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A DECIDING FACTOR FOR LEARNING STYLES AS AN ELEMENT OF COVID-19 OMICRON VARIANT RAPID TRANSMISSION

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry explores correlation between learning styles in language learning and academic attainment as against the rapid transmission of COVID 19 Omicron variant. Ever-changing necessities by government due to reported rise in number of infected persons as well as moderate vaccination status has led Education Department with no choice but to ensure maintained social distancing protocols in schools. For this paper, the main objective is to determine the extent of recent learning styles brought about by the current schooling situation, as against language development, precisely reading comprehension. Ten primary school English teachers randomly nominated from one Education district became participants for this qualitative investigation. Data was obtained through administering semi-structured interviews. Key findings to this study divulged that learning styles that came into existence since the prompt transmission of the disease seemed to have some negative results in language learning as decline in learner reading proficiencies was perceived by English language teachers. The author recommends that English teachers need to advocate the notion of 'drop all and read infused technology' as a strategy by all teachers. Success in schooling is tantamount to efficiency in reading.

Keywords: Learning styles, rapid transmission, Language proficiency, Academic attainment, Reading, Comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

For a number of educational sectors, the only major concern centres around effective learning as the core learning practise that transpires in the classroom setting as declared by Hunt (2011). Teachers who demonstrate an indulgent zeal towards learning practices always have an ultimate aim for appropriateness in their pedagogical methods for progression with regards to teaching and learning. Yassin (2012) concurs that an application of operational learning in the classroom has been found to have some benefits in academic attainment. Henceforth, as a way of achieving effectiveness in teaching and learning of language development, precisely reading comprehension, there is a dire need for teachers to be conversant of the emergent eruption of diverse learning styles and methods especially in this period of drastic changes emanating from the COVID-19 Omicron that still persists its transmission (Almut & Thomas, 2021).

In relation to the drastic changes championing running of almost all organisations in the country, the Department of Education in South Africa has since tabled down procedures to be adhered to during the processes of teaching and learning (Gazette 44154, 2021). All schools are expected to comply with requirements on social distancing, health and safety of all stake

holders involved. All these movements have since resulted in the change of learning styles, this being observed when curriculum frameworks and education programmes were reorganised and re-adjusted as agreed upon by policy logistics (National Policy Act, 1996). As English is a core subject, a language of learning, as well as a medium of instruction for a greatest percentage of subjects reinforcing the curriculum, its major aspects like reading, speaking and writing got affected as they were observed to be deteriorating after these changes were effected, this being an indication for a decline in academic attainment (Donnelly, Patrinos & Gresham, 2021).

For learners to be successful in their schooling, with specific regards to reading comprehension as one of the vital aspects in language learning, one has to take into cognisance how learners are affected by learning styles that have since emanated during the era of the COVID-19 Omicron variant rapid transmission (Max Kozlov, 2022). In instances where there is an eruption of new learning styles, it has been proven by research that such drastic changes tend to lead to deterioration in learner achievement. Alharbi (2015) concurs that for improved language proficiencies in learners, the entire learning and teaching as a process needs to consider that learners are at the core of studying, with varying learning styles that consistently need to be nurtured. Moreover, for learners to develop love of the language that is unfamiliar to them, yet being the medium of instruction for most subjects underpinning the prescribed school curriculum, teaching has to be learner-centred and learner- paced (Ewing & Cooper, 2021; Flynn, Keane, Davitt, McCauley, Heinz, & Mac Ruairc, 2021).

Accordingly, there are three key learning styles. In visual learning style learners prefer to see and observe things, whilst an auditory learning style has a preference for one to transfer information through listening, yet in kinaesthetic or tactile learning style learners prefer physical experiences like touching and engaging on practical work. In accordance to that, each single individual has got a way which best suits them for learning (Sarasin, 1999; VAK Test, 1991). This means all learners, although in one common classroom, have different preferred learning styles (Leckie, 2013). For English language teaching to be effective in such situations, teachers are advised to integrate a wide range of teaching methods. By so doing all learners would be accommodated irrespective of their differing learning barriers nor learning styles (The University of Massachusetts, 1991).

Subsequently, COVID 19 made us rethink our ways of working. We had to ask ourselves of the trends to be taken 2019 going forward. Teachers need to have experiences of various technologies like google meet, Microsoft teams, zoom etc. so as to use when teaching (Park, Yang & Hsieh, 2014). This presumption calls for teachers to deliver wherever learners are and also doing recordings to cater for learners who had missed attendance due to logistics challenges like network connectivity. Schools really need to invest in smart technologies. Some practical exercises can be conducted through using augmented virtual platforms. Nonetheless, such suggestions by the author can only be applicable when the country has managed to have more robust networks, as well as considering traffic for users and also the number of learners enrolled (Nguyen, 2015). As perceived by the author, there is great reason to mention that learners were observed to be intrigued as they had never embarked on remote learning in their entire lives. A change in learning styles brought about by COVID has since conveyed some new technological expertise which seems to be positively roaming across learners and English language teachers (Flynn, Keane, Davitt, McCauley, Heinz & Mac Ruairc, 2021).

