

Using English as a second language as the language of instruction: Concerns and needs of primary school teachers in South Africa

A B S T R A C T The issues discussed in this article have arisen from the authors' concern about primary school teachers' ability to use English as the language of instruction in their classrooms. Teachers in primary schools who are English second language speakers were asked to comment on the three main problems that they experience in using English as the medium of instruction in their classrooms. From the teachers' responses it was deduced that their main problems in using English as the language of instructions are that their learners are 'deaf' to correct English pronunciation and that the learners do not understand English. Teachers also indicated that they have a lack of vocabulary and that they also lack the confidence to teach in English.

Key Concepts: English as a second language (ESL), language of instruction, primary school teachers, pronunciation, understanding as a language skill, vocabulary

1. Introduction

In a report on the language of learning and teaching in all African countries, it was stated that in the classrooms where children are not taught in their mother tongue, it is usually only the teacher who speaks (Kgosana, 2006:19). The children do not speak because they are taught in English or French, the languages of the colonists of Africa. It is, however, not only the learners who do not have sufficient command of the language of instruction, but many teachers also struggle with it. How the teachers speak the language of instruction and their general competence in and knowledge about the language of instruction should also be

considered because it could have an influence on the effectiveness of their teaching and the learners' comprehension of the content that they are taught.

Although English is the home language of only about seven per cent of the South African population, it is widely used as the language of teaching and learning. This means that most teachers use English as the medium of instruction although it is also their second or third language. Although it is presumed that they can speak English, they are less competent in English than in their home language.

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. Since each school can decide on its policy with regard to the language of instruction, learners are not necessarily taught in their home language. Many parents and caregivers opt to send their children to schools where English is the only language of instruction. Many children thus start their formal school education through the medium of English as their second language. Many of these learners do not understand a word of English when they enter school. The problem with the language of learning is exacerbated by the teachers' often imperfect command of English. The result is that the language used in the classroom can become a barrier to learning and teaching.

2. Teaching in a second language

Teaching a second language or any subject through the medium of a second language requires the integration of several areas of knowledge and practice. Competence in the second language is important. Competence refers to:

- The ability to listen, read, speak and write in the language to be taught
- Knowledge about language, language use and culture and their interrelationship
- Knowledge of how second languages are learned and acquired (Lange in Lessow-Hurley, 1990:248).

This should lead to reflective teaching so that teachers may become aware of both their learners' as well their own language problems.

Language study and especially second language study in teacher education need to be undertaken professionally using new approaches. In teacher education language awareness and language improvement should for instance be presented naturally. Primary data such as newspaper articles, advertisements and popular magazines also provides access to contemporary culture (Van der Walt, Evans & Kilfoil, 2009:195). This type of language usage has a particular role in teacher education because it is 'real' and undecorated and therefore presents a more challenging foundation for professional language study.

Widdowson (1994:117-118) believes that learners (especially those in developing countries) who have received several years of formal English teaching frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language and to understand its use in normal communication, whether in the spoken or in the written mode. Knowing what is involved in putting sentences together correctly is only one part of what is meant by knowing a language. To be able to use and speak and eventually to teach in a certain language require many intricate competencies.

3. Teaching through the medium of English as a second language in South Africa

Using English as the medium of instruction in South African primary schools has various facets. Ideally, and in accordance with government policy, learners in Grade 1 to 3 are taught in their mother tongue or home language and then in English from Grade 4 onwards. Learners are taught English as a second language from Grade 2. For the majority of learners English is the only medium of instruction in the intermediate and senior phases. In the junior classes teachers often use code switching when teaching on the condition that they can speak the learners' home languages. However, many young learners attend schools where teachers cannot speak the learners' home languages at all. The only exception to this might be Afrikaans-speaking learners who are taught in Afrikaans throughout their schooling. In these schools, English is taught as a second language but it does not necessarily become the language of instruction.

