

# The Effect of Some Aspects of Swati Grammar on the Conceptualization of the Structure and Functions of the English Noun Phrase by University Students

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**Abstract** Eswatini is a bilingual country with English and Swati as official languages. Speakers of other languages use English to communicate with the exception of many speakers of languages spoken in Mozambican such as Shangaan and Portuguese who tend to acquire Swati as soon as they interact with the locals and pick some English if they work for English-speaking employers. At the University of Eswatini, students in the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities programme have an option to study both Swati and English grammar in the Departments of African Languages and Literature and English Language and Literature respectively. Over the years, we noted that despite intensive teaching the constituent structure of the English noun phrase and its syntactic functions within the clause, many candidates still translate the syntactic functions of the Swati noun phrase when describing the English noun phrase. This study then determined to investigate whether the incorrect description of the syntactic functions of the English noun phrase was a result of negative transfer/interference; lack of focus, or an error learnt during the teaching and learning of the English noun phrase from the secondary school level. Using a linguistic analysis of students' responses to tests/examinations and an analysis of prescribed textbooks for teaching English Language in secondary schools, we found that the problems students had in describing the constituent structure and syntactic functions of the noun phrase were transferred from two sources. The first source is the errors

identified in the content of prescribed textbooks used to teach English Language at the secondary school level and the second source is the transfer of the description and function of the noun phrase from Swati—a first language of the participants. The findings show the need to incorporate all pillars of linguistic competence: the organizational and sociolinguistic competences when designing materials for the teaching of English to enrich the input required for the optimal comprehension and use of the structural elements of a second language.

**Keywords** Language Transfer, Interference, Conceptualization, Competence, English Noun Phrase

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## 1. Introduction

This study was located in Eswatini, Southern Africa. It drew its participants from students who studied English Language and Linguistics at the University of Eswatini from 2014 to 2019. Some of the English language courses they took included: *Grammar 1: A Survey of English Grammar*, *Grammar II: Phrases and Clauses*, and *Grammar III: Clause Combining and Text Creation*. In Grammar 1, the focus of the course is on the general overview of the morphological, syntactic and semantic classification of parts of speech in English, and how these

syntactic categories are used in the sentence. In Grammar 11, the focus is on the in-depth analysis of English phrases and clauses. And in Grammar 111, the analysis is on various processes involved in clause combining and creation of various types of sentences, and their role in creating cohesive and coherent text. The study of cohesion and coherence at this level equips students to be sensitive to the functions of text's linguistic and paralinguistic features.

In this paper, we present a problem that we face when year one and year two students attempt to explain the concept of the 'headword' in the syntactic use of the noun phrase in English. We argue that the incorrect explanations they give in tests or examinations are a result of the approaches used in language teaching which the students are exposed to at the secondary school level.

## 2. Problem Statement

When teaching the 'word classes' as well as the concepts of 'phrases' and 'clauses', we teach the constituent structure and syntactic functions of the English noun phrase. We begin by describing the notion of 'headword'. We explain that the noun is the headword of the noun phrase. But we have noticed that when we require our students to explain the concept or other syntactic functions of the noun phrase, they tend to write a response that reflects a direct translation of the same from the Swati language or a total misunderstanding of the concept. This prompted us to investigate what might be influencing the minimal conceptualisation of the constituent structure of the English noun phrase and its roles within the clause.

## 3. Literature Review

When we were confronted with the problem already stated above, we thought that maybe it was a result of the fact that our environment is a bilingual context. It is often a tendency for bilinguals to transfer linguistic features from their first language (L1) to the learning of the second language (L2) or any target language [1]; hence, the direct translation that we observed. In this section of the paper therefore, we discuss various concepts which we considered responsible for the students' tendency to confuse the structure and function of the noun phrase in English with that of Swati. Such confusion may be explained by describing the linguistic context of the students as well as the expected linguistic system which underlies the learning of all linguistic structures of either the first language or the second language. This section will also describe 'conceptualisation', which explains how the mental capacities process linguistic information. Therefore, the problem may be understood by describing both sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors that contribute to language teaching and learning.

The linguistic context in this area of study is mainly bilingual. In Eswatini, like in many SADC countries, English is generally used as a second language; Swati being the first language. Therefore, the subjects of this study were all bilinguals. Some researchers argue that the two languages are represented as separate linguistic systems in the mind of a bilingual individual. So it is important to describe the nature of bilinguals.

A bilingual is described as a person who uses two languages on a regular basis. Though there are more, only two types of bilinguals are identified in this context of study: 'balanced bilinguals' and 'unbalanced bilinguals' [2].