Be that as it may, teachers also need to ensure they still maintain quality in both activities assigned and online administered assessments, especially for learners emanating from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited access to digital technology devices. By so doing, teaching as a valuable profession would be safe-guarded. As the community of scholars comprises learners from diverse backgrounds and with varying learning abilities, teachers have to consider collaborating through different learning styles when reading comprehension is administered (Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008). A benefit of understanding learning styles acquaints teachers with logistics on how to plan in order to accommodate and match all when reading comprehension lessons are tackled. Matching has been identified as an important factor to be considered especially when an unfamiliar language is dealt with, in this case being English as an additional language, further than that, all schools investigated apply English language as a medium of instruction for the greatest percentage of the subjects underpinning the curriculum (Yassin, 2012). On the other hand, learners have an obligation to recognise own learning styles for integration into the learning process. When learners have reached a point where they have identified own learning styles, learning process then becomes more successful yet operational. However, the Health Department has been monitoring the ever-changing conditions of COVID-19 over the last several months, there has been reported rapid transmission of the variant omicron among the humankind. Because of the rapidly rising rates of COVID-19 Omicron variant transmission (Douceff, 2021) fluctuating state requirements related to vaccination status together with a wide range of COVID-related policies, led to the Education Department factoring in some new decisions as well, thus prioritising with health and safety of the school community. These statistics have then resulted in re-considering schooling protocols, inclusive of learning styles' modifications (Huber & Helm, 2020). Sitting plan in schools led to groups and pairs segregated, yet most learners are dependent on one another for team learning and mentoring.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purposes of this qualitative investigation and as a way to generate some philosophies from participants (Brinkman, 2013), a case study was used as this research design has an added advantage to assist in exhibiting relating aspects that exist within and around the lives of humankind. The sample for this investigation comprised of ten primary school English teachers who were randomly selected to represent the larger population group of all English teachers for the Education District since using the entire group is generally not feasible (Seal, 2015; Fick, 2014). For the purposes of collecting rich data the author administered semi-structured interviews which led the participants giving open-ended responses for each interview question asked (Mackey & Gass, 2016). It was an added advantage for the author to generate truthful responses from the interviewees more so in consideration of ethical issues like confidentiality and anonymity being ascertained (Rich, 2014). Participants gave consent to the author that they would voluntarily participate in the investigation. The interview schedule contained questions that revolved around learning styles used in studying English as an additional language during the era of COVID-19 Omicron variant rapid transmission.

Theory

Underpinning this inquiry is the Experiential Learning Approach Theory by Kolb (2013). As perceived by this theory, considering varying learning styles when teaching and learning is administered is of profitable benefit and acceptable throughput with regards to learner

progression as learning styles are observed to be positively imparting the necessary development in the education of young learners. Consequently, functional teaching and learning becomes the outcome if differing learning styles are made the core (Armstrong, 2012). The theory by Kolb (2013) therefore implies that teachers have a task to analytically assess whether learning styles used really have any significance in the development of language proficiency among learners. It is for this reason that English language teachers are then faced with a huge task of assuring each learner is given an opportunity to participate in language learning by using the style, method or mode that they feel it is appropriate for them (Cimermanová, 2018). As an author I already believe that if this strategy is observed, language learning would then be reinforced, thus leading to growth in comprehension abilities intertwined with academic achievement. With regards to the main objective guiding this inquiry, it was imperious to conduct this investigation as a way to ascertain the potential learning styles in alignment with language proficiency during this period of drastic changes in the schooling system.

RESULTS

This is the where the author has tabled an argument of findings (Fick, 2014) as reflected by responses from participants in relation to the influence of learning styles during the rise of omicron towards development of reading proficiency in learners. Thereafter the author makes conclusions and suggests some recommendations intended to curb the identified factors that seem to hinder language development.

