

Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language Teaching  
- Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi -  
Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo  
- Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali  
Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo  
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig -  
Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi  
- Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi  
- Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -  
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi  
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa  
Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language  
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa  
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta  
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo -  
Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo  
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi  
- Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig  
- Journal for Language  
Teaching - Ijenali  
yokuFundisa iLimi -  
Ijenali yokuFundisa  
iiLwimi - Ibhuku  
Lokufundisa Ulimi  
- Tšenale ya tša  
Go ruta Polelo -  
Buka ya Thuto  
ya Puo - Jenale  
ya Thuto ya Dipuo  
Ijenali Yekufundzisa  
Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u  
Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala  
yo  
Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig  
- Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali  
yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi -  
Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta  
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya  
Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya  
u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi  
- Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language  
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali  
yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi -  
Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -  
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi  
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa  
Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language  
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa  
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta  
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo -  
Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo  
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig -  
Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi  
- Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi  
- Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -  
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi  
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa  
Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language  
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa  
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta



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# Exploring the learner profile of the English Home Language classroom in select urban secondary schools

## Abstract

In a democratic South Africa, English has increasingly become the preferred medium of instruction despite the majority of South African learners being mother tongue speakers of other languages. Many learners in urban areas are enrolled to take English Home Language and especially novice teachers expect them to have mother tongue proficiency. However, the reality is that learners come from diverse backgrounds and a single class comprises learners with varying levels of English proficiency. This study seeks to establish who is the actual target audience seated in the so-called English Home Language class. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire completed by 642 Grade 8 and 9 respondents at three suburban schools in Gauteng. Cross tabulations were used to compare different variables. Key findings indicate that respondents –

although multilingual – do not consider themselves adequately proficient in English. Secondly, the role of the caregiver as initial source of learning English has been underestimated. Although small-scale, the study highlights the mismatch between classroom reality and curriculum requirements. Results suggest that the national education authorities need to adapt policy documents so that what is currently expected of learners might be more easily accomplished in the English class. The questionnaire may serve as a useful resource to determine the linguistic profile of a particular target group.

**Keywords:** English language proficiency, medium of instruction, non-native speakers, linguistic profile, policy mismatch, urban schools

## 1. Introduction

In South Africa, especially in urban schools, English has increasingly become the preferred medium of instruction despite the majority of learners being mother-tongue speakers of many other languages. In South Africa, those caring for learners on a daily basis are not necessarily the parents but include immediate family members such as siblings, close blood relatives such as aunts, uncles or grandparents and even members of the community. Regardless of their legal guardianship status, such caregivers often feel that as English is the language of business it would be beneficial to their charges, regardless of their proficiency in English, to enrol them as learners in English medium schools.

Upon entering the teaching profession, many novice English teachers idealistically envisage reading Shakespeare and discussing the mysteries of love, as imagined by the great poets, with equally eager, passionate and capable learners. The stark reality is that during the initial months of their career, these novice teachers discover that the learners seated in their English Home Language (EHL) classrooms, are not a homogenous linguistic group but represent disparate levels of English proficiency and diverse academic, social and cultural backgrounds. Some learners may even be recent arrivals to the country with little exposure to English. Levels of English proficiency encountered in one single classroom might, instead of representing a homogenous group of English mother-tongue speakers, be so diverse that only some learners cope adequately with the syllabus content. Some may struggle to complete simple tasks while others may view the teacher's interpretation of the literature as simplistic and the grammar explanations as elementary.

This growing awareness that a tangible mismatch exists between the requirements of official policy documents and the actual learner proficiency levels present in the EHL classroom tend to dishearten novice teachers. A further consequence seems to be their inability to create sufficient learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of the disparity in the language proficiency levels represented in any EHL classroom. An initial solution could be to compile a linguistic profile of the target group in question before devising a plan of action in order to accommodate all levels of language proficiency.

This extract from an unpublished study conducted in an urban setting at three secondary schools, presents a sample profile of Grade 8 and 9 learners studying through the medium of English - learners who are thus by default seated in the English Home Language class. It seeks to answer the question: What is the linguistic profile of the average Senior Phase learner attending school in an urban setting? Extrapolations based on this sample might be applicable to other settings.

