Albert Weideman and Christo van Rensburg
Unit for Language Skills Development, University of Pretoria

Language proficiency: current strategies, future remedies

ABSTRACT

Language proficiency among young South Africans is low. This is true not only of mother tongue speakers of English and Afrikaans, but also, and especially, of non-mother tongue speakers of English, among whom language proficiency levels raise serious concern. Some examples are given to illustrate the importance of this problem, and the extent of the problem is outlined. In this paper, we focus on one critical factor related to these low proficiency levels. What is important, in addition, is that the conditions, strategies and current remedies are all less than likely to make a difference. In fact, one can safely predict that the situation is likely to worsen. The importance of remedying the present situation is therefore crucial, and we discuss a number of alternatives to do so successfully.

Keywords: language proficiency; English for academic purposes; language of education; reading skills

Low language proficiency levels: a chronic condition among young South Africans?

Since adopting the ELSA Plus test (English Language Skills Assessment for the tertiary environment) to assess the language proficiency levels of first year students at the University of Pretoria some three years ago, we have been struck by the size of the problem. This test, which was adapted for a higher education environment after having been successfully piloted and standardised for use in commerce and industry, measures proficiency levels in terms of school grades and beyond (6 to 14). The following graph indicates the percentage of students who have a language proficiency level lower than Grade 10 (considered here to be the minimum language proficiency level at which prospective students must be able to operate if they wish to study successfully) and those who have language proficiency levels higher than Grade 10. Of the more than 1000 students in the particular faculty of a residential university in Gauteng who wrote this test in 2002, more than a quarter have language proficiency levels below Grade 10 levels.

Results of language proficiency test 2002 for Faculty of Humanities

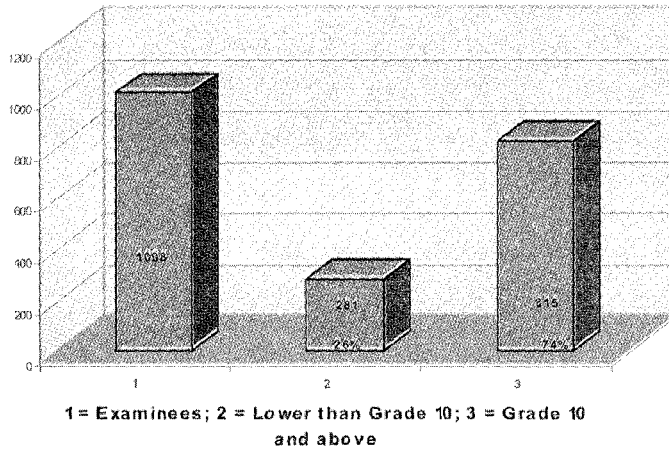1 = Examinees; 2 = Lower than Grade 10; 3 = Grade 10 and above

FIGURE 1

How widespread is the problem? We have come to realise that the low level of language proficiency that obtains among this group of students enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities is not limited to second language speakers. Indeed, problems with language proficiency affect not only non-mother tongue users of academic language, but also first language speakers of English and Afrikaans, as the following graphs for students from all faculties show. Figure 2 shows the results, across faculties, for first language speakers of Afrikaans who wrote the language proficiency test in 2001. The first column indicates those below a Grade 10 level (and thus in need of remediation); the second column indicates those with language proficiency levels at Grade 10 and above in 2001:

