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Lessons from small-scale standardised testing of English reading and writing performance in two types of primary schools in South Africa

Abstract

The multilingual composition of South African schools and the choice of English as the preferred language of teaching and learning (LoLT) have created well-documented academic challenges for English second language learners (ESL) and their teachers. Poor performance in English is associated with poor performance among ESL learners across the curriculum. Small-scale standardised testing for ESL performance is an assessment strategy that can contribute to identifying specific needs at a particular school. Standardised testing, as a sub-component of the broader concept of assessment which includes a range of assessment options, is defined as any form of test that requires all test takers to answer the same questions in the same way. This paper reports on a study which implemented small-scale, standardised testing of English reading and writing performance of ESL Grade 7 learners in two types of primary schools in a semi-rural area in Limpopo Province (a public fee-paying school and an independent for-profit school). The overall findings indicate that learners in both schools performed extremely well in the English writing performance test; however, learners in the public school outperformed learners in the independent school in both English Reading and Writing performance tests, although the difference in the Writing performance test was minimal. The superior performance by the public school can partly be explained by teachers teaching experience, most of them have been teaching for more than ten years and greater community support for the school. It is recommended that data produced through small-scale standardised testing should be used by school management teams to design instructional improvement plans and by individual teachers to make data-driven decisions about improved language instruction.

Key words: standardised testing, small-scale language testing, English Second Language, writing performance, reading performance, primary schools, Grade 7 learners

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1. Introduction

Educational achievement is dependent on a learner's ability to access and display knowledge through the spoken or written word (Cummins, 2012). In many multilingual societies, learning a second language is a necessity in order to function in key domains of society where the second language operates as the official or the dominant language (Crystal, 2010). In societies where English is used as the language of teaching and learning (LoLT) and the language of commerce and government, English Second Language learners (ESL) function in classrooms where the linguistic environment is different from that of the home and community (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Using English as LoLT in all learning areas across the curriculum differs in many ways from voluntarily learning a foreign language in a dedicated foreign language programme (Adger, Snow & Christian, 2002). In this context poor proficiency in English frequently compromises the academic achievement of ESL learners and perpetuates disparity in the learning experiences and outcomes between English First Language speakers and ESL speakers (Cummins, Mirza & Stille, 2012). The complexity of this learning situation is compounded by variations in the teachers' own English language proficiency as well as their pedagogy (Nel & Muller, 2012). Teachers in multilingual classrooms where English is the LoLT may not be English native speakers or they may not have received the necessary preparation to reach ESL students effectively (Trumbull & Farr, 2005).

Further, adequate assessment of ESL learners' language proficiency presents teachers with challenges. ESL assessment can be defined as the broad range of methods applied in a wide variety of contexts by language educators to evaluate, measure and document the language learning progress and the language skill acquisition of learners at all levels of the education system (Assessment: The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014). Standardised language assessment refers to a variety of language assessments which are designed, administered, and scored in a standard or consistent manner which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual learners or groups of learners. Large-scale standardised assessments of English language proficiency are extremely useful for several reasons. They can be used to monitor a school system's success and to develop strategies to improve educational quality. They provide data to inform education policies, including the design and implementation of programmes to improve language teaching and learning in the classroom; to identify underachieving learners so that they can receive the needed support; to design appropriate technical assistance and training to teachers who are under-performing at schools; and to improve in-service and initial teacher training with regard to language pedagogy (Kellagan, Greaney & Murray, 2009). A sub-component of standardised language assessment is the standardized language test which refers to any form of test (often pencil and paper or computer-based) that requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from common bank of questions, in exactly the same way. Standardised language testing as an assessment strategy are considered highly reliable, objective and valid; they require relatively little time to administer and minimum resources (Lengyel, 2010).

In South Africa English as the preferred LoLT in the education system has been rigorously interrogated in both the pre- and the post-democratic era and English as LoLT in schooling has been associated with underachievement among ESL learners with particular reference to poor performance in literacy and maths performance (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014). Annual nation-wide standardised assessments (ANA) of literacy and numeracy in primary schools (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014) and large-scale internationally-based standardised assessments of the reading skills of South African learners (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007; Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012) confirm that the performance of the country's learners is below par. While the results of these large scale standardised language assessments published in international comparisons or nation-wide and/or province-wide reports are useful to benchmark performance, they are less useful as a diagnostic tool to individual schools and teachers who may wish to determine the performance of specific groups of learners in their own schools. In this regard, site-based, small-scale standardised testing can contribute to identifying strengths and weaknesses specific to a certain school. School management teams can use results of small-scale testing in school improvement plans and individual teachers can utilise these results to make data-driven decisions about their own instruction (Bernhardt, 2013; Chase & Johnston, 2013).

Against this background, this paper reports on the results of small-scale standardised testing of the English reading and writing performance of ESL Grade 7 learners at two types of primary schools in a semi-rural area in Limpopo Province, South Africa: a public fee-paying school and an independent for-profit school. The study forms part of a larger project which examines ESL and home language (HL) proficiency among black learners in South African primary schools through standardised testing (Manyike, 2014; Manyike & Lemmer, 2012).

2. Standardised language testing assessment strategy in ESL learning

As mentioned above ESL learners' proficiency can be assessed by a large battery of assessment options available to educators (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Among these options, standardised tests of Standard English usage administered fairly and ethically by language specialists are useful. They provide important information for placement purposes and allow educators to assess progress in language development according to benchmarked standards as a step toward school accountability and improvement (Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003). Standardised language tests are based on classical test theory or item response theory to achieve standardisation. In such tests, language proficiency is usually divided into a number of components and the test aims to measure the extent to which learners have mastered these components. In particular, they are most frequently used to assess receptive components such as labelling or reading comprehension (Lengyel, 2010).

Nonetheless, certain objections have been raised regarding the use of standardised ESL tests. The linguistic and cultural foundation laid by the HL and the cultural relevance of test items in multilingual and multicultural settings may obscure accurate and fair assessment of language minorities (Malcolm, 2011). Lowenberg (2003) argues that standardised tests measure Standard English norms based on the norms of educated native-speakers and these tests seldom accommodate indigenous forms and functions of English, which may have evolved as local norms in Anglophone countries. In English-speaking countries with large language minority populations, such as the United States (US), standardised language testing has the potential of limiting ESL students' placement opportunities in quality programmes and institutions, thus negatively affecting their life outcomes (Hurley & Tinajero, 2001). For example, Kokhan's (2013) research found a 40% chance that the undergraduate ESL population may be misplaced in university courses if the placement decision is made solely on the standardized language test scores.

