

# Language Development Engulfed Within Social Distancing Proprieties

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**Abstract:** This paper reasons that language learning for most secondary school learners post COVID-19 pandemic era was submerged by of social distancing emergent procedures. These were restrictions people from all spheres were expected to observe and adhere to. This has resulted in becoming a difficult exploration for language teachers as learners have been noted to perform better in relation to language development when they learn as both pair and groups. For learners to be held up in predicaments of abruptly distancing themselves from peers, guardians, or teachers, really raises some alarm bells as language with its expanded aspects need collaborative engagements. Authors conducted a survey in a nominated school in an Eastern Cape Education District. The identified district formed part of a community where high death toll from COVID-19 statistics was reported. The investigated school emanates from a society that was forced to abide by the restrictions brought about by the pandemic era. Investigation conducted aimed at identifying whether social distancing proprieties have any significant influence on language development, thereby imparting also in learner academic attainment. Semi-structured interviews as data collection tools were administered to five purposefully selected participants who offered English as First Additional Language (FAL) in the nominated school. The interview schedule contained open-ended questions that allowed robust and lengthy discussions. Findings to this investigation disclosed that language proficiencies in learners have been noted to deteriorate due to the methods of teaching that have since emerged, as well as declining relations among school stakeholders. Human relations in any sector, either governmental or non-governmental, when not nurtured, could lead to a decline in the throughput rate. For purposes of this investigation, it became eminent for a firm sustenance with regards to human relations within all school stakeholders. Considering re-aligned teaching methods, coupled with maintained relations, is recommended. In conclusion, proficiency in a language as a collective advantage leads to improved communication and excellence in academic attainment as most subjects underpinning the curriculum in the investigated schools are offered in the English medium.

**Keywords:** Development, Language, Academic attainment, Social distancing, Proficiency

## 1. Introduction

For an envisaged and efficient language proficiency aptitudes it has been proved vital that learners work collaboratively as peers, through academic guidance from their teachers in line with subject specific (Emmanuel, Adom, Josephine & Solomon, 2014). At the same time, when parents are at the core, proficiency in all subjects offered by the school curriculum, together with improved academic attainment, become the best and delicious fruit ever anticipated by all stakeholders involved in the schooling system (Jagero, 2011). Strengthened collaborations, energetic engagements, especially within a specified schooling environment, results of information being shared and skills-transfer, become the basis of maintained improvement cherished by all (Benthall, 2019). As English language is foreign and unfamiliar for most learners in the school where this inquiry was conducted, teachers

are faced with a huge challenge to trans-pursue varieties of teaching approaches to cater for diverse learners (Chand & Das, 2022). Further than that, collaborative engagements within learners, teachers and parents have been noted to promote augmented social skills, thereby leading to improved communication abilities, fluency, and adequate abilities to comprehend with text (Naz & Murad, 2017).

Accordingly, for the entire countries of the world to be attacked by COVID-19 pandemic era, there emanated newly designed policies for all organisations (Saavedra, 2020). These changes greatly affected the schooling norm as there were school closures, social distancing protocols, non-collaboration within individuals from the very same household, let alone shaking of human relations as community members were barred from commonly-known collaborative gatherings. Such procedures to be observed by all proved to have negatively impacted not only on

learner language enhancement but a decline in academic throughput rate became the talk of the day (Consilz, 2020). It is for this reason that authors of this paper embarked to undertake an investigation where a question had to be answered: How has language development been affected by social distancing?

Although studies have been conducted in relation to social distancing logistics that have affected schooling processes, this paper has identified a gap that no studies have been made in relation to effects of social distancing on language development. It is for this reason that we were probed to undertake this investigation. As articulated by Meeter, Bele, Den Hartogh, Bakker, De Vries & Plak (2020), such emergent changes leading to teaching and learning processes being revised, leave us as authors with no room but to acknowledge that indeed social distancing logistics have somehow hindered learner language proficiencies, yet, success and effectiveness for all subjects underpinning the curriculum need learners who display mastery across all language aspects like listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, fluency and text comprehension.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Empirical Literature

Fatima (2020) argues that language development has been reported to be deteriorating as language teachers narrated sad stories that they no longer had freedom as per their anticipation because they recently could not freely move very closer to learners to assist those who seemed to have barriers in learning. In the same view, learners identified as introverts have lately found themselves in a condition that they never predicted. Such cohort of learners seemed to be really enduring stress hence conveying reports that they were struggling to collaborate with either their peers or teachers for the purposes of sharing information (Bin Dahmash, 2020).