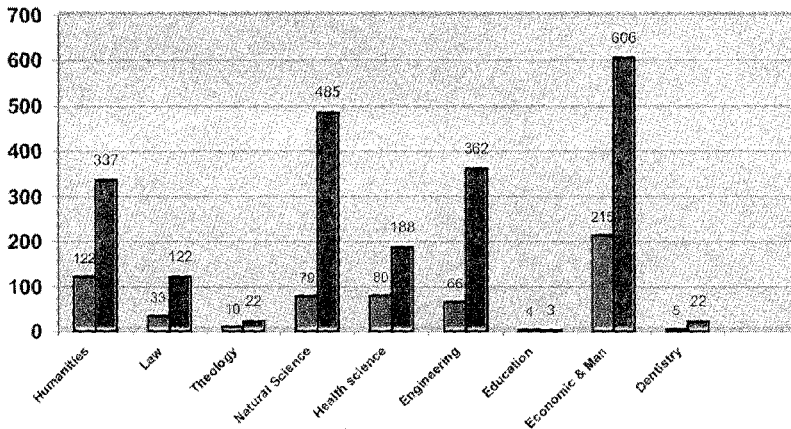**Below and above Grade 10/Faculty (Afrikaans Test) 2001**

FIGURE 2

Figure 3 shows the proportion of students (the top part of each of the bars below) who have language proficiency levels of Grade 10 and below in the 2002 test. The English/Afrikaans bar refers to students from bilingual English/Afrikaans homes.

Test results 2002: Proportion above and below Grade 10 per home language
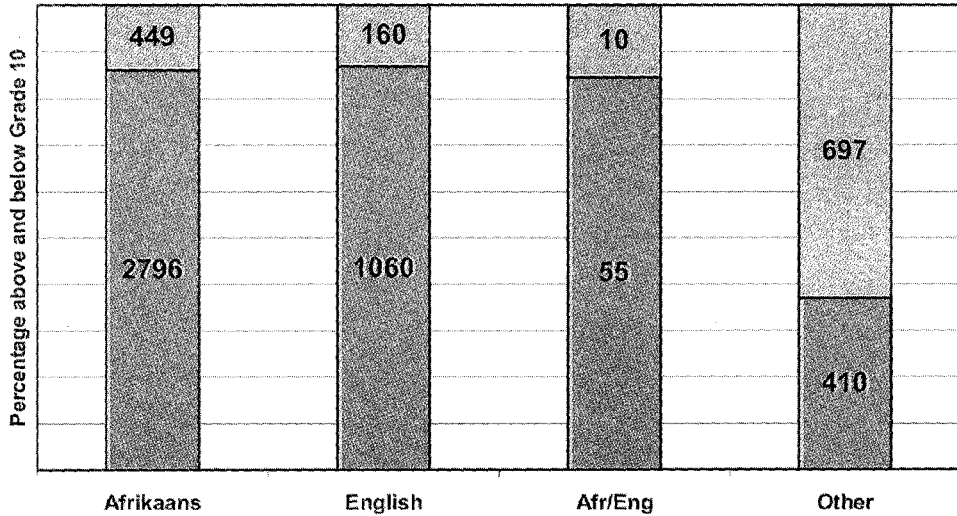

FIGURE 3

Low proficiency levels in English for academic purposes are, as one might expect, especially low among non-mother tongue English speakers, as the following set of results from the 2000 test for a group of just fewer than 500 students, who do not have English as a first language, indicates:

Proficiency in English:
476 non-mother tongue speakers enrolled at
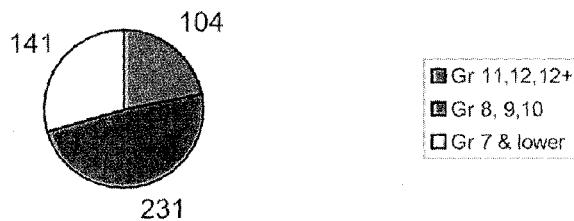**a northern university in 2000**

FIGURE 4

As Figure 4 illustrates, 372 students, or 78%, have proficiency levels of Grade 10 and lower.