## 2. Contextualising the study

Before South Africa's first democratic election and the implementation of our current constitution, an English teacher could have expected to teach a reasonably homogeneous group of learners segregated by skin colour, language and cultural practices. After 1994,

learners regardless of their ethnicity, cultural or linguistic background were free to attend any school and several new policy documents in all sectors, were formulated in order to ensure the rights of all learners. The South African School's Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) served as a guideline for several matters related to school management and policy. Based on the SASA, the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) was determined in order to address the question of what language would be used as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) and what languages would be presented at Home Language (HL) and First Additional Language (FAL) level (Department of Education, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

The Department of Basic Education (DoBE), prescribes policy issues for government schools. Such schools, although government-assisted, are managed by a school governing body consisting of the school principal and democratically elected representatives of the caregivers whose children are enrolled at the school, as well as staff and senior learners. The school governing body has jurisdiction to determine which language is used as the LoLT and which languages are offered at Home Language or First Additional Language level (Joubert & Prinsloo, 2001:234; South African School's Act 84 of 1996). Regardless of the decision made by the individual school governing body, according to the SASA and the LiEP, caregivers have a right to send their child to any school regardless of the child's competency in the LoLT, HL or FAL (Department of Education, 1997). If no school offers tuition in the desired LoLT, HL or FAL, caregivers have to make alternative arrangements or submit a formal request to the DoBE to receive tuition in the chosen LoLT, HL or FAL (Department of Education, 1997). A school where English is used as the LoLT is however, generally preferred by caregivers since English is currently viewed as the language of prosperity (Kamwamgamalu 2000:35; Olivier, 2009; Evans & Cleghorn, 2012).

Although South Africa has 11 official languages, final school-exiting examinations in all subjects other than languages, are only offered in Afrikaans or English (DoBE, 2016). This despite the fact that only 4 892 623 or 9.6% of a total of 50 961 443 citizens in South Africa indicated in the 2011 census that they spoke English as a home language (Statistics SA, 2012:25). Learners in one classroom could thus represent a variety of linguistic backgrounds and a diverse level of proficiency in English (Manyike & Lemmer, 2010:29). The implication for teachers is that they need to adapt their teaching as well as the subject content based on the context rather than the prescribed curriculum.

The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) - introduced as the first democratic national curriculum - maintained that when a learner reaches the General Education and Training phase (GET) and he or she still cannot "communicate well enough" in the language to be considered a home language speaker, they are thus not capable of coping with the demands of taking the subject at home language level (DoBE, 2011:8). This document vaguely defined the EHL target group and has since been substituted by a more realistic English HL curriculum - the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). However, the success of it still needs to be judged. Nevertheless, the section relating to English Home Language, now suggests an attempt to amend the unrealistic expectations of the RNCS. This has been necessary since so many non-native speakers of English attend

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<sup>1</sup> We use the anglicised forms of the official languages rather than the contested appellations used in the national constitution.

schools that have traditionally served mother tongue speakers exclusively (DoBE, 2011:6). The CAPS document, also makes reference to cognitive academic language skills required for thinking and learning (DoBE, 2011:24), as learners despite not being mother tongue speakers of English, need to be taught how to use the language effectively in a range of daily interactions (Brunner, 2009:36) e.g. Knowing different forms of apologising as well as in the learning environment.

The distinction made by Cummins (1979) between Basic Communicative Interpersonal Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is particularly pertinent to the EHL learner who is not a mother tongue speaker since having conversational fluency in an additional language does not guarantee being able to master an academic environment competently in that language (Joubert, Bester, Meyer & Evans, 2013).

Caregivers and teacher are often misled by the apparent ease with which learners communicate in English yet this social use of the language does not demand high levels of cognition and is reliant on context-rich cues such as facial expressions, intonation, gestures and other paralinguistic features to facilitate effective communication.

CALP is a sophisticated, demanding linguistic literacy that is developed during exposure to formal explanations, argumentation and analyses. It includes learning subject-specific vocabulary, argumentation, how to compare, summarise, make deductions, synthesise information or create links between concepts. Learners require this academic proficiency to master high level cognition and abstractions. The learning environment also demands reading and writing extended texts – skills mastered over time and with dedicated practice.

To thus operate successfully in an academic environment requires a very different type of English to that used on the playground or when sending text messages.

If a learner has not developed CALP in the medium of instruction, s/he will be lost when confronted with new content and unfamiliar concepts. This may lead to confusion, withdrawal and even demotivation.