Balanced bilinguals are described as those people who are competent and fluent in both languages, and are conversant with the culture of both; these are also described as 'biculturals'. This observation is supported by Luna, Ringberg and Peracchio [3] who argue that bilinguals are those individuals who "have fully internalized two separate cultures...[and they] have two separate culture-specific mental frameworks and identities which are linked to different languages [those] biculturals have mastered". However, this portrayal of bilinguals is not a comprehensive representation of linguistic contexts where English is learnt as a second or third language (or any other linguistic community that is bilingual or multilingual). In such cases, the people who use English as a second or third language may be able to learn and effectively use the "grammatical/linguistic competence" of the second or third language. However, they may have limitations in effectively implementing their 'pragmatic competence', which enables an individual to be sensitive to the social values and context of the linguistic signal used by the linguistic community where the language is spoken as a mother tongue. Therefore, some individuals may not be conversant with all aspects that pertain to the culture of their second language. Thus, Knickerbocker and Altarriba [2] point out that such bilinguals are unbalanced.

Unbalanced bilinguals, though they know two languages, tend to use one of the languages daily, and the other is hardly used except in very formal environments. Therefore, Luna et al. describe them as 'monocultural' bilinguals. This indicates that there is a qualitative difference between the balanced and unbalanced because balanced bilinguals have the capacity to process information using both languages at the same level while unbalanced bilinguals are not likely to do the same. The differences in the competencies of these two types of bilingual individuals may also be explained from a psycholinguistic perspective.

Garman [4] explains that the linguistic system, from a psycholinguistic perspective, is as an abstract system that is responsible for the generation and perception of language. Generally, the linguistic system refers to individuals' underlying knowledge about language which enables the individual to produce and understand language. Lashley cited in Aitchison [5] states that language production and comprehension involve the 'multiplicity of integrative

processes'. Aitchison further explains that speech depends on the simultaneous integration of a remarkable number of processes. She argues that, "In speech [alone], three processes, at the very least, are taking place simultaneously"; these are: (1) the phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic processes involved in activating words, (2) attributing the meaning of the words, and (3) combining them into phrases and statements to express a particular idea.

Several studies have also shown that the two languages of the bilinguals may have some differences which imply that their linguistic systems are represented differently in the mind. Other scholars such as Nunan [6] suggest that the mind enables the individual to store information as 'mental frames' and 'mental schemas' which relate each word to some experience or event. The mental frames and schemas describe how information and/or our experiences are stored in our memories. Santrok [7] describes human memory as "a single unified capacity to remember information and this includes a range of mental processes such as encoding, storing and retrieval of information".

The frame theory introduced by Frederick C. Bartlett in 1932 [6], a cognitive psychologist, explains how people perceive, comprehend and recall information. Bartlett proposed that individuals acquire and remember new material in terms of existing knowledge structures in the memory [which he calls schemata or schemas, and these structures are defined as] an active organization of past reactions or of past experiences. These schemas are said to be activated whenever an individual needs to understand a text or remember a past event or just to comprehend new information related to the stored schemata. And the schemata is constantly reconstructed and reorganized as the individual encounters new, but related experiences of the world. The concept of schemas in memory is closely related to what Marvin Minsky calls 'frames' [6] referring to knowledge structures about stereotyped situations. Information within frames is arranged in a hierarchical structure. At the top of the structure there is fixed information about a particular situation and at the lower level, the information is a variable. These components of a frame are believed to guide how to take action, what to expect next, and what to do if these expectations fail.

Our investigation on why students were transferring the description of the syntactic functions of the noun phrase in Swati into that of the English noun phrase also led us to consider the macro-activities that are involved in the production of an utterance. We seem to believe that students' inaccurate descriptions may be attributed to their inability to maximize the use of some of these micro-activities. Botha [8] identifies four micro-activities involved in producing an utterance. These include: *conceptualizing*, *formulating*, *externalizing* and *self-monitoring*. Conceptualizing is described as all mental processes that are involved in the formulation of a 'preverbal message'. A preverbal message is described as "what the producer intends to utter or convey: knowledge,

thoughts, feelings..." In other words, the speaker needs to know what he has to say. Thereafter, the preverbal message is formulated, and formulating is done in terms of two kinds of encoding: grammatical encoding and encoding with an externalizing plan. Here, the message is presented in a particular grammatical structure and then expressed as a linguistic signal whether, spoken, written or signed. The last micro-activity Botha suggests is the self-monitoring activity. This enables the producer to "check whether he/she is conceptualizing, formulating and externalizing the utterance correctly". He further explains that, "self-monitoring allows the speaker to detect and correct errors in a flash". Therefore, self-monitoring involves the comprehension and analysis of what the individual has produced, and detects whether the other processes have been implemented effectively. Denes and Pinson [9] refer to this self-monitoring process as the *Feedback Link* which enables the speaker to hear himself, comprehend his own speech and immediately make necessary corrections wherever required. In written language, the writer is able to make such corrections through proofreading and editing what has been written.