Why language proficiency is so critical at university level is the high correlation between language proficiency and academic performance. Figure 5 below gives an indication, for a 2001 group of students at an institution of higher education, of how closely academic performance and language proficiency track each other. The student marks are reflected on the vertical axis, and student numbers on the horizontal:

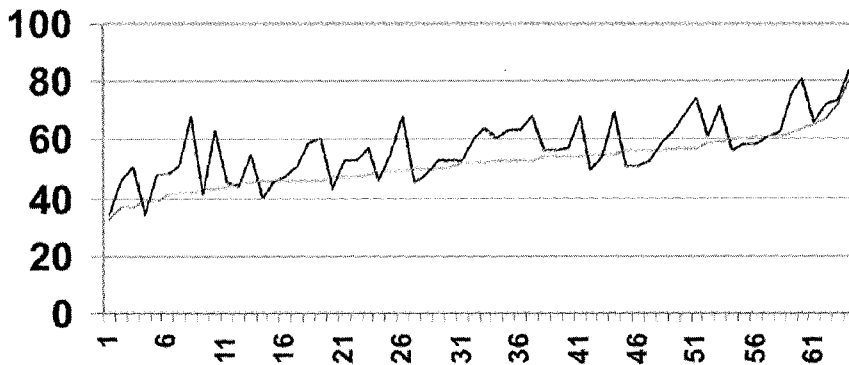## Average for language proficiency course and academic courses: 2001

FIGURE 5

Low levels of language proficiency are not limited to first year university undergraduates. Other data indicate that this is also the case in a range of applicants to other institutions of higher education. For example, the data in Figure 6 below illustrates that only 5% of first year trainee teachers in a certain region have achieved language proficiency levels associated with Grade 8 and higher:

1995 first year trainee teachers in a province in the northern part of South Africa (Horne 2001)
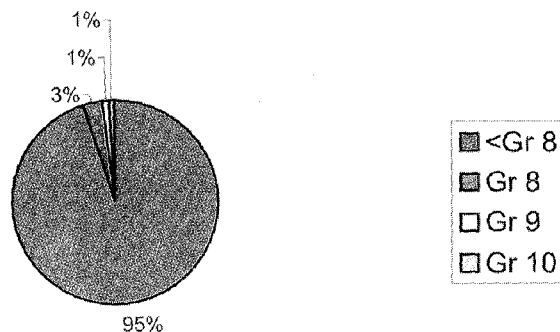
Legend:
- <Gr 8
- Gr 8
- Gr 9
- Gr 10

FIGURE 6

It appears that language proficiency levels have declined among tertiary level entrants between 1990 and 2000. In Figure 7, there is an indication of this decline (functional literacy is measured here as below Grade 8.)

Grade 12 SAAL-E School-leavers applying for admission to Technikons - mainly in Gauteng (Horne 2001)
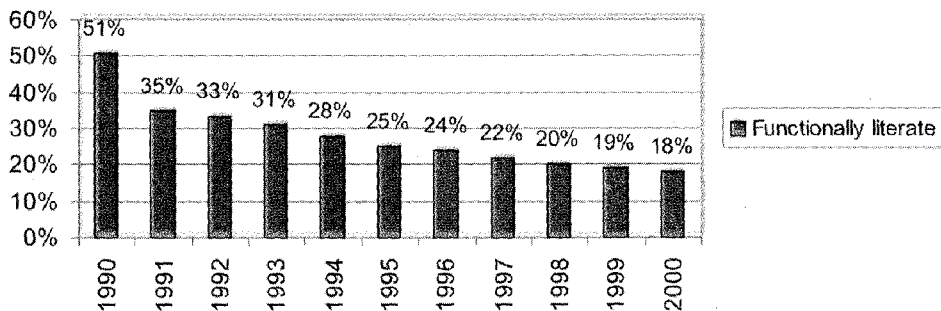

FIGURE 7

The category 'SAAL-E school-leavers' (South African African Language speakers of English) refers to those whose instruction at school was in English, not in their first language, and whose language of learning in higher education institutions is most likely to be English as well.