The linguistic demands faced by the ESL learner when undergoing standardised language testing can be partially explained by certain tenets of Cummins' comprehensive and well-accepted theory of bilingualism. Cummins (2000) distinguishes four dimensions of communication: (i) context-embedded versus (ii) context-reduced communication and (iii) cognitively undemanding versus (iv) cognitively demanding communication. Context-embedded communication occurs in face-to-face interactions, where communicative aids, such as body language or visual clues, are available for a student to assist him or her to discern the meaning of communication. Context-reduced communication occurs when there are few, if any, communicative cues to support the interaction, such as in written language and particularly as encountered in textbooks and written instructions as opposed to oral explanation or verbal instructions. The second dimension, cognitive demanding communication, intersects with the level of context within which language is used. Cognitively demanding communication occurs frequently in a classroom setting where learners are required to analyse and synthesize abstract information. On the other hand, cognitively undemanding communication occurs typically on a sports field or on the school playground. Applied to the context of this paper, standardised tests administered by language specialists constitute both a disembedded communicative context, even where a test may include illustrations, and a cognitively demanding communicative context.

However, in spite of these drawbacks, standardised language testing remains an important measurement of student language performance and progress and an indicator of school accountability, particularly if the testing is carried out annually (Abedi, 2004). Accommodations, such as the use of dictionaries by testees and modified instructions, can make ESL standardised language testing more compatible with cultural and linguistic diversity present in multilingual settings (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004). Butler and Stevens (2001) point out that expertise in sound test development principles, coupled with knowledge of how to best evaluate language ability, makes language testers, who develop and apply standardised tests, invaluable participants in the improvement

of student and school achievement. Researchers who understand language are also essential in interpreting test results and recommending and monitoring corrective action which is to be implemented by schools and by teachers. According to LaCelle-Peterson and Rivera (1994), the solution to the disadvantages around standardised language testing lies in the development of more equitable tests for ESL learners rather than the abandonment of such standardised language tests. Furthermore, collaboration between expert researchers and language teachers can draw the latter into small-scale school-based ESL standardised testing, thereby training teachers on how to interpret tests and how to design remedial instruction that suit their own learners and their own classrooms (Verplaetse, Ferraro & Anderberg, 2012).

Finally, we acknowledge that standardised tests are not the only means to determine ESL proficiency. Obtaining a holistic and accurate understanding of an ESL learner's language proficiency requires evaluating him or her in multiple settings and evaluating multiple ways of using the language. For this reason teachers should use different strategies of assessments. These range from evaluating learner responses during classroom discussions, observation in and outside the classroom and parent interviews to assess language use at home to more formal assessments, such as written tests, formal presentations and standardised testing (Dutro & Moran, 2003). Teachers should also take into account the ESL learner's proficiency in his or her HL (Cummins, 1979). No important educational decision should be based on the score of a single test or a single type of test. Where a formal test may be able to reveal the ESL learner's ability to comprehend or produce certain syntactic forms, it cannot reveal how successful the learner is in social communication, including classroom discourse (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005).

In summary, accurate assessment of the language proficiency of ESL learners is critical in order to make valid interpretations about their academic progress. Notwithstanding the challenges associated with the standardised testing of ESL learners, on-site, small scale standardised testing which produces a database specific to an individual school and which can identify deficits that require special services should not be overlooked.

3. Method

Based on the abovementioned, the following research question was formulated: *How can standardised testing of the English reading and writing performance of Grade 7 ESL learners at two types of primary schools in a semi-rural setting inform the improvement of ESL teaching and learning?* The question was addressed by an inquiry using a standardised test aimed at providing feedback to schools on Grade 7 learners' performance in English reading and writing with the view to developing a localised database for each school and determining differences in learner performance (if any) between the two types of schools.

3.1. The sample

The sample comprised all Grade 7 ESL learners (HL is Xitsonga) in two selected primary schools (n = 54) in a semi-rural setting in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Permission for fieldwork was granted by the respective principals and the Limpopo Department of Education. A brief description of the schools ensues. Pseudonyms were used for both schools for purposes of confidentiality. The sample comprised 31 learners from Forest Primary School (hereafter FPS) and 23 learners from Maxima College (hereafter MC). The schools, situated in the greater Tzaneen municipality area of the Limpopo Province, were chosen as research sites by maximum variation sampling. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:402) define maximum variation sampling as a strategy to illuminate different aspects of the research problem, in this case two different types of schools: a public former model C school and an independent for-profit school. Notwithstanding, their difference in administration (by the Department of Basic Education and independent School Board), the schools share similarities by virtue of their distance from the English-using urban areas of the country. In both schools learners use HL (or first language L1 in this case, Xitsonga), as the LoLT from Grade 1 to Grade 3 during which time English is introduced as an additional language. In Grade 4 learners transfer to English as LoLT and Xitsonga is taught as an additional language. In both schools the typical ESL learner has had little contact with English outside of the school setting and, more particularly, in non-English classes and lessons in school.

Maxima College is an independent, for-profit school established after 1994 and situated, about 15 km from the nearest large town, Tzaneen. The school has a small enrolment of white learners; most learners are black children from the surrounding area. Teachers are inexperienced but professionally qualified. The teacher responsible for Xitsonga instruction is a Xitsonga L1 speaker and the teacher responsible for English is an English L1 speaker. The rest of the staff is Afrikaans L1 speakers who can be regarded as equally proficient in English and Afrikaans. As primarily a commercial undertaking, the school does not enjoy strong community links. Extramural activities are limited and there is no after-school care. The school is adequately resourced with textbooks, a library and print-enriched classrooms. School fees were approximately R850 per month as of 2011.

Forest Primary is a well-resourced public (former model C) school situated about 25 km from Tzaneen, the nearest large town. Prior to 1994, it served white learners from the surrounding farming community but has since become increasingly multicultural. Most black learners hail from the neighbouring settlements. As is the case at Maxima, teachers are professionally qualified. The teacher responsible for Xitsonga instruction is a Xitsonga L1 speaker and the teacher responsible for English is an English L1 speaker. The rest of the staff is Afrikaans L1 speakers who can be regarded as equally proficient in English and Afrikaans. As a school established before 1994, the school enjoys strong links with the surrounding community and consequently is able to access additional resources. A wide range of extra-mural activities are available and an after-care centre offers the opportunity of homework and play under supervision. The school also offers extra classes for learners who experience subject specific difficulties. Classrooms are print-enriched with adequate

textbooks and displays of learners' work. The school has its own library. The school is fee paying and fees were approximately R 530 per month in 2011.

