

# Barriers to acquiring English reading and writing skills by Zulu-speaking Foundation-phase learners

## A B S T R A C T

This article reflects on an investigation into the barriers that hinder Zulu-speaking English second language (L2) learners in the Foundation Phase from acquiring reading and writing skills. These barriers are categorised as contextual, language, school and intrinsic learner factors. A questionnaire based on these categories was completed by teachers in the Foundation Phase in schools in and around Durban to determine to what extent teachers' experiences concur with the barriers identified in the literature on the subject. Several significant relationships were found between the various variables which contribute to the problems L2 learners experience in acquiring English reading and writing skills: poor socioeconomic environments, lack of parental involvement, low educational level of parents, cognitive factors and various language, school and intrinsic factors.

**Keywords:** English second language (L2), reading, writing, Foundation Phase, barriers to learning, contextual factors, school factors, language factors, intrinsic factors

## 1. Background

Various studies (Abbott, Walton & Greenwood 2002; Roth, Speece & Cooper 2002; Vakalisa 2000) indicate the importance of reading and writing skills, not only as a means to cope with scholastic demands but also to survive in the modern information era. Proficiency in reading and writing relies largely on adequate language use which, according to Matlin (2002:284), is the vehicle that is used to move through life. Language proficiency forms the basis of all learning and is closely related to a person's experience and general knowledge.

If learners are not taught in their first language (L1), they need to be sufficiently proficient in the language of instruction to derive the full benefit from their education. Research by Henning, Gravette and Daniels (1998), the National Association Education of Young Children (NAEYC;

### 2.3 Scholastic factors

The school itself is also often a barrier to the acquisition of English as a second language. The National Teacher Education Audit (1995) revealed that the majority of South African teachers are either underqualified or unqualified to teach, and/or are frequently absent from school (Chisholm, 2000:11). The most common scholastic factors<sup>3</sup> which may influence the acquisition of reading and writing are teachers who are not equipped in L2 acquisition or the principles that underpin bilingual and multilingual education; English L1 teachers who do not know the home language of the L2 learners; L2 teachers who do not have proper knowledge of English as a medium of instruction; large classes and high learner-teacher ratios which result in teachers being unable to attend to learners' individual learning needs and to practise outcomes-based education; and inadequate resources such as readers, audiovisual aids, well-equipped libraries, electricity, furniture and other resources from the home and surrounding environment.

### 2.4 Intrinsic factors

Intrinsic factors<sup>4</sup> also play an important role in the acquisition of English as a second language. Foundation Phase L2 learners may, in fact, be at a disadvantage even before they enter the classroom. The relevant stakeholders in the lives of these learners must be cognisant of the impact they have on the holistic development of these school beginners. While some of us take literacy for granted, L2 learners may battle to come to terms with it. L2 learners' experiences of reading, writing and comprehension are individual and different, depending on their circumstances.

## 3. The empirical research

### 3.1 Research design

The literature reveals various barriers to the acquisition of reading and writing. The question that must be asked is: *Do barriers to the acquisition of reading and writing proficiency, as identified in the literature, relate to the reading and writing ability of L2 Foundation Phase learners as perceived by their teachers?* In a quantitative research design (Durrheim, 2002:29-49), some of the possible barriers were used to compile a questionnaire to *determine whether there is a relationship between the barriers to acquiring reading and writing skills as found in the literature study and the reading and writing ability of Zulu-speaking L2 learners in the Foundation Phase as perceived by their teachers.* The questions included in the questionnaire covered contextual barriers, linguistic factors, scholastic factors and intrinsic factors. The researchers were interested in whether or not teachers believe that these factors hinder Zulu-speaking learners in their acquisition of English reading and writing skills. For that purpose, close form items were used in the design of the questionnaire to ensure that the respondents (teachers involved in L2 teaching) stick to the subject and that they found the questionnaire easy to complete (Best & Kahn, 1989:183).

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<sup>3</sup> Calteux (1996:184), Chisholm (2000:11), Dlamini (1998:19), Kokot (1997:21), Kreuger & Braun (1998:410), Lemmer (1996:328, 334), Loubser (1997:28), Ragaven (1998:2), Rhine (1995:382), Secemski, Deutsch & Adoram (2000:241), Sharski (1997:52) and Vakalisa (2000:24).

<sup>4</sup> Day & Bamford (1998:23, 24, 29), Gardner & Tremblay (1998:31), Goh (2000:59-69), Lemmer (1996:331, 336, 337), Ford (1993:49), NYEYC (1996:4, 5), Okagaki & Diamond (2000:76), Rhine (1995:383), Rosowsky (2000:51), Sears (1998:77, 78, 79), Sharski (1997:52), Van der Walt & Dreyer (1997:220), Van Niekerk & Prins (2001:293) and Wang (1996:14).

