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# The efficacy of a whole language approach to ESL teaching in an under-graduate classroom

## **Abstract**

This article examines English Second Language (ESL) students' access to knowledge through early literacy text-based readings in an under graduate classroom. A basic qualitative research design was selected to understand how students perceive and sustain learning through text-based readings while using a whole language approach toward teaching. Twenty-nine students were engaged in a survey to determine their Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP). Fourteen students responded to focus group interviews. This article argues particularly for the adoption of text-based readings as a teaching strategy for English Language Learning (ELL) in early childhood teacher training. The results of this TORP survey indicate that much work needs to be done in order to support under graduate students' exposure to

skills and strategies for effective ESL education. The narratives of students' revealed reading gains as a result of their increased interaction with reading texts, the English Second Language (ESL) challenges, and changing perceptions in terms of reading and the understanding of English reading texts in meaningful ways. The results also highlight students' ELL challenges in terms of low self-efficacy and lack of confidence to speak English. The study recommends further research on ESL teaching to carefully document the outcomes of English Language Learning within Namibian multilingual teacher training contexts.

**Keywords:** English Second Language, whole language, training, reading, multi-lingual contexts

## 1. Introduction and aim

The article reviews literature on “whole language” as a teaching approach and documents under graduate students’ emerging perceptions of teaching through text-based readings that challenge the current status quo of ESL pedagogy. When English language training focuses on decontextualized and discrete traditional aspects of language teaching and learning, it signals an approach that is no longer adequate in today’s multilingual global marketplace. Bagwandeem and Louw (1993) indicate that the tempo and complexity of education change and the limitations of pre-service education call for intensive training programmes for teachers. Namibia has thirteen different indigenous languages (MBESC 2003). The majority of Namibian students who are enrolled in higher education training programmes come from multilingual backgrounds and English is the medium of instruction in both schools and institutions of higher learning (MBESC 2003). Therefore, English Second Language (ESL) teacher training needs to model and educate teachers to use explicit teaching and learning strategies that can promote English Language Learning (ELL).

Larson-Freeman and Anderson (2011: 141) state that “a whole language approach calls for language to be regarded holistically, rather than as pieces, i.e. the vocabulary words, grammar structures, and pronunciation points.” Traditionally, formal English education was viewed as a matter of transferring knowledge from the teacher’s head and from textbooks into the students’ heads (Rigg 2001), a methodology that is still commonly used in many teacher training environments. With this in mind, the researcher argues that “whole language” approach especially as a language teaching strategy expands ESL knowledge and develops reading skills that can enable rich communication with English language learners while they learn both field specific content and language. The specific question of the study and the sub-question are as follows: 1) How do under-graduate students preparing to become early childhood teachers modify their perceptions of a whole language approach toward ESL education? 2) What benefits and challenges do students self-report after learning through text-based readings in an English language classroom?

## 2. Definition of “whole language”

The term ‘whole language’ is new and not commonly used within a teacher training context in Namibia. In a review, Rigg (1991:521) states that “whole language is both a theoretical perspective and a movement affecting both instruction and research.” Haste and Burke (1977), Ken and Yetta Goodman (1981), and Watson (1989) assert that language is whole (hence the name), and that any attempt to fragment it into parts—whether these be grammatical patterns, vocabulary lists, or phonics will potentially destroy it. This implies that language learning is an integrated whole. It teaches phonics, skills, and the interaction with reading text. These language skills contribute to meaning making around text and make communicative forays into language pragmatics. In a study, Goodman (1989:115) contended that “the popular use of the term whole language came from teachers who were becoming aware of the knowledge explosion surrounding

oral and written language development and the reading and writing process.” According to Goodman (1986), whole language teaching is set up within a framework based on children’s literature. Whole language teaching involves telling stories, making personal and social connection to reading, allowing learners’ choice and supporting authentic meaning, student-generated writing, and meaning making. Other studies, e.g. Haste and Burke (1984) explain that each time someone reads, writes, speaks, and listens, language feeds into a common data pool. Spiegel (1991) believes that whole language classrooms can strengthen literacy education and enables teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners who come to school with varying language and print experiences. The review of literature reveals that whole language emphasizes flexibility of teacher and student choice of materials and activities, and that the teacher can focus on reading and writing, speaking and listening simultaneously. In these studies, ‘whole language’ teaching in the broad-sense includes literature, stories, poems, plays, allegories, letters, argument, and articles (Ling 2012). A key aspect of whole language teaching is to develop and demonstrate an appreciation of books to afford ESL speakers the opportunity to make progress in acquiring English language proficiency and broad base vocabulary. Other studies have found that “educators provide content-rich curriculum where language and thinking can be about interesting and significant content” (Altwerger, Edelsky & Flores 1991:11). Students experiment with reading and writing to encourage both enjoyment and ownership (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson 2011). A critical review of literature reveals common elements included in the definition of ‘whole language.’ These are: 1) constructing meaning, 2) functional language, 3) literature, 4) writing process, and 5) cooperation while recognising that the flexibility in terminology demands innovations. Furthermore, Bergeron (1990: 319) defines ‘whole language’ as follows