Heugh (in Fleisch, 2008:105) states that two language policy models have become dominant in the majority of South African primary schools where English as a second language (ESL) is used as the language of learning and teaching. Heugh refers to the first model as subtractive bilingualism (where English is used from the beginning) and the second model she calls transitional bilingualism (early exit from mother tongue). In her analysis both models lead to high rates of school failure.

Research has shown that many South African learners' lack of fluency in English may be traced back to their teachers' inadequate command of English. As far back as 1992 Ardington (1992:39) reported that this is particularly true for the rural areas where teachers are not fluent in English and where there are no libraries and resource centres to turn to. In 1994 Widdowson (1994:117) stated: 'The problem is that students, and especially students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language, and to understand its use, in normal communication, whether in the spoken or in the written mode.' In his research about South African learners' poor academic performance in primary schools, Fleisch (2008:111) states that it is especially schoolchildren in rural areas who experience problems with English as the language of instruction because English is hardly ever heard or spoken there, and having 'teachers with limited English proficiency, these learners inhabit a world in which English is essentially a foreign language.'

According to Barkhuizen (2004:569), the segregated teacher education system in South Africa which existed until 1994 produced black teachers who were hopelessly underqualified with regard to modern language teaching methods. This problem continues today, especially for teachers who are speakers of African languages. In addition, the English proficiency of those who teach English is woefully inadequate. The same could surely be said about some Afrikaans-speaking teachers who now teach through the medium of English. Like their African counterparts, these teachers learned English as a second language at school, often taught by teachers whose home language is not English. It is nevertheless presumed that when teachers in South Africa can speak English, they know the language and are able to use it as the language of instruction.

Barkhuizen (2004:570) refers to the communicative approach to the teaching of language and especially second language in South Africa. He states:

A communicative approach has been endorsed in syllabus documents since the early 1980s (and reinforced in a range of new syllabuses that emerged post-1994) but it was rarely implemented with any effect. Many black and Afrikaans speaking learners, for example, endure endless grammar lessons working steadily through outdated language textbooks, mainly because their teachers are themselves unable to communicate very efficiently in the target language.

Since 1995, and coinciding with the new political dispensation, communicative language teaching goals have been reinforced through special emphasis in syllabus documents, the purpose being to empower language learners to be successful users of the language in situations outside the classroom, particularly for further study and in the job market. Badenhorst (2004:290) believes that teachers have to be prepared to teach a second language using a communicative language approach. However, the way that communicative language teaching has been applied in Afrikaans Additional Language classrooms, for example, has not prepared learners to adhere to the communicative demands of the job market once they leave school.

When considering the problems related to second language acquisition, including English as a second language, a distinction should also be made between BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Communicative Academic Language Proficiency). Baker (1996:151) uses Cummins' image of an iceberg to portray the difference between BICS and CALP. Above the surface are language skills such as comprehension and speaking. Underneath the surface are skills of analysis and synthesis. Above the surface are the language skills of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Below the surface is the deeper, subtle language of meaning and creative composition. This applies very aptly to many ESL teachers whose command of English is presumed to be good, but when it comes to the subtle and more complex language skills in English, especially in academic language usage, there is a significant lack in knowledge.

The question arises whether the ESL teachers in South Africa have progressed from using BICS abilities to using CALP abilities in English. According to Cummins, if learners do not have CALP in either their home language or in a new language, they may be at a special academic disadvantage (Aukerman, 2007:626). The former Minister of Education, Ms Naledi Pandor, stated in this regard that the challenge was to ensure that teachers had the ability and competence to teach through the medium of English. She thus emphasised that teachers' competencies in English need to be developed (Sunday Times, 2005:13).

If one considers that only seven per cent of South Africans use English as their home language, it can be deduced that the majority of teachers who teach through the medium of English are English second language speakers themselves. The researchers suggest that the way in which these ESL teachers learned to speak and use English, and the way in which they teach learners using English as their second language, is a problem that has not been addressed in our education system.