3.2. Data gathering and analysis

Data were gathered by means of the Reading Performance Test and the Writing Performance Test in English (Intermediate Level) as developed by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) (Chamberlain & Reinecke, 1992). This is a standardised test aimed at determining the testees' English reading and writing performance in the Intermediate Phase. This test, which is the only standardised language test available for this purpose at present, is applicable to L1 and L2 speakers, although different norms apply to these groups. To write the Reading Performance Test a candidate is supplied with a test booklet, an answer sheet, a pencil and an eraser. The Reading Performance Test comprises multiple-choice questions and learners are expected to choose the correct answer. The Reading Performance Test in English has two components: comprehension (Q1-12, 14; 15; 17; 21; 22; 26-29; 30; 31) and grammar (Q 13; 16; 18-20; 23-25; 32-40). The comprehension component has a maximum possible score of 22 and the grammar component has a maximum possible score of 18. The test manual does not give any indication of what is considered to be a pass mark, as performance depends on the context in which the test is written. However, 40% (a raw score of 16 out of the possible score of 40) is given as a guideline for the overall Reading Performance test; 8.8 out of 22 is given as a guideline pass mark for the comprehension component of the test; and 7.2 out of 18 is given as a guideline pass mark for the grammar component of the test. This guideline was used in the inquiry and it allowed for comparison of results. Furthermore, the Reading Performance test has a reliability coefficient of 0, 89 (Chamberlain & Reinecke, 1992: 18). For this kind of test, a reliability coefficient of 0, 8 or higher can be regarded as satisfactory. Regarding test validity, the items of the test were accepted by a committee of subject experts after a specification table was drawn up and a thorough study had been made of the suitability of the items for test reading performance (Bernard & Reinecke, 1992: 21).

To write the Writing Performance Test, a candidate is supplied with a test booklet, an answer sheet, a pencil and an eraser. The Writing Performance Test in English has two components: (i) spelling and syntax; and (ii) sentence and creative writing. The spelling and syntax component has a maximum possible score of 29 and the sentence and creative writing component has a maximum possible score of 21. The test manual does not give any indication of what is considered to be a pass mark, because performance depends on the context in which the test is written. However, 40% (a raw score of 20 out of the possible score of 50) is given as a guideline for the overall writing performance test, 11.5 out of 29 is given as a guideline pass mark for the spelling and syntax component of the test, and 8.5 out of 21 is given as a guideline pass mark for the sentence and creative writing component of the test. This guideline was used in this study and it allowed for comparison purposes (i.e. to compare results). Furthermore, the Writing Performance Test has a reliability coefficient of 0.89 (Chamberlain & Reinecke, 1992:18). For this kind of test, a reliability coefficient of 0.8 or higher can be regarded as satisfactory. As far as test validity is concerned, the items of the test were accepted by a committee of subject experts after a specification table

was drawn up and a thorough study had been made of the suitability of the items for test writing performance (Bernard & Reinecke, 1992:21). With regard to the issue of possible cultural bias, the test deals with topics of everyday occurrences at home and at school. The tests were scored by the researcher and, finally, an expert statistician used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SSPS) to obtain results from the raw data.

4. Findings

In this section research findings are presented in the following sequence. Firstly, the results of the Reading Performance test in English, commencing with its two subcomponents (comprehension and grammar) are indicated and then the overall test results of the Reading Performance in English are presented. Secondly, the results of the Writing Performance test in English, commencing with its two subcomponents (spelling and syntax and sentence writing and creative writing) are shown, followed by the overall rest results of the Writing Performance test in English.

4.1. Reading Performance Test results

Table 1 gives the summary statistics of the reading comprehension component for Forest Primary and Maxima College.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of summary statistics of reading comprehension component

Comparative analysis of summary statistics of reading comprehension		
Summary statistics	**Forest Primary**	**Maxima College**
Mean	**11.77**	**8.86**
Median (50th percentile)	**11**	**9.5**
Mode	**11**	**7^{a}**
Lower quartile (25th percentile)	**10**	**7**
Upper quartile (25th percentile)	**14**	**11**
Standard deviation	**3.39**	**3.03**
Skewness	**0.45**	**-0.38**
Kurtosis	**0.30**	**-0.49**
Range	**14**	**11**
Minimum	**5**	**3**
Maximum	**19**	**14**
Coefficient of variation	**28.82%**	**34.16%**
Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown.		

The possible score for the reading comprehension subtest ranged from 0 to 22. The minimum score for Forest Primary was 5 out of 22 (1 learner); the maximum score was 19 out 22 (2 learners). The minimum score for Maxima College was 3 out of 22 (2 learners); with the maximum score of 14 out of 22 (1 learner). The reading comprehension component mean for Forest Primary was 11.77 with a median of 11, while the corresponding mean for Maxima College was 8.86 with a median of 9.5. The mean for Forest Primary is slightly greater than the median, thus data are slightly positively skewed. The mean for Maxima College is slightly less than the median, thus the data are negatively skewed. The learners' mean of 11.77 for Forest Primary is above the 40% pass mark (8.8 out of 22) while that of Maxima College is at the 40% pass mark (8.86) and most of its learners (54.5%) obtained scores below the 40% pass mark. This is in contrast with Forest Primary wherein only 16.1% of the learners (5 learners) achieved scores below the 40% pass mark. The standard deviation for Forest Primary was 3.39 with a coefficient of variation of 28.82%. Maxima College, on the other hand, had a standard deviation of 3.03 with a coefficient variation of 34.16%. A small proportion (12.9%) of Forest Primary learners obtained a mark above 15. The modal for Forest Primary and Maxima College was 11 and 7, respectively.

