

“Collect a word, add a word” catalysing youth to sustain local languages: A project at Ngwaketse junior secondary school Library

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Abstract:

Setswana is a local language spoken in Botswana and it is an official language. It is spoken by most Batswana across the country. It is taught in the school curriculum starting from primary to secondary schools. It is very important as it gives learners their identity. Learning the language in school is imperative because it helps in sustaining it. Though Setswana is taught as a subject in schools in Botswana, it has been noticeable through national results that students regularly underperform in their local language. Students fail the subject and this concern. There are many reasons why this is happening; one major reason is that as learners graduate to higher grades, they stop learning Setswana intensively. They feel that since it is their language they do not have to learn it; they already understand everything about it. Some even believe it is boring. This has led to many Batswana losing rich Setswana words, which could help improve learners' vocabulary and eventually leading to academic improvement. This paper describes a project which is going on at Ngwaketse Junior Secondary School library. The project's objective is to collect and add Setswana words into the school library. The project started in 2016 with the objective to preserve the words and facilitate access to them. This paper explains how the project has worked and how the words collected so far have been accessed and used by learners, leading to better scores in essay writing. It will also show how the project has led to the improvement of Setswana language speaking in the school as a whole. An example is the formation of the Library Setswana Club, whose members have agreed that twice in a week they speak Setswana only, using those rich words from the collection. Sometimes members of this club give presentations during school assemblies. This is a good initiative because it is doing much in sustaining the Setswana language and at the same time it helps in sustainable academic development. Finally, the paper will share with school libraries globally the importance of local language sustainability which eventually leads to sustainable academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

School libraries play a pivotal role in every school environment. They are important because they support the school curriculum in various ways. School libraries in the 21st century have gone further to position themselves by hosting other services involving users themselves. These services come in the form of projects and programmes. This is why Ngwaketse CJSS library found it fit to collect, document, and store Setswana words to be accessed and used by learners. The collection of words aims at preserving them for academic purposes and also for posterity. The exercise also is intended to encourage the speaking of mother tongue Language is very important; it is an identity to every nation. Young people are supposed to be encouraged to preserve it and use it even save it for the generation to come after them.

BACKGROUND OF NGWAKETSE CJSS

Ngwaketse Community Junior Secondary School is a school at Kanye village in Botswana. It is 90km southwards from Gaborone, which is the country's capital city. The school was established and opened in 1964. By then, the school was not yet a government school; it was a study group which was led by a village elder by the name Mr K.K Moshaga. During that time the study group was situated in the eastern side of Kanye village in a place called Ga-Sorinyana. In 1983, the school was taken over by the Botswana government and it was moved to near Kgwakgwe hill at Kgwakgwe ward in the village. The same year, the school was officially opened and it was under the leadership of a board of governors who elected Mr K.K Moshaga as chair person. By then the school had few members of staff and the school head was Mr S. Ford who was an expatriate from the United States of America.

NGWAKETSE JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL LIBRARY

At inception, the school did not have a school library. The library was built and opened in 1992. Its collection was acquired through book donations from Boipelego Book project which was an organisation under the Botswana National Library Services and was mandated to supply school libraries with books. Some other books were purchased from a government school library vote. Most of the books were bought as second hand from the United States of America. These books were taken to a senior secondary school called Maun Senior secondary school and teacher librarians travelled from all over the country to go and purchase the books at cheaper prices. Ngwaketse school library benefitted from this programme.

There are around 4000 books in the school library so far. The library also has text books for all subjects studied by learners in the school. These books were a donation to the library from different subject teachers as being requested by the teacher librarian. The school library has always had a school librarian. It supports around 700 learners and 50 members of staff, though the second group are reluctant library users. There are library lessons for all eighteen (18) classes in the school; forty (40) students per class are allocated one lesson in a seven (7) day time table. During the library lessons learners are trained on how to use the library, taught information literacy skills or spend time reading alone or participating in storytelling with the teacher librarian.

The school library has one computer and access the internet through a modem which was donated by Mascom Internet Service Provider in 2017. In this computer, there is software called Encarta Premium, an encyclopaedia from which learners search for information whilst doing their assignments and projects. The school library also provides games which learners play to refresh their minds once every week. Educational games such as chess and Scrabble

are of interest to gifted learners though other learners use scrabble to build words in order to enhance their writing skills. The school library also hosts a programme called reading skills builders programme for learners with reading challenges. Other programmes include reading club, knowledge sharing and “collect a word, add a word”. The school library, although with minimal resources, is very active and very much used. There is no time one can find it empty. Learners always visit it for reading, research and discussions among themselves.

