

# Discrepancies between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English tests: Implications for teaching English in South Africa

**A B S T R A C T** Empirical data that indicate a discrepancy between perceptions and scores on English tests among South African participants (1998-2011) are reported. A discrepancy between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English tests is important because of its potential impact on language learner motivation. It will be shown that inflated self-perceptions of English proficiency result in the discrepancy between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English proficiency tests. Three explanations are offered for inflated perceptions of English proficiency. Firstly, it is argued that the multilingual identities of the respondents provide some understanding of inflated perceptions of English proficiency. Secondly, it is maintained that there are different conceptions of proficiency at work. Thirdly, resilience reported for African youth at a macro level is considered as contributing factor that results in inflated perceptions of English proficiency. The pedagogical implications of these explanations result in a proposed “multilingual awareness pedagogy” embedded in Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self System theory.

**Key words:** self-reported perceptions, language proficiency, English proficiency, multilingualism, pedagogy, resilience, L2 Motivational Self System

## 1. Introduction

Studies of affective factors such as perceptions are important because at a very basic level it is believed that perceptions influence behaviour (Oller & Perkins, 1977: 90; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991: 303; Ochse, 2005: 334), especially via contingent mediating variables like motivation

(Ochse, 2005: 334). For example, in the context of theories of motivation in psychology, Bandura's (2001: 10) self-efficacy theory establishes a link between perceptions, motivation and action when he states that perceptions (akin to attitudes, opinions and beliefs) about self-efficacy are the foundation of human agency.

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research, there is a long history of studies that focused on understanding the role of affective variables in second language learning (see, for example, the overview by Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011: 39-73). A prominent area of research along this line of inquiry is how perceptions and related affective variables influence motivation to learn second languages. Currently, according to the analyses of the state of the art in this domain (as presented in Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011), research about the role of affective variables and motivation in language learning is in the process-oriented period and there is a great interest in studying the trajectories of motivational change. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011: 60) argue that the study of motivational change "is of particular importance when the target of our interest is a sustained learning process, such as the mastery of a second language, which may take several years to accomplish".

Recently, the notions of perception, motivation and language learning were integrated into a comprehensive theory by Dörnyei (2009: 29-31, Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011: 84-88) referred to as the "L2 Motivational Self System". It is not the aim of this article to evaluate the appropriateness of the L2 Motivational Self System Theory for the learning of additional languages in South Africa. However, the theory provides a compelling rationale for the importance of studies of perceptions of English proficiency in South Africa and it is described briefly for that purpose.

The "L2 Motivational Self System" theory comprises the following three components (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011: 84-88):

- The **Ideal L2 self** which is the language-specific part of the ideal self that relates to the notion that if the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the ideal L2 self would be a powerful motivator to learn an L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves.
- The **Ought-to L2 self** which is related to the attributes one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and avoid negative outcomes.
- The **L2 Learning experience** which concerns the effect of the immediate learning environment and experiences of language learning.

In this theory, perceptions of the actual, ideal and ought-to L2 self are crucial. The theory hinges on the notion that a discrepancy between the actual L2 self and the ideal L2 self, moderated by influences from the ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience, would relate to sustained motivation and effort that would result in successful L2 learning (Dörnyei, 2009: 18). In other words, this theory proposes that a specific type of Ideal L2 self-perception would mediate language learners' motivation and effort and that it would ultimately determine the success or failure of language learning. The importance of understanding the perceptions of language learners about their actual and ideal L2 selves and how this potentially mediates their motivation and effort in language learning classrooms is underscored in this theory.

Although, as mentioned above, it is not the aim of this article to review the appropriateness of the theory for multilingual societies like South Africa, one needs to take cognisance of some

theoretical difficulties. It is important to note that the L2 Motivational Self System Theory was developed for and has to date been evaluated in foreign language learning contexts like Hungary (where learners learn English, German, French, Italian or Russian as additional languages) and Japan, China and Iran (where learners learn English as additional language) (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011: 85, 87, 275). There is no indication to date of the explanatory power of the theory in contexts other than that of foreign language learning or immigration.

At the conceptual level, there is a very obvious theoretical problem if one applies this theory in a multilingual society. In South Africa where there is widespread and deep societal and individual multilingualism, the notion of a singular additional language learning self is problematic. The main issue is: how would the L2 Motivational Self System Theory change if the ideal L2 self is conceptualised as the ideal multilingual self? Comprehensive evaluations (conceptually and empirically) would need to be conducted in South Africa (and other multilingual societies) to determine the validity and explanatory power of the theory in those contexts.