The other linguistic aspect that may have contributed to the students' responses is negative transfer. Hence, it interfered with the conceptualization of the syntactic functions of the English noun phrase. Grosjean cited in Hoffman [10] explains that interference occurs at different linguistic levels: phonological, lexical or grammatical level. Literature on interference clarifies that second language (L2) learners tend to transfer linguistic patterns of the first language (L1) into similar linguistic situations of the second language, and such transfer results in interference. Lado cited in Gass and Selinker [11] asserts that, "individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their L1" when attempting to grasp and understand the target language. Some linguists prefer the term 'transference' to interference in that transference explains the adoption of any elements or features of the L1 which are then applied to the L2. Others, on the other hand, suggest a more neutral term – 'cross-linguistic influence'. Cross-linguistic influence explains how one language influences another. Studies on transfer and interference show that although the occurrence of such in the process of learning the target language results in the creation of incorrect structures in some instances. However, the process itself is an expected phase that contributes to the acquisition of the target language.

A close examination of the Swaziland General Certificate for Secondary Education (SGCSE) English Language Syllabus for the 2013 and 2014 (which has been similar over the years) reveals that the main aim of English Language teaching is to ensure that students show the expected language proficiency which displays the individual's *communicative competence*. This term was coined by Dell Hymes in the 1960s, and it refers to the individual's knowledge of a language as well social

knowledge about how certain excerpts of the language are used appropriately in specific communicative events [12]. Literature reveals that Dell Hymes coined *communicative competence* as a reaction to Chomsky's distinction between two concepts associated with his Linguistic Theory of first language acquisition: *competence and performance*. Many scholars especially those in second and foreign language teaching have found the application Hymes' 'Communicative Competence' more applicable to teaching; thus, they find the communicative language approach to language teaching more convincing than the linguistic competence/performance proposed by Chomsky. But it should be noted that the conception of Hymes' Communicative competence has been extended by other scholars. Canale and Swain [13] identified four components of communicative competence: *grammatical competence* (knowledge of words and language rules – phrase structure /transformational rules), *sociolinguistic competence* (appropriateness), *strategic competence* (appropriate use of communication strategies), and *discourse competence* (that enables the individual to have control of discourse by using cohesion and coherence appropriately in discourse). Bachman [14] renamed the concept and called it *Communicative Language Ability* because he wanted to extend its meaning by explaining the concept using two broad headings: "organizational competence" and "pragmatic competence". Organizational competence comprises both grammatical or discourse / textual competence while pragmatic competence includes sociolinguistic and "illocutionary" competence – that is the ability to use communicative strategies by interlocutors.

#### 4. Research Questions and Objectives

The following questions guided our investigation:

- Do the students properly conceptualize the concept of 'headword'?
- Do they apply self-monitoring of the descriptions of the concept in their academic essays?
- Do they transfer the information about the first language to explain similar concepts in the second language?

To determine the cause of the interference/negative transfer of the knowledge of some aspects of the Swati grammar; specifically the noun phrase, for when describing the English noun, we noted that we needed to:

1. Analyse the English Language syllabus to identify the key linguistic competencies that are expected at the end of secondary school;
2. Compare and contrast the nature of the description of the English noun phrase and Swati noun phrase; and
3. Analyse the nature of errors in students' essays when describing the constituent structure and syntactic functions of the English noun.

#### 5. Methodology

The study focused on language use in a specific context where English is generally used as a second language; hence the study was qualitative in nature. This study investigated level 1 university students' responses when describing linguistic structures in sampled simplified texts and reviewed secondary school English language textbooks to check related content.

According to Simensen [15], simplified texts are texts written (a) to illustrate a specific language feature; (b) to modify the amount of new lexical input introduced to learners; or (c) to control for propositional input, or a combination thereof. Simplified texts exclude unnecessary and distracting idiosyncratic style without suffering a loss of valuable communication features and concepts that are found in discourse. In addition, simplified texts are often seen as valuable aids to learning because they accurately reflect what the reader already knows about the target language being studied and have the capacity to unconsciously extend this knowledge in their use of the target language (Crossley, Louwse, McCarthy & McNamara) [16].

The data was drawn from tertiary students' essays written as responses in tests for courses on English grammar taught by the authors as well as from an analysis of textbooks used to teach English Language and the Swati language at the secondary school level.

The students' essays were responses on the syntactic functions of English nouns at the level of the phrase and the level of the clause. The expected responses required participants to describe each function, give an example and comment on the example to illustrate the point given in their description. This task was given after the participants had been extensively taught about the content and guided on how to present responses when describing any grammatical unit.