Table 2 shows the summary statistics of the grammar component for Forest Primary and Maxima College.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of summary statistics of grammar component

Comparative analysis of summary statistics of grammar		
Summary statistics	**Forest Primary school**	**Maxima College**
Mean	**7.23**	**4.59**
Median (50th percentile)	**7**	**5**
Mode	**8**	**7**
Lower quartile (25th percentile)	**4**	**2.75**
Upper quartile (25th percentile)	**9**	**7**
Standard deviation	**3.19**	**2.46**
Skewness	**0.37**	**-0.40**
Kurtosis	**0.53**	**-0.53**
Range	**15**	**9**
Minimum	**1**	**0**
Maximum	**16**	**9**
Coefficient of variation	**44.16%**	**53.63%**

The possible scores for the grammar subtest ranged from 0 to 18. The minimum score for Forest Primary was 1 (1 learner) out of 18; and the maximum score was 16 (1 learner) out of 18. The minimum score for Maxima College was 0 out of 18 (2 learners); with a maximum score was 9 (1 learner). The grammar component mean for Forest Primary was

7.23 with a median of 7, while the corresponding mean for Maxima College was 4.59 and a median of 5. The almost identical mean and median data values for both schools shows that the data are symmetrical. The learners' mean for Forest Primary of 7.23 is at the 40% pass mark (which is equivalent 7.2 out of 18), while the mean of 4.59 for Maxima College is below the 40% pass mark indicating that most learners performed poorly. The standard deviation of the Forest Primary learners was 3.19 with a coefficient of variation of 44.16%. Maxima Collage had a standard deviation of 2.46 with a coefficient of variation of 53.63%. Most of the scores for Forest Primary learners ranged from 6 to 9, while those of Maxima Collage ranged lower from 4 to 7. However, the data Forest Primary had an outlier of one learner who achieved a score of 16 and performed well above the other learners in that school. The modal mark for Forest Primary was 8 whereas that of Maxima College was 7.

Table 3 indicates the statistical summary of the overall results of the Reading Performance Test for Forest Primary and Maxima College. The results of the two subtests: reading comprehension and grammar were combined to provide the overall results of the Reading Performance test in English.

Table 3: Comparative analysis of summary statistics of overall Reading Performance test results

Comparative analysis of summary statistics of overall Reading Performance test		
Summary statistics	**Forest Primary**	**Maxima College**
Mean	**19.00**	**13.46**
Median (50th percentile)	**19**	**14**
Mode	**19**	**16**
Lower quartile (25th percentile)	**14**	**11**
Upper quartile (25th percentile)	**22**	**16**
Standard deviation	**5.83**	**3.80**
Skewness	**0.52**	**-0.06**
Kurtosis	**0.28**	**-0.53**
Range	**25**	**14**
Minimum	**9**	**7**
Maximum	**34**	**21**
Coefficient of variation	**30.66%**	**28.25%**

The possible scores for the Reading Performance Test ranged from 0 to 40. The minimum score for Forest Primary was 9 out of 40 (1 learner); while the maximum score was 34 out of 40 (1 learner). Maxima College's minimum score was 7 out of 40 (2 learners) whilst the maximum score was 21 out of 40 (1 learner). Forest Primary's Reading Performance test had the same score of 19 for both mean and the median, indicating symmetrical data. Maxima College also had near identical mean and median scores of 13.46 and 14

respectively, also indicating symmetrical data. The mean of 19 for Forest Primary is above the 40% pass mark (16 out of 40). Thus, most of Forest Primary learners performed above the pass mark while most of Maxima Collage's learners performed below the 40% pass mark with a mean of 13.46. The standard deviation for Forest Primary was 5.83 with a coefficient of variation of 30.66%. The standard deviation for Maxima College was 3.80 with a coefficient variation of 28.25%. The combined test for Forest Primary had higher variability than the reading comprehension subtest and lower variability than the grammar subtest. On the other hand, Maxima College's combined test had less variability than each of the subtests. Most of the Forest Primary scores range from 18 to 20, whereas for Maxima College most of the scores ranged lower from 11 to 16. A small proportion of Forest Primary learners (9.7% or 3 learners) had scores above 25; in contrast Maxima College had 4.5% (1 learner) with a score of above 20. The modal value for Forest Primary and Maxima College was 19 and 16 respectively.

4.2. Writing Performance test results

Table 4 gives a comparative analysis of summary statistics of spelling and syntax.

Table 4: Comparative analysis of summary statistics of spelling and syntax

Comparative analysis of summary statistics of spelling and syntax		
Summary statistics	**Forest Primary**	**Maxima College**
Mean	**23.32**	**22.52**
Median (50th percentile)	**24**	**23**
Mode	**27**	**18**
Lower quartile (25th percentile)	**22**	**21**
Upper quartile (25th percentile)	**27**	**25**
Standard deviation	**4.46**	**3.10**
Skewness	**-2.11**	**-0.08**
Kurtosis	**6.65**	**-0.85**
Range	**23**	**10**
Minimum	**6**	**18**
Maximum	**29**	**28**
Coefficient of variation	**19.12%**	**13.77%**

The spelling and syntax subtest of the Writing Performance Test in English had a maximum possible score that ranged from 0 to 29. The minimum score for Forest Primary was 6 out of 29 (1 learner), whilst the maximum score was 29 out of 29 (1 learner). Maxima College's minimum score was 18 out of 29 (1 learner) whilst the maximum score was 28 out of 29 (1 learner). The mean score for the spelling and syntax component for Forest Primary was 23.32, with a median of 24. Maxima College on the other hand had a mean score of

22.52 with a median of 23. Since the mean for Forest Primary is slightly lower than the median, the data are slightly negatively skewed. The mean for Maxima College is almost equal to the median and the data are almost symmetrical. The mean for Forest Primary is well above the 40% pass mark of 11.6 out of 29. This also applies to Maxima College. The standard deviation for Forest Primary was 4.46, with a coefficient of variation of 19.12%. The standard deviation for Maxima College was 3.10 with a coefficient of variation of 13.77%. Most scores for Forest Primary ranged from 23 to 27, while most scores for Maxima College ranged from 21 to 23. A small proportion of Forest Primary learners (3.2% which is 1 learner) achieved a score below 11. The modal value for Forest Primary and Maxima College was 27 and 18, respectively.

Table 5 gives the statistical summary results of the sentence writing and creative writing component for Forest Primary and Maxima College.

