become the case.

In this research we made use of Stake's (2005:445–447) *intrinsic* case study model where the focus is not necessarily on theory building and representivity, but rather on a search for commonalities, as well as particularities in the case itself. The *intrinsic* case study method does not avoid generalisations, but describes the case in sufficient detail so that readers comprehend the interpretations of the researcher, and draw their own conclusions about the phenomenon.

Population and sampling

In accordance with Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), Maxwell (2013:96) and Nieuwenhuis (2010:79), a purposive sampling method was chosen as it would provide in-depth understanding and information-rich data that are pertinent to the research question and the goals of the inquiry. The total population consisted of all the tutees and tutors in the tutoring programme, the lecturers in the three subjects identified as challenging for isiXhosa first-language students (Mathematics in Education, Language in Education and Computer Literacy), the programme manager and the trainer sourced by the institution for the training of tutors. A total of 30 tutees, divided into five groups, five tutors, three lecturers, one programme manager and one trainer participated in the programme, accounting for a population of 40. For data collection purposes, the focus shifted to at least 10 tutees, two per group, depending on their

availability, as well as the programme coordinator, the lecturers and the tutor trainer, all of whom were mainly in a supporting role.

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews were used which afforded participants, from whom data was collected, the opportunity to express their views on their experiences, either as participants in the tutoring programme or in a supporting role (Cohen et al. 2007:349). In addition to the interviews, tutees and tutors used reflective journals to reflect on, and write about, their experiences at the end of each tutoring session. Three of the five tutors and four of the 30 tutees submitted reflective journals. The small number of tutees submitting reflective journals might serve as a limitation in terms of the validity of the findings in the study.

Data analysis

In an effort to select, reduce and organise the information according to relevance and applicability, the first step was to read the reflective journals and transcripts of interviews to gain an overall picture of the information. In the next step units of meaning were identified for coding purposes and to identify categories based on the codes. This was followed by the identification and presentation of key themes and sub-themes. The final step entailed a more comprehensive and deeper discussion of the themes to facilitate insight into the comments and remarks of participants.

Discussion of findings

Table 1 represents the key themes and sub-themes as identified from the collected data.

For the purpose of this article we decided to focus only on the key themes and their accompanying sub-themes that speak about the study challenges of tutees and tutors, and the benefits of tutoring from the perspective of the tutees, tutors and lecturers. Although part of the population of this study, the views of the programme manager and the tutor trainer reflect in the theme of implementation, management and monitoring of the tutoring programme and are therefore not represented in this article. For information about the other identified key themes and their sub-themes, the reader is referred to the full study.

TABLE 1: Key themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-themes
1. Commitment and attitude of tutees and tutors	1.1 Commitment and attitude of tutees 1.2 Commitment and attitude of tutors
2. Study challenges of BEd Foundation Phase isiXhosa first-language tutees and tutors participating in the tutoring programme	2.1 Challenges in Mathematics in Education, Language in Education and Computers in Education 2.2 Challenges in Language of Learning and Teaching 2.3 Challenges in general
3. Benefits of tutoring	3.1 Benefits of tutoring for tutors 3.2 Benefits of tutoring for tutees
4. Implementation, management and monitoring of the tutoring programme	4.1 Selection of tutors and their ability to implement the programme 4.2 Liaison between role players 4.3 Monitoring and evaluation

Study challenges of BEd Foundation Phase isiXhosa first-language tutees and tutors participating in the tutoring programme

Participants in this study attested to how students struggled with English as the LOLT which is an additional language for them, and this struggle with the LOLT was the cause for them misunderstanding and not fully comprehending the course material. The lecturer in Mathematics in Education commented:

'For someone who is not first-language speaker ... you hear something in a foreign language ... you now have to translate it into your brain ... translate the words and then you have to translate the concepts ... you have to translate it again into mathematics.' (Lecturer, Mathematics in Education, L1)

This comment is a confirmation that tutees' and tutors' main difficulty in the subject was closely linked to the challenges they experienced with English as LOLT. The lecturer in Language in Education alluded to students' general limited English reading when stating that:

'They don't take the notes and go read to understand ... because they don't read and write in English, it's a big stumbling block for them. (Lecturer, Language in Education, L2)

According to tutees in this study, tutoring in isiXhosa provided them the support they needed in understanding the concepts and terms better and aided them in mastering the course material. This better understanding resulted in the course material becoming accessible to them and they were able to prepare for, and complete assessments more confidently. Tutors reported that:

'They were all participating and sharing views ... the more they gained knowledge.' (Tutor, TR1)

'Everything was clear ... the questioning and the answers came out from them.' (Tutor, TR2)

Similarly, tutees said that:

'Some of the things they learn in class are difficult to understand but with tutor they understand them easier.' (Tutee, TE1)

This reported improvement in understanding led tutors and tutees to believe that institutionalised tutoring in their home language would be to their advantage. One tutor said that:

'Tutoring is a good thing and should probably be fitted formally into a student's time table.' (Tutor, TR2)

Meanwhile a tutee commented that:

'This would have helped last year ... I would have done better.' (Tutee, TE3)

