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Teaching and learning of language structures and conventions in the intermediate phase English home language classroom: a comparative study of a public and an independent school in South Africa

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2017

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/25696

Koutris, Ioanna (2017) Teaching and learning of language structures and conventions in the intermediate phase English home language classroom: a comparative study of a public and independent school in South Africa,University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/25696>

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ABSTRACT

This study explored and compared how language structures and conventions were taught in the intermediate phase English Home Language classroom at a public and at an independent school in central Johannesburg, South Africa. The aim was to identify challenges and strategies in an attempt at promoting pedagogies that enhance the learning of language structures and conventions. Specific themes related to the teaching and learning of language structures and conventions have been highlighted as the main point of departure in the study. Such themes include: a synthesis of the curriculum applied at public and independent schools; theoretical viewpoints in the teaching and learning of language structures and conventions, highlighting challenges experienced in the EHL classroom; and lastly, the teaching strategies used in overcoming the challenges. A qualitative research approach was adopted, using a case study as the research design. Most case studies allow space for generalisations to be made, however, in this study I was limited to making such generalisations because my study is considered a minor study. The research methods consisted of: biographical questionnaires; 8 teacher interviews (Grades 4 – 6); and 5 classroom observations (only Grade 6) per school which were audio-taped. The findings suggested that the most common teaching approach used throughout the lessons in both schools was the text-based approach, which is advocated in the CAPS (2011). The classroom observations conducted at the public school illustrated that the Audio-lingual Method of language teaching was used, as opposed to CLT which was evident in the classroom observations at the independent school. Lessons in the public school were primarily teacher-centered, where the teacher engaged in giving instructions, providing explanations and eliciting responses. The type of questions asked consisted of lower level thinking (literal). Learners in the independent school, however, showed more enthusiasm towards participating in classroom discussions and answering questions, thus creating a learner-centered culture. It is evident that the independent school is more flexible in selecting the language components that need to be covered within a specific period. Based on the interview sessions, the teachers at the independent school mention that it is more important for them to cover a minimum amount of work in-depth rather than covering everything and not having learners understand what they are learning. As a future recommendation, a similar study can be conducted comparing an urban public school and a rural public school that apply the CAPS. This study adds to the understanding of how language structures and conventions are taught in the intermediate phase EHL classroom in the South African context. By encouraging and promoting the teaching of grammar, we are able to identify approaches best suited for quality learning to take place.

Keywords: language structures and conventions, grammar, English Home Language, teaching and learning, challenges, strategies