## **2. The research problem and questions**

The research problem I want to focus on in this article is how self-perceptions of proficiency in English could be related to English second language learning success for urban native speakers of Afrikaans and speakers of African languages (for example, Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana) in South Africa. I want to specifically focus on the implications for teaching English in a multilingual society like South Africa. In order to investigate the problem of interest in this article, I want to answer the following research questions regarding the native speakers of Afrikaans and the African languages used by participants (for example, Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana who participated in the study):

- a) What are their self-reported perceptions of their English proficiency?
- b) What are their actual English proficiency levels (according to different measuring instruments)?
- c) What is the relationship between their self-reported perceptions of English proficiency and measures of their English proficiency?
- d) What are the implications of the findings regarding questions (a) to (c) for teaching English in a multilingual context such as South Africa?

For the purpose of this article, it should be noted that language “proficiency” is used in a broad sense depicting the ability of language users in the context where they are asked to evaluate their skills at listening, speaking, reading and writing a language or the languages they know. In this very general sense, tests like standardised English proficiency tests and Grade 12 English First Additional Language examinations are regarded as indicators of English proficiency that could be compared with perceptions of English proficiency. For example, a participant’s perception of his proficiency at “reading English” is compared with his/her scores on a standardised English proficiency tests or final scores in Grade 12 English First Additional Language examinations that included components of reading English.

## **3. Research methodology**

For each of the three studies discussed in this article (1998/1999, 2002, 2010), the main research method involved the completion of a self-designed biographical questionnaire that gathered

opinions from participants about issues related to language and society. The basic format of the self-perception of English proficiency question was that participants had to rate their current English proficiency for specific skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was, “I am poor at, for example, speaking English” and 5 was, “I am very successful, for example, at speaking English”. The question participants had to answer was:

Table 1a: Question capturing perceptions of English proficiency in the 1998/1999 and 2002 studies

	Very poor	Poor	OK	Successful	Very successful
I SPEAK English	1	2	3	4	5
I WRITE English	1	2	3	4	5
I READ English	1	2	3	4	5
I UNDERSTAND English	1	2	3	4	5

In the 2010 study participants were asked to rate their perceptions of their language proficiency for all the languages they know separately. Participants in the 2010 study also had to indicate which language is their strongest, second strongest etc. “Strongest language” was defined as “the language that is the easiest for you to use to express yourself and people who know your strongest language understand what you want to communicate with ease in this language.” Participants could report up to five languages that they know and they ranked them from “strongest language” to fifth “strongest language”. In this study, data about self-perceptions of English proficiency were related separately for the various positions participants afforded English in the context of their ranking of their “strongest” languages. The perception of proficiency question that participants answered in this study was:

Table 1b: Question capturing perceptions of English proficiency in the 2010 study

On a scale from 1 to 4, please select your level of proficiency for each of the following skills in your strongest language / L1 [... second strongest language / L2; third strongest language / L3 and so on]

Not very good	1	2	3	4	Very good
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Language Skill	Proficiency rating in strongest language / L1
Speaking	
Listening to / understanding spoken language	
Reading	
Writing	

All participants in the 1998/1999, 2002 and 2010 studies completed a test of English proficiency, or gave permission for data from previously completed tests that are used as indicators of

English proficiency to be accessed by the researcher. The measures of English proficiency used were the “Proficiency test of English school language advanced level” (Van der Schyff, 1991; Chamberlain and Van der Schyff, 1991) in the 1998/1999 and 2002 studies, and in the 2010 study, learners’ marks for their final grade 12 English as First Additional Language subject were used as indicator of English proficiency.