The problem of low proficiency language levels is not limited to students registering for study in higher education. It also includes young professionals in high-status professions. As may be observed in Figure 8 below, there are similar trends among articled clerks in the accountancy profession. Once again low language proficiency levels are marked in the case of non-mother tongue speakers of English (the first column for every grade. Grade 12/12+ indicates students on the border between grade 12 and grade 12+):

Language proficiency levels in English: articled clerks (CA)
1998/1999 (N=110)
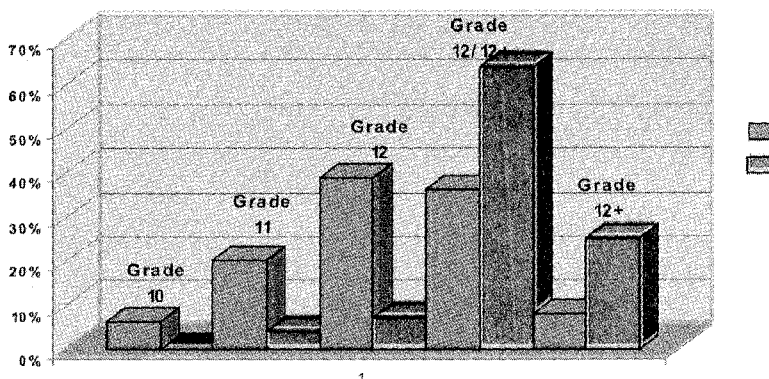**African language speakers and mother tongue speakers of English**

FIGURE 8

Current strategies: how does the choice of the language of learning affect success?

Various good reasons have been advanced in studies of language policies and politics as to why many forms of English language teaching are detrimental to the language health of the continent (for a recent survey, see Wolfaardt, 2002). The arguments put forward in these studies suggest that in this post-colonial period the lack of initial mother tongue education in many African countries will eventually result in lower literacy levels, and will have consequences that are nothing short of an educational disaster.

Why is initial instruction in the mother tongue so unpopular? One may speculate about this, but it appears that many parents are persuaded – and are probably correct – in believing that English is the most important language of opportunity for their children. There are few arguments against such a belief. However, in selecting a strategy to have their children learn English, they demonstrably take the worst route, namely to choose English as the language of instruction from as early a grade as possible. In present day South Africa, all attempts to point out that this is possibly the worst strategy if one is serious about one's offspring eventually learning English, have thus far been futile. Indeed, pleas for adopting an alternative, i.e. the gradual introduction of English as a language of learning and teaching that came, for example, out of the otherwise influential Threshold Project more than a decade ago (cf. Macdonald & Burroughs, 1991), have similarly fallen on deaf ears. It is as if parents do not even wish to consider that starting out correctly (Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1998) may entail initial mother tongue enliteration, followed by the intensive study of the desired target language (English, in most cases).

Parental choice can be presented schematically as one that needs to strike a balance between the status of the desired language (English) and proficiency in it:

My choice of another language for my children is influenced by ...

		Low	High
S	High	Parents prefer this for their children	Everybody prefers this
T A			
T U S	Low	Nobody prefers this	Parents don't prefer this for their children

<div align="center">Low   High
PROFICIENCY</div>

FIGURE 9

As the matrix indicates, everyone seems to want high proficiency for their children in a high status language such as English. The problem is that parents – this time incorrectly – do not regard high proficiency in a low status language (often the children's mother tongue) as a viable option, and therefore settle for what will eventually turn out to be a disastrous alternative: low proficiency levels in a high status language.

The result of this is that children's initial reading at school fails to develop to the level required. What we know about successful reading is that one should begin and preferably consolidate one's reading ability in the first language:

Becoming a successful reader depends upon whether you ...

S in		may work	will work
T first			
A language			
R or in		won't work	may work
T			
another language			

different   same

consolidate in

FIGURE 10

Reading: a critical skill

There is no doubt that reading ability, more than any other skill, is a critically important factor in academic success. It is also true that low reading ability trips one up right through school and entry into higher education. As Pretorius (2000) has pointed out, access to the massive amounts of print information that accompany education

> ... is obtained primarily through reading... The ability ... to utilise knowledge from print information becomes more demanding as students move up the education ladder, while the gap between skilled and unskilled readers widens... [U]nless the reading problems of our students are addressed, present failure rates will continue.

