

Primary school teachers' opinions of their ESL learners' language abilities

A B S T R A C T The language of learning and teaching in schools remains a problem in Africa, as well as in South Africa. In a research project primary school teachers at schools in four provinces in South Africa were asked to give their opinions about their learners' language abilities in English as their second language which is used as the medium of instruction at the schools. The research project helped to shed light on some of the problems which ESL learners in primary schools, as well their teachers have to grapple with. The research results could be used to give direction as to which issues need to be investigated more, should a national research project be undertaken. The knowledge and expertise from people in various related fields of study such as Linguistics and Applied Linguistics could for instance be used when second language problems and especially problems with ESL are addressed in primary schools. Thus primary school teachers could be informed how to support learners to gain competent academic language proficiency in English as their language of instruction.

Keywords: English second language (ESL), listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation

1. Introduction

Researchers with professional standing in the field of language education have indicated over the past two decades that social and survival skills in English are not sufficient to enable English second language learners to meet required standards in the content areas. In the USA it is estimated that it takes four to eight years to become proficient enough in English as a second language to achieve the ability to read or to communicate abstract ideas. In Canada it is reported that it takes four to seven years to develop the ability in a second language to make a long-term success at school (Feinberg, 2002:10-11). Basic concepts and learning skills should be mastered in a person's home language before a second language can be introduced and then it should still not be the language of instruction. The European Union, for instance, has

adopted a policy that stresses the importance of home language instruction for the children of their employees, regardless of the country in which the family lives. English is taught as a second language to EU employees' children when they have to work in foreign countries. These children learn through the medium of English at a late stage in their school years, and only after they have developed proficiency in English for at least six years.

It is presumed that pre-schoolers can easily pick up a second language and without systematic teaching. However, to become proficient in a language is a complex process that takes many years. It also has to be borne in mind that children differ according to the ways in which they acquire a second language. The rate at which a language is acquired, is influenced by factors within the child, as well as the child's learning environment. A child's personality, interest, aptitude for languages and motivation all interact in acquiring a second language (Espinosa, 2008:75).

A recent report on the language of learning and teaching in all African countries states that in classrooms where children are not taught in their mother tongue, as a rule, only the teacher speaks. The children keep quiet because they do not understand what the teacher is saying. One of the co-authors of this report, Alidou, has the following to say: 'Because children do not understand the language of teaching, the teachers are forced to use traditional teaching methods such as the repetition of rhymes, memorisation and the use of codes. In such a context efficient teaching cannot take place' (Kgosana 2006:19). According to Heugh, the languages used as the language of instruction in Africa date back to the colonial era. Instruction in the mother tongue is thus still denied. Although Africa has shed colonialism, a silent revolution is necessary to save the children of Africa from the burden of colonial languages (Kgosana 2006:19).). Thus Alidou, Boly, Brock-Utne, Diallo, Heugh and Wolff (2006:10) state, after their stocktaking research on the language factor to optimise learning and education in Africa, that school children will be better supported by 'the use of mother tongue or the use of an African language familiar to the children upon school entry as the natural medium of instruction in all African schools and institutions of higher education. This approach reflects better the socio-economic and cultural realities of multilingual Africa.'

The last South African census indicated that English is the home language of only seven per cent of the South African population. According to Fleisch (2008:98) less than one South African child speaks English as their first language. English, however, is widely used as the language of commerce and communication in South Africa. The education debate about learning through the medium of one's own home language or of a second language (usually English) is an ongoing debate in South Africa. The view on the importance of well-developed home language skills was enhanced in a research project conducted into South African teachers' opinion of the choice of English as the language of learning and teaching. The majority of teachers indicated that they believe that learners' learning is enhanced if they are taught through the medium of their home language (De Wet 2002:23). This is the ideal situation, but many parents and teachers have a different opinion.

Some learners in South Africa start their formal schooling in their home language. After three years during which English is taught to them as a second language, English becomes the language of learning. Many children, however, start their formal school education through the

medium of English as their second language. They often do not understand English at all. This means that a large percentage of South African learners at school learn through the medium of English as their second language. Many teachers teach through the medium of English, which is also the teachers' second language. The result is that the language of learning and teaching can become a problem – often causing a barrier to learning.

A major consequence of this is that many learners in South African schools are not taught through the medium of their first language and their English language abilities are often not sufficiently well developed to make a success of their academic years at school or even tertiary level. In a study conducted by the Unit for the Development of Language Abilities at the University of Pretoria, it was found that 2 000 out of 6 000 first-year students who were the grade 12 learners of the previous year(s), had a language ability that was on the level of a grade 7 learner or even lower. Some students also had poorly developed reading and writing skills (Rademeyer 2001:1).