Participants' identity was not shown for ethical reasons. Only one picture of an excerpt from one essay has been inserted for illustration purposes, and the other responses were lifted as is from the essays.

Raw data is has some relevant sections highlighted to identify them for analysis.

Because the data is drawn from different types of texts: books, documents and essays, in its presentation, we adopted Sorsoli's [17] method of layered analysis where each set of data is presented then described and analysed in relation to what it entails in our findings.

The analysis of textbooks focused on determining the depth of the content that describes the syntactic function of the English noun compared with the same in the Swati language, which was assumed to be interfering with the conceptualisation of the same in English at tertiary level. To get an overview of the expected competencies of students after graduating from secondary school, we analysed the general secondary school English Language

syllabus so that we could determine if the content in the secondary school textbooks was adequate to achieve the acquisition of such competencies.

Secondly, we examined the extent to which the noun phrase in English is explained in the English Language textbooks for junior and senior secondary levels.

Then, we analysed the students' performance in their essays where they responded on the syntactic functions of the English noun, especially how the description of the same in the Swati language seems to interfere with that of English.

## 6. Findings and Analysis

The findings are based on the data we analysed. The data include: (1) an analysis of the Swaziland General Certificate for Secondary Education English Language Syllabus (6873) and Assessment Guide, (2) textbooks used to teach English language and Swati language in secondary schools, and (3) students' essays describing the syntactic use of the English noun in tests.

The data is explained in reference to the theoretical underpinnings provided by the theories reviewed.

### 6.1. An Analysis of the General Secondary School English Language Syllabus

In this section, we present the generic form of the syllabus used in the teaching and assessment of English language in Eswatini. The Cambridge Assessment Unit of the University of Cambridge accredits the syllabus. The excerpt below is taken from the main document. And the sections underlined indicate portions of the syllabus that are of interest in this article.

#### ESWATINI GENERAL CERTIFICATE FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION (EGCSE) ENGLISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS 6873

##### Aims

The aims of the syllabus are the same for all learners. These aims are set out below and describe the educational purposes of a course in English Language for the EGCSE examination. They are not listed in order of priority

While the approach aims at a high level of proficiency in the use of Standard English, the teaching methodology acknowledges that English is not the first language of the majority of the learners in Eswatini. The four skills of language learning should be an integral part of all aspects of English teaching. That is: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Language activities must meet the needs of learners and promote their language development effectively. In focusing on the skills that promote language activities: language is essentially creative and expressive and can only grow from this point.

While it must be stressed that communicative competence should be the main aim, a sound understanding

of how language works (usage) will help learners to appreciate the principles underlying their own speech, reading, listening and writing, and to cope with the demands of language across their curriculum and outside the classroom.

For this reason, the material detailed under the Curriculum Content in this syllabus will be taught communicatively, with the emphasis being on achieving communicative rather than purely linguistic competence. This is because learners need to be able to communicate in English in the real world, rather than to analyse it for its own sake.

The main features of the course of study in SGCSE English Language can be summarised as follows:

- The subject is skills based, focusing on the development of the basic language skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing with the emphasis on developing the communicative competence of learners in real life situations.
- These skills are taught in an integrated way to bring about the development of positive attitudes, values and extension of knowledge.
- Grammar is taught as an integrated component of the subject and not in isolation.
- The subject caters for a wide range of ability, providing equal opportunities for all, so that learners are able to realise and fulfil their potential.
- The content is drawn from other subjects and a variety of sources in *order to facilitate learning and provide meaningful and creative experiences in all aspects of language.*
- Language development should be supported by an extensive reading programme that demands the use of the library as a major resource centre.

The EGCSE syllabus also provides a scheme of assessment that provides criteria for the standard of achievement a candidate should score for the writing and speaking tasks in the examination. The assessment guide states that for a student to obtain the highest grades in English Language, s/he should demonstrate expertise in:

- *Understanding and communicating arguments, ideas and information both at a straightforward and a more complex level;*
- *Structuring work overall so that the reader can follow the argument from the beginning to the end;*
- *Selecting material from texts and developing it in relation to the question, sufficient to show some independence of thought;*
- *Describing and reflecting upon experience and expressing effectively what is felt and imagined;*

From the aims and objectives of the syllabus, we noted that the teaching of grammar is not encouraged; thus, it is argued that grammar is taught communicatively. It should be noted that the syllabus here provides that proficiency in language use is based on the display of an appropriate

*communicative competence*. What we observed from the provisions of the syllabus is that the conception of *communicative competence* is based on the initial understanding of the concept developed by Hymes in 1966. The syllabus fails to capture the extended definition of the concept which is now broad, and takes into consideration the importance of the acquisition/teaching of other types of competencies especially as reflected by Bachman's 'organizational competence' which indicates that communicative competence demands the knowledge of grammar and text structure and logical sequencing of discourse; that is, textual competence. Widdowson cited in Bachman also states that communicative competence "recognizes that the ability to use language communicatively involves both knowledge of and competence in the language, and capacity for implementing or using this competence".