### **3. Research design and methodology**

In order to establish the linguistic profile of the sample group, we approached the study from a positivist stance collecting primarily quantitative data but drawing too in the larger study, on qualitative statements made by the pilot group.

We approached several schools in the greater Tshwane metropole of suburban Gauteng, South Africa with the request to conduct a questionnaire survey (See Addendum A) among their Grade 8 and 9 learners. We were eventually able to draw a convenience sample of three large, secondary schools willing to participate. Selection criteria included being public schools from a particular district that used English as a medium of instruction in the General Education and Training band. The three schools are situated

in middle-class suburban areas where learners have easy access to shops and public transport. By national standards, these schools are categorised as quintile 5 schools – by implication a functional, well-resourced school that is governed responsibly by fee-paying parents in collaboration with a well-qualified teaching complement. The schools' websites indicate that they are considered reputable within the respective communities and provide learners with an environment conducive to learning.

After contracting the participating schools, the research process unfolded in definite stages. With the assistance of an institutional statistician assigned to the primary researcher, we formulated questions to establish several characteristics of the target group and then piloted it at a similar non-participating site. Based on the feedback received, we refined the phrasing of certain questions and reduced the number of questions to 12 closed-ended questions (See Addendum A). This ensured that respondents could complete the survey comfortably in a lesson period of approximately 40 minutes. We also excluded the open-ended questions in the final survey - in order to simplify the analysis.

Before data collection commenced, ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board and the Department of Basic Education. Permission was also sought and obtained from principals and their relevant school governing body, caregivers and learners themselves. The primary researcher was unfortunately not granted permission to conduct the survey herself as the schools felt that using their own staff, known to the learners and caregivers would raise fewer ethical queries and logistical problems. Since the teachers were merely responsible for handing out and collecting the questionnaires, and had no vested interest in the outcome, no undue power relationship was envisaged.

The process of conducting the survey was discussed in detail with the heads of the English departments (HoDs) at the participating schools. On average, class size at these schools is 40 learners so we provided this number of printed questionnaires per class to the HoDs in sealed envelopes for easy distribution to the teachers. The HoDs passed the envelopes on to the teachers and explained the anticipated process to them. They administered the survey when class schedules afforded an opportunity. Once schools had indicated that teachers had finished administering the survey, we collected them. The unfortunate result of not being permitted to speak to the teachers directly nor being able to administer the questionnaire ourselves was that 200+ questionnaires were spoilt as many learners had misunderstood the purpose of the column labelled *For official use only*, rendering such questionnaires impossible to code. Upon completion of the data collection phase, 642 unspoilt questionnaires, completed by Grade 8 and 9 respondents, were coded, captured and cross-tabulated.

#### **4. Presentation and discussion of findings: learners' linguistic profile**

Teachers can no longer assume that where the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is English, all learners are proficient enough in it to cope comfortably with any

learning task prescribed by the national curriculum. It is thus necessary to establish more accurately who the target audience is and then possibly to adapt the content and teaching style in order to accommodate learners who are not fully proficient in the language of instruction. A close analysis of the questionnaire data enabled us to construct a profile of the typical English Home Language learner, with whom a teacher in an urban GET classroom would most likely engage on a daily basis.

Biographical information indicated that the 642<sup>2</sup> Grades 8 and 9 learners who participated in our study were between the ages of 12 and 16, with being almost 10% of the target group (9.8%) being older than the average age expected in the General Education and Training (GET) phase. A possible explanation for this phenomenon might be learners repeating a year of schooling possibly related to inadequate cognitive academic language proficiency. This, in turn, might be linked to the fact that it is within the legal rights of the caregivers to determine to which schools they send their children. According to the South African Schools Act (SASA), schools are not allowed to turn learners away regardless of their proficiency in the LOLT if the caregivers are satisfied with the learners receiving education in that language (Joubert & Prinsloo, 2001, p. 234).

Respondents also indicated why they had chosen to attend their specific school. Convenience in terms of the school's proximity to home (36%) and perceived high academic standards (29%) were the most compelling reasons. Only 3.4% of the respondents perceived access to a school where English is the LoLT as a significant factor.