The questionnaire, the aim of which was to gather information on the educators' perceptions of the various factors, was divided into four sections and comprised 66 items. The first section comprising ten multiple-choice questions reflected the biographical information of the educators and L2 learners; some of the information about the learners was gleaned from the educators' records. The second set of ten multiple-choice questions required the educators to describe their training and proficiency in their first language and the L2 by rating the aforementioned variable as either *good*, *average* or *weak*. The third and fourth sections comprising a total of 46 statements concentrated on contextual, language, scholastic and intrinsic variables, which were interspersed. Educators were asked to respond to these statements on two five-point Likert scales. Section three ranged from *none* to *all* and Section four from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

Applicable questions and statements were used to address the following:

- Contextual factors which included the socioeconomic environment, parental involvement, family configuration, parents' educational level, and the language and culture of the community.
- Linguistic factors which included statements on language structure, cultural vocabulary, language proficiency, perceptions of illiteracy and reading.
- Scholastic factors which included languages spoken by teachers, funding, qualifications, resources, training, educator-learner ratios and curriculum content.
- Intrinsic factors which included psychological barriers, personal attitude, alienation, frustration and fear to respond.

Content, face validity (Delpont, 2002:167; De Vos & Fouché, 1998: 82) and reliability were adhered to in the questionnaire. The reliability (Delpont 2002: 168; Mulder 1996: 209) of the scaled items of the questionnaire was calculated by means of the Cronbach alpha coefficient and measured at an acceptable level of 0.65.

After a pilot study, the questionnaire was finalised and administered to the teachers in the sample. The questionnaires were handed to the participants after an explanation to avoid any misinterpretation of the questions. A total of 96.1% of the questionnaires handed out were returned. Respondents and the schools remained anonymous. After capturing the data, the Statistical Programme for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data. The Pearson correlation was used to determine whether a relationship exists between the various barriers and the L2 learner's ability to read and write. The 1% and 5% levels of significance were used.

The researchers expected *a relationship between various factors that contribute to reading and writing difficulties as identified from the literature and the reading and writing ability of Zulu-speaking L2 learners in the Foundation Phase as perceived by their teachers*. Appropriate statistical procedures were used to test this assumption.

A research sample of 104 Foundation Phase teachers from sixteen KZNDEC schools in the larger Durban area (Isipingo, Merebank, Overport/Sydenham and Durban Central) who were selected by means of the *randomised cluster sampling method* (Strydom & Venter, 2002: 206) took part in the investigation. The participants were all teachers in the Foundation Phase at schools that follow a similar curriculum, teach through the medium of English and have experience of L2 learners with barriers to learning. Furthermore, the teachers indicated that the L2 learners in their classes demonstrated no or little reading and writing ability, that OBE in line with Curriculum 2005 (C2005) was followed in their schools and that the learners came from various socioeconomic backgrounds. These teachers assessed the learners' reading and

writing ability continuously and indicated that the majority of the L2 learners experience reading and writing difficulties

### 3.2 The results and analysis of the empirical research

The results of the responses to the questionnaire are summarised in Table 1. The barriers (factors) which may contribute to the reading and writing difficulties of L2 learners as identified in the literature were tested. A correlation coefficient was calculated for each of the factors with respect to reading and writing difficulties.

Table 1: Correlation between the various factors that may influence the reading and writing ability of L2 learners in the Foundation Phase as perceived by teachers

Factor	Variables	Correlation coefficient	Significance
1	Parental involvement and learners' ability to read and write in English	0.301	p < 0.01
2	Poor socioeconomic backgrounds and the ability of L2 learners to read and write in English	0.375	p < 0.01
3	L2 learners' ability to read and write in English and the inclusion of the L2 learners' culture in the teaching material	0.123	p > 0.05
4	L2 learners' proficiency in English language structure and L2 learners' ability to read and write in English	0.278	p < 0.01
5	Quality of the teachers' training in OBE and bilingual/multilingual teaching, and the proficiency of the teachers in the English language structure	0.118	p > 0.05
6	Teachers' proficiency in Zulu and their proficiency in the teaching of the English language structure	- 0.202	p < 0.05
7	Availability of resources at home and the L2 learners' ability to read and write in English	- 0.156	p > 0.05
8	L2 learners' fear to respond to tasks (intrinsic factor) and the L2 learners' ability to read and write in English	0.300	p < 0.01
9	Knowledge of phonological skills (decoding and encoding) and knowledge of English language structure	0.769	p < 0.01

It is clear from the information in Table 1 that the null hypothesis may be rejected at the 1% level of significance for factors 1, 2, 4, 8 and 9, which implies that teachers perceive parental involvement, poor socioeconomic backgrounds, proficiency in English language structure, fear of responding to tasks and knowledge of phonetic skills as contributing factors to learners' ability to read and write in English.