It is revealed by findings that drastic change of learning style that had recently emerged was found to be adversely affecting learner reading comprehension (Ishak &Awang, 2017). Further than that, findings indicated a decline in learner reading proficiencies. Another finding was that learners seemed to be enjoying learning languages through the use of digital technologies, an indicator for the positive effects of a technology-infused learning style. The author of this manuscript therefore came up with two themes to be discussed: declining reading proficiency caused by transition in learning styles; technology-infused learning

DISCUSSION

Declining reading proficiency caused by transition in learning styles

A decline in reading proficiency as caused by transition in learning styles was identified as a fundamental finding in this investigation. This paper provides new evidence pertaining language learning for primary school learners as the decline in reading proficiency is measured and compared to the era before the pandemic began to unravel, leading to enormous changes in the education system as well (Spector, 2021). As the style to separate learners from seating as groups or pairs when reading activities were administered had to be put on hold as a way of responding to the social distancing protocols, the ability to fluently read the given texts declined as learners were no longer in a position to assist or mentor one another. This type of a learning style was noted to be having some negative effects in developing learner reading comprehension skills. Such changes in learning styles led to interruptions in language competency. This makes the author wonder if the current situation will ever subside as the testing stations seemed to report a rise in numbers of infected inhabitants (Doucleff, 2021), as such wonders whether English language teachers would improvise learning styles that would be robust enough for closing the created gaps in language learning, specifically reading.

Moreover, for academic development, fluency in reading acts as a remedy or a skill that necessitates eagerness to learn as most subjects were reported to be offered in the English medium across all the studied schools. Chen, Chiu & Huang (2015) is of the same view that all disciplines are dependent on effective reading for learners to be recognised as having attained the intended academic skills for learning. Numerous changes brought about by the pandemic era have resulted in some transformations with regards to learning patterns. As the investigated schools were from an area regarded as rural, the author also detected lowered reading skills as against schools located in urban areas, hence reported by research to be producing learners who could read texts effectively due to advantages of available varying reading material hence within reasonable range to the district library.

Technology-infused learning

In relation to this theme, data collected revealed that recent approach to engage with learners through digital platforms when reading comprehension activities were administered, was noted to have brought about some motivation and eagerness to learn the unfamiliar English language which is also not a home language for learners enrolled in the investigated schools. This learning style had proved beneficial to language learning, specifically reading. Nonetheless, a huge number of learners were noted to exhibit some fatigue (Russell, 2010). As an author I suspect that this tiredness in language learning was a result of numerous reading tasks assigned to learners in the classroom setting as a way to cover up lost time caused by non-attendance as schools had to abruptly shut down because of the rise of COVID 19 infections across the country. Schools, as agents of communities, were deeply affected, as such, these language teachers were devising strategies to close the wide-opened gaps.

Moreover, as these learners were not acquainted with learning through digital platforms, they were noted, as perceived by English language teachers, to be spending more time probing more into the gadgets-compared to the actual engagements on reading activities. Nevertheless, all those who displayed great enthusiasm to know more of the gadgets, were identified to have alarmingly improved in reading comprehension as compared to a few who showed some reluctance to engage in the e-learning style. Subsequently, the majority of learners were not only identified to have lately become fluent, effective and efficient readers for a wide range of purposes, what was interesting was the computer-engaging skill they had acquired within a limited space of time. Participants further reported that they highly adored the displayed passion to learn via technology applications as such skills would ultimately lead to a wide range of employability for the young as future citizens of the country (York & Richardson, 2012). Indeed, a country with inhabitants fully developed in technology skills is a wealthy one. However, it sadness me that even in the current decade there are still populations out there who have been inexplicably affected by the COVID 19 pandemic era, thus encroaching on their inclination to learn, let alone mentioning limited access to computers and internet connectivity.

CONCLUSION

Recognition of relevant, suitable and appropriate learning styles enables learners to easily assimilate and incorporate own ways of engaging into the learning process, leading to functionality for both the learner and the teacher, as the core recipients to language proficiency. This statement is in line with Kolb (2013) who recommends that for purposeful learning and academic attainment, teachers are faced with a huge task to ensure they strive for equilibrium

in the learning styles used as a way to accommodate all learners irrespective of their language complexities nor wavering abilities.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview schedule

Interview schedule for English First Additional Language Primary School teachers

1. How has reading proficiency been affected by the alteration of learning styles during the COVID 19 Omicron variant rapid transmission era?
2. What role has infusion of technology played towards language development?

Your participation in this regard is of the highest value in this enquiry. Thank You

Acknowledgment

Appreciation is bestowed upon God the Almighty for continually providing me with strength to fulfil my aspiration of becoming a fully blown scholar through manuscript writing. Transfiguring own thoughts to become real life stories is really not an easy task as one would anticipate. I have discovered that rigorous comprehending with written texts has proved to be the best recipe for me in this overwhelming exercise. This paper is intended to determine the effect of recent shift in learning styles as decided upon by the rapid rise of COVID-19 Omicron variant transmission towards language proficiency, specifically reading as one of the core aspects in language development.

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