The lack of use of a similar English proficiency measure across the three studies limits the strength of findings to some extent and future studies should endeavour to gather perceptions of proficiency and direct measures of skills more closely. The “Proficiency test of English school language advanced level” (Van der Schyff, 1991; Chamberlain and Van der Schyff, 1991) is a standardised general English proficiency test designed to test the “general proficiency level of English Second Language testees within the range of senior secondary proficiency levels (i.e. Standards 8, 9 and 10)” (Chamberlain & Van der Schyff, 1991: 15). The test specifically aimed to avoid scholastic content (Chamberlain & Van der Schyff, 1991: 16). It is a 40 item multiple-choice test and the test duration is 40 minutes. The test includes items that gauge the skills of English second language learners at the current grades 10, 11 and 12 levels at the morphological (for example, recognising incorrect use of tenses), syntactic (for example, changing actives to passives), lexical (for example, recognising correct idiomatic and functional use of verbs), semantic (for example, recognising paraphrased meaning of common idioms) and textual (for example, making general inferences based on the given text) levels. This test formed part of the battery of tests developed, maintained and sold by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of South Africa in the past. Currently, the HSRC does not perform these functions anymore and upon request for permission to use the “Proficiency test of English school language advanced level” (Van der Schyff, 1991; Chamberlain and Van der Schyff, 1991) in the 2010 study I was referred to a company called MindMuzik. My inquiries at the company made me realize that the “Proficiency test of English school language advanced level” (Van der Schyff, 1991; Chamberlain and Van der Schyff, 1991) was changed somewhat in the new battery of tests available from the company. I am in the process of trying to get permission from the test makers to use the older version of the test in future studies, because it would enable me to compare data in this cross-sectional study more directly. To solve this problem for the purpose of the 2010 study, I therefore had to work with the participants’ final Grade 12 marks for English as First Additional Language as indicator of English proficiency.

In the 1998/1999 study, a stratified random sample of Afrikaans and Southern Sotho speakers from three contexts participated in the study: Grade 11 and 12 learners from two high schools and first-year students from a former Technikon (now referred to as a university of technology) in the Vaal Triangle area. A total of 233 participants were involved in the study.

In the 2002 study, there was a focus on students enrolled at four higher education institutions who took Quantitative Techniques / Statistics as a subject. The criteria for participation were: students had to be enrolled for a business related qualification and as a result of this had to be enrolled for Quantitative Techniques / Statistics but this should not be one of the major subjects in their qualification. No sampling was conducted. The researcher depended on the goodwill of lecturers of Quantitative Techniques / Statistics at the participating institutions (three former Technikons: 1 in the Free State and 2 in Gauteng; and 1 historically disadvantaged university

Table 2: Biographical data of respondents in the 1998/1999 study<sup>1</sup>

	First year	Grade 11 / 12	Average number of languages known	Average age	Female	Male	% of fathers highest qualification Grade 12 or lower	% of mothers highest qualification Grade 12 or lower
<b>Afrikaans</b>	0	149	2	17	69	75	27%	45%
<b>Southern Sotho</b>	69	17	5	21	38	48	77%	67%

in the North-West Province) to make students available to participate in the study on the day of her pre-arranged visit. A total of 295 students participated in the study.

Table 3: Biographical data of respondents in the 2002 study

		Technikon 1	University	Technikon 2	Technikon 3
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	29 (59,2%)	11 (37,9%)	93 (57,8%)	30 (53,6%)
	<b>Male</b>	20 (37,7%)	18 (62,1%)	68 (42,2%)	26 (46,4%)
<b>Age</b>	<b>Average</b>	21	20	21	21
<b>Home languages of participants</b>	<b>Southern Sotho</b>	44,9%	0%	0%	16,9%
	<b>Tswana</b>	40,8%	77,1%	25,9%	15,3%
	<b>Northern Sotho</b>	0%	0%	27,2%	13,6%
	<b>Zulu</b>	0%	0%	8,6%	18,6%
	<b>Tsonga</b>	0%	0%	0%	13,6%
Number of languages known by participants	<b>Average</b>	4	4	5	5

No sampling was conducted in the 2010 study. The population that is reported on includes all the first-year students who attended the first day of orientation at a university campus in the Vaal Triangle area. A total of 1011 students participated in the survey.

<sup>1</sup> If numbers do not correspond with the total number of respondents that participated, this is due to missing data. This observation applies to data in all tables presented in this article.

Table 4: *Biographical details of participants in the 2010 study [n=1011]*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	663 (65,6%)
	<b>Male</b>	348 (34,4%)
<b>Age</b>	<b>16-20 years</b>	907/1011 (90%)

Table 5: *Home language distribution of participants in the 2010 study (n=1004)*

<b>Home language</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Southern Sotho	347	34.56%
Afrikaans	243	24.2%
Zulu	112	11.15%
English	96	9.56%
Tswana	92	9.16%
Northern Sotho	42	4.17%
Xhosa	40	3.97%
Venda	10	0.99%
Swati	5	0.5%
Tsonga	5	0.5%
Ndebele	4	0.4%
Shona	3	0.3%
German	2	0.2%
Chinese	1	0.1%
Greek	1	0.1%
Polish	1	0.1%