4. Pilot study on the reasons provided by ESL primary school teachers why they have problems teaching in English

A pilot study on the use of ESL as medium of instruction in primary schools was undertaken. ESL teachers in primary schools in both urban and deep rural areas were asked to complete a questionnaire. In view of time constraints and financial implications, the researchers used a small group of reliable fieldworkers to distribute and collect the completed questionnaires. Convenient sampling was thus used in this study. Four provinces were selected and a total of 84 questionnaires were used. The names of teachers, schools and towns or cities were not identified.

As part of the questionnaire, teachers who do not speak English as their home language were asked to comment on the three main problems that they experience when using English as the medium of instruction in their classrooms. Not all 84 the teachers completed the three open questions about their opinions of their personal competence in English. A group of 76 teachers gave a first comment, 59 wrote a second comment and 47 provided a third comment. In this article the teachers' responses to the open questions are addressed.

The analysis of the open questions entailed categorising the teachers' comments and opinions on their own language problems using ESL as the language of instruction in the classroom. The teachers were asked to list the three main problems that they experienced when teaching in English as their second language. These three groups were retained in the data categories. The teachers were not requested to place the comments in order of priority and therefore in the discussion all three categories of comments are discussed as one unit. A frequency procedure was used to obtain statistics for the various categories of the teachers' opinions. The nature of the research was exploratory and the results were intended to guide the researcher to formulate questions for a structured questionnaire on the English second language abilities of primary school teachers. For the purpose of discussing the teachers' comments in this article, the main issues raised by the teachers are captured in table 4.

Three comments received from primary school teachers about their own language problems using ESL as the medium of instruction

TABLE 1: First comment made by the ESL teachers

	Frequency	Percentage
Learners do not understand	7	20.24
Deaf to correct English pronunciation	16	19.05
No comment	12	14.29
Lack vocabulary	6	7.14
Not related to ESL	5	5.95
No problems	5	5.95
Explain in mother tongue	4	4.76
Lack resources	3	3.57

Teacher cannot communicate with learners	3	3.57
Explain a lot to learners	2	2.38
Teachers lack confidence	2	2.38
Think in own language then translate	2	2.38
Teach English sounds, time consuming	1	1.19
Learners have attention problems	1	1.19
Multi-lingualism	1	1.19
Teacher training in English is poor	1	1.19
Incorrect pronunciation – teachers	1	1.19
Western culture associated with English	1	1.19
Inadequate knowledge of English	1	1.19

TABLE 2: *Second comment made by the ESL teachers*

	Frequency	Percentage
No comment	25	29.76
Deaf for correct English pronunciation	22	26.19
Learners do not understand	10	1.90
Lack confidence	6	7.14
Not related to ESL	5	5.95
Explain in mother tongue	4	4.76
Lack vocabulary	3	3.57
Lack resources	2	2.38
Explain a lot to learners	1	1.19
Learners have attention problems	1	1.19
Teacher training in English	1	1.19
Incorrect pronunciation – teachers	1	1.19
Western culture associated with English	1	1.19
Think in own language then translate	1	1.19
Struggle with terminology	1	1.19

TABLE 3: *Third comment made by the ESL teachers*

	Frequency	Percent
No comment	37	44.05
Deaf to correct pronunciation	23	27.38
Learners do not understand	8	9.52
Not related to ESL	4	4.76
Lack resources	3	3.57
Lack vocabulary	1	1.19
English writing skills limited	1	1.19
Explain in mother tongue		
Learners have attention problem	1	1.19
Lack confidence	1	1.19

Teacher cannot communicate with learners	1	1.19
Incorrect pronunciation – teachers	1	1.19
Western culture associated with English	1	1.19

TABLE 4: Total taken from tables 1-3 of the main comments made by teachers

	Total
Deaf to correct Eng pronunciation	61
Learners do not understand	35
Lack vocabulary	9
Lack confidence	9
Explain in mother tongue	9
Lack resources	8
Teacher cannot communicate with learners	4

5. Discussion

The majority of teachers mentioned learner-related problems as the main reasons why they experience problems with ESL as the language of instruction in their classrooms. It is interesting to note that teachers regard correct pronunciation in English as important, and many of them believe that the learners in their classrooms are ‘deaf’ to correct English pronunciation. In South Africa where people speak English with many accents, the notion of standard accent has not been researched widely. Variations in the ways in which people pronounce words in English are widely accepted and these variations should not be problematic. Pronunciation does, however, become a problem when it influences comprehension of what is said and it can eventually also influence correct spelling.