NGWAKETSE LIBRARY INITIATIVE TO PRESERVE THE SETSWANA LANGUAGE

The initiative to preserve the Setswana language came as a result of a decline in the 2016 Junior Certificate final results at Ngwaketse Junior Secondary School. The analysis revealed that there was a drop in the performance of Setswana subject results ever since 2013. From this analysis, the teacher librarian shared an initiative as to how to assist or contribute to improved Setswana subject results. An agreement was reached to collect and store Setswana words into the school library and learners were to be the main contributors. This was to pride them with a sense of belonging to their school library sources. This was done with the hope and belief that the results will improve. The other reason was that Setswana as a language is getting lost as young people grow into the 21st century trends. All thirteen subjects taught in the school are deliberated in English language except Setswana. This means most of the time learners speak English hence lose in Setswana. The project was initiated to encourage learners to save their own language themselves because as they collect and add the words into the school library, they could access and use them in writing and even in their conversations. Learners are encouraged to refer to the documented words time and gain in order to improve their speaking, reading and writing skills particularly in the Setswana subject. This project is also useful in the preservation of Setswana language which is part of culture. Furthermore, it encourages learners to take part in the school library by generating their own content as users. It has been noticed that they use what they created more than what they found in the school library.

THE COLLECTION OF WORDS

The initiative to collect and preserve Setswana words started in 2016 after the analysis of Setswana subject Junior Certificate examination results was completed. The analysis revealed that Setswana subject results were very low and most learners who had failed to perform very well overall failed because of the Setswana subject. It was from then that the teacher librarian shared with the school library committee, learners who are library friends, the idea of helping learners with composition writing which is one of the papers learners are required to take. During the discussions the idea to collect Setswana words, which are of the standard authorised orthography for learners to integrate into their compositions, essays and paragraphs. This was agreed upon and some library monitors and friends were tasked with the collecting the words with the help of the teacher librarian and the library committee. Learners collected words from parents at home, village elders, chiefs and books. They write the words in books and every day deliver them at the school library. These words are then sorted out, learners write down their meaning in Setswana, and then they are grouped according to their group names; for example: names referring to food items are put together. This enables ease of access.

DOCUMENTATION AND STORAGE

The words are then written with coloured markers in some bound hard cover books which are placed in the reference section. Every time words are delivered some of them are posted up on the notice board with names and photos of learners who collected them. This is meant to alert library users about newly arrived words and also to encourage the learners who contributed the words. Some words are also shared with the Oxford Online English – Setswana Translation Dictionary. This is done because Ngwaketse school library has an agreement with the Dictionary organisers to share the words with the dictionary. Learners are also able to access the dictionary online whenever they need word meanings. From the year 2017 to date the learners have collected around 400 words.

USER ACCESS TO SETSWANA WORDS

Learners, who are the primary library users, are usually alerted about the words and directed to access them. Both the words from the books and the online dictionary are accessed and used by learners to integrate them in their compositions of the Setswana subject. Some learners have formed the school library Setswana club and they market the use of these words during school assemblies. They have also agreed to use some words in their casual conversations on Mondays and Wednesdays every week. Through this project many learners have turned to enjoy speaking Setswana language, they value it and quite a number of them have improved in composition writing as reported by some teachers of Setswana.

CONCLUSION

“Collect a word, add a word” has proved to be a project which young people appreciate. As they go around searching for words and their meanings from their parents in the village, they feel proud that they are preserving their own language which is the main part of their culture. On the other hand, parents also appreciate that their children have interest in their language and this is helping in its preservation. The words which learners collect and keep in their school library act as reference sources to be used in composition writing. School libraries across the world can do the same. They can engage learners in projects, especially this one which the paper is addressing. Collecting and preserving words is an important activity which can be very beneficial to any school library and any learner from any culture globally. It is important because it enhances both academic and indigenous knowledge. The other important fact about this project is that since it is managed by learners who are the school libraries’ primary users; it gives them a sense of belonging.

When asked how they view the project one of them said, *“Since I volunteered to engage in this project, I feel I am a great contributor to my school library sources, I am a real part of the school library. It is really my school library.”* This is to say, as teacher librarians, we need to engage our users in library projects because as they do them they are motivated to use the school library in meaningful ways. In a nutshell, user generated content motivates school library usage!

BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Lillian Oats is a Senior Teacher – Librarian at Ngwaketse Junior Secondary School, Kanye Village, Botswana. She has worked with the school for eleven (11) years now since 2009. She holds a Bachelors Degree in Library and Information Studies and Masters Degree in Library and Information Studies both from the University of Botswana. Lillian Oats is currently studying for her Phd. in Information Science with the University of South Africa.