In this article, respondents who indicate the use an African language (such as Southern Sotho, Tswana and Zulu used by the majority of respondents in all three studies) as home language, will be clustered into one group for the purpose of analyses, because to date there is no evidence that different African first languages impact the English usage of these respondents in unique ways (Van Rooy, 2000; Van Rooy and Van Huyssteen, 2000; Wissing, 2002: 141). In other words, there is no linguistic evidence that indicates that “Southern Sotho English” is very different from “Setswana English” or “Zulu English”. Data for Afrikaans respondents are presented separately, simply because linguistically, Afrikaans is not regarded as an “African language”, and typically Afrikaans respondents are only bilingual, whereas African language speakers report proficiency in between three and five languages, irrespective of first language. The different experiences of bilingual and multilingual people are regarded as important in a study focusing on perceptions of language proficiency.

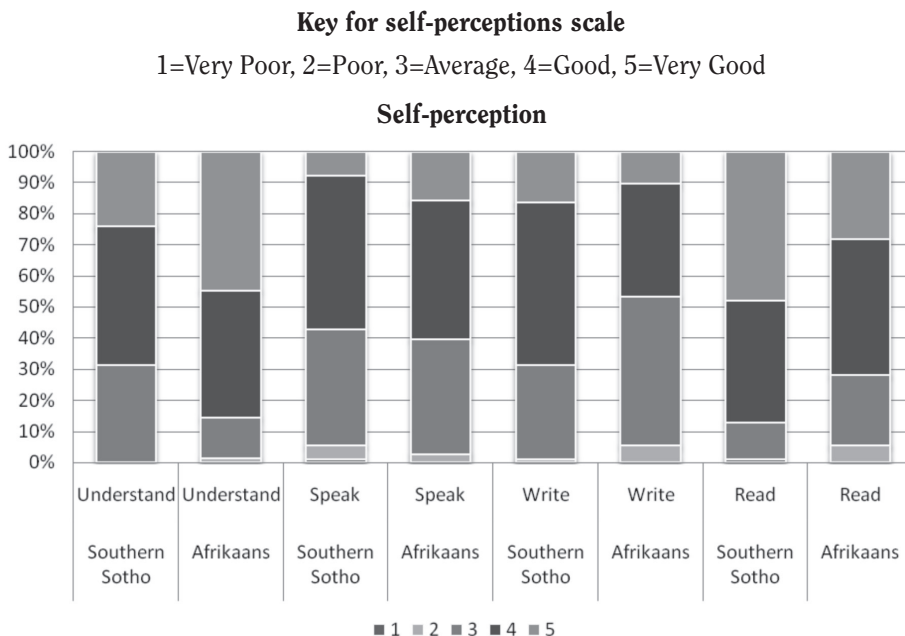
The following statistical analyses were conducted: (a) basic frequencies of the two sets of data (self-reported perceptions of English proficiency and scores on a measure of English language proficiency for Afrikaans and African languages participants) were calculated and the means and standard deviations were observed and interpreted; (b) an aggregated mean of all the measures of self-perception of English proficiency was correlated (Pearson Product Moment) with the raw scores on a measure of English proficiency for the Afrikaans and African languages participants.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 What are the self-reported perceptions of the English proficiency of Afrikaans and African Languages participants in the three studies?

The main finding related to the self-reported perceptions of the English proficiency of African and Afrikaans language speakers is that both groups believe that they are proficient in English. From the data presented in Graph 1 it is clear that the perceptions of proficiency of English for the Afrikaans and Southern Sotho respondents in the 1998/1999 study are high. The means and standard deviation are presented in Table 6. It is also important to note that the participants believe that they are equally proficient at the various skills in English.

Graph 1: Percentages of frequencies for Afrikaans and Southern Sotho participants for Understanding, Speaking, Writing and Reading English in the 1998/1999 study [Afrikaans n=148; Southern Sotho n=86]



In Graph 2, the self-reported perceptions of the African languages participants (where the majority of the participants used Southern Sotho and Tswana as home languages) in the 2002 study indicate a trend similar to that found in the 1998/1999 study: participants view their English proficiency as high. The means and standard deviations for this data are presented in Table 7.