For an enhanced language proficiency, information sharing through group learning and teaching engagements, as supported by Rifiyanti (2020) is a remedy that assists learners to voice out own opinions through group participation, yet protocols on social distancing limit learners to unite and form groups in a classroom setting. For each learner to be expected to learn an unfamiliar language by

own self really raises some alarm bells to us as the authors of this manuscript, yet on the other side the greatest percentage of subjects in the school where this enquiry was made, practise English language as the medium of instruction (Chambers & Schilling, 2013).

In relation to language proficiency, social collaboration as opined by Racine, Birken & Madigan (2020) is proved to be an essential strategy. Despite that, measures and constraints on social distancing for large groups are declared to have affected learning in schools (Glass, Glass, Beyeler & Min, 2006). For realistic language development, peer grouping is renowned as a crucial element for its inclusion of conversational skills as learners obtain platforms for exchanged and shared learning coupled with understanding the implicit meaning behind a speaker's words (Hopman, Tick, Ende, Wubbels, Verhulst, Maras & Lier, 2018).

Astuti and Solikhah (2021) believe that the current state of affairs seems to have an effect on the methods of teaching used by language teachers. Teachers in one study that was undertaken contended that they experienced some hindrances of not conducting lessons the way they had planned (Barker, Semenov, Michaelson, Provan, Snyder & Munakata, 2014). For them to be found disbanding group learning started to be imparting negatively in their teaching methods. This was made evident as the study divulged that ever since schools started to adhere on social distancing regulations, learners' academic attainment in languages, specifically reading and writing scores, were reported to show some decline when compared to the period prior the pandemic era (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

Furthermore, Köylü (2021) is of the opinion that as learners have varying learning styles, some learn quicker when they engage in pair or group discussion with their peers. On the same vein, teachers reported being caught up at using more or less the same teaching methods time and gain (Llanes & Serrano, 2017). For instance, in cases where debating activities were performed for language enhancement, only a limited number of learners were permitted to partake as there had to be a measurable distance in between them. In addition to that, teachers are faced with a situation where they find themselves disadvantaged in engaging learners in group discussion method as learner groupings had to be disbanded, this method also limiting

sharing of teaching and learning material as learners are expected not to share, instead to use own material as a way of avoidance to spread the deadly COVID-19-related sicknesses (MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2020; Salas-Pilco, Yang & Zhang, 2022).

On the same judgment, Sawchuk (2020) and Patrick, Henkhaus, Zickafoose, Lovell, Halvorson, Loch, Letterie and Davis (2020) echo a similar view. They declare that lately some attitudes from learners were observed. Such attitudes include displaying tenseness regarding drastic emergent changes as they swept over the previous norms and values of the schooling context. As sudden changes brought about by COVID-19 social distancing proprieties had begun to emerge, fear could be written all over learner faces as learners endured hard time meeting others to pursue school matters.

Additionally, interaction between learners and teachers was no longer the same as before due to social distance limitations (Holger & Dieter, 2020). This action has proved to cause lots of strain for both teachers and learners as recipients for learning. On a different scenario, Kumar and Chacko (2010) argue that some learners had continuity at displaying positiveness in learning. This was evident as learners showed indications that, for a new lesson implemented, learners proved to be somehow ahead of their teachers as they demonstrated fluency and better text comprehension when compared to previously conducted lessons.

## 2.2 Theoretical Literature

Underpinning this paper is the Model of Teacher Change by Guskey (1986). This framework portrays teaching-learning beliefs and attitudes in a schooling environment as a focal point. Teachers have beliefs that in the previous era implemented strategies of grouping learners were seen to be yielding better progression results when analysis was tabled, as against the current learning situation where close interaction is permitted for either stakeholder. Educational implications for this model are that for enhancing language development in these destabilising current times, it is therefore vested upon language teachers to regularly assign reading texts to learners, whether in singles, pairs or groups; yet, either out-of-school or within the learning environment itself, for prompt monitoring and rendering all the necessary assistance required (Cave, 2021). It became imperative to use such a model as

it relates to the schooling emergent changes in the entire sector of the education system, the underlying effects being aligned to COVID-19 protocols and regulations (Akram & Qureshi, 2017).

It is needless to mention that there was an imperious need for this study to be conducted to examine the possible impact of social distancing proprieties towards language development more so that language learning is a fundamental aspect intertwining all subjects offered by a specific curriculum because for ease of access to communicate whether locally, nationally or internationally, one needs to have language command.

## 3. Methodology

This is the segment where methodology undertaken to arrive at the objectives of this investigation is discussed. Justifications on why a specific type of research methodology has been chosen, has also been appropriately clarified. As opined by Goundar (2012), numerous research methodologies often provide an all-inclusive introduction to the topic under investigation. Methodologies adopted for this investigation rotated around evaluating social distancing proprieties towards language development. Accordingly, research methods are strategies of inquiry that move from the inherent theoretical expectations to research design and data gathering.