Table 5: Comparative analysis of summary statistics of sentence writing and creative writing

Comparative analysis of summary statistics of sentence writing and creative writing		
Summary statistics	**Forest Primary**	**Maxima College**
Mean	**14**	**13.39**
Median (50th percentile)	**15**	**14**
Mode	**15**	**10[a]**
Lower quartile (25th percentile)	**12**	**11**
Upper quartile (25th percentile)	**16**	**16**
Standard deviation	**2.81**	**2.55**
Skegness	**-0.68**	**0.04**
Kurtosis	**1.21**	**-1.56**
Range	**14**	**7**
Minimum	**6**	**10**
Maximum	**20**	**17**
Coefficient of variation	**20.04%**	**19.07%**
a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown		

The possible score for the sentence writing and creative writing component ranged from 0 to 21. The minimum score for Forest Primary was 6 out of 21 (1 learner); and the maximum score was 20 out of 21 (1 learner). The minimum score for Maxima College was 10 out of 21 (4 learners); while the maximum score was 17 (3 learners). The mean score for Forest Primary for the sentence writing and creative writing component was 14 with a median of 15. The mean score for Maxima College was 13.39 with a median of 14. Since the mean for Forest Primary is less than the median, the data are negatively skewed. This is in

contrast to almost identical mean and median for Maxima College resulting in data that is almost symmetrical. Only 1 (3.2%) Forest Primary learner performed below the 40% pass mark (8.4 out of 21), while Maxima College had no learner with scores below the 40% pass mark. The standard deviation for Forest Primary was 2.81, with a variation coefficient of 20.04%, while the standard deviation for Maxima College was 2.55, with a variation coefficient of 19.07. The modal score for Forest Primary and Maxima College was 15 and 17, respectively.

Table 6 gives the statistical summary results of the overall writing performance test for Forest Primary and Maxima College. The results of the spelling and syntax subtest and the sentence writing and creative writing subtest were combined to obtain the overall results for the Writing Performance Test in English. The overall writing test had possible scores that ranged from 0 to 50.

Table 6: Comparative analysis of summary statistics of overall Writing Performance

Comparative analysis of summary statistics of overall writing performance		
Summary statistics	**Forest Primary**	**Maxima College**
Mean	**37.32**	**35.91**
Median (50th percentile)	**38**	**36**
Mode	**42**	**29[a]**
Lower quartile (25th percentile)	**34**	**33**
Upper quartile (25th percentile)	**42**	**41**
Standard deviation	**6.16**	**5.16**
Skegness	**-1.26**	**-0.01**
Kurtosis	**2.53**	**-0.95**
Range	**29**	**17**
Minimum	**17**	**28**
Maximum	**46**	**45**
Coefficient of variation	**16.49%**	**14.37%**
a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown		

The possible score for the Writing Performance Test ranged from 0 to 50. The minimum score for Forest Primary was 17 out of 50 (1 learner); and the maximum score was 46 out of 50 (1 learner). The minimum score for Maxima College was 28 out of 50 (1 learner) and a maximum score of 45 out of 50 (1 learner). The mean for the overall Writing Performance Test for Forest Primary was 37.32 with a median of 38. The average score for Maxima College was 35.91 with a median of 36. Since the mean for Forest Primary is almost the same as the median, the data are almost symmetrical. The same applies to Maxima College. Only one learner in Forest Primary (3.2%) performed below the 40% pass mark

(20 out of 50) whereas all leaners in Maxima College performed above the 40% pass mark. The standard deviation for Forest Primary was 6.16 with a coefficient of variation of 16.49%. The standard deviation for Maxima College was 5.16 with a coefficient of variation of 14.37%. The combined test for Maxima College had more variability than the spelling and syntax test and lower variability than the sentence writing and creative writing. On the other hand, Forest Primary showed less variability in all aspects of the test. The modal score for Forest Primary and Maxima College was 42 and 29, respectively.

4.3. Distribution of the variables

The data were tested for normality to determine the appropriate use of parametric and/or non-parametric tests. In terms of graphical presentation, box plots and normal quantile plots were used to determine whether data were symmetric (normally distributed) or not. In terms of the normal quantile plot, if points lie in a straight line, data are normally distributed. The Shapiro Wilk test was used to determine the normality of the distribution.

4.3.1 Testing for normality of reading comprehension

The normal Q-Q plot of the reading comprehension showed that the majority of the points were lying along the diagonal except for a few points as shown in Figure 1

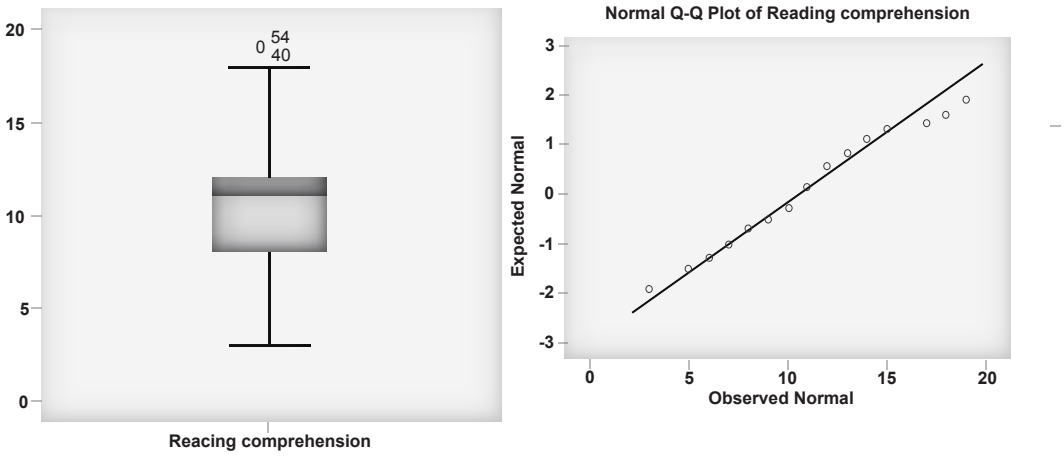

Figure 1: Reading comprehension

The box plot showed that the data is almost symmetrical except for two data points that are potential outliers. The Shapiro Wilk test for normality gave a *p-value = 0.155*. Thus, the hypothesis that the data follows a normal distribution was not rejected. Parametric tests might be used in testing differences in reading comprehension between groups.

4.3.2 Testing for normality of grammar

In terms of grammar, there was one outlier as depicted by the box plot. Removing the outlier would make the distribution symmetrical as indicated in Figure 2.