The syllabus shows that students in Eswatini are taught the English Language mainly to achieve communicative competence without focusing on the linguistic or grammatical aspect of language study. Theoretically, communicative competence is a product of organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Therefore, the aims and objectives of the syllabus have serious shortcomings and this affects the teaching of English language. Here, we concluded that the limited focus on the Bachman's organizational competence results in the students receiving very little training on grammar, cohesion and coherence in text creation.

As a result, the school graduates complete secondary school with a limitation that has contributed to the difficulties in conceptualizing the linguistic analysis of the second language at tertiary level. Thus, many students tend to confuse the description of the concepts; hence, they resort to transferring what they learnt about the noun phrase in the Swati Language through direct translation.

This conclusion is based on the underlined section of the excerpt taken from the Eswatini General Certificate in Secondary Education English language syllabus.

It should also be noted that the provisions of the syllabus have an impact on the content of books for teaching English Language that are designed by the National Curriculum Centre (NCC).

The next section shows how the noun phrase in English is taught from the entry point to the last level of secondary education in Eswatini. These findings will be compared with the noun phrase in Swati to determine the influence of the Swati grammar in learning the English noun phrase.

## 6.2. Analysis of English Language Prescribed Textbooks

Macmillan Eswatini publishes all the books used in schools in partnership with the Department of Education in Eswatini. However, teachers have the opportunity to supplement their teaching with books from other publishers if they wish to do so. The challenge may be their

availability in bookstores and limited resources to buy additional resources and even the culture to draw from various textbooks in the teaching of language because many educators tend to prefer to rely on the textbook – sometimes at the instance of specialist inspectors.

The raw data is presented in boxes, and the source formatting used in the textbooks was retained. The analysis of the data follows each data set in line with Sorsoli's [17] method of layered analysis.

### 2(a) Name of the Book: New Language for Life 1

Dlamini, Hlophe, Nkosi, Simelane, Schroeder, Sukati's [18] textbook was designed for students doing their first year in secondary education in Eswatini after completing seven years at the primary level and obtaining the national primary school certificate.

The following data was lifted from pages 29-30:

#### Activity 7 Language in action: Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that is used instead of a noun. Instead of repeating a noun several times in a sentence, we can use a pronoun.

##### Example 1

- (a) Simphiwe cooks so well. She makes best porridge and stews, and her baking is fantastic.

In the sentence, she stands in for Simphiwe and her stands in for Simphiwe's

- (b) The cat was adorable. It purred happily as it sat on my lap.

In this sentence, it stands in for the cat.

#### Personal Pronouns

There are different types of pronouns. Personal pronouns are used in the place of nouns. **They can be used as subjects and objects in sentences.**

The subject of a sentence is the person or thing doing the action in the verb.

The object of a sentence is the person or thing acted upon by the verb.

Look at this example:

2. Themba finished the homework.

He finished it.

**Subject:** [Themba] is the person doing the verb

**Object:** [the homework] is the thing the verb is done to

A close analysis of the content in Activity 7 of the textbook shows that the given explanation of the functions of pronouns in texts has some limitations. One limitation is its failure to expose the students to different types of pronouns and the identification of the various roles pronouns play in substituting noun phrases or functioning as pre-modifiers in their roles as determiners.

In example 1(a) the definition seems adequate mainly because the noun phrase here is a proper noun. But the

explanation of the use of the pronoun in the phrase; her baking, is incorrect. In this phrase; the possessive pronoun; her, is a Determiner rather than just a pronoun that replaces a noun phrase.

The definition illustrated in Example 1(b) in the textbook also omits a fundamental element of the function of pronouns. It is incorrect to state that pronouns replace nouns. Pronouns replace noun phrases whether that noun phrase constitutes a single noun or a series of items, including pre-modifiers and post-modifiers. In example 1(b), the example given in the book is a noun phrase; [the cat] which is replaced by the pronoun; *it*. The comment the authors make to explain the example in 1(b) says:

*In this sentence, it stands in for the cat.*

We observe that this was a good opportunity for the authors to teach the constituent structure of a noun phrase, but the presence of the Determiner; *the*, was ignored. In this example, the authors did not follow their definition of a pronoun because the pronoun replaced the NP as a unit, not just the noun.

In example (2) the noun phrase; [the homework] has functioned as an object. But we observe that the arrow that identifies the object only points at the headword of this NP – that is, the noun; homework. Here, we notice that again the Determiner has been ignored since it is not explained as part of the noun phrase.