A concept that embodies both a philosophy of language development as well as the instructional approaches embedded within, and supportive of, that philosophy. This concept includes the use of real literature and writing in the context of meaningful, functional, and cooperative experiences in order to develop in students’ motivation and interest in the process of learning.

Whole language has its roots in Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development and emphasizes the relationship of a student’s individual learning and his environment within a social context (Goodman 1989; Vygotsky 1978). The ‘whole language approach’ asserts that children learn language most effectively at their own development pace through social interaction in language rich environments and through exposure to quality literature. As a result, ELL’s may benefit from social interaction, discussion and exposure to professionally authored reading-texts about teaching strategy. This approach is in contrast with a phonics-oriented strategy in which language learners receive formal instruction emphasizing sound symbol correspondence. Teacher training in developing countries face several challenges to prepare teachers within a multilingual context. Limited research has been done in Namibia on ESL teaching and learning processes. Therefore, the development of ‘whole language’ strategies amongst several other teaching strategies for ELL may provide essential academic context through which prospective early childhood teachers may gain effective ESL skills and content knowledge.

### 3. Theoretical framework

Pre-service teachers' involvement in developmentally appropriate practice requires them to "scaffold children's language learning within their ZPD" (Vygotsky 1987). Research by Ling (2012) states that traditional language teaching cultivates mainly language knowledge (pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary) and basic language abilities (listening, speaking, reading and writing) separately. For developmentally appropriate teaching and learning of early childhood education, teaching approaches need to transform relationships within teacher training classrooms with the intent of transforming conditions for children's language learning. Vygotsky's (1987) beliefs that consciousness arises from this interactive activity that serves as the foundation upon which generalisation and systematised thinking emerges. Vygotsky recognised that a child's (and, by extension, a pre-service teacher's) spontaneous, everyday knowledge is a necessary but insufficient starting point because these spontaneous concepts transform scientific thinking and vice versa in the journey to higher consciousness and development. This is an important idea for supporting the development of pre-service teachers because it is a process which leads not only to conceptual development, but also to practical competence in the classroom.

Within an African context, "ESL students who are African mother-tongue speakers prefer to be taught in English, particularly at university, even though it takes longer to learn in the second language than in the mother-tongue" (Tondlana 1992: 248). On the other hand, Laufer and Yano (2001) reveal that learners in tertiary institutions are expected to read authentic (real) academic texts which are bound to contain many words that are unfamiliar. Therefore, research-based text readings foster under graduate students' understanding of field specific course content through language.

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1. Design

A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyse data. The primary purpose was to solicit and document under graduate students' perspectives, their challenges and benefits when they interact with text-based readings. The English language education programme prepares under graduate students to become early childhood teachers. Merriam (2009:23) states that researchers conducting a qualitative study would be interested in three components: "how people interpret their experiences," "how they construct their worlds," and "what meaning they attribute to their experiences." In this study, under graduate students provide their perceptions of a whole language approach in an English language education classroom. The study also examined students' access to knowledge through text-based reading to promote ELL in multi-lingual contexts.

## 4.2. Participants

This study utilized purposeful sampling to locate participants. Patton (2002:230) explains that the intention and power of this type of sample selection rests in its ability to select “information-rich cases.” The researcher created a list of essential criteria that included the prospective participants that could describe the phenomenon in question. The inclusion criteria were: 1) participants must be under graduate students, 2) enrolled for early childhood education studies, 3) be able to elaborate and discuss actual classroom experiences. Participants who met the selection criteria were identified as information-rich cases (Coyne 1997) and were selected for the study. The final sample included twenty-nine under graduate students in the TORP survey and fourteen under-graduate students for two focus group interviews.