The null hypothesis may be rejected at the 5% level of significance for factor 6, which implies that teachers perceive their proficiency in Zulu as important for their proficiency in the teaching of the English language structure. The null hypothesis may be accepted for factors 3, 5 and 7. Teachers perceive the inclusion of the L2 learners' culture in the teaching material, teachers' training in OBE and bilingual and multilingual teaching, and their proficiency in the English language structure as not influencing the reading and writing ability of learners. The availability of resources at home is also not perceived as important for the reading and writing ability of learners. A more detailed discussion of these findings now follows. The discussion starts with

the factors for which the null hypothesis is rejected and is followed by a discussion of the factors for which the null hypothesis is accepted.

### 3.2.1 Parent involvement (factor 1)

There is a significant relationship between the barrier *parental involvement* and L2 learners' ability to read and write in English. The teachers view parental involvement as an important contributing factor to acquiring reading and writing skills. Parent involvement in L2 learners' education improves their ability to learn English and learn by means of English. Calteaux (1996: 153, 184) asserts that the most important support system for youth to remain at school is their families and Van Wyk and Lemmer (2006: 8) state that learners achieve better when parents are involved in education. The parents of L2 learners have an important role to play in the education of their children and in preparing them for school, as learning about literacy begins very early in life, which means that parents should expose their children to literacy-related activities (Du Plessis, 2001: 106). In fact, much of the language children learn reflects the language and behaviour of the adult models they interact with and listen to (Isbell, 2002: 26). Correlational studies by Wang (1996: 12) support the positive relationship between parental involvement and L2 learners' school performance. According to Blackledge (1999: 192) and Han and Ernst (1999: 153), parents and teachers usually play significant roles in assisting learners in overcoming their reading and writing difficulties. Parents should attend to both the L2 and the L1 (Zulu) as Wang (1996: 149) believes that the maintenance of the mother tongue promotes positive orientation towards the facilitation of English proficiency. Lemmer (1996: 334) concurs that the low literacy levels in L2 among parents in black communities render them unable to function as effective primary educators to their children. This is in accordance with the perceptions of the teachers in this study.

### 3.2.2 Socioeconomic status (factor 2)

There is also a significant relationship between the barrier *socioeconomic status* of L2 learners and their ability to read and write in English. Teachers perceive low socioeconomic status as an impediment to the development of reading and writing skills. Low socioeconomic environments and literacy levels of parents tend to provide L2 learners with minimal chances of exposure to the English language, thereby effectively reducing their ability to speak in English. As Lemmer (1996: 335) states: "Children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds also face general linguistic deprivation. There is frequently a lack of books, magazines and newspapers, educational radio and television in the home, as well as the practice of communicative styles that are not consonant with those in the school. This kind of dissonance between home and school further diminishes the chances of school success." It is clear that the people (from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds) who acquire English to empower themselves are the very people who can hardly afford their day-to-day basic requirements such as food, shelter, water, transport and electricity (Baloyi, 2002a: 3). Van der Walt and Dreyer (1997: 225) agree that the low socioeconomic status of L2 learners is an impediment to their progress. Because of low and unstable incomes, there is often no electricity in their homes; as a result, learners lack restful and stimulating study environments and their exposure to an experiential world is limited (Van der Walt & Dreyer, 1997: 307).

### 3.2.3 Knowledge of English language structure (factor 4)

A significant relationship is found between the barrier *knowledge of English language structure*

and L2 learners' ability to read and write in English. According to the teachers, the less proficient L2 learners are in the different English language structures, the less able they are to read and write in English. The findings are similar to those presented by Miller and Gillis (2000: 220) which show that when learners begin school they already have oral language experiences, which are then transferred into written language. L2 learners who do not have any oral experience with the L2 will encounter difficulties in acquiring a second language. Jordaan (1993: 8) confirms that second language proficiency will be partly dependent on the competency of learners in the first language. This is also supported by Wang (1996: 8).