Fleisch (2008:98) conducted research on the relationships between learners' poor achievement and languages practices in schools. Based on key empirical evidence which he obtained from existing national studies, he is of the opinion that: '[w]hile these studies provide strong evidence that shows the relationship between failure to master the basics of literacy and numeracy and the disjunction between the language of instruction and the language of the home, they often provide few real insights into the generative mechanisms, the underlying reasons or causes that link children's experience with language at school and their failure to become proficient in reading and mathematics.'

One can understand why Naledi Pandor, the present minister of Education, stated that her department had found that English as a language of learning was proving to be a barrier for many learners in the country. The Department of Education thus needs to ensure that all learners are competent in their language of learning to perform academically well. For many learners, English as the medium of instruction remains a second or even third language, and this is a real concern (*Sunday Times* 2005:13).

2. The research project

The aim of this research project was to gain insight into the opinions of teachers in primary schools about the language abilities of the English second language (ESL) learners in their classrooms. The researcher thus wished to get to terms with the type of mistakes and problems ESL primary school learners experience when they study through the medium of a language other than their home language. This research should be considered as an attempt to obtain, in Fleisch' (2008:98) view of the matter, some insight into the underlying reasons or causes that links children's performance at school with their weak achievement. The researcher also wished to gain knowledge concerning the level at which problems relating to ESL teaching occur and determine whether problems relating to the language of teaching and learning occur within the ambit of all the language skills.

Open-ended questions about ESL learners' abilities in listening, speaking, reading, writing and pronunciation were used. A group of teachers from primary schools in both urban and remote rural areas were approached to give their opinions about the main problems in listening,

speaking, reading, writing and pronunciation facing ESL learners in their classrooms. Because of time constraints, the researchers had to make use of a small group of reliable fieldworkers – hence the use of convenient sampling in this study. Four provinces were selected and a total of 84 questionnaires that were completed anonymously were returned. The names of schools and towns or cities were not identified, but the schools were identified as urban, peri-urban and rural schools.

Once the questionnaires had been returned, the answers of the teachers were categorised. Based on these responses, various categories for five language areas, namely listening, speaking, reading, writing and pronunciation, were established. A frequency procedure was used and the statistics for the various categories obtained. The nature of the research was exploratory and the results were intended to guide the researcher to formulate questions for a structured questionnaire on ESL learners’ language abilities in a survey in which more teachers from more schools in all the provinces could be involved. It could also serve as a point of departure for improving language courses in teacher training.

The five tables reflecting the research results are presented under the following headings:

- Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ listening abilities
- Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ speaking abilities
- Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ reading abilities
- Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ writing abilities
- Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ pronunciation in English

3. Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ listening abilities

The following table indicates the reasons for and frequency of the reasons why primary school teachers who feel that the ESL learners in their classrooms do not have well-developed listening abilities.

Table 1: Learners’ listening abilities

	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative Per cent
Poor comprehension	23	27.38	23	27.38
Short attention span	17	20.24	40	47.62
Other	17	20.24	57	67.86
No comment	9	10.71	66	78.57
No problems/good	6	7.14	72	85.71
Poor foundation phase training	5	5.95	77	91.67
English ‘deafness’	4	4.76	81	96.43
No listening skills	3	3.57	84	100.00

A small number of teachers (6 out of a total of 84) indicated that the learners in their classes had no problems with listening. Another small percentage of the teachers mentioned problems such as poor training in listening skills in the foundation phase, ‘deafness’ to English and no

listening skills as the reasons why ESL learners in their classes do not have well-developed listening skills. The two major reasons for learners' bad listening skills, as indicated by the teachers, were poor comprehension and short attention span.

It is interesting to note that a third of the teachers in both Gauteng (7 out of a total of 27) and in the Free State (5 out of 17) cited short attention span as the reason why learners do not listen adequately in their classes. These learners are in schools in urban areas and the question arises whether young learners in urban areas are bombarded with oral information which results in their ignoring important discussions in the classroom. It is also possible that young learners do not understand what is being said and therefore choose to pay little attention. A few teachers provided reasons for learners' short attention span for instance that learners lose concentration if the teacher speaks non-stop or that it could be as a result of their diet, long hours in transport or their sleeping patterns at home.