## 4.3. Instrumentation

Data collection commenced with a normed survey to determine under graduate students’ Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile. DeFord (1985) designed an instrument that defines teaching beliefs towards reading. DeFord (1985) notes that the phonics construct emphasizes learning small language units with gradual movement toward whole word reading comprehension. A large amount of time is allocated for decoding isolated phonemes and letter patterns, while student texts introduce consonant-vowel combinations systematically (DeFord 1985). Sight word instruction is only used for words not conforming to standard spelling rules, and fluency. Text comprehension is introduced after a foundation in letter-sound correspondence is built. The second orientation, namely skills guides teachers towards literature, thus emphasizing story reading and text structure as a framework for dealing with smaller language units. The third orientation of this instrument, “whole language orientation” deals with shared reading and writing experiences (DeFord 1985).

The results of the statistical analysis include: 1) establishing the theoretical orientation/ beliefs of under graduate students and presenting descriptive outcomes based on demographic variables such as language proficiency and gender. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (2015) was used to analyse the TORP profile data, and the participants’ language profile. Focus group interview questions revolved around how under graduate students perceived teaching, what benefits and challenges they had with increased demands to read for meaning, and what coping strategies they developed to foster understanding of English as a second language. Field notes were taken and participants were given the opportunity to write their views of the curriculum and class anonymously. The data was collected over a period of time and entered in an online software program [www.NVivo.com](http://www.NVivo.com) to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

## 5. Data analysis

Grounded theory tools were utilized to analyse the data. When analysing data, the qualitative researcher attempts to make sense and interpret the phenomena in terms of the meaning the participants bring to their experiences (Creswell 2009). The researcher organised and structured the data in manageable patterns, themes and categories through initial open and axial coding for emergent patterns. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to this process as involving a three-step process—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Bogdan & Biklen 1998). With a number of themes identified, the researcher returned the set of coded notes to identify the particular themes most relevant to the phenomena under study. This study build theory around the phenomenon of interest within the ESL teaching environment.

## 6. Presentation of findings

In the initial phase of the study, a pilot study determined that participating under graduate students required more interaction with text readings to express their experiences in meaningful ways. A few months later and after under graduate students have engaged extensively with coursework, follow-up focus group interviews were conducted. Participating under graduate students were exposed to field specific text readings and engaged in dialogic teaching practices. During the focus group sessions, a total of fourteen participants actively participated voluntarily. The findings of the study are presented in a framework that depicts particularly teaching reading, oral participation and reflection in writing. In communities of practice (Lave 1996) people are coming together around specific tasks in situated practices. The exchange of ideas in a community of practice allows for the combination of intellectual resources to collectively make meaning and to solve learning problems. Teaching under-graduate students through text-based readings revolved and focussed on important aspects such as 1) time for reflection 2) opportunities for scaffolding from experienced or knowledgeable others, and 3) opportunities to engage in reflective conversations and through writing. Under graduate students' theoretical orientations to reading profile is defined, background information, and perceptions of 'whole language' as a teaching approach are presented in the next discussion.

## 6.1. TORP survey analysis and results

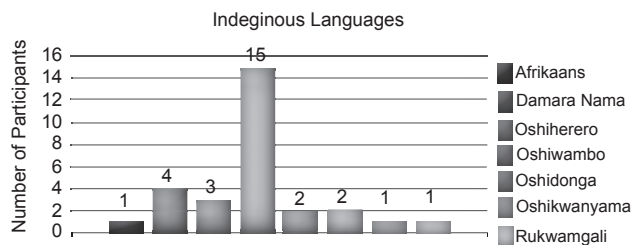
**Table 1: Results of Theoretical orientation to reading profile (TORP)**

	THEORETICAL ORIENTATION TO READING PROFILE	PERCENTAGE
Under-graduate students' orientation		
Phonics (N=28)	(0-65)	96,6%
Skills (N=1)	(66-110)	3.4%

The results of the TORP survey point to under graduate students' orientation or teaching beliefs to reading profile. Teachers' beliefs within an ESL teaching context make up an important part of the prior knowledge through which they perceive the instructional process and act upon information in the classroom.