#### 3.2.4 Fear to respond to tasks (intrinsic factor – factor 8)

It is clear from the research that *fear to respond to tasks* has an effect on L2 learners' ability to read and write in English. L2 learners who struggle to read and write in English are afraid and reluctant to respond to tasks set in English (Van Niekerk & Prins, 2001: 293). They fear the reprisals meted out by their teachers and/or peers for their perceived incompetence. Their fear of embarrassment causes them to withdraw rather than provide the required work. It is possible that L2 learners experience heightened levels of stress due to the dichotomy of living between the different cultures of home and school. The impact of emotional trauma, bewilderment and frustration has resulted in severe backlogs in the acquisition of English L2 by Zulu-speaking learners. According to Lemmer (1996: 336), they experience frustration when they know the answers to the questions posed, but lack the adequate vocabulary to express it. Stress negatively affects L2 learners' academic progress and their acquisition of English. Ford (1993: 49) states that many black learners feel alienated from, unaccepted and unconnected to learners whose culture, values and beliefs are different from theirs. Such learners may become introverted or withdrawn as a result of their poor social and emotional relationships.

#### 3.2.5 Knowledge of phonological skills (factor 9)

*Knowledge of phonetic skills* (decoding and encoding) has a profound influence on the reading and writing ability of learners. The present research indicates that knowledge of phonetic skills (decoding and encoding) in L2 learners influences their knowledge of the English language structure. Universal to all languages is the language's multilevel structured system, which starts off with a small, single sound and builds up into larger units of words in sentences. Single sounds are combined to form a word, which when combined with other words, gives those words meaning. This in turn will make sense within the structure of a sentence. Phonology forms the first level of language (Adler, 2001: 3; Lane, Pullen, Eisle & Jordan, 2002: 102; Walton & Walton, 2002: 80). Any alphabetic language comprises symbols that represent the sounds of the language. As Miller and Gillis (2000: 221) put it: "It is the essential foundation upon which language is built. Many teachers are uninformed about the various levels of language. In order for their students to understand the foundation of any language, teachers themselves must understand how these parts fit together to form a whole."

#### 3.2.6 Teachers' proficiency in Zulu (factor 6)

It may be argued that proficiency in one language may enhance proficiency in a second language. This research study indicates that the barrier *teachers' proficiency in Zulu* has an effect on their proficiency to teach different English language structures. Teachers who are proficient in Zulu perceive themselves to be more successful in teaching different language structures to the learners. Ragaven (1998: 2) argues that if teachers are not schooled in the language of L2

learners, they may lose the interest of the learners. It often happens that children are placed at school in the care of teachers who do not share their cultural background or speak the same home language and thus cannot supply bilingual input in the class situation. Teachers who speak English as a first language but who are handicapped by their inability to speak Zulu, are unable to allow for learners' responses in the mother tongue, for switching codes or the use of translation while teaching (Lemmer 1996: 330-331). Vakalisa (2000: 24) argues that due to teachers' lack of knowledge of the mother tongue of L2 learners, they find it difficult to guide learners from mistakes made in the L2.

It is clear from the information in Table 1 that there is no significant relationship between the quantity of L2 learners' culture that is included in the teaching material, the quality of the teacher's training in OBE and bilingual/multilingual teaching, the proficiency of the teacher in the English language structure, the availability of resources, and the reading and writing ability of L2 learners in the Foundation Phase.

### 3.2.7 The extent to which L2 learners' culture is included in the teaching material used in the Foundation Phase (factor 3)

According to the perceptions of the teachers who participated in this research, the L2 learners' ability to read and write in English is not affected by the extent to which *L2 learners' culture is included in the teaching material used in the Foundation Phase*. The medium of instruction in the schools is English and English stories are used in the instruction of the learners. In contrast to this finding, Rosowsky (2000: 51) asserts that an important relationship exists between reading comprehension performance and cultural bias. No other empirical investigations reporting on the effect of L2 learners' culture (included in the teaching material) on the acquisition of L2 were found in the literature, although various ideas (hypotheses) were found regarding language acquisition and culture. Although language and culture are inextricably interrelated and consequently influence each other, the social context within which language is used dictates the type of proficiency demanded by context. Most children gain the knowledge of the language implicitly during the socialisation process. The meaning of words in different contexts may confuse L2 learners further. L2 learners, whose cultural knowledge is different from English L1 learners, find comprehension of items in the L2 text difficult.