For many ESL teachers in South Africa the correct pronunciation of English words is a problem. Teachers who took part in this research indicated that long sound and sounds are often a problem. Learners in their classes would for instance use ‘stut’ for the word ‘start’ and ‘ship’ for the word ‘sheep’. They would write a word in the way they pronounce them, for example, ‘bed’ instead of ‘bird’. Silent consonants are often audible, for example the ‘l’ in the words ‘should’ and ‘palm’. Learners also do not understand that ‘ph’ is pronounced as a ‘f’. Some teachers mentioned that learners’ weak English pronunciation may be influenced by their poor listening skills or that it is because they imitate their educators’ wrong pronunciation. This is in line with the findings of other researchers, namely that a large number of teachers teach in ‘an English dialect’ which results in learners imitating their role models’ incorrect pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary (De Wet, 2002:119). A group of teachers mentioned a lack of resources as being problematic when teaching through the medium of English as their second language.

Understanding lies at the heart of all language skills; without understanding, communication cannot take place. The second biggest problem which teachers commented on when they use ESL in their classrooms is also learner-related: they indicated that the learners do not understand them. Four teachers mentioned that they cannot communicate with the learners, which could also be as a result of the learners’ poor understanding of the English used in the

classroom. A reason for this breakdown in communication could be that many teachers cannot speak the learners' home language themselves; and therefore English is the only language that can be used when communicating with the learners.

The main reason related to teachers or training supplied by the participants was their lack of vocabulary. Some teachers explained this as the inability to find the right words to express themselves. Two teachers mentioned that they think in their own language and then translate into English.

Vocabulary is one of the most important components in language acquisition. A lack of vocabulary can lead to a breakdown in communication, which forms a vital part of a teacher's instruction in a classroom. Vocabulary is a skill on the BICS level of language acquisition, and one wonders what the teachers would say if they were asked about their academic language competence in English.

Some teachers touched on the important issue of the emotional side involved in teaching and learning a language by mentioning that they lack the necessary confidence to use English as the language of instruction. However, another group of teachers did not think that the language of instruction is a pure English second language problem. A small number of teachers mentioned as their problem with the language of instruction, the Western culture associated with English, while another few teachers ascribed it to the training in English received during teacher training.

6. Conclusion

Learners in South Africa who use English as a second or third language as their language of instruction are predominantly taught by teachers who are ESL speakers themselves. Most of these teachers have not undergone proper training in the theory of second language teaching. The ability to speak and write in a second language does not necessarily translate into an ability to understand all the concepts in that language, let alone to teach young learners to think, reason, understand and study in that language. Lavender (2002:117) states that learners, teachers and 'especially students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the languages, and to understand its use in normal communication, whether in the spoken or in the written mode.' The question arises whether some South African teachers' basic ability to speak English as a second language does not erroneously imply that they have attained CALP status in English. ESL teachers should be supported to attain CALP status in English. As such, they would be able to think and reason in English; they would understand all aspects of the English language better and would be able to teach using the English language properly.

The results of this project suggest that well-planned in-service and pre-service teacher training is needed that focuses on the methodology of teaching and learning English as a second language. Based on the teachers' responses, it is recommended that English pronunciation should be included in both in-service and pre-service teacher training. It can no longer be assumed that if teachers are able to speak English, they are able to teach it and to use it effectively as the language of instruction. An example of this is a module on language awareness in the Trinity Certificate TESOL offered at Nottingham in the United Kingdom, which addresses

basic lexical and syntactic features of language and ways of teaching them, as well as the sound system of standard English, and other features of pronunciation (<http://74.6239.67/...>). To our knowledge, no such content forms part of the compulsory language training of South African student teachers.