#### 4.1 Multilingual respondents

The language that children learn to speak first is generally considered their home language and is usually also the language that they are most proficient in by the time they start school. We thus anticipated correctly that most respondents would be native speakers of languages other than English while apparently being proficient enough in English to be taught in it. Table 1, indicates that 181 learners (28% of the total respondents) considered English as their mother tongue. This implies that three quarters of the learners (72%) fall outside the linguistic profile expected of learners in General Education and Training (GET) English Home Language (EHL) classrooms. This group would represent varying proficiency levels and are probably not comfortably coping with the demands of English being offered and assess as a home language although 80% of these respondents consider themselves to be confident users of it. If data for all speakers of other languages are pooled, then only 35% of these respondents are more confident when using English than their home language. The confidence scores per language group are well below 50% suggesting a strong lack of confidence in their English abilities. In total, less than half the respondents - mother tongue speakers of English included - claim to be confident users of English.

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2 It is unclear why respondents failed to answer certain items resulting in missing variables and thus not tallying to the total number of respondents. The results have been discussed accordingly.



**Table 1: Home language and confidence in English**

| Languages spoken by respondents | Language learnt first | Most confident in English | Most confident in another language | Percentage of respondents most confident in English |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| English                         | 181                   | 145                       | 36                                 | 80%   |
| Venda                           | 14                    | 7                         | 7                                  | 50%   |
| Other                           | 32                    | 15                        | 17                                 | 47%   |
| Afrikaans                       | 37                    | 17                        | 20                                 | 46%   |
| Tswana                          | 81                    | 30                        | 51                                 | 37%   |
| Zulu                            | 58                    | 21                        | 37                                 | 36%   |
| South Sotho                     | 64                    | 22                        | 42                                 | 34%   |
| Northern Sotho                  | 51                    | 17                        | 34                                 | 33%   |
| Xhosa                           | 33                    | 9                         | 24                                 | 27%   |
| Swati                           | 10                    | 2                         | 8                                  | 20%   |
| Ndebele                         | 18                    | 3                         | 15                                 | 17%   |
| Tsonga                          | 12                    | 1                         | 11                                 | 8%  |
| <b>Total</b>                    | <b>591</b>            | <b>289</b>                | <b>303</b>                         | <b>49%</b>  |

According to the 2011 national census, English and Zulu are the two most common home languages spoken in the area in which the research sites fall. (Statistics South Africa, 2012:37). However, at the three research sites, the two most widely spoken languages were English and Setswana running counter to regional data. However, 515 out of 642 learners (80% of respondents) indicated that they use at least three languages comfortably although it is not known whether learners read or write in all the languages in which they claim to communicate. 508 of the 642 respondents (79%) perceived being multilingual as an asset as it provides social agency and mobility (Granville et al., 1997:10) i.e. enabling them to communicate with members of other linguistic communities in a variety of contexts. 173 respondents (27%) indicated that being multilingual made them feel good about themselves.

Since English Home Language is a compulsory subject for learners in Grade 8 and 9, teachers cannot expect all learners to be equally capable and motivated to perform well in this subject. Yet many teachers judge a learner’s overall academic ability as below par based on limited proficiency in the LOLT. Instead of drawing on the rich linguistic repertoire that learners bring to class, many schools tend to negate their learners’ capabilities in several languages. This attitude is manifested in e.g. application forms, which generally ask caregivers to indicate their child’s ‘home language’, - a misnomer



when multiple languages are used constantly and fluently on a daily basis in their community (Mncwango, 2009:51).

It is specifically in the instructional context that multilingualism could be exploited to create language awareness, and valorise languages besides English while using strategies like translanguaging to enhance the learning experience. Learners who are fluent in several languages have cognitive structures in place that encourage metalinguistic awareness in others (Gabryś-Barkera & Otwinowska, 2012:382) and facilitate gaining proficiency in the target language, in the case of this study, English. Teachers ought to view multilingualism as a strength and draw on the resources present in class in order to promote the development of English proficiency.

#### 4.2 Age and source of English acquisition

Early exposure to English is a fair predictor of later academic progress, particularly when used as the LOLT. Knowing the age at which learners were first introduced to English as well as the duration and type of exposure during the first years of language development could provide insight when attempting to plan for the unique characteristics of particular learners. These factors might determine the degree of scaffolding and support needed when expounding curriculum content.

Question 7 and 9 were cross-tabulated in order to establish the age at which respondents believed they had acquired or learnt English, and how confident they felt in the language (See Table 1). 218 respondents (34% of 642 respondents) indicated having learnt English before the age of 7. By implication they knew English best and were confident users by the time they started school.