### 3.1 Approach

This paper administered a qualitative approach. This approach was relevant because of its characteristic of giving access to examine both cultural and social phenomena of the problem under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There was motivation to undertake this qualitative investigation upon observing that was an interest to understand people better, thereby getting a closer understanding on how social distancing proprieties affected language learning as such regulations were not a normalcy in the previous learning environment.

### 3.2 Research Design

Embedded in this qualitative investigation is action research. This research design, as opined by Strauss and Corbin (2015) is an acknowledged yet a logical investigative method normally employed in sectors like organisation improvement and education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Action research design also

aims at examining persons' real-world immediate challenging concerns coupled with social science goals within an adequate ethical basis (Rapoport, 1970). This design was perceived a valuable research design for use at investigating social distancing protocols towards language development.

### 3.3 Sampling

Creswell and Poth (2018) acknowledge that sampling has an objective to identify population descriptions through observing a specified percentage of the population. It was for this reason that this paper conveniently selected participants that would serve as agents to collect data more so because of their relevancy as they were language teachers who offered tuition in a schooling environment where there had previously been a whale of bereavements from COVID-19 deaths, as such social distancing logistics remained under contingent observation in most schools around. Henceforth, results to this enquiry could not be generalized. Five English language senior secondary school teachers were identified as participants as they were the relevant cohort with easy access to information, as well, with observance of ethical considerations to acknowledge participant rights as elements of research data gathering (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 3.4 Research Instruments

Research instrument as a data collection tool necessitates measurement and analysis of data from, moving in-between subjects and the topic being investigated (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). The instrument for use is determined by the approach administered, either qualitative or quantitative or mixed. For this investigation, efficacy was on administering semi structured interviews. When this process was conducted, interviewers verbally engaged by asking questions from the interviewees. As the interview schedule composed of open-ended questions, the order of questions changed time and again in their specific ways. Open-ended responses resulted at interviewees probing follow up questions.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a critical aspect of action research, Gass and Mackey (2011) declare that this process includes categorizing and interpreting gathered data into valuable evidence, thereby forming themes as

findings for the topic under investigation. This entire process started by encoding, thus, classifying the context with its plethora of responses that later formulated the basis of thematic opinions. For purposes of this investigation authors analysed social distancing proprieties brought about by COVID-19 regulations towards language development for senior secondary school learning as compared to previous moments where merging of learners was regarded a vibrant approach during processes of teaching and learning. Participant responses were transcribed and grouped as per their similarities. This led to identification of themes discussed in the next section as findings of the study.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This unit is where authors have presented a contention of findings as emanated from participants responses. Focal point for discussion rotates around proprieties of social distancing intertwined with effects towards language development and academic attainment. During data analysis similar or relevant responses were grouped together, as such, codes were formed. Two codes that came up were teaching tactics and relationships. Coding led to formation of themes. Two themes that frame the discussion as divulged by findings are: approaches to teaching and stakeholder relations. In conclusion, the authors outline recommendations as means to address the identified challenge.

### 4.1 Approaches to Teaching

In response to teaching approaches participant S1 responded that:

*As a teacher who has long been teaching English subject in different classes, I really got overwhelmed that my previously used tactics of grouping learners seemed to be no longer viable.*

In line with the response above, participant anonymously coded as S4 had a similar response:

*For me, it usually works to my advantage when learners undergo language activities like comprehending texts, together, at the same time, be it as pairs or as groups. Be that as it may, governmental regulations on social distancing had resulted at me having to throw away my preferred teaching strategies as learners had to work independently, away from each other.*



These responses are comprehended by S2 who commented that:

*Closure of schools whilst countries around the world were held tight by pandemic bereavements really resulted at a very huge decline in relation to learner language proficiencies. Actually, the fact of the matter is that learners come into close and serious encounter with English language only at school, specifically during English periods. For learners to have stayed at their homes for prolonged periods affected language development as learners had got exposed to their background/cultural communities held up with varying linguistic complexities coupled with linguistic constituencies.*

From the findings of this paper, it emerged as a major challenge that learner language proficiencies were observed to have deteriorated ever since the sudden changes of teaching methods that overtook the eruption of COVID-19 pandemic (Aji, Ardin & Arifin, 2020). Despite restrictions brought by emergent changes in the education system, language proficiency remains with all its aspects like listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, and fluency, meaning, as these are fundamentals towards academic attainment, language teachers continue to be faced with a burden to revitalise existing teaching methods. It then becomes the task of teachers to invent strategies and approaches that have an ultimate goal of evolving learner competency (Mahmood, 2020).