The phonology of English as an international language (2000:199-200) states that more than training is required to address the issue of pronunciation teaching in English, and that teachers should be educated to do so. He proposes that teachers be provided with the facts to make informed decisions in their selection of pronunciation models depending on the teaching context, as opposed to training them to unquestioningly reproduce a restricted range of techniques. He suggests that teachers should also study certain aspects of sociolinguistics and social psychology to help them with their own pronunciation and with the teaching of pronunciation.

Although not everything that is relevant to teaching in the USA is pertinent to the South African school system, cognisance could be taken of the ESL standards for teacher education programmes in the USA. The American preparation guidelines recommend coursework in the following (among other things):

- Linguistics and culture: the grammatical, phonological and semantic systems of English
- First and second language acquisition: the role of culture in language learning
- Methods: preparation in language teaching, including courses in second language testing; methods of teaching content through ESL methods, and methods that use content-area instruction to teach the language (Feinberg, 2002:133)

The acquisition of proper communicative skills forms the crux of learning a second language, especially when this language is used as the language of both teaching and learning. This calls for new pedagogies, new approaches such as strategy-based instruction, and new textbooks (Rifkin, 2006:49). Although the communicative approach to language teaching is widely propagated in South Africa, ways of doing so are not always indicated. Thus, Rifkin's suggestions seem particularly appropriate.

Aukerman (2007:627, 634) states that English-language learners often receive decontextualised language from teachers and text. Decontextualised language is language used in such a way that it eschews reliance on social and physical contexts in favour of reliance on a context created through the language itself. There is then no shared social context that learners can rely on to deduce what to say or what something means. To recontextualise English for ESL learners, Aukerman suggests that teachers should discover what they can do and use about each child's language and life experience, and they should make room for this. In South Africa, where children speak so many different languages, it is debatable whether educators take cognisance of children's language experiences. Despite this complexity, South African communities are home to many people who could be approached and employed to assist learners whose home language is not the language of instruction. Classroom language activities should also be relevant from the learners' point of view and selected in accordance with the principles of outcomes-based education. Thus language learning and second language learning should be embedded in doing and talking.

As far as the teaching and learning of subject content in English as a second language is concerned, second language learners have a threefold task: they have to make sense of the

instructions posed in the second language; they have to attain sociolinguistic competence in order to allow greater participation; and eventually they have to attend to the learning content itself. Thus teachers should be aware of these processes when planning lessons and their methodologies. They have to provide assistance in understanding both the instructional processes and the linguistic medium that conveys them. Teachers need a thorough knowledge of relevant teaching strategies that can be used in the teaching of English as a second language. Short (1999:109) also believes that teacher background is a significant factor that affects student success. One of the main reasons for this is that institutions where teachers are trained rarely train student teachers in strategies for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse learners.

It is recommended that the knowledge and expertise of persons from various subjects be drawn upon when second language problems and especially problems with ESL are addressed in primary schools. The role of including community members in providing classroom assistance has already been mentioned. Experts in second language teaching, linguists and sociolinguistics should be brought in to address issues such as vocabulary acquisition in a second language, correct and understandable pronunciation, communication and the communicative approach in second language teaching, as well as the emotional side of second language learning. These guidelines could be considered in both in-service and pre-service teacher training in South Africa.

It is clear that a basic knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary is not sufficient to properly teach in English as a second language. The basic knowledge of English that many South African teachers have often masks their deficits in using the language effectively in the classroom. A consequence is that teachers' poor English ability is unfortunately passed on to many of their learners, with far-reaching consequences.

Alidou and Brock-Utne's (2006:85) recommendations for language training in teacher training in Africa apply equally to South Africa. They support the "integration of multilingual and intercultural education philosophies, theories and methodologies in the initial and in-service teacher training programs. Such an approach will help teachers become familiar with first and second language acquisition and teaching theories and methodologies" (Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2006:85).

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