Poor comprehension, however, is the main reason advanced by teachers as to why learners in primary school do not listen properly in the classroom. Without comprehension, no learning can take place and this is possibly the main reason for the numerous language problems experienced by young ESL learners in the classroom. Listening is regarded as the first language skill. It is a receptive skill and a prerequisite for other skills, including the development of expressive skills. ESL learners tend to become easily frustrated when they do not understand what is being said in English and this could lead to a poor interest in and low commitment to learn the second language.

Some of the reasons for ESL learners' poor comprehension skills in English as provided by their teachers are: Learners are 'deaf for English sounds'. emotionally deaf for other languages'. 'used to African dialect of English' and that learners 'do not know or hear unfamiliar words.'

4. Teachers' opinions about ESL learners' speaking abilities

In the next table, the various factors that could be the cause of ESL learners' poor speaking abilities are indicated.

Table 2: Learners' speaking abilities

	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative Per cent
Limited vocabulary	22	26.19	22	26.19
Shy, self-conscious	20	23.81	42	50.00
Poor pronunciation	12	14.29	54	64.29
Inability to express themselves in English	10	11.90	64	76.19
No comment	8	9.52	72	85.71
Poor sentence construction	4	4.76	76	90.48
Tenses	3	3.57	79	94.05
Need to be encouraged	3	3.57	82	97.62
Not fluent in English	1	1.19	83	98.81
Lazy	1	1.19	84	100.00

According to the teachers, the two primary speaking problems that ESL learners in primary schools experience, are a limited vocabulary and shyness and self-consciousness. Teachers mentioned that learners have a restricted vocabulary which makes it very difficult to express themselves. Vocabulary learning in both a first and a second language involves systematic processes, morphological rules and rules in languages about word construction that can be learnt as systems. The latter includes elements such as suffixes, prefixes and mutations (McDonough 2002:67). What is important is the fact that these processes have to be learnt and they have to be learnt systematically because ‘[v]ocabulary teaching and learning is central to the theory and practice of English language teaching’ (Carter, 2001:47).

The second factor touches on the vital issue of the affective side when learning a language, especially a second language. Self-esteem is associated with second language proficiency. One can thus assume that learners with a high self-esteem are less likely to feel threatened when communicating in a second language or in an unfamiliar situation (Littlewood 1985:64). Some of the teachers mentioned it specifically that learners often lack self-confidence to speak in English and that they are very shy.

Twelve of the 84 teachers indicated poor pronunciation as the reason for learners’ poor speaking abilities. Pronunciation will be discussed under table 5. Ten teachers indicated that the learners find it problematic to express themselves because ‘they translate from their other tongue to English’, ‘the sentence construction’ differs and they ‘do not use the tenses correctly’.

5. Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ reading in English

The group of primary school teachers who completed the questionnaire advanced the following reasons why the learners in their classrooms who use English as a second language have reading problems.

Table 3: Learners’ reading abilities

	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Per cent
No reading skills	19	22.62	19	22.62
No comment	11	13.10	30	35.71
No comprehension	11	13.10	41	48.81
Pronunciation problems	11	13.10	52	61.90
Sounds unfamiliar	7	8.33	59	70.24
Read words	7	8.3	66	78.57
Insufficient reading practice	5	5.95	71	84.52
Read well	4	4.76	75	89.29
Omit words	3	3.57	78	92.86
Self-conscious/need assistance	12	2.38	80	95.24
Eye span problems	1	1.19	81	96.43
Lazy	1	1.19	82	97.62
Recognition sight words	1	1.19	83	98.81
Sound out words	1	1.19	84	100.00

The main reason given by the teachers for ESL learners not having properly developed reading abilities is a lack of reading skills. However, it is clear from the literature that reading and reading skills are language abilities that are easily transferred from one language to another. Lessow-Hurley (1990:60-61), for instance, contends that reading ‘is an illustration of an area where there is significant transfer of behaviours, skills, knowledge and attitudes from one language to another. Other pre-reading skills include directionality, sequencing and the ability to distinguish among shapes and sounds. Those skills are not language bound: they transfer, as does the knowledge that written symbols correspond to sounds and can be decoded in a particular direction and order.’

It is understandable why a group of teachers indicated that learners lack comprehension when reading in English as their second language.

They indicated that the learners ‘do not read with understanding’, ‘have ‘problems with difficult words’, ‘do not recognise words’ and some learners ‘can read but they do not know the meaning’. Young learners learning to read in their home language already have an adequate number of schemata to use and are usually able to select an appropriate schema quickly when they hear a word. They therefore understand the word. When these young learners have to read, they need only develop decoding skills because their schemata are adequate. However, second language learners frequently do not understand a new word they have to read because of a lack of the necessary schema. They therefore not only have to try to find a link between the new word and their inadequate schemata of the second language, but also have to decode both the word and the text (Wessels & Van den Berg 1998:199-200).