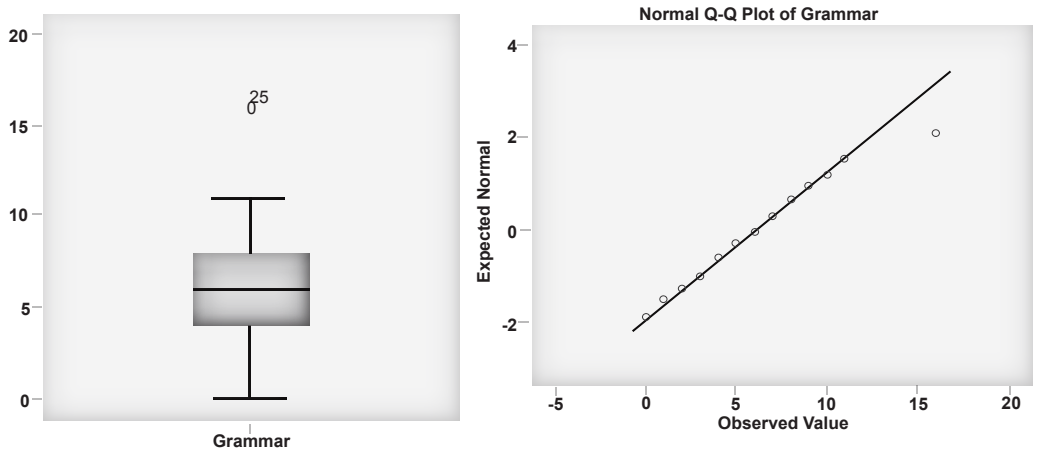

Figure 2: Grammar

The normal Q-Q plot had all points along the diagonal except one. To formally test for normality, a Shapiro Wilk test was done. It resulted in a *p-value =0.279*. Since the p-value was more than 5%, the null hypothesis was not rejected and we conclude that the data follows a normal distribution. Thus, one can use parametric tests to determine whether the groups differ by school.

4.3.3 Testing for normality of overall reading

Overall reading had a potential outlier to the right. This is of the learner who achieved a maximum value of 34. The information is depicted in the box plot in Figure 3.

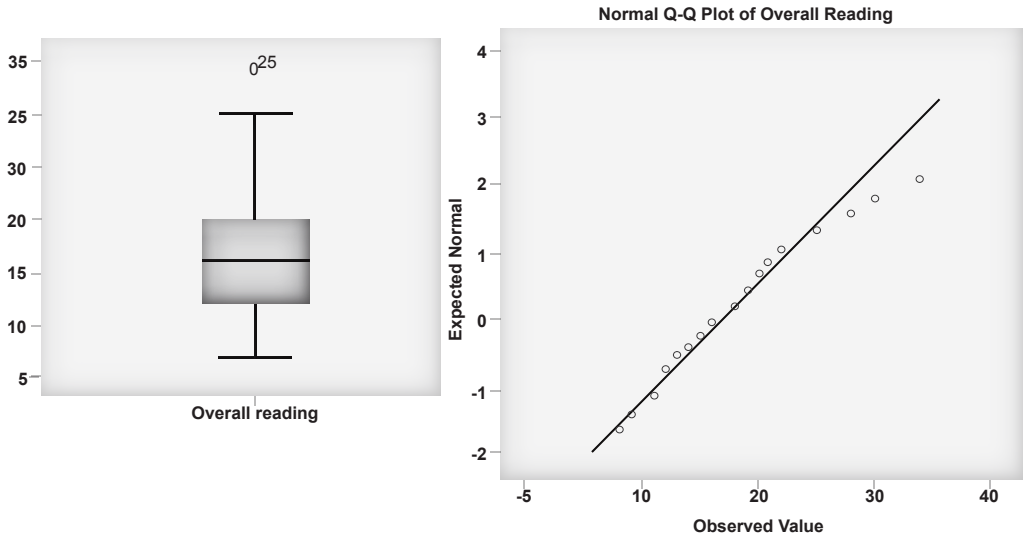

Figure 3: Overall Reading

Except for a few, the normal Q-Q plot shows the majority of the points lying along the diagonal. The data seems to be symmetrically distributed. The Shapiro Wilk test gave a *p-value =0.088*. Since 0.088 is more than 0.05, we fail to reject the null hypothesis of normality and conclude that the data is symmetrically distributed.

4.3.4 Testing for normality of spelling and syntax

In terms of spelling and syntax, there was one student who achieved a lower mark as indicated in the Box plot in Figure 4.

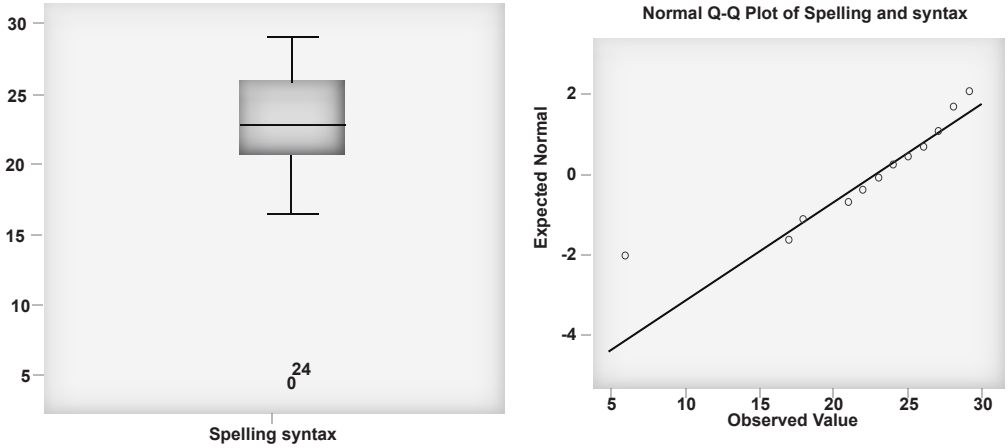

Figure 4: Spelling and syntax

The normal Q-Q plot also supports the observations made on the box plot. The point on the lower end is far away from the diagonal and this might suggest that the data is not symmetrical. The Shapiro Wilk test gave a *p-value = 0.000*. Since 0.000 is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the data is not normally distributed. This is highly significant.

4.3.5 Testing for normality of sentence writing and creative writing

The box plot shows that the scores for sentence writing and creative writing were almost symmetrical as shown in Figure 5.