The conventional wisdom in this case (which, along with most of the choices presented schematically above and below, has been taken or adapted from the study *Starting out Right* – Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education 1998 – and the survey in Wolfaardt, 2002) is that, if one wishes to read successfully in another language, there are several sets of conditions that need to be satisfied. The first is that one must be a proficient reader in one's first language in order to be able to transfer the (generic) skill of reading to the desired target language (English), and the second is that there must be sufficient, and appropriate, reading material available:

Successful reading in another language depends on:

		High		
A **V** **A** **I** **L**	of a p p r o p r i		**may** **work**	**best** **conditions** **by far**
A **B** **I** **L** **I**	a t e	Low	**almost certain** **failure**	**may** **work**
T **Y**	reading material		Low — High	

(left axis: A V A I L A B I L I T Y of appropriate reading material)

Reading proficiency in first language

FIGURE 11

It does not need much argument to demonstrate that in all of these cases (i.e., the ones represented in Figures 9, 10 and 11), conditions are less than ideal for African students. Many African children are exposed to reading in English so early in their primary school careers that there is not much opportunity for them to become fluent readers in any language: either in their first language, or in English. The dearth of appropriate and sufficient reading material in African languages further compounds the issue. The current strategy of "the earlier, the better" for learning English does not appear to be a successful one, as the following diagram attempts to capture schematically:

Proficiency in reading in English as an additional language

R **E** **A** **D** **I** **N** **G**	materials in abundance dearth of materials	attainable	potentially high
		low	attainable
		early late	

EXPOSURE

FIGURE 12

Some complications and remedies

The depth and range of the problem is evident from the argument and data presented above. The remedy, however, is itself beset by a further number of complications.

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There is no doubt that the remedy lies not only in adopting a sounder strategy for learning English, but also in making English instruction more effective. The first complication is that the English language teaching profession has not captured, and does not capture, the imagination of parents when they are faced with a choice in this respect. It is nothing less than an indictment of the language teaching profession as a whole that the current generation of parents has chosen an alternative to the instruction that they can offer. This places a great deal of responsibility on those teachers.

In the meantime, the choices of parents nonetheless come to a head in instructional arrangements, for which teachers are, by the very nature of their work, responsible. It is at this juncture that the demands of, *inter alia*, parents and officialdom force themselves upon those teachers and language instructors who are, in turn, expected to make good the expectations of parents and the body politic. Often, as we have noted (cf. Wolfaardt, 2002), those who hold political power on our continent impose an inefficient language policy, which creates among parents the false image that the high status language, be it English or French, is the lever for upward social mobility for their children. It is apparent, therefore, that teachers and language instructors themselves may have very little control over a number of conditions that have created barriers for their learners before they even arrive in their classes.

One may look from several different angles at the problems that teachers and learners face when they are expected to teach and learn in another language in such a context. The first is that teachers may have to act against the wishes of parents who, even if there is a choice, prefer a high status language (such as English) for their children as the language of learning, rather than a low status language (often the first language of their children). Secondly, especially in higher grades, language teachers reap the doubtful rewards of learners who have become enliterated in less than ideal ways, as we have demonstrated above. Thirdly, given the lack of suitable and appropriate reading materials complementing classroom learning, and, fourthly, as contextual theories of second language acquisition have pointed out, given organisational arrangements that further obstruct language learning (cf. Gebhard, 1999), one indeed has a recipe for low levels of language proficiency among learners. As regards the latter, scholars such as Gebhard have over the last decade begun to indicate that there are discourse practices at institutions of learning that in fact socially construct illiteracy.

The actors who are most likely to contribute to a solution, apart from parents or government officials, are the insiders, that is, both learners and teachers. They have the daunting responsibility of bringing about changes within what is often a negative framework and a set of conditions that is detrimental to learning and teaching.