In an assessment of students' orientations, the largest percentage of students, 96.6% has a phonics orientation, while one, 3, 4% has a skills orientation: none scored as whole language orientation. A phonics teaching orientation does not indicate support for whole language teaching and learning strategies in early childhood classrooms. Westcott (2012) indicates that a phonics approach teaches young learners to decode words by sound, rather than recognising whole words and emphasizes grammatical correctness rather than fluency and understanding. Teaching phonics only does not teach reading for meaning or for pleasure. Therefore, the results of the TORP survey indicate that much work needs to be done in order to support under graduate students' exposure to skills and strategies for effective ESL education. Acquiring ESL education skills will benefit under graduate students from multilingual backgrounds preparing for young learners' ESL teaching.

## 6.2. Linguistic background information



**Figure 1: Linguistic diversity of participants**



Figure 1 shows that the under graduate students speak various indigenous languages. These languages are referred to as “mother tongue” in the education system and presents unique challenges to educators from diverse language backgrounds. Fifteen of 29 participating under-graduate students speak Oshiwambo, 4/29 dialects of Oshiwambo, 1/29 speaks Silozi, 1/29 speaks Afrikaans, 3/29 were Oshihherero speaking, 4/29 Nama or Khoegowab speaking, and 1/29 speaks Rukwangali. Such a variety of languages and dialects indicate the multilingual context of teacher training and highlights the centrality of strong ESL teaching strategies to meet the language learning needs of ESL speakers in ways that foster language gains in holistic ways. From the total participants, 23/29 were female, and 6/29 were male.

### 6.3. Focus group results

The focus group sessions solicited under graduate students’ perception of English language learning through their class experiences with up-to-date text-based readings for English language education. Additionally, they were asked about what benefits and challenges they experienced when they were required to read specific content as well as their views of working in peer collaboration. Table 2 indicates that a smaller subset of each focus group dominated the focus group conversations.

**Table 2: Frequency of participation**

DATA COLLECTION	SURVEY	FOCUS GROUPS
Survey	29	X
Focus group 1	X	6
Focus group 2	X	8

The data was analysed immediately after each focus group session. The first step in data analysis was to identify open codes (See Appendix A: Code Book). Strauss and Corbin (1998:101) defined open coding as “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data.” After the completion of the initial coding, new concepts started to emerge as axial and selective coding reduced the original codes to more focused thematic ideas. These concepts included: 1) low self-esteem, 2) communication, 3) benefits to new approaches, and 4) learning specific teaching strategies. This constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss & Corbin 1998) involves equating one segment of data with another to determine differences and similarities. The data showed similarities and differences with the www.NVivo.com concepts: 1) confidence, 2) language learning, and 3) teaching reading. Figure 2 is an indication of the initial codes when the data was entered into www.NVivo.com.



(L-3) The majority of participants indicated the content specific learning from the teaching approach. The dimension was indicated as broad to specific in the sub-category which is labelled, 'strategy.'

"Early literacy readings were specific and about classroom practices."

"The interesting topics were teacher rich talk, individual and group work and/ story reading." (L-26-27)

The text reading as a sub-category under 'learning tools' in the 'whole language' approach was regarded by the majority of participants as the most difficult tool in the teaching and learning process. The dimension of this sub-category was from no confidence to confidence in reading. This experience was apparent in the comment: "It was difficult to understand the text, but as I have progressed when we interact more with the text readings. It got better with time" (L-18-19). The properties of this subcategory, language skills with the dimensions no gains to gains were revealed in

"My vocabulary has increased. I was prompted to read more." "It helped me to gain better language competence that could be beneficial for teaching."  
(L- 44-45)

"The reading taught both reading, writing and language." (L-71-72)

### ***ESL Challenges***

The data illustrated the psychological effects that pre-service teachers underwent while learning English or through English as a medium of instruction. In the sub-category 'low self-esteem' with the dimension no confidence to confidence, the participant revealed

"I was lost at the beginning and had to read several times to understand. I fear of using English. I simply lack confidence when using the language. Sometimes I do not understand and as a result cannot write about the content." (L-12-14)

In the sub-category, 'ability to respond,' the dimension points to articulate to confronting. A participant confessed that he could not respond as he wished to, because he does not have the right words to respond. There are several dimensions of this category in response to the ability to respond in any situation. Speakers of a foreign language may choose to respond or to avoid response. Key insights with regard to the goals of this project were revealed in: "I could not understand what I have read. It was difficult to understand the text, but as we have progressed and interact more with the text. It got better with

time" (L-18-19). In the sub-category 'low self-esteem' the dimension no gains to gains were identified. A participant recounted: "I thought the course will teach us English, but it mainly prepared us on how to teach English." (L-17-18-19)