Learners who perceived themselves as being on First Additional Language (FAL) level indicated years three to six as the ages at which they had acquired the language. The learners who perceived themselves as being on Second Additional Language (SAL) level generally indicated ages five to seven. Those respondents who had learnt English after the age of seven would thus be behind their peers, even in suburban areas where English is more prevalent. Furthermore, only 51% of the respondents started their secondary school career being confident in English.

**Table 2: Age at which learners acquired English**

| Age learnt                | 1         | 2         | 3         | 4         | 5         | 6         | 7         | 8         | 9         | 10        | 11       | 12       | 13       | Total      |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|------------|
| Knows English best        | 34        | 46        | 42        | 24        | 37        | 22        | 13        | 4         | 0         | 2         | 0        | 1        | 0        | 225        |
| Knows English second best | 4         | 10        | 17        | 24        | 38        | 31        | 17        | 11        | 7         | 7         | 2        | 5        | 2        | 175        |
| Knows English third best  | 2         | 0         | 4         | 5         | 11        | 6         | 6         | 0         | 3         | 1         | 2        | 0        | 1        | 41         |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>40</b> | <b>56</b> | <b>63</b> | <b>53</b> | <b>86</b> | <b>59</b> | <b>36</b> | <b>15</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>6</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>441</b> |

The immediate familial circle stands out as the primary domain where learners acquired English. More than half the respondents (52%) believed that they had learnt to speak it from their primary caregivers. This was followed by respondents (27%) who claimed having learnt English at pre-school. In suburban areas and for middle class families this is a likely source of linguistic development in a language other than the one spoken most at home. From the age of 6 or 7, learners spend most of their day in formal schooling where learning English would happen in a more structured and direct manner. Table 3 suggests that only 10% of the respondents believed that they had learnt English like this. The role of the community and friends (7%) was deemed the least likely source.

**Table 3: Source from whence learners acquired English**

| Where learners acquired English | n = responses | % of total responses |
|---------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| Caregivers                      | 361           | 52%                  |
| Pre-school                      | 170           | 27%                  |
| Primary school                  | 66            | 10%                  |
| Friends                         | 13            | 2%                   |
| Community                       | 35            | 5%                   |

Question 11 asked how the respondents perceived the English proficiency of their caregivers. Responses were cross-tabulated and compared to responses from learners who indicated that they know English best and learners who indicated that they know English second best. Learners who indicated that they know English best perceived their caregivers as being proficient speakers of English. Respondents also generally perceived themselves as being more confident speakers of English if they perceived their caregiver(s) as being competent speakers of English – once again emphasising

the influence of the primary caregiver(s) in the linguistic development of a child. Such learners would also have better assistance with homework if the primary caregivers are sufficiently proficient speakers of English (Lindholm-Leary, 2001:145; Yazıcıca et al., 2010:259). Such support may result in an improvement in all subjects and not just EHL. Table 4 also confirms the prominent role of the caregiver(s).

**Table 4: Perception of caregivers' English proficiency**

| Perceived level of proficiency in English | Caregivers know English well | Percentage of total respondents |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Knows English best                        | 217                          | 33.8%                           |
| Knows English second best                 | 131                          | 20.4%                           |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>348</b>                   | <b>54.2%</b>                    |

Having a solid foundation in their home language supports learners in excelling at another language (Baker & Hornberger, 2001:263; Barry, 2002:107). Caregivers ought to encourage the maintenance and further development of a home language as well as provide the cultural transfer inherent in speaking a particular code.

### 4.3 Frequency with which English is used at home and in the community

Questions 3.1 through to 3.14 related to various domains where respondents used English in the past and currently use English. Responses to Questions 3 and 7 were cross-tabulated and categorised in order to examine how learners use English in the home, social and school environment. We draw on the same data summarised in Table 5 when reporting on using English in the school context.