Table 6: Means and standard deviations for data presented in Graph 1

	Afrikaans respondents		Southern Sotho respondents	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Listen to English</b>	4,3	0,74	3,9	0,74
<b>Speak English</b>	3,7	0,77	3,6	0,74
<b>Write English</b>	3,5	0,77	3,8	0,69
<b>Read English</b>	3,9	0,87	4,3	0,77

Graph 2: Percentages of frequencies for African Languages participants for Understanding, Speaking, Writing and Reading English in the 2002 study [n=125]

**Key for self-perceptions scale**  
 1=Very Poor, 2=Poor, 3=Average, 4=Good, 5=Very

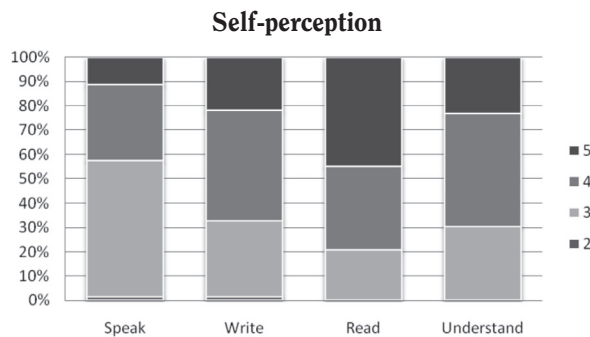


Table 7: Means and standard deviation for data in Graph 2

	African languages respondents	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Listen to English</b>	3,9	0,74
<b>Speak English</b>	3,52	0,71
<b>Write English</b>	3,87	0,76
<b>Read English</b>	4,23	0,79

The majority of the Afrikaans home language respondents (225/243) regarded Afrikaans as their strongest language and 18 out of 243 regarded English as their strongest language. In total, 15 of the 243 Afrikaans home language respondents indicated that they know a third language (3 knew German and Southern Sotho, 2 knew Dutch and 1 participant each knew French, Italian, Northern Sotho, Portuguese, Spanish, Zulu and Turkish) and the Afrikaans respondents did not indicate fourth or fifth languages at all. The Afrikaans home language group of respondents

are mainly bilingual, and the majority of the Afrikaans respondents (200/218) regarded English as their second strongest language in the 2010 study. They rated their proficiency at various skills performed in English as second strongest language as high, as is visible in Graph 3.

Graph 3: Percentages of frequencies for Afrikaans participants for Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading English perceived as second strongest language in the 2010 study [n=177]

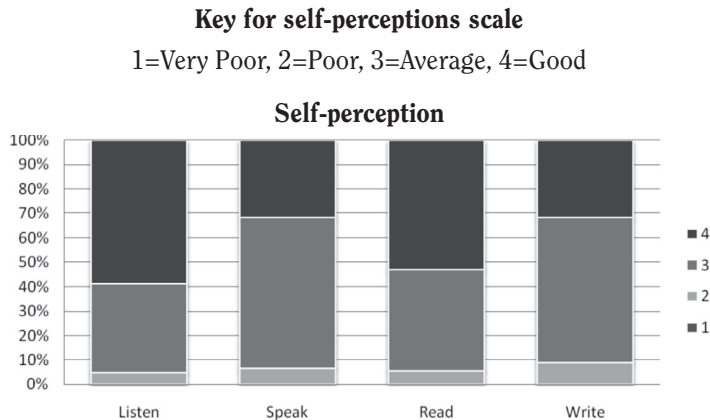


Table 8: Means and standard deviations of data presented in Graph 3

	Afrikaans respondents	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Listen to English</b>	3,53	0,61
<b>Speak English</b>	3,24	0,56
<b>Write English</b>	3,22	0,59
<b>Read English</b>	3,47	0,60

The majority of the African languages participants in the 2010 study used Southern Sotho (347/1004), Zulu (112/1004) and Tswana (92/1004) as home languages. These participants also reported to know an average of 4 languages. African languages participants (mainly using Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana as home languages) who regarded English as their second strongest language (see Graph 4) in the 2010 study present the same trend as that reported in the other studies: they believe they are proficient at English.

This trend (high perceptions of English proficiency) is repeated for the African languages participants (mainly using Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana as home languages) who regarded English as their strongest language in the 2010 study, as is visible in Graph 5.

In Graph 6, an aggregated perception score for the three groups that participated in the 2010 study indicates that the Afrikaans respondents perceive themselves as less proficient in English than the African languages respondents. It is also clear that the African languages respondents who perceive English as their strongest language are the most confident about their English proficiency when expressed as an aggregated score.