Pronunciation is once again mentioned as the possible reason why ESL learners have reading problems. This issue is discussed in another section.

6. Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ writing abilities

According to 44 per cent of the teachers who completed the questionnaire used in this research project, the two main reasons for ESL learners’ poor writing abilities in their second language are phonetic spelling and the fact that they cannot express themselves.

Table 4: Learners’ writing abilities

	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Per cent
Phonetic spelling problems	37	44.05	37	44.05
No comment	19	22.62	56	66.67
Cannot express themselves	9	10.71	65	77.38
Sentence construction	7	8.33	72	85.71
Grammar specifics	4	4.76	76	90.48
Lack skills	3	3.57	79	94.05
Suitable resources	1	1.19	80	95.24
Lazy	1	1.19	81	96.43
Write slowly	1	1.19	82	97.62
Omit/mix letter order	1	1.19	83	98.81
Single words are fine	1	1.19	84	100.00

South Africa has 11 official languages of which English is one. The other 10 are indigenous languages and the spelling in them is far more phonetic than English. Although some of the languages have their own special features such as the clicking sounds in isiZulu and isiXhosa, the ‘k’ and ‘kh’ sounds in Sipeedi and Afrikaans in which an ‘f’ and ‘v’ sound the same, the languages are mostly phonetic – hence what one writes, is what ones hears. It is, however, clear that many ESL learners do not know the letter-sound relationship in English which makes spelling a difficult task to perform. Teachers indicated, for example, that learners confused the ‘u’ and ‘ar sound which results in writing ‘cut’ for ‘cart’, as well as the ‘t’ and ‘d’ sound at the end of words which explains why ‘sat’ is written in stead of ‘sad’. As individuals many learners used phonetic spelling.

Writing does not necessitate only spelling abilities – far more is required, especially when it comes to writing your own text and creative writing in a second language. Teachers stated that some learners struggle to express themselves, to find sentence construction, at times they are unable to formulate logical sequence when writing or they cannot create their own sentences. Writing in a second language requires three things: text, process and discourse. Cumming (1998:61) states the following in this regard: ‘The word writing refers not only to text in written script but also to the acts of thinking, composing, and encoding language into such text; these acts also necessarily entail discourse interactions within a socio-cultural context. Writing is text, is composing, and is social interaction.’

7. Teachers’ opinions of ESL learners’ pronunciation in English

The teachers mentioned pronunciation as a reason why some ESL learners could have speaking and reading problems. It would therefore seem that pronunciation is an issue that needs to be addressed. In the table below, the teachers indicated why they think ESL learners in their classrooms have problems with pronunciation in English.

Table 5: Learners’ pronunciation in English

	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Per cent
Ethnic related pronunciation	41	48.81	41	48.81
No comment	17	20.24	58	69.05
Not really a problem	6	7.14	64	76.19
Cannot differentiate / listen	4	4.76	68	80.95
Whisper	3	3.57	71	84.52
Copy others incorrectly when pronouncing	2	2.38	73	86.90
English pronunciation different/ difficult	2	2.38	75	89.29
Short/long sound problems	2	2.38	77	91.67
Drilling problems	1	1.19	78	92.86
Do not use dictionaries	1	1.19	79	94.05
Silent consonant problems	1	1.19	80	95.24

Same-sounding words	1	1.19	81	96.43
Self-conscious	1	1.19	82	97.62
Hear/lack speaking practice	1	1.19	83	98.81
Problems with vowel sounds	1	1.19	84	100.00

When one looks at the list of reasons supplied by the teachers, it would seem that there are some reasons that could be grouped together under a certain heading. Some reasons could be ascribed to English as a language, because teachers mentioned factors such as short/long sounds (for example 'ship' instead of 'sheep'), silent consonants (for example saying 'stut' for 'start', or 'palm' instead of pronouncing it as [pɑ:m]), same-sounding words and vowel sounds (not knowing the difference between the 'a' [ei] or [ɑ] sound and the 'e' [e] or [ə] sound) as reasons for this. Additional reasons such as not being able to differentiate when listening, copying others incorrectly and the fact that the English pronunciation is difficult or different could be ascribed to poor or underdeveloped auditory discrimination problems or even auditory memory.