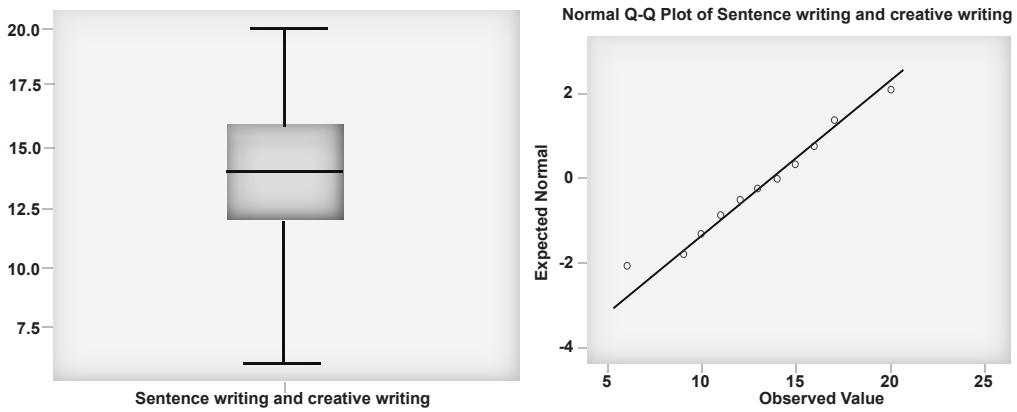

Figure 5: Sentence writing and creative writing

The normal Q-Q plot had few points which are not along the diagonal suggesting that data are normally distributed. A formal test using Shapiro Wilk test was done. The null hypothesis that data follows a normal distribution was not rejected since the p-value was 0.081 (greater than 0.05). Thus, the data for sentence and creative writing were normally distributed.

4.3.6 Testing for normality of overall writing

The overall writing box plot shows that there was a potential outlier to the left. This is also evidenced by points not along the diagonal on both ends of the line as shown in Figure 6.

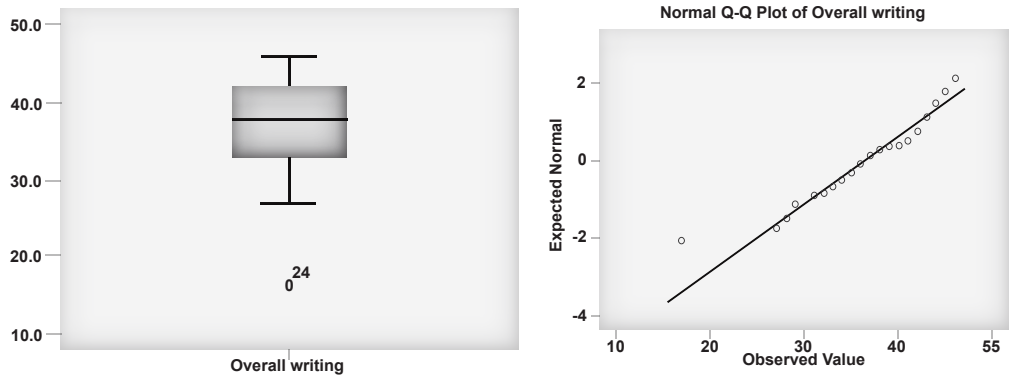

Figure 6: Overall writing

The Shapiro Wilk test for normality gave a *p-value =0.016*. Thus, the null hypothesis that the data follows a normal distribution was rejected. The data are not symmetrically distributed and a non-parametric test will be used to compare the tests.

4.4. Comparative analysis of the two schools

The aim of this section is to be able to ascertain whether a difference in performance exists between Forest Primary and Maxima College. All the aspects of reading showed that data were normally distributed, thus the independent t-tests were used to compare performance between schools. In terms of the aspects of writing only sentence and creative writing had a normal distribution and all the other aspects were not normally distributed. For a comparative purpose non-parametric tests were used to determine whether there are differences in school performance in terms of writing. The comparative analysis was done using box plot and error bars. Bivariate profiling box plots were done to determine whether the variability was the same and error bars were constructed to determine whether the confidence intervals for the means overlap. Where the error bars overlap, they might not be significantly different from each other. In the case where they do not overlap, the null hypothesis of equal means will be rejected.

4.2.1 Comparative analysis of reading comprehension by the two schools

The box plots showed that there are some learners who performed very well at Forest Primary and the length of the box plot was longer, suggesting more variability than at Maxima College. The main question is whether the difference is significant. The information is shown in Figure 7.

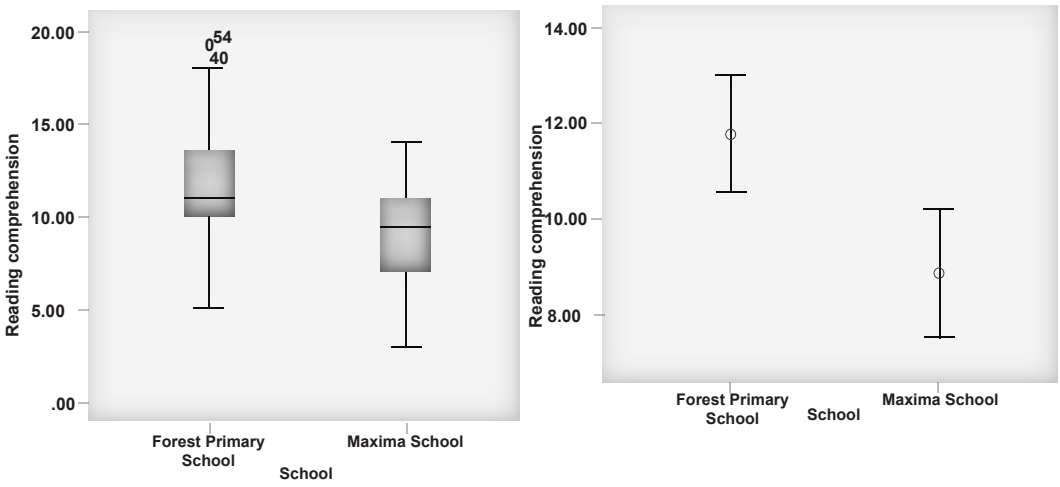

Figure 7: Box plots and confidence interval error bars of reading comprehension

The 95% confidence intervals do overlap and one can conclude from the intervals that the mean score of reading comprehension of Forest Primary is higher than that of Maxima College. This means that the null hypothesis of equal means will be rejected.

Since the data was normally distributed, the independent t-test was used to test the hypothesis to establish whether the means are the same. The hypothesis was:

H_o: $\mu_1 = \mu_2$

H_1: $\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$

The following data was obtained.

Table 7: Independent t-tests of reading comprehension scores by school

	Group	Mean Score	t-value	p-value	Decision
Reading comprehension	Forest Primary	11.77	3.315	0.002	Reject the null hypothesis
	Maxima College	8.86			

Firstly the Levene's test of equality of variances between schools was done. It gave an F-value = 0.001 with a p-value = 0.000. Thus, the null hypothesis of equal variances was not rejected at the 5% level of significance. In this case an independent t-test with equal variance assumed was done.