Our observation is that if the constituent structure of the noun phrase (i.e. adding a few pre-modifiers and post-modifiers) had been part of the content in this textbook, the errors that have been identified would have been avoided. Such an omission is seen to be one of the factors that contribute to the fossilized content in the students' interlanguage, which makes it difficult to unteach at the tertiary level.

## 2(b) Name of the Book: New Language for Life 2

Students use this textbook in year two in secondary schools in Eswatini. The data presented was taken on page 145 [19].

Language in action

Study the following:

*Notsile trained the dog.*

This is a sentence: a group of words put together to express a complete thought. It has a number of parts of speech in it, i.e. nouns – *Notsile, dog and verb – trained*.

A sentence has a subject. A subject names the person or thing you are talking about...

The predicate is what you say about the subject...

The object is a noun or phrase that describes the person or thing that is affected by the action...

In this book, we expected more information about the noun to develop on the content taught in Book 1. But what we observe is that the authors here explain the syntactic functions of noun phrases: the subject and the object. These

are explained, but the given explanations seem inappropriate because *the subject* is explained by using some semantic properties that we usually use when we give the traditional definition of a noun: "A *subject names the person or thing you are talking about*". The definition of the object is even more interesting. It says: "*The object is a noun or phrase that describes the person or thing that is affected by the action ...*"

Here, we observe that the authors do make an attempt to use the notion of a phrase though they do not describe it. This was another opportunity that could have been used by the authors to teach the constituent structure and syntactic function of the noun phrase.

An incorrect word is also noted in their definition. The authors state that "a noun *describes...*". This definition is not acceptable because a noun names four entities: people, places, things and ideas. It does not describe these. Hence when the attributive function of an adjective is described as part of the constituent structure of the noun phrase, many of our students often have difficulty in conceptualizing this.

## 2(c) Name of Textbook: New Language For Life 3

Shongwe [20] does not make any attempt to give learners an opportunity to practise their understanding of the noun or noun phrase in Book 3. The focus for both teachers and students in year 3 is the external examinations. The focus of the book is on creative writing rather than aspects of grammar.

The analysis of the three textbooks reveal that very little content on the constituent structure and syntactic functions of the noun/noun phrase is taught at this level. The structural input for the organizational competence of English language is very limited in the prescribed texts.

## 2(d) Name of the Book: Enjoy English Senior Secondary: Learner's Book

Learners at the senior level of secondary school use Hlophé's et al. [21] book. This is the last two years of secondary education. Once students graduate from this level, they enrol at tertiary level or join the working class.

The data was taken from pages 36 and 80.

### Activity 7: Language in Practice

#### Collective Nouns, Reflexive Pronouns and Questions

Let us remind ourselves of these parts of speech:

- The noun – a word that names a person, place, animals and other things
- The pronoun – a word which replaces a noun or noun phrase to avoid repetition. It is therefore a word which *refers* to a noun.

Our observation is that the content given at this level should have been used in the low level classes because this book is used in the last two years of secondary school. The semantic definition of the noun given is incomplete. Nouns naming ideas are left out. At this level, one would think that learners are mature enough to understand abstract

nouns. We noticed that there is still limited content about the noun/noun phrase even at this level.

We also noted that the authors do mention the noun phrase when they give the function of a pronoun. But the problem is that the concept of the noun phrase is again not explained even at this level. This makes the researchers conclude that learners of English Language in public schools are likely to complete their secondary education with inadequate content on the constituent structure of the noun phrase and its syntactic functions.

#### e). Name of the Book: Sihlatiya siSwati "An Analysis of the siSwati Language"

Sibanda and Mthembu's [22] text is one of those used to teach the structure of the Swati Language (siSwati) both in schools and is used as one of the reference texts in tertiary institutions. Its explanation of the siSwati grammar is common across other textbooks. Therefore, even if students use other textbooks, the definition of terms or some aspects of grammar, such as the noun phrase in the Swati language are the same.

The data presented below was taken from 45. Here, the authors define the syntactic function of a noun in Swati.

Libito lingasebenta kuba yinhloko emshweni.

[a direct translation of the above statement given by the authors reads: "The noun can function as a head in a sentence". In this book, the word; "head" actually refers to 'subject']

Here, Sibanda and Mthembu do not discuss the noun phrase; they are focusing on the noun, yet even in Swati there is a noun phrase where the noun is postmodified by four types of *qualificatives*: the adjective, the possessives, the relative qualificative and quantifiers, and these post-modify nouns. Whereas the English noun phrase constitutes of both pre-modifiers and post-modifiers. Hence, there is a need to teach the constituent structure of the English noun phrase so that the learners differentiate between the two and acquire the complex structure of the English noun phrase.