### 3.2.8 Quality of the teacher's training in OBE, bilingual/multilingual teaching and the proficiency of the teacher in the English language (factor 5)

It is clear from the research that the participating teachers' perceptions are that the *quality of the teacher's training in OBE, bilingual/multilingual teaching and the proficiency of the teacher in the English language structure* have no influence on L2 learners' proficiency in reading and writing. The quality of training in OBE and bilingual and multilingual teaching do not impact on the proficiency of the teacher in teaching the different English language structures. This finding is in contrast with Lemmer's (1996: 334) research. The discrepancy between the findings in the present empirical investigation and the findings from the literature may have resulted from the possibility that the teachers did not truly reflect their level of skills. The teachers may have underreported their level of skills because the questionnaire questioned their ability to teach OBE and bilingual classes. This may have prevented them from answering truthfully and faithfully. It has, however, been ascertained that those teachers who are not equipped to teach in bilingual or multilingual classes jeopardise their L2 learners' emotional, cognitive and social development. Teachers are unable to teach the different English language structures correctly

because of a lack of understanding of the L2 learners' mother tongue, which could have been used to code switch.

### 3.2.9 Availability of resources

The perceptions of the teachers in the present study are that the *availability of resources* (at school, home and environment) has no influence on L2 learners' ability to read and write in English. This finding is in contrast with the finding of Kreuger and Braun (1998: 410) who contend that learning a new language and learning to read without sufficient support is too great a task for many children. The result is that these children fall behind in their school work.

## 4. Conclusions

Since the introduction of the new educational policy in South Africa in 1994, bilingualism and multilingualism have become part of the school system in this country. The underlying principle of the Language in Education Policy (1997) "... is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s)". Neither teachers nor parents were/are well prepared for this new educational system and many parents enrol their children as L2 learners at English medium schools (Mgqwashu, 2007: 2) without realising the possible consequences of such a decision for their children. Learners who are not fluent in L2 experience difficulty in coping with the change of cultural environment. The reality is that the Zulu mother-tongue learners who are taught via the medium of English experience difficulties in areas of reading, reading comprehension and writing. The present study proposes to determine from the literature the possible barriers to reading and writing and to determine to what extent teachers' experiences concur with the barriers identified in the literature.

According to the literature, there are various barriers to learners' acquisition of reading and writing skills in a second language. It has to be noted that these possible barriers are highly interdependent and are seldom responsible for reading difficulties. Once L2 learners experience difficulties in reading and writing, ripple effects manifest in poor performance in other learning areas in the grade, in possible delays in their emotional development and in the onset of concomitant socioenvironmental problems.

The participants in this study agree that poor socioeconomic environments, lack of parental involvement, low educational status of parents, cognitive factors, and various linguistic and scholastic factors contribute to the problems L2 learners experience in acquiring English reading and writing skills. They also perceive that fear of responding to tasks affects learners' acquisition of reading and writing skills. In contrast to the literature, it was found that the extent to which L2 learners' culture is included in the teaching material used in the classroom does not have an influence on learners' acquisition of reading and writing skills. Teachers also perceive that their training in OBE, bilingual/multilingual teaching and their proficiency in the English language structure do not influence the learners' ability to master English reading and writing skills. The teachers also believe that the lack of resources at home does not hinder the acquisition of reading and writing skills.

The value of this investigation lies in the empirical testing of existing knowledge (barriers to acquiring reading and writing skills) in an unknown situation, namely in schools with L2 learners of whom the majority experience barriers to reading and writing and where teachers do not know the language of the L2 learners. Most of the L2 Foundation Phase learners in the



Durban schools where teachers participated in this investigation experience barriers to reading and writing in the second language. Many of the teachers do not know Zulu and are not able to assist the learners in their first language.

It is recommended that schools employ some Zulu-speaking teachers to assist L2 learners with reading and writing problems in English on a daily basis. Furthermore, the study reveals that L2 learners experience difficulty with the English language structure and phonology. Basic English phonetics must be taught and revised daily, teachers must pronounce the sounds slowly, clearly and correctly, and learners need to be exposed to a variety of reading material and other types of resources.

According to the teachers, the socioeconomic background of the L2 learners is a barrier to reading and writing and that it is necessary to attend to the needs of the parents. These needs may be overcome by empowering the parents by presenting, for example, ABET classes in English for parents of L2 learners. It is also important to encourage parents to select mother-tongue education for their children in the first school years and to value their own first or home languages (PRAESA, 2007: 1).

This study may also alert teachers who did not previously think about possible barriers to attend to the barriers and support the L2 learners in acquiring reading and writing skills.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Sandhya D Mahabeer**

MEd student

Department of Educational Studies

UNISA

PO Box 392

Pretoria

**Ansie C Lessing**

Department of Educational Studies

UNISA

PO Box 392

Pretoria

Email: [lessiac@unisa.ac.za](mailto:lessiac@unisa.ac.za)