The hypothesis gave a **t-value = 3.315** with a **p-value = 0.002**. The null hypothesis of equal means was rejected. The 95% confidence interval for the difference between means was 1.08 to 4.73. It does not include zero, thus Forest Primary learners performed better in reading comprehension than Maxima College.

5. Discussion

The overall results of the two schools show that Forest Primary School learners performed better than the Maxima College learners in all aspects of the Reading and Writing Performance tests in English. With regard to reading comprehension, Forest Primary School learners had a mean score of 11.77, whereas Maxima College learners had a mean score of 8.86. Furthermore, Forest Primary School learners outperformed Maxima College learners in grammar with the mean average of 7.226 and 4.5 respectively for each school. These two subtests show a huge performance variation in the test results of the two schools. The variation in performance is further evidenced in the overall Reading Performance test results with both schools overall score being 19 and 13.391 respectively. It can be inferred from the results that Forest Primary School learners are better readers as shown by both their above average performance in the two subsections of the test and their overall reading performance. This is in contrast with the performance of most Maxima College learners' which is below the 40% pass mark.

Forest Primary School learners also outperformed Maxima College learners in the Writing Performance test, but here the difference in the performance is minimal. The results of the Writing Performance test do not show large variability as compared to the Reading Performance test. In the writing sub-components, for example, with regard to spelling and syntax, both schools' results show similar performance patterns. Forest Primary School leaners have a mean score of 23.323 in spelling and syntax, whereas Maxima College learners have a mean score of 22. In sentence and creative writing both schools' mean scores are 14 and 13.391 respectively. The overall English Writing Performance test result for Forest Primary School leaners is 37.323, whereas for Maxima College learners it is 35.913. A closer look at the Writing Performance test indicates less variability between the results of the two schools.

Results on Writing Performance shows better performance by both schools than obtained in the Reading Performance test. Test results indicate that learners in both schools are better writers than readers. This is contrary to most language research

results, which show a close correlation between reading and writing proficiency skills (Manyike and Lemmer, 2012). The best performance in the Writing Performance test can partly be explained by the fact that in this test, learners were provided with a sequence of illustrations which acted as writing prompts (e.g. five sketches indicated the steps in a child's morning routine). The use of illustrations falls into what Cummins (2003) refers to as context embedded. The inclusion of appropriate illustrations was intended to assist the learners in their writing and the likelihood that they served this purpose can be assumed. This was not the case with the Reading Performance test: each comprehension exercise was accompanied by an illustration, but this dealt with the topic of the piece and did not provide detailed information about all content which was tested by comprehension. The reading performance was thus context disembedded (Cummins, 2003). Illustrations can thus be said to be effective in encouraging learners to write coherently and to describe a sequence of activities. This is a valuable lesson for the practising teachers to apply when teaching second language learners writing skills.

Surprisingly, the results further show that most Forest Primary School learners performed above the 40% pass mark in all aspects of the two tests (Reading and Writing Performance tests). The superior performance of Forest Primary, a former Model C school, can partly be explained by the school's specific context. The school has well-qualified and experienced teachers, although its learners are from the farming and rural communities. Furthermore, Forest Primary provides learners with extra classes in HL instruction of a high quality (teachers teaching HL are both professionally qualified and native speakers). HL proficiency provides the foundation for successful ESL learning (cf. Cummins, 2000).

On the other hand, although Maxima College is a for-profit enterprise attended by learners primarily from a Tzaneen's surrounding areas, with middle class parents, the learners have not performed as well as the other school. Their poor performance in reading (most learners achieved below the 40% pass mark) can partly be explained by the fact that its' teachers although well qualified have less teaching experience in comparison to Forest Primary's corps. Second language learner's low performance in standardised tests is supported by research which indicates that ESL learners are most likely to be taught by inexperienced and less qualified teachers (Cummins, 2000). Further, the school lacks extra curricula activities which give learners additional language practicing opportunities. Although the school is well resourced, it lacks the tradition of community support, particularly parental participation in school governance, which is enjoyed at Forest Primary. The school also pays little attention to allocating additional time to assist underperforming learners as is evidenced by its lack of afternoon classes for language enrichment. Although most learners are from middle class backgrounds and the classes have small numbers of learners, the test results reveal learners' lack of cognitive academic language proficiency which may impact on their use of English as LoLT.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the usefulness of small-scale standardised language testing to provide benchmark data about the performance of learners in a particular grade, also in comparison to schools within the same area. The data identifies specific areas of underperformance which teachers should target during instruction (e.g. reading instruction at Maxima Collage).

The difference in performance of the two schools despite the socio economic status of the learners (the public fee paying school produced a better performance than the independent for profit school) indicates that some teachers are more effective in teaching ESL and other sub language groups. In the case of the public school, most teachers are more experienced which can also help explain their better performance. This points to the need for ESL teachers to be well qualified in both language development and content. Research needs to be conducted on the characteristics of ESL teachers who are able to yield academic success for their students. Finally ESL teachers should equip their learners with knowledge of the type of skills they can transfer from their L1 to the learning of a second language.

Standardised testing, however, requires expertise in test application; thus, it is recommended that universities should encourage postgraduate students to conduct small-scale annual language assessments particularly in disadvantaged schools in order to assist schools to track learner progress and build a firm data base. Further, the results of large-scale standardised national assessments carried out by the Department of Basic Education and other entities should be shared with individual schools in order to maximise the usefulness of data in improving language classroom practice. Nonetheless, the importance of using multiple strategies of data gathering to assess language performance, such as mentioned in the literature review of this article, should not be overlooked. Standardised testing should always be combined with on-going assessment in different language contexts, both within the school and extramurally. Furthermore, it is recommended that schools should continually engage all teachers in professional development which addresses second language pedagogy across the curriculum. Additional language enrichment classes after official school hours can also be very beneficial in addressing language deprivation. Parents and the community should be informed about the results of standardised testing and should be drawn into devising solutions to address underperformance, such as the provision of library books and language resource materials, the organisation of Readathons and the engagement of volunteers in language enrichment programmes. Particularly important in the South African context is to apply sufficient attention to the maintenance of the HL due to its crucial role in ESL learning. Thus, in spite of the limited generalizability of this small-scale study, the findings can prove useful to other schools which face similar challenges in comparable contexts.

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