Graph 4: Percentages of frequencies for African languages participants for Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading English perceived as second strongest language in the 2010 study [n=235]

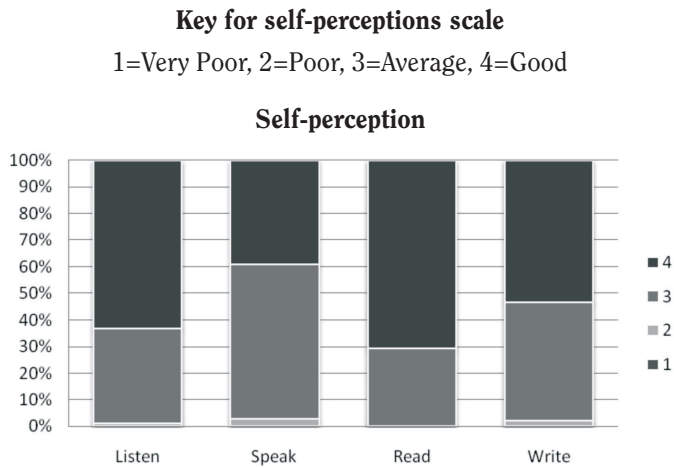


Table 9: Means and standard deviations of data presented in Graph 4

	African languages respondents	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Listen to English</b>	3,62	0,51
<b>Speak English</b>	3,36	0,55
<b>Write English</b>	3,22	0,59
<b>Read English</b>	3,51	0,56

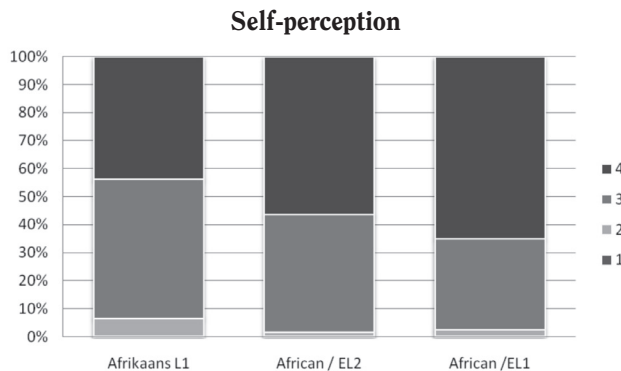
Graph 5: Percentages of frequencies for African languages participants for Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading English perceived as strongest language in the 2010 study [n=199]



Table 10: Means and standard deviations of data presented in Graph 5

	African languages respondents	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Listen to English</b>	3,73	0,49
<b>Speak English</b>	3,61	0,60
<b>Write English</b>	3,46	0,60
<b>Read English</b>	0,70	0,49

Graph 6: Aggregated perceptions of English proficiency in the 2010 study



Key to graph: L1=perceived as strongest language; EL2=English perceived as second strongest language; EL1=English perceived as strongest language

In summary, the findings are that the Afrikaans and African languages respondents in all three studies are equally confident that they are good at the English skills that they were asked about in this study.

#### 4.2 What are the English proficiency levels of the Afrikaans and African Languages participants in the three studies?

The overall finding related to scores on the different measures of English proficiency used in these three studies indicates that the English proficiency of the participants is average or below average. The English proficiency test used in the 1998/1999 and 2002 studies enabled the expression of respondents' English second language proficiency as a stanine that relates as follows to raw scores out of 40:

Table 11: Raw scores, stanines and descriptions of English second language proficiency for the English proficiency test by Van der Schyff (1991)

Raw score out of 40	Stanine	Description
36-40	9	Very good
33-35	8	Good

28-32	7	Above average
23-27	6	High average
18-22	5	Average
14-17	4	Low average
11-13	3	Below average
8-10	2	Poor
0-7	1	Very poor

(Van der Schyff, 1991: 20)

The average Stanine achieved by the Afrikaans participants in the 1998/1999 study is 5,9 and this average indicates that they are at a high average English L2 level for Grade 12 based on their performance on this proficiency test. The average Stanine for the African languages participants is 4,1 which indicates that they are at low average level for English L2 proficiency for Grade 12. A Pearson Product Moment correlation between the stanines of these two groups of participants indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the English proficiency scores of the two groups (see Table 16).