Another complication is that teachers often do not turn to the appropriate solutions. Such solutions may be right at hand, in the form of empowering curricula, for example. Yet there is some evidence that teachers have found ways of getting around the innovative approaches prescribed by newer language teaching curricula, curricula that might have been a better starting point for a solution to the problem of low levels of language proficiency than anything that was traditionally available. A number of recent studies of language teaching on the African continent (Tesfamariam, 2000, Shaalukeni, 2000) have investigated how teachers manage to retain old styles of language teaching in the face of new approaches that have been introduced by the education authorities that employ them. The ingenuity with which this is accomplished in itself would make a mockery of the casual explanation often given for this state of affairs, viz. that teachers somehow lack initiative, are 'lazy', or 'untrained' and unskilled. The conviction with which teachers justify their traditional styles of teaching also suggests that they do not teach without deliberation.

Tesfamariam (2000: 111) identifies the typical classroom practices that obtain in Eritrea, where the first of the studies being referred to here derives from. The classrooms in his study are characterised by a lecture-mode, mostly for the sake of explaining some point of grammar, as well as by students copying down notes from the blackboard, by the use of the mother tongue to explain the meaning of English words, and by students sitting silently, and speaking only when asked by the teacher to answer questions. The conventional nature of these classroom practices is evident. The effect of this traditionalism is an almost complete mismatch between the demands of the syllabus, that requires a broadly learner-centred, communicative, skills-based approach, and the instructional practices of teachers.

Similarly, in the second study mentioned above, which concerns the classroom practices that obtain in a number of localities in northern Namibia, Shaalukeni (2000: 85) found what she terms the typical 'quiet African classroom.' Her experience is confirmed by recent UNICEF studies that she refers to, which indicate that

> ... teachers and parents in African countries have a picture in their minds of a classroom as a place where silence and strict discipline should prevail. This is the kind of classroom our teachers carry around in their minds, the one in which they wish to teach. (Learners) are not accustomed to talk to one another other than when conventionally responding to the teacher's questions.

These, then, are the general characteristics of the instructional contexts that prevail in post-colonial Africa. In South Africa, the situation is not any different (see Macdonald & Burroughs, 1991).

Given these complications, it is evident that the challenge of raising language proficiency levels is indeed a daunting one. Where should teachers turn for solutions?

One way is to begin to learn from the literature on learning another language. Habte (2001: chapter 2, but especially pp. 34–41), for example, has focussed on how to develop information gap tasks appropriate to the language proficiency level of high school students. His argument is, first, that the literature leaves almost no doubt about the effectiveness of such tasks in raising proficiency levels in English, since they heighten fluency in spoken English, which in turn, is a prerequisite for proficiency in reading and writing it. The problem is, of course, that such teaching techniques belong to the very approach that teachers are resisting. These techniques are firmly part of communicative language teaching, the approach most often prescribed in syllabuses on the African continent and which teachers most frequently attempt to sidestep. Habte's (2001) second argument is that information gap type of activities, of which he surveys a wide variety, provide a concrete, practical kind of task type that is easily adaptable to the level of a class learning English at secondary school. He successfully designed and adapted a number of such tasks in his action research study undertaken for this very purpose. His third argument concerns the increased opportunity for interaction amongst learners which is provided by such tasks, and which is considered in the literature to be a prerequisite for learning another language in a classroom setting. In looking at the research that has been done on this, Lightbown and Spada (1993: 86) point out that (second-language) learners simply talk more with other learners than with native speakers (or with their teacher, for that matter) during such activities, and that, interestingly enough,

> ... intermediate-level learners did not make any more errors with another intermediate-level speaker than they did with an advanced or native speaker. This is a particularly interesting finding because it calls into question the argument that learners need to be exposed to a native-speaking model (i.e. teacher) at all times if we are to ensure that they produce fewer errors.