The deeper level of critical thinking skills and the frame of reference that is needed for success in Mathematics in Education and Language in Education were lacking in isiXhosa students in the BEd Foundation Phase course at the institution. According to the lecturer in Language in Education, tutees had an inability to engage with the theory of the subject, while the lecturer in Mathematics in Education

spoke about students' inability to think on a deeper, more critical level. According to the Mathematics in Education lecturer:

'The students do not have a good enough frame of reference of their own. So their own maths teacher was probably not great, they probably never went to pre-school ... and now they're faced with this thing called mathematics.' (Lecturer, Mathematics in Education, L1)

This statement suggests limited exposure to formal education in Grade R or quality Mathematics education, as well as the lack of an adequate frame of reference to help them understand and apply the course material in the Foundation Phase. Tutees attested to how tutoring in their home language supported them in gaining a better understanding of the concepts and terms and aided them in mastering the course material.

Students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds to start their university studies often have difficulty finding their feet, due to a lack of skills and know-how that are needed to settle into the diverse culture of the university. Computer literacy, as one of the at-risk subjects in which tutoring was offered, was identified by tutors and tutees as a challenge due to lack of exposure to computer skills prior to entering university. Thus, limited computer literacy, coupled with students' inadequate English language proficiency, negatively impacted their advancement towards academic success within a reasonable period of time. Tutees and tutors commented that:

'A disadvantage for us isiXhosa speaking students, especially in the townships is that there are no computer classes.' (Tutor, TR3)

One tutee stated:

'I was so not ready for varsity, I won't lie – I was scared, nervous and yeah, I felt small.' (Tutee, TE6)

For a student who, for the most part of their education up to that point, had been exposed to their mother tongue only, a situation with 'lecturers who speak English all the time' can be very overwhelming.

The examples of the challenges discussed above suggest that tutors and tutees in the programme faced issues that extended beyond an inability to understand concepts and terminology in English. Among the examples mentioned by tutees and tutors were socio-economic pressures, family responsibilities and other personal issues, such as transport and conflicting needs of self and family. African-language students from previously disadvantaged communities are not adequately prepared for the demands of higher education and can easily become distracted from focusing on the academic programme (Mokoena & Materechera 2012; Seabi et al. 2012). The challenges that the tutees and tutors in this study experienced in terms of English as LOLT and under-preparedness when entering university are evidence thereof. When considering

all of the challenges mentioned above, tutoring in students' home language offered an opportunity for tutees to eliminate at least one set of challenges – that of understanding the course material.

The link between the literature and the data presented in the study as it pertains to the struggles students face with English as an additional language, as well as the correlation between the academic and non-academic challenges of tutees and tutors, is evident of the fact that the challenges of students in this study are inter-related and that the challenges cannot be dealt with in isolation. De Klerk et al. (2017) amplify how students are at risk of failing when their non-academic needs are not met, while Lotkowski et al. (2004) explain how non-academic factors such as lack of confidence and lack of commitment add to students' risk of failure. The views of the researchers mentioned in this paragraph are amplified by Pather's (2013) claim of how first-year students who feel they cannot adjust to the new academic and social environment are often at risk of feeling alienated and may even drop out. Tutoring with its cooperative nature offers an environment where students can engage with peers and exchange learning habits and success strategies, a view that is supported by Pearson and Naug (2013), Ginty and Harding (2014) and Farao (2017).

The efforts of providing support to the isiXhosa students by initiating tutoring in their home language can be regarded as a step in the right direction, but its once-off nature does not make it a sustainable model. Considering the challenges that African-language students experience with English as their language of instruction and how it prevents them from gaining equal access, as opposed to their counterparts who are more conversant in English, it seems that support in their home language should be a strong consideration to help them to be successful in their studies. IsiXhosa students at the institution, and African-language students elsewhere for whom English is an additional language, could benefit greatly when support is intentional, sustained and more of an institutionally structured programme, instead of an occasional, once-off intervention.

Benefits of tutoring

The tutoring in their home language created opportunity for tutees to develop solutions for their academic needs. Interacting with the tutors in their home language facilitated a more constructive and mutually beneficial cognitive experience and made tutees receptive to the course material while simultaneously building self-confidence. Confirmation of this benefit was evident in statements such as:

'During lectures you are afraid to like answer ... during tutor classes at least you get to like express yourself more confidently ... nobody will judge you.' (Tutee, TE5)

Ginty and Harding (2014) and Lotkowski et al. (2004) promote and support non-academic aspects, such as sharing of techniques and strategies during engagement with peers, especially academically vulnerable students, as reflected

in tutoring. The researchers acknowledge the value of support programmes designed to supplement both the academic and life skills that enable at-risk students to persevere in their studies.