Graph 7: Frequencies of Stanines (English proficiency score) for Afrikaans and Southern Sotho participants in the 1998/1999 study [Afrikaans n=148; Southern Sotho n=86]

**Key for Stanines**

1=Very poor, 2=Poor, 3=Below Average, 4=Low average, 5=Average, 6=High Average, 7=Above Average, 8=Good, 9=Very good

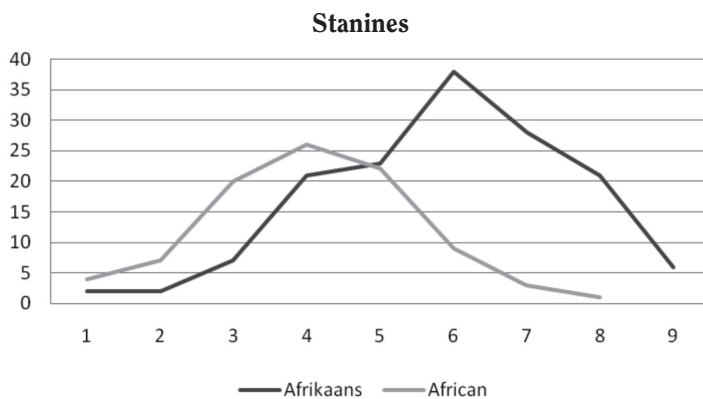


Table 12: Means and standard deviations of data presented in Graph 7

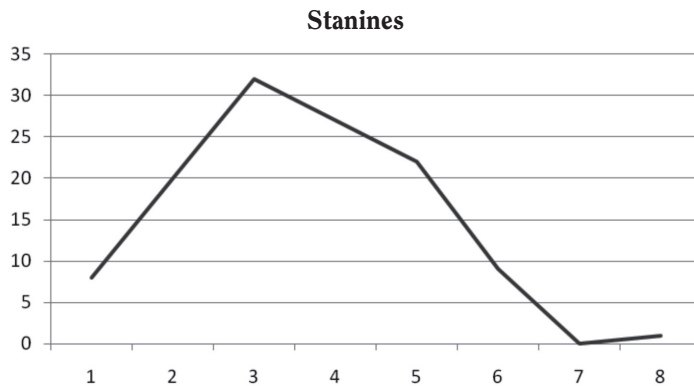
	Afrikaans respondents		Southern Sotho respondents	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Listen to English</b>	5,9	1,68	4,1	1,42

The average Stanine for the African languages participants in the 2002 study was 3,56 which is described as a point between below average and low average for English L2 reading proficiency for Grade 12 by this test. See Graph 8 for a presentation of this result.

Graph 8: Frequencies of Stanines (English proficiency score) for African Languages participants in the 2002 study [African Languages n=119; Mean=3,56; Standard Deviation=1,41]

**Key for Stanines**

1=Very poor, 2=Poor, 3=Below Average, 4=Low average, 5=Average, 6=High Average, 7=Above Average, 8=Good, 9=Very Good



As explained earlier, permission to use the “Proficiency test of English school language advanced level” (Van der Schyff, 1991; Chamberlain and Van der Schyff, 1991) could not yet be obtained for the 2010 study. The indicator of English proficiency used for these participants is their final Grade 12 English First Additional Language marks. It is important to note that participants in the 2010 study were asked to indicate their strongest, second strongest etc. languages and their perceptions of English proficiency are related to their choices of English in this context. The majority (91%) of the Afrikaans participants in the 2010 study perceived English as their second strongest language; the majority (55%) of the African languages participants perceived English as their second strongest language and for 45% of the African languages participants English was perceived as their strongest language, although they indicate an African language as home language.

Table 13: Scores of English proficiency for Afrikaans L1 speakers who indicated English as their second strongest language in the 2010 study

	Valid n	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Std.Dev.
<b>Final Grade 12 English First Additional language mark</b>	178	67.07	45.00	85.00	8.32

The African languages participants who believed that English is their second strongest language achieved an average of 60% for English as first additional language in Grade 12 (see Table 14).

The African languages participants who believed that English is their strongest language also achieved an average of 60% for English as first additional language in Grade 12 (see Table 15).

Table 14: Scores of English proficiency for African languages L1 speakers who indicated English as their second strongest language in the 2010 study

	Valid n	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Std.Dev.
<b>Final Grade 12 English First Additional language mark</b>	202	60.65	42.00	83.00	7.11

Table 15: Scores of English proficiency for African languages L1 speakers who indicated English as their strongest language in the 2010 study

	Valid n	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Std.Dev.
<b>Final Grade 12 English First Additional language mark</b>	238	60.30	46.00	81.00	7.02

In summary, it is noteworthy that the African languages participants in the 2010 group who believed that English is their strongest language, achieved the same average Grade 12 English First Additional Language marks in their final examination.