**Table 5: Domains in which English is used**

| Environment where English is used | Most confident in English | Percentage of total responses | Most confident in a different language | Percentage of total responses | Did not select this option | Percentage of total responses |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Home environment                  | 258                       | 40%                           | 206                                    | 32%                           | 179                        | 28%                           |
| Social environment                | 256                       | 40%                           | 270                                    | 50%                           | 117                        | 18%                           |
| School environment                | 283                       | 44%                           | 277                                    | 43%                           | 83                         | 13%                           |

The languages which respondents spoke to their immediate family (grandparents, mother, father, siblings) were cross-tabulated with confidence data in order to establish how many learners use English in the home environment. Of the 642 respondents, 28% indicated that they did not use English in the home environment. Although just over 70% of the respondents indicated that they use English in the home environment, 90% indicated that they use English in the social environment. The 117 respondents (18% of 642 respondents) who did not use English in the social environment, suggests limited exposure to English interaction in authentic communicative situations outside the home and school environment.

#### 4.4 English and the learning environment

Although respondents were overall confident speakers of English, a marked number struggled with reading and writing skills in the LOLT. This is a key area which determines academic success and is a prime example of CALP discussed in Section 2. Question 6 sought to establish the respondents' perception of their receptive and expressive abilities in English. Although 87% of the respondents indicated that they use English exclusively in the school environment, Table 6 indicates that only 68% of them perceive themselves as being able to speak English well. The other communicative skills were rated well below this percentage with a disconcertingly poor 32% of respondents feeling competent in reading English.

**Table 6: Respondents' perceptions of their receptive and expressive English skills**

| Perceived capability         | Total responses to this question | Percentage of total respondents |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Listening to English:</b> |                                  |                                 |
| Well                         | 383                              | 60%                             |
| Okay                         | 212                              | 33%                             |
| Poor                         | 21                               | 3%                              |
| <b>Reading English:</b>      |                                  |                                 |
| Well                         | 202                              | 32%                             |
| Okay                         | 203                              | 32%                             |
| Poor                         | 10                               | 2%                              |
| <b>Speaking English:</b>     |                                  |                                 |
| Well                         | 438                              | 68%                             |
| Okay                         | 165                              | 26%                             |
| Poor                         | 14                               | 2%                              |
| <b>Writing English:</b>      |                                  |                                 |
| Well                         | 373                              | 58%                             |
| Okay                         | 234                              | 36%                             |
| Poor                         | 11                               | 2%                              |

In the classroom, respondents (39%) indicated that they struggled with English and wished that they understood the work better possibly implying that they felt that they were not performing to the best of their ability. Almost a quarter of the respondents (22%) experienced understanding the teacher as problematic. The question did not allow for elaboration on what would make comprehension easier e.g. accent, pace, or teaching style. Respondents also found the written texts difficult to follow (21%) although working with peers while using English (8%) was the least problematic.

**Table 6: Respondents' struggle in the English class**

| In the English class I wish I understood ... more. | Responses | Percentage of total respondents |
|--|-----------|---------------------------------|
| the work   | 252       | 39%                             |
| the teacher  | 140       | 22%                             |
| the books  | 134       | 21%                             |
| my friends   | 53        | 8%                              |

Although not a significant number, some respondents expressed a preference for using an alternative to English as the language of tuition. The reasons given included understanding them better and interacting with speakers of the languages in their personal space.

**Table 7: Languages learners know best versus a preferred language of tuition**

| Language in which respondent feels most confident | Prefers to be taught in isiZulu | Prefers to be taught in Sesotho |
|---|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| English   | 23                              | 31                              |
| Sesotho   | 12                              | 17                              |
| Afrikaans   | 3                               | 5                               |
| isiZulu   | 30                              | 4                               |

The linguistic profile we draw from these results is – with few exceptions – that of young learners compelled to attend school until the age of 15 or upon completion of Grade 9. They also have no choice about the level at which they are enrolled for English. These learners, despite having had several years of exposure to English and input from caregivers who are perceived to speak English well, do not have full competency in the LOLT. They claim to use English at home and socially with ease but struggle in the academic sphere, especially with a key skill – reading. They have linguistic prowess as they use multiple languages daily but the varying degrees of English proficiency,

diverse linguistic backgrounds, pedagogical challenges and an unrealistic curriculum militate against this being turned to their advantage. This profile highlights the need for a further reassessment of the English Home Language curriculum which can accommodate linguistic diversities in the classroom or the introduction of alternative streams.