The data that were collected for the study clearly indicated that the benefits of the tutoring extended to the metacognitive advantage of the tutors as well, where metacognition is described as the student's ability to think about learning, to think critically and to reflect on their own thinking. Tutors said:

'They should consider using students from Foundation Phase to tutor computer literacy because it is really very difficult for an FET student to fit into the tutoring programme for FP.' (Tutor, TR2)

This statement is an example of the enhancement of cognitive processes such as reflecting and problem-solving. Tutors demonstrated an awareness of metacognitive skills such as improved communication, organising and planning skills through comments such as:

'It helps me with my communication skills, because I had to know-how to bring it across to the students/how to deliver my knowledge to them.' (Tutor, TR3)

Tutors demonstrated an elevated awareness of the learning process when commenting:

'I must identify the challenges of my students.' (Tutor, TR2)

Recommendations by Cook, Kennedy and McGuire (2013) and De Backer, Van Keer and Valcke (2012), which state that metacognition in students is promoted by the social dimension present in tutoring, are strongly supported by the comments of the tutors.

Metacognition is teachable and learnable (Mahdavi 2014) and the benefits of tutoring as an instructional approach should be explored and taken advantage of. The data from this study (as reflected in the comments of the tutors in the previous paragraph) illustrate the metacognitive benefits and inherent advantages associated with tutoring and how the tutors in this study benefited from it. Given the transitioning and academic challenges that students from disadvantaged communities face when they enter university, they need metacognitive awareness which corresponds with meaningful, deep-level thinking for higher achievement. De Backer et al. (2012) amplify this need for metacognitive awareness when stating that the majority of higher education students from disadvantaged communities lack the skill and ability to self-regulate their learning, a skill that is crucial for success at tertiary level.

Summary of main findings

Tutoring in their home language served as an aid for students whose first language was not the language of learning and teaching of the institution

Tutees found the course material more understandable when the concepts and terms were explained to them in their home language. With better understanding the curriculum became

more accessible to them: in the process their chances of success in their studies increased.

Tutoring in their home language serves as a tool to overcome the academic and non-academic challenges of first-year students from disadvantaged communities

The process of interaction in a language that both tutor and tutee understood created an atmosphere that was conducive to developing confidence and boosting self-esteem. Increased confidence and self-esteem were evident in the comments that tutees made about their freedom to ask questions and engage on fundamental issues in the course material when conversing in their home language. Tutoring is a successful tool in the enhancement of metacognition of tutees and especially tutors.

Recommendations for future practice

Tutoring in the home language of students from disadvantaged communities and whose home language is not English should be a mandatory requirement in the Education Faculty of the university

Tutoring in students' home language should be considered as an institutional support structure available to all students whose home language is not English, instead of the opportunity for tutoring in their home language being an occasional event for first-year students or unsuccessful students. Informal correspondence with the tutees indicated that their participation in the tutoring programme may have contributed to their success in the three subjects at the end of the academic year. Another contributing factor worth considering is the fact that many of them had a second chance at interacting with the course material, this time in their home language. This recommendation for support in the mother tongue is emphasised by the Council on Higher Education (2001) when stating that effective learning and teaching cannot happen where students are unable to understand the language of tuition.

The cognitive, metacognitive and non-academic value of tutoring as a teaching and learning support strategy should be optimised at the university

To meet its mandate of ensuring access to education for all, tutoring should be considered a part of the university's service to first-year students from schools in disadvantaged communities. This recommendation is supported by Norodien-Fataar and Daniels (2016) who appealed to the university involved in this study to 'actively recognize and strengthen its support platforms to help students from disadvantaged communities towards success'. This recommendation finds further support from Pather's (2013) claim that the small class size and individual attention that students are privileged with in tutoring encourage them to persist and not drop out.

Conclusion

This article discussed the experiences of role players in a tutoring programme for BED Foundation Phase isiXhosa first-language students at a University in Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa. The study on which this article is based established that isiXhosa Foundation Phase students struggle with English as the LOLT. The tutees who participated in the tutoring programme underperformed in assessments due to an inability in understanding the concepts and terms of the course material they deal with. The study established that instruction in English was more of a barrier in the lecture room than a means to transfer knowledge. It was further established that students have difficulty in adjusting to the higher education culture, mainly because of their under-preparedness as a result of an historically unequal school education sector in the country. The struggles mentioned put many isiXhosa students at risk of being unsuccessful, an aspect which is often misinterpreted as them being lazy or incompetent. It was illustrated how tutoring in the home language can be employed as a teaching and learning tool to assist students who struggle with the English LOLT of the institution. The findings of the study showed how tutoring in their home language facilitated a more positive learning experience that supported their navigation through higher education.

The most profound finding of this study lay in the fact that, when the tutoring was offered to tutees in their home language, which was not the LOLT of the institution, they began to understand the course material better, which ultimately boosted their confidence and chances at success. During the tutoring sessions the tutees could engage with the course material in their own language, allowing them access to the curriculum, which was otherwise inaccessible to them given the English LOLT of the institution. Considering the importance of improved throughput and completion rates for students from disadvantaged communities whose home language was not the LOLT of the institution, tutoring in the home language of isiXhosa students must become an intentional institutionalised priority, instead of a once-off effort as was the case in this tutoring programme.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

Ethical consideration

Approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the university and the research department of the Education Faculty approved access to the site, the students and the lecturers. Participants were requested to

sign a consent letter in which aspects like the purpose of the study and anonymity were set out. Education Faculty Ethics Committee, CPUT, EFEC 2-1/2014.

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