The following figure sums up the findings in the literature (Habte, 2001: 15–49, 109) on this:

How to encourage fluency in spoken English

O p p o r t u n i t y			
	frequent	moderate success likely	greatest chance of success
	low	less chance of success	moderate success likely
	for interaction	**one-way**	**two-way**
		Information gap tasks	

FIGURE 13

One-way information gap tasks, in which one partner of a pair of learners has all of the information, which then has to be transmitted to the other partner, are less effective than two-way information gap tasks, in which both partners have an equal part of the information, which they then have to share in order to complete the task. Habte (2001) summarises the major reasons why the kind of negotiation of meaning that such tasks require is considered to be so effective. Fourth, and finally, his plea for the development of such activities is reflected in the title of his study: these are activities that can easily be designed and adapted for use in environments with scarce resources.

This kind of environment – one which is not well endowed with language learning resources – is, of course, typical of the English language learning contexts on the African continent. Many parents and government officials who issue pleas for, and make policies that encourage the early introduction of English in schools (cf. Wolfaardt, 2002) have a picture in their minds of the educationally successful missionary schools on the African continent. Yet, as Wolfaardt (2002: 23) also points out, the general pattern followed by most of the missionaries was first of all to use a relatively well-known European language, such as English, only until sufficient books could be translated into the relevant African language. In those missionary schools that became fully English later, English was probably also more truly a second language – i.e. was used not only in the classroom, but also outside of it, in extra-mural activities, in the disciplinary practices of the student residences, and in worship, which formed an important part of every day – than a third, or a foreign, language. To think that those schools can be compared with the relatively poorly-resourced institutions of today is patently misleading. To expect, furthermore, that such poorly-endowed institutions could provide the same kind of second language environment for learning English as the successful missionary school is probably also asking too much.

Habte's (2001) study is evidence that there are cost-effective, local, small-scale solutions available to teachers. These solutions are supported by evidence from the international literature (Habte, 2001: 14 –59). It is evidence, furthermore, that the resistance to innovation that is typical of language teaching in much of Africa can be overcome.

Where else can language teachers turn?

Post-modernist critiques of method have played an important part in making many language teachers cynical about the effectiveness of selecting one method instead of another. Within that component of applied linguistics that concerns itself with language teaching, many are suggesting that it is probably more useful to look at the strategies that learners employ when learning another language, and even to teach good strategies consciously. It might well be that our own teaching strategies are at odds with learners' beliefs about language learning, and teachers have to deal with that as well. Finally, there is a renewed interest in the beliefs that teachers themselves hold with respect to language learning, beliefs that are expressed in their own teaching style.

A second possible way to begin to meet the challenge, it therefore seems to us, is to allow teachers and learners to start articulating their beliefs about language learning. Teaching in a way that meets the challenges facing language instructors today depends crucially on the assumptions that both teachers and learners make about learning. As long as these remain unarticulated and therefore unexamined, we are unlikely to make much headway with raising English proficiency levels.

Acknowledgements

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christo van Rensburg is the director of the Unit for Language skills Development, University of Pretoria. His main research areas are second and foreign language acquisition, and languages in contact. Prof. Henk Kroes was instrumental in founding this Unit for the Development of Language skills when he was associated with the University of Pretoria at the start of its involvement with language proficiency work in 1997 and 1998. This paper acknowledges his valuable and enthusiastic input.

Prof. christo van Rensburg
Unit for Language skills and Development
University of Pretoria
Tel: 012 4202334
Fax: 012 4202000
vrensbur@libarts.up.ac.za

Albert weideman deputy director in the Unit for Language skills Development, where his primary responsibility lies in developing courses. His main research interests are alternative and innovative second language teaching methodologies. His association with prof. Henk Kroes goes back over many years. Their collaboration on evaluating and developing training courses for township teachers in new language teaching methodologies is especially pertinent in the context of this article and this special commemorative issue.

Prof. Albert weideman
Unit for Language skills and Development
University of Pretoria
Tel: 012 4204957
Fax: 012 4202000
ajweideman@postino.up.ac.za