Each language has its own sound system and uses a certain number of sounds known as phonemes. Phonemes play a crucial role in the understanding and pronunciation of a language. A phoneme is a sound that is conventionally used to distinguish meanings in a language (Cook 2001:47-48). If the sound in a word is incorrect, one can assume that the meaning will usually also be incorrect.

According to Littlewood (1985:88), when people speak a second language, the vocabulary errors they make affect communication more than grammatical errors. Pronunciation errors seem to have the least effect on communication, unless they are particularly serious.

Hewings (2004:13-14), however, contends that native speaker pronunciation is neither necessary nor desirable. The aim of speaking English as a second language is to achieve an easily understandable pronunciation in most situations with most people, with both native and non-native English speakers. Hewings therefore suggests that learners of English as a second language should aim to achieve an English pronunciation that is understandable in international communication, but to retain features of a non-English accent.

In South Africa, English is spoken with a variety of accents. In the research one teacher went so far to state that each learner 'pronouns' (sic) differently. This is widely accepted and usually does not pose a problem. However, it can be a problem when the pronunciation influences comprehension and writing, especially the spelling of words.

8. Discussion

The findings of this research project are in line with the findings of other research studies conducted in South Africa. One such example is the 2003 Western Cape Department of Education Grade Six Learner Assessment Study, which found that for many learners, English as a second language and as the language of instruction remains a barrier to academic success. The above study showed that English as a home language is a strong predictor of success. The language issue does explain why some learners did extremely well and others did poorly. The

study (Fleisch 2008:100) also revealed that 'while having English as one's home language does not guarantee academic success, it strongly improves one's chances. For those whose home language was different from that of the test, ie all isiXhosa first-language speakers, language is a major disadvantage as revealed by the shocking statistic that only 1,6 per cent of isiXhosa home-language speakers were found to be performing at official grade level'.

The findings of the research described in this article, albeit on a small scale, reiterate the fact that many learners in South African primary schools struggle to master the language skills in and pronunciation of English as their second language and language of instruction. Teachers mentioned various factors in all four language skills and in learners' pronunciation which give rise to learners' poor command and understanding of English as their second language. As far as pronunciation is concerned, Hewings (2005:14) states that an appropriate and reasonable goal would be to attain an English pronunciation which is understandable in international communication, even if the ESL speaker retains unobtrusive features of a non-English accent. It is thus not necessary to pronounce English perfectly but to work towards as Chimbganda (2005:29) propagates the nationalising and re-standardising of the regional varieties of English in Southern Africa or even Africa since the ultimate aim any language is to act as a tool of thought.

Poor comprehension of English as a second language appears to be a major factor and the cause of poor performance in three of the tables – ESL learners' listening, reading and writing abilities. Comprehension and vocabulary (mentioned as the main obstacle in ESL learners' speaking abilities) go hand in hand and the effects of comprehension and vocabulary are often reciprocal. According to Bouwer (2004:95), when reading in a second language, the reader's comprehension is often hampered by unfamiliar words. This would certainly also apply to listening, speaking and writing abilities.

It is clear from many of the teachers' answers and opinions that the emotional side of language teaching and consequent motivation to learn and master a second language is often lacking in primary schools. Motivation is part of any language teaching and learning because it involves what we feel comfortable with. McDonough (2002:96) states the following in this regard: 'Motivation may be seen as a goal-directed strength which gets us to decide to learn a language, to engage in learning activities, to tolerate the inevitable frustrations, and to persevere in the face of impatience and boredom.'

A factor that became apparent in this research is that phonological and linguistic demands vary in different languages. This means that content that would not be problematic when learners are learning their home language, might cause difficulties when they learn a second language. Think in this regard about the tones or syllables stressed in a word. English has specific and sometimes peculiar ways of stressing syllables, for instance, photo or photograph and photography or photographer. For a non-English speaker this may seem and sound strange. Teachers referred to this problem using phrases such as 'English deafness', 'sounds are unfamiliar' and 'ethnic-related pronunciation'. The problem could be exacerbated if a young learner already has a language problem in the home language and this is transferred when a second language has to be learned.

Littlewood (1985:90) cautions that people should not rush into second language research and demand definite prescriptions about how to make learning occur more efficiently. What can be found in this research, however, is a source of insights into and ideas about second

language learning which could add to present understanding and experience and thus help in the constant search for better ways of teaching. In some instances, these insights and ideas may lead to new orientations, approaches and methods.