## ***Social learning***

The participating pre-service teachers shared experiences that illustrated their coping strategies while learning English as second language. In the sub-category, 'social learning activities' labelled in the dimension individual to group, participants expressed the following thoughts: "I sourced the opinion of others. I try to understand the topic from the view of others." (L-36-37)

Another student commented: "As a group, we could complement each other. We talked about the readings and were excited about the course." (L-42-43) In further assertions pre-service teachers recounted that they have gained in the following ways from social learning

"I frequently discussed the readings with my friends and picked up what I didn't capture during class or when I read on my own." (L-71-72)

"I learned new words from all the readings and has upgraded my vocabulary." (L-71-72)

Pre-service teachers gradually gained new knowledge and as a result new vocabulary from course specific text readings which increased their vocabulary and ability to participate in classroom discussions. All the properties showed the dimension no gains to language gains, no confidence to confidence or dislike to like amongst others. The results indicate that pre-service teachers show personal and academic growth increased confidence and self-efficacy as a result of their interaction with more text readings.

## ***Transformation***

The personal development are indicators of the positive consequences and a validation of the changing perceptions of the efficacy of a whole language approach as a result of their participation in ESL classroom activities. These experiences were confirmed in the following assertion:

I was prompted to read more. This process has increased my vocabulary. I have learned new words and gained better language competence that could be beneficial for teaching. I will definitely use the classroom tips in my practice. (L-45-46)

In the sub-category, 'approach' with the dimension broad to specific, a participating teacher narrated the following: "I have enjoyed the readings. It was informative and deals with content about young children's learning such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and phonemic awareness." The majority of the participants revealed that the text readings were informative, have meaning, and were desirable for preparing them for early childhood practice.

## 7. Discussion/Conclusion

This study offered several insights into the experiences of under graduate students' access to knowledge through early literacy text-based readings. Discussions based on text-based readings problematise the 'teacher as transmitter,' and allow pre-service teachers to interrogate knowledge in the English education classroom, rather than being required to uncritically absorb theory and practice. The benefits and challenges of text readings, social learning, and the transformation as a result of reading occurred in a variety of ways. Students narrated that "It was difficult to understand the text, but as I have progressed when we interact more with the text readings. It got better with time." Students' comments implied that with practice, their reading experiences in an under graduate classroom became better accepted. The results of the TORP survey invite pre-service teachers to critically reconsider commonly held beliefs. Strauss (2018) states that "Theoretical Orientation" refers to teacher's particular knowledge and beliefs of reading instruction which guide instructional decisions. With more interaction with course specific reading texts, pre-service teachers can disrupt held ideas about teaching and seeing the world to reconsider using new teaching approaches or strategies for early childhood teaching practice. Participation in reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities promote holistic and dialogic participation and thus more interactive classroom debate for ESL learning. In the assertion: "Reading is beneficial. I have improved my reading skills and reading habits" (L-51-52), the results show that the use of a "whole language" approach in preparing under-graduate students to become early childhood teachers has potential to modify their perceptions on the efficacy of reading in a higher education English language education environment. In further elaborations, "Every time I have learned new words, and have enjoyed the classes," the use of a "whole language" approach evidently provides enjoyment and new opportunities that can contribute toward ESL learning needs. The findings also revealed the benefits of story readings and how it has resulted into new meaning and the enjoyment of reading.

Many under graduate students face many challenges when they have to read at higher levels of English during coursework. Participants revealed challenges of ELL and the lack of vocabulary to express themselves. A "whole language" strategy offers integrated language learning experiences that are clearly opposed to traditional teaching that constructs language skills into parts. The use of the approach creates new opportunities for social learning that could benefit ESL learning. In the comment, "I frequently discussed the readings with my friends and picked up what I didn't capture during class or when I read on my own" (L-71-72), it is inferred that social learning within a support network with peers provides a sense of comfort, confidence, and fluences students' meaning making when learning ESL. Fundamental to a sociocultural approach to learning is the assumption that "learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community" (Rogoff 1994, p. 209).

## 8. Limitations and further research

The study was limited by participants' non-articulate or nonverbal behaviour as a result of their limited language proficiency in ESL. However, with continuous scaffolding the alternative teaching strategy has potential to result into increased language gains. There is little research in the area of ESL teaching in Namibia, thus, more research is needed to carefully document the outcomes of early childhood education teachers to adopt a more whole language approach in teacher training contexts or teacher preparation.

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