It should be noted that the constituent structures of the noun and noun phrase in Swati language is different from that of the English Language especially when it comes to the use of determiners with nouns. There are no determiners in Swati, unlike in English. The syntactic function of nouns in Swati is taught with the exclusion of qualifiers, so the presence of the qualifiers tends to be ignored, yet they do form part of the noun phrase.

Since the syntactic functions of nouns are taught from primary school in Swati, we therefore conclude that the learners internalize this definition; hence, it interferes with the conceptualization of the notion of 'headword' in the analysis of the constituent structure of the English noun phrase which is taught in year 1 and year 2 at university level.

This observation triggered us to relate the students' confusion on the notion of headword in the constituent

structure of noun phrases to how information is stored in our mental lexicon. The mental lexicon is said to store words in different forms, but what is of interest to us is the semantic relatedness of a similar or related item within a particular conceptual category. The semantic relatedness of words within the mental lexicon makes it possible for one to relate such words to a particular experience or event (schemata). This is the way the learners would not mix these structures in their mental frames and be able to conceptualize the schemas of the same structure of the two languages.

Since the notion of 'headword' and its translated version already exists in students mental lexicon [23], we inferred that the description noun in Swati is transferred by many students to the description of the English noun phrase. Unfortunately, such a transfer is a result of direct translation of the siSwati definition. The content on Swati grammar then became a source of interference in the understanding of the English noun phrase.

Such negative transfer was reflected by the responses given by students in a test. These are presented in the next section.

### 6.3. Students' Responses on Syntactic Functions of the English Noun

We tasked students to describe the syntactic functions of the English noun. Here, we expected participants to explain the constituent structure of the noun phrase using the notion, 'headword' and then identify the four functions of the noun phrase within the clause: subject, object, complement and adverbial.

The picture below depicts one of the essays written, but we listed most of the responses below the picture for clarity of presentation in this paper. Since the students' responses are incorrect in terms of content and grammar, we marked them with an asterisk in the beginning. We then explain why they are incorrect.

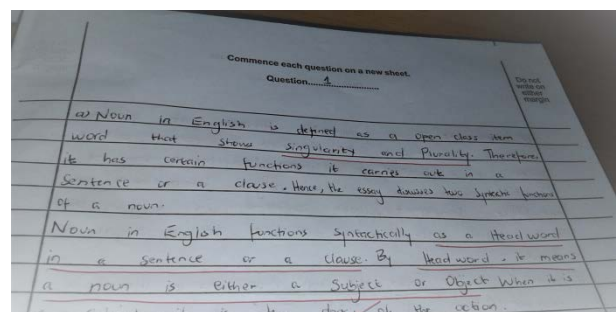


Figure 1. A picture of one of the students' essays

- (a) \*A noun can function as a subject in a sentence, it can be the main thing that talks about...Consider the following example: Thoko is playing. In this example, Thoko is an NP that has function (sic) as a head.
- (b) \*The noun is the head of the sentence.
- (c) \*A noun phrase can function as a head which in turn as subject.



- (d) \*Noun phrases in English may be subject in a sentence. This means that noun phrase can appear as the head in the sentence...
- (e) \*Head (sic) it is the noun that determines the order in which elements shall appear, it usually has the main meaning in a sentence or phrase.
- (f) \*A subject in English can be defined as the head of a sentence.
- (g) \*A subject is known to be the head word in a phrase
- (h) \*A subject is a headword in a sentence.
- (i) \*Subject functions as a headword (direct translation from the Swati textbook).
- (j) \*A subject works as a head of the sentence.
- (k) \*A subject is the headword of a sentence it is part of the noun phrase.

In these responses, the students seem to confuse the syntactic functions of nouns in terms of form and function. Carter and McCarthy [24] argue that in terms of form/structure, the noun functions as a headword of a noun phrase which then becomes a clause element that functions as a subject, object, complement and adverbial within a clause. The explanations given by many students indicate that the students were transferring the explanation of syntactic functions of a noun phrase from Swati, specifically the subject, and they confused it with the notion of headword. Many struggled to conceptualize the noun phrase as a complement and adverbial. Only the subject and object were included in the textbooks' content.

## 7. Discussion

Sharwood-Smith and Kellerman's [25] notion of *crosslinguistic influence* (CLI) show that CLI may operate both in underlying interlanguage knowledge and the retrieval of that knowledge. They further point out that it is now established beyond reasonable doubt that the first language, (or those languages that have already been acquired by a learner in cases of multilingual contexts), can have a constraining role in the L2 production of learners. In this study, the students' limitation in conceptualising the notion of *headword* in the constituent structure of English noun phrase in a tertiary academic setting does not mean that the knowledge dimension of the students had a limitation. But their limitations could be attributed to what Sharwood Smith and Kellerman call 'Immature Processing Routine' which plays a role in the form learners' interlanguages may take. The study reveals that the processing dimension of content by participants in this case was impacted by the limited teaching of English grammar in general which resulted in cross-linguistic influence in the analysis of the English noun phrase. We therefore argue that such influence weakens the learners' representation of certain words and their exact use in the mental lexicon which results in them confusing information. In this study, many participants generally confused the concept of

'headword'. Many used it to refer to the notion of 'subject'; thus, confusing the noun as a headword of a noun phrase and a subject as a function of the noun phrase within the clause.