9. Recommendations

This research project helped to shed some light on some of the problems that ESL learners in primary schools and their teachers have to deal with. The research, however, is of a limited scope and further national research needs to be undertaken. The research results could be used to give direction to what issues require further investigation should a national research project be undertaken. With the assistance of an experienced statistician, a questionnaire could be designed in which factor analysis could be done in depth.

The knowledge and expertise of people in various related fields of study are often denied when second language problems, especially problems with ESL, are addressed in primary schools. The role of Linguistics and especially Applied Linguistics, for instance, is seldom included when a second language is taught and learned. Applied Linguistics could, for example, help to answer and understand key questions such as the following (McDonough 2002:53):

- How do second languages develop?
- How does the process of development compare with first language development?
- Why do all children acquire a first language more or less perfectly and generally fail to repeat the experience with someone else's language?
- What are the necessary and sufficient personality factors for learning a new language?
- Does second language learning proceed in the same way for everybody or are there significant individual differences affecting either the process or the speed of acquisition?
- How is second language learning affected by or how does it affect educational practice?
- What are the roles of teachers in this process?

From the teachers' discussions it is evident that there is a need to address all the language skills, including pronunciation, when teaching English as a second language and as the medium of instruction in primary schools in South Africa. Hewings (2004:15) is of the opinion that the following are the 'five top' important features of pronunciation that should be taught:

- Consonants
- Consonant clusters
- Vowel length
- Word stress
- Tonic words

Learning vocabulary is an essential part of mastering a second language. Learning a new language requires more than a large number of lexical items that have to be mastered. The learner also has to know a great deal about each item referred to as a 'depth' of vocabulary knowledge. Different teaching approaches may be more appropriate at the various stages of learning a lexical item (Schmitt, 2008:292. 333-334). This means that teachers should be acquainted with various teaching approaches and methodologies. Depending on what they plan to teach, teachers should know when to implement intentional learning and when to use incidental learning. It is essential that different aspects of word knowledge should be taught and that it should be taught in many different contexts numerous times (Schmitt, 2008:353).

To be able to speak in a second language requires the development of communication skills. Parents could, if they can speak the second language, provide comprehensible input into their children's speaking in a second language. They could, for instance, help to develop their children's oral vocabulary, develop their comprehension skills and provide first language support where necessary (Anthony, 2008:473).

There are various and many successful methods and techniques that can be used to teach writing in the ESL classroom. Reid (2001:32) stresses the following:

- A careful needs analysis
- Co-operative and group work
- Integration of all the language skills in class activities
- The use of relevant and authentic materials and tasks

As far as reading is concerned, McDonough (2002:81) states that there is choice of two strategies that could be used to improve the reading abilities of poor readers in a second language:

- the readers could be taught reading skills in their home language so that they can become skilled readers
- the readers should be taught more of the second language so that their first language reading skills can be transferred to the second language

Hence teachers who teach a second language need to know about and be able to teach reading skills, be it in the learners' first or second language. More strategies to teach reading, as well as the other language skills, in ESL should be investigated. In South Africa, the teaching of reading occurs mainly in grades 1, 2 and 3, and often stops there.

Proper assessment practices that are vital for satisfactory outcomes-based education require teachers to reflect on their teaching. According to Lange (1990:248), second language education requires the integration of several areas of knowledge and practice which leads to reflective teaching. One of the characteristics of this teaching is competence in the second language which requires

- the ability to listen, read, speak and write in the language to be taught
- knowledge of language, language use and culture and the interrelationship between them
- knowledge of how second languages are learned and acquired

In South African schools, it remains the task of primary school teachers with little or no knowledge about the teaching and acquisition of a second language to teach English as a second language in ordinary mainstream classes. What is said about teachers in the USA probably also applies to teachers in South Africa (Willis, Garcia, Barrera & Harris 2003:187): 'Without professional support or training mainstream classroom teachers have to resort to "sink or swim" approaches when it comes to the teaching of English as a second language often leading to learners' frustration and academic failure. Despite the fact that these teachers are responsible for much of the literacy instruction for learners with diverse linguistic needs, most of them are unprepared and hold uninformed views about ESL learners' literacy learning.'

It is thus recommended that the knowledge and experience of experts from various fields of study should be drawn upon when second language problems and, in particular, problems with ESL, are addressed in primary schools. The fact that learners are able to speak and understand

a second language or that teachers are able to teach in a second language, does not necessarily mean that the teachers understand the reasons why learners grapple with ESL problems, and more importantly, what can be done to support learners in gaining competent academic language proficiency in English as their language of instruction.

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