## **5. Significance and implications**

Many caregivers do not fully understand the complexities of a learning environment and the integral role that language plays. They choose to send their children to a particular school for a variety of reasons without questioning – possibly even wilfully ignoring - a key variable: the medium of instruction. Teachers too, cannot assume that when a learner has been enrolled in a school where the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is English, he or she is proficient enough in the language to cope with any learning task prescribed by the national curriculum. A close analysis of the questionnaire data enabled us to construct a profile of the typical English Home Language learner, with whom a teacher in an urban GET classroom would most likely engage on a daily basis. This foregrounded the mismatch that currently exists between the expectations set by curricular documents and the reality of the classroom experience.

South Africa's official languages are generally geographically specific, but due to urbanisation, economic migration, globalisation and political reasons, the linguistic profile of a learner cohort might differ even within a specific community. This nested study suggests that establishing the linguistic profile of learners may assist teachers to reconcile the demands of official policy documents with their classroom reality by being able to adjust and scaffold the content being taught and to implement strategies to accommodate all learners in the same classroom, regardless of their English proficiency or linguistic background. The significance of this study is thus the cameo description of Senior Phase learners taking English as a home language in three urban schools which may mirror similar contexts.

Implications for policy include aligning the curriculum with the realities of the learner demographics of schools that use English as a LoLT. This may have concomitant knock-on effects to align the EHL curriculum with other home language curricula e.g. Afrikaans or Zulu. Although politically contentious, a policy may need to be considered which enables learners to matriculate using different measures to the current language levels and subject groupings.

In terms of adjusting practice, English Home Language teachers need to be enabled to capitalise on the linguistic strengths and weaknesses of their learners as well as present subject content in such a way that it accommodates learners from all backgrounds and levels of English proficiency. More decisively, support mechanisms should be introduced early in a learner's scholastic pathway to ensure full proficiency as soon as possible in the medium of instruction.

An unforeseen limitation was related to the primary researcher not being permitted by schools to conduct the survey herself and as a consequence having to rely on teachers to administer the questionnaires. This resulted in many being discarded due to invalid or incomplete data.

## 6. Conclusion

In a country with 11 official languages, where learners hail from diverse religious, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, presenting any curriculum despite clear guidelines from the Department of Basic Education, is never a straightforward matter.

Developing full communicative competency in English, will serve South African learners well upon leaving school. Despite the many challenges of classroom diversity, knowing who is seated in the EHL class will assist teachers in supporting multilingual learners; most who hope to eventually succeed in sitting for the National Senior Certificate exit exam set in English at home language level.

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## Addendum A: Questionnaire

I am enrolled for a Masters degree in education at the University of Pretoria. I am doing research on grade 8 and 9 learners who take English as a Home Language but who speak other languages too. You will help a great deal if you complete this questionnaire. Remember not to write your name anywhere. If you are unsure about anything you can ask your teacher .

### 1. How old are you?

|               |   |       |   |    |   |             |   |  |          |
|---------------|---|-------|---|----|---|-------------|---|--|----------|
| 12 or younger | 1 | 13-14 | 2 | 15 | 3 | 16 or older | 4 |  | Q1 _____ |
|---------------|---|-------|---|----|---|-------------|---|--|----------|

### 2. I am in this school because (mark only one):

|  |   |  |          |
|--|---|--|----------|
| The school is close to where we live           | 1 |  | Q2 _____ |
| The school is close to where my parents work   | 2 |  |          |
| The school fees are reasonable                 | 3 |  |          |
| There is easy transport to the school          | 4 |  |          |
| There are no other schools for me to go to     | 5 |  |          |
| The school has a good academic standard        | 6 |  |          |
| The school has many sports/cultural activities | 7 |  |          |
| I can learn in English                         | 8 |  |          |
| The teachers are good                          | 9 |  |          |



| 4. In which language/s do you wish the teachers taught you? |   |          |
|---|---|----------|
| Setswana  | 1 | Q4.1 ___ |
| seSepedi  | 2 | Q4.2 ___ |
| seSotho   | 3 | Q4.3 ___ |
| isiXhosa  | 4 | Q4.4 ___ |
| isiNdebele  | 5 | Q4.5 ___ |
| Xitsonga  | 6 | Q4.6 ___ |
| Tshivenda   | 7 | Q4.7 ___ |
| Siswati   | 8 | Q4.8 ___ |
| isiZulu   | 9 | Q4.9 ___ |