The EGCSE syllabus channels the teaching of English based on the initial understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the *Communicative Language Approach* in the teaching of English Language. Bachman's [14] *organizational competence* seems to be ignored, yet this would enable a deeper analysis of the basic structure of the grammatical structure of the target language, especially in the first three years of the secondary school syllabus.

Another perceived cause for the confusion many students made when explaining the English noun phrase was attributed to the students' failure to apply Botha's micro-activities (conceptualizing, formulating, externalizing and self-monitoring) required to articulate appropriate 'preverbal utterances'; thus they give incorrect information. This observation then highlights that the incorrect responses should not be attributed to the transfer of strategies or interference from the first language. Literature on linguistic transfer also show that structural identity between languages is not necessarily a sufficient condition for transfer to occur. So the fact the both languages have some similarities in their constituent structures cannot be viewed as the cause of the failure by the students to give correct response on the aspect studied.

We also noted that many students seemed to lack a deliberate intention to engage their metacognitive skills in the activation of micro-activities that enable learners to pick correct content from frames and schemas. They tended to make simple associations to explain similar structures of the two languages. This illustrates that the students need to engage themselves more in reading and analysing the constituent structure and syntactic functions of the phrase in the target language. They have to ensure that both their knowledge dimension (competence) and their processing dimension (performance) are engaged as they analyse the second language so that what they produce in their tests reflect what they know about different aspects of the second language.

Pavlenko [26] asserts that words in the mental lexicon "are organized according to related meaning/semantic units and phonological similarities". Therefore, the words in the mental lexicon are stored as members of similar or related items within a particular conceptual category. The semantic relatedness of words within the mental lexicon makes it possible for one to relate such words to a particular experience or event. This explanation of the mental lexicon makes us assume that maybe the relatedness of the concept of '*headword*' when teaching the English noun phrase triggered a similar connection to most the learners to the function of the Swati noun phrase.

Hence, we also observed a tendency to engage in direct translation of the word 'head'. Their definition of the word 'head' in the Swati language is based on its literal meaning and not its linguistic sense. So to conceptualise its

linguistic use at tertiary level becomes difficult because the participants are exposed to the literal sense of the word in explaining a grammatical concept from primary school.

This then accentuates the participants' limited conceptualization of this aspect in the analysis of the constituent structure of the English noun phrase.

## 8. Recommendations

The Ministry of Education through the English Panel needs to re-evaluate the implementation of the theoretical framework of communicative language approaches to materials design, second language teaching and testing. Such an evaluation would influence the decisions made on how to teach and assess the students' competencies in the target language. The evaluation may probably influence the content in prescribed books on teaching grammar as well as assessment. There is a need to attempt to strike a balance between *organizational competence and pragmatic competence* proposed by Bachman.

The teaching of English at tertiary institutions should clearly unpack the noun phrase, and point out the problem areas to help the students unlearn the incorrect explanations that end up rooted in their mental frames resulting in confusing content that belongs to different yet related schemas.

The National Curriculum Centre designers should make an effort to review and update the sections where incorrect content was identified by our analysis and consider expanding the sections that target the growth of learners' organizational/linguistic competence.

Such a change of language teaching approach is now provided for by the latest approach for teaching communicative competence. This approach stipulates that language teachers should teach aspects of grammar whenever they identify limitations in students' discourse. We do not think that this provision of the approach is adequate in that once an item is not itemised in the scheme of work for teachers that item is not likely to be taught. In theory, it is plausible, but in reality, the teaching of grammar tends to be ignored, and the limitations of the textbooks also compound this situation.

Teachers of English language should be motivated to draw their teaching content not only from the prescribed textbook(s), but should also use a range of books to extract content that may be inadequate in the prescribed text. A quick google search on the preferred publisher in Eswatini shows a range of textbook for teaching English.

## 9. Conclusion

In conclusion, we recommend that more elements of the English structure should be taught in secondary schools to assist the students broaden their organizational and pragmatic competencies. When the students enrol for

courses in linguistics, they apply their knowledge and processing dimensions at an advanced level, hence, they are not expected to make incorrect transfers which interfere with their understanding of the linguistic/grammatical concepts. Well-designed teaching materials at secondary level would broaden their communicative language ability in addition to their knowledge of language analysis.

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