In addition, teachers can devise strategies that allow, accept and respect individual learner submissions, these being tasks compiled outside the schooling environment, yet, in the absence of the teacher (Hopp & Thoma, 2020). As observance of social distancing remains a challenge (Akban, Rathert & Agcam, 2021), teachers, without diverting from the intended work schedules, need to allow for robust discussions about learnt experiences, thereby enhancing language development by clarifying and extracting identified language errors. As these engagements go on and on, teachers should then ensure they afford consistent opportunities for learner-teacher interaction, taking into cognisance that as learners perceive things differently, so are their dissimilar learning styles. Teaching approaches and learning styles are inseparable.

## 4.2 Stakeholder Relations

Positive relations among parents, teachers and learners are renown of their characteristic to reap

satisfactory throughput regarding academic attainment. As soon as such relations thereof, begin to be shaken by either environmental or societal influences, decline in learner performance is well-noted (Rifiyanti, 2020). It is for this reason that participant S2 relayed a very sad story to us as authors when interviews were administered:

*When I re-look at how the school year plan would be designed by us a languages department, I become so saddened to observe that the so called 'open-learning days' are no longer the talk ever since the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gone are those days when parents would be timeously invited to schools to observe, applaud and motivate both their children and teachers on the appealing work displayed. Such an event used to be solely organised for learners to compete and engage at a circuit or district level, where skills like reading, speaking, debating, writing, text comprehension, were groomed and developed. Top achievers would be handed some awards. Events of this nature encouraged and stimulated also those learners who were lazy or had difficulties in learning.*

In congruency to S2, another participant coded as S5, responded:

*For us as teachers to attend to learners in a one-on-one fashion as we are forced to observe social distancing protocols, is really a strain as it affects human relations between teachers and learners. Additionally, as it has become to clomp learners as pairs or groups, peer-learning relations are somehow hindered.*

This is supported by S3 who accords that:

*As learners have varying learning styles coupled with learning abilities, some perform better when working as pairs or groups. For learners to be suddenly divorced from sharing information among themselves is tantamount to a decline in learner language proficiency, likely to impart in negativism when academic attainment is looked over at a broader spectrum because for learning to be granted effective, yet efficient, there is a dire need for learners to have holistic grasp of language aspects as all subjects underpinning the prescribed curriculum have texts to be comprehended.*

Another finding to this investigation was the decline in stake-holder relations. Relations among

all persons involved in the schooling environment were influenced by the sudden change in governmental restrictions after the entire countries of the universe got affected by COVID-19 ailments. In-between teachers and learners as recipients to teaching and learning, declining relations were eminent due to school closure impacts, more especially towards language learning as most subjects offered by the curriculum centre around languages because of texts to be comprehended (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). During this disturbing transition to learning, most learners were reported to have lost relationships with peers as communication vibes had been lowered as most schools had opted to session-schooling attendance, surely to lose bonding of the previously constructed concrete relationships. This situation really raises some anxieties to the most vulnerable, likely to endure additional learning barriers.

In line with vulnerability, Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) opine that protocols of social distancing have brought about concerns to discourage sharing and caring among human nature as compared to the previous ways of teacher-parent-learner engagements. On the other side, Ariyanti (2020) argues that learners have begun to display some negativity as they seem not to take anything seriously, thus continuing sharing everything. Additionally, social distancing protocols have been reported to limit effective and efficient relations that were previously perceived by teachers to be having a satisfactory effect on learner academic attainment. When the processes of teaching and learning are held in predicaments of attitudes by either of the stakeholders, the probable outcome is downgraded language proficiency, thereby hindering learner academic performance.

As broader curriculum objectives are addressed by the content of the subject learnt, learning outcomes for English language learning describe actual examples and specifications of enhanced language proficiency with descriptions of possible strategies that can aid language learning, also intended to cater for improved academic attainment despite diverse learning and teaching approaches. Findings of this paper are in line with Guskey's (1986) Model of Teacher Change as this theory focuses on emergent changes in the schooling environment thereby having an educational implication that teachers should regularly dispense texts to be comprehended to, irrespective of the modes that have been recently noted to disband pair or group learning.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Encounters experienced by English language teachers due to social distancing proprietaries' effects on language development, were examined. To teach and learn an unfamiliar language, yet, within constraints to communicate and engage frequency, is a real test. We, therefore, conclude that for learners to become proficient in language learning, there would be improvement also in text comprehension and fluency, thus serving as drivers for quality in academic attainment as the subjects for the offered curriculum in the studied school has an English medium base. In addition, we recommend revamping in language teaching methodologies to cater for the global emergent changes, be it technologically, policy-related, or otherwise. There is a direct need for maintained relations within the schools' stake holders. We therefore propose for unity among recipients in any organisation of learning, surely to erupt to excellence in academic attainment, not only for languages, but cutting across all subjects reinforcing the curriculum of that institution. Competency in language learning is tantamount to outshined learner throughput rates.

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