| 4.1 Why would you prefer those languages?               |   |            |
|---|---|------------|
| My parents know those languages                         | 1 | Q4.1.1 ___ |
| My grandparents know those languages                    | 2 | Q4.1.2 ___ |
| My community speaks those languages                     | 3 | Q4.1.3 ___ |
| My friends speak those languages                        | 4 | Q4.1.4 ___ |
| I want to learn those languages                         | 5 | Q4.1.5 ___ |
| I think those are important languages to know           | 6 | Q4.1.6 ___ |
| Because they are easier to understand                   | 7 | Q4.1.7 ___ |
| I want to speak those languages to my children some day | 8 | Q4.1.8 ___ |

| 5. In the English class I wish I understood ___ more |   |          |
|--|---|----------|
| the teacher  | 1 | Q5.1 ___ |
| the books  | 2 | Q5.2 ___ |
| the work   | 3 | Q5.3 ___ |
| my friends   | 4 | Q5.4 ___ |

| 6. Indicate how good you are at English: |                       |                       |          |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------|
|  | 1 Well                | 3 Poor                |          |
| Reading                                  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Q6.1 ___ |
| Writing                                  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Q6.2 ___ |
| Speaking                                 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Q6.3 ___ |
| Listening                                | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Q6.4 ___ |
| Understanding                            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Q6.5 ___ |

| 7. Mark the 3 languages that you know best (mark only 3) |                |                 |                |          |
|--|----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------|
|  | First language | Second language | Third language |          |
| Setswana   | 1              | 1               | 1              | Q7.1 ___ |
| seSepedi   | 2              | 2               | 2              | Q7.2 ___ |
| seSotho  | 3              | 3               | 3              | Q7.3 ___ |
| isiXhosa   | 4              | 4               | 4              |          |
| isiNdebele   | 6              | 6               | 6              |          |
| Xitsonga   | 7              | 7               | 7              |          |
| Tshivenda  | 8              | 8               | 8              |          |
| Siswati  | 9              | 9               | 9              |          |
| isiZulu  | 10             | 10              | 10             |          |
| English  | 11             | 11              | 11             |          |
| Afrikaans  | 12             | 12              | 12             |          |
| Other  | 13             | 13              | 13             |          |

**8. Where did you learn the language/s?**

|                              | First | Second | Third |      |      |      |
|------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|------|------|------|
| From Preschool               | 1     | 1      | 1     | Q8F1 | Q8S1 | Q8T1 |
| From Primary school          | 2     | 2      | 2     | Q8F2 | Q8S2 | Q8T2 |
| From my parents/grandparents | 3     | 3      | 3     | Q8F3 | Q8S3 | Q8T3 |
| From my friends              | 4     | 4      | 4     | Q8F4 | Q8S4 | Q8T4 |
| From my community            | 5     | 5      | 5     | Q8F5 | Q8S5 | Q8T5 |

**9. How old were you when you learnt the language?**

|              | First | Second | Third |                      |
|--------------|-------|--------|-------|----------------------|
| Age in years |       |        |       | Q9.1<br>Q9.2<br>Q9.3 |

**10. How well do you know the language?**

|               | First  |        |        | Second |        |        | Third  |        |        |       |       |       |
|---------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
|               | 1 Well | 2 Okay | 3 Poor | 1 Well | 2 Okay | 3 Poor | 1 Well | 2 Okay | 3 Poor |       |       |       |
| Reading       | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | Q10F1 | Q10S1 | Q10T1 |
| Writing       | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | Q10F2 | Q10S2 | Q10T2 |
| Listening     | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | Q10F3 | Q10S3 | Q10T3 |
| Speaking      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | Q10F4 | Q10S4 | Q10T4 |
| Understanding | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | Q10F5 | Q10S5 | Q10T5 |

**11. My parents speak English:**

|     | 1 Well | 2 Okay | 3 Poor |       |
|-----|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Mom | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | Q11.1 |
| Dad | ☺      | ☺      | ☹      | Q11.2 |

**12. Being able to speak many languages:**

|                                 |   |       |
|---------------------------------|---|-------|
| Helps me understand more people | 1 | Q12.1 |
| Makes school harder             | 2 | Q12.2 |
| Is really difficult             | 3 | Q12.3 |
| Is really easy                  | 4 | Q12.4 |
| Makes me feel good about myself | 5 | Q12.5 |
| Often confuses me               | 6 | Q12.6 |

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