*4.3 What is the relationship between self-reported perceptions of English proficiency and measures of English proficiency for these Afrikaans and African Languages participants?*

The relationships between perceptions of English proficiency and measures of English proficiency are investigated with Pearson Product Moment correlations. Perceptions of English proficiency are correlated with scores on a variety of English proficiency measures.

The main finding is that there is a correlation between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English proficiency tests. Correlation results for the 1998/1999 study indicate that there is a statistically significant relationship between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English proficiency tests for both the Afrikaans and the African languages groups. However, the correlation between the perceptions and scores of English proficiency is much stronger for the Afrikaans respondents ( $r= 0,51$ ) than for the African languages respondents ( $r=0,25$ ) (see  $r(X,Y)$  in Table 16).

Table 16: Pearson Product Moment correlation between the raw score of English proficiency test and aggregated means of components of self-reported proficiency for Afrikaans and African languages participants in the 1998/1999 study

<b>Afrikaans</b>	Mean	Std.Dev.	$r(X,Y)$	$r^2$	p	n
Raw Score	24.84	7.59				
Self perception	3.86	0.65	0.51	0.26	0.000	146
<b>African languages</b>	Mean	Std.Dev.	$r(X,Y)$	$r^2$	p	n
Raw Score	16.53	5.53				
Aggregate Self-perceptions	3.92	0.55	0.25	0.06	0.016	92

In Table 17 the results from independent t-tests are presented that investigated the difference between groups in terms of perceptions of English proficiency scores and scores on an English proficiency test. From this table it is clear that the perceptions of English proficiency for both groups are exactly the same; but that there is a statistically significant difference between the English proficiency scores achieved by the two groups.

Table 17: Independent t-test to determine if the means of the proficiency tests and aggregate score of self reported proficiency for the Afrikaans and African languages participants are similar in the 1998/1999 study

	Mean African	Mean Afrikaans	t-value	df	p	n African	n Afrikaans	Std. Dev.	Std. Dev.
<b>Self perception</b>	3.92	3.86	0.64	237	0.522	93	146	0.55	0.65
<b>Raw Score</b>	16.57	24.75	-9.01	239	0.000	93	148	5.51	7.58

The within group analyses of data for the 2002 study indicates that there is a statistically significant correlation between an aggregate of components of perceptions of English proficiency and scores on an English proficiency test for the African languages participants in this group. See Table 18.

Table 18: Pearson Product Moment correlation between the raw score of English proficiency test and aggregated means of components of self-reported proficiency for African languages participants in the 2002 study

	Mean	Std. Dev.	r(X,Y)	r <sup>2</sup>	p	n
<b>Raw score / 40</b>	14.50	5.14				
<b>Composite means self-perceptions</b>	3.85	0.62	0.34	0.11	0.00	96

In other words, there is a statistically significant correlation between the self-perception of English proficiency and achievement on an English proficiency test for these participants. Furthermore, this is a stronger correlation ( $r=0,34$ ) than that reported for African languages participants in Table 15 (recall,  $r=0,25$ ), but it is still a weaker correlation than that reported for Afrikaans participants in Table 15 (recall,  $r=0,51$ ).

There is a statistically significant correlation between perceptions of English proficiency and the final Grade 12 First Additional Language marks for the Afrikaans participants in the 2010 study ( $r=0.38$  in Table 19).

Table 19: Pearson Product Moment correlations between final Grade 12 English First Additional Language marks and aggregated means of components of self-reported proficiency for Afrikaans participants who perceive English as their second strongest language in the 2010 study

	Mean	Std. Dev.	r(X,Y)	r <sup>2</sup>	p	n
<b>Composite self-perception of English as second strongest language Composite L2 perception</b>	3.35	0.48				



<b>Grade 12 English First Additional Language marks</b>	67.13	8.02	0.38	0.14	0.00	153
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There is a statistically significant correlation between perceptions of English proficiency and final marks achieved in the Grade 12 English First Additional Language examination for African languages participants who perceive English as their strongest language in the 2010 study; although the correlation is weak ( $r=0,10$  in Table 20).

Table 20: Pearson Product Moment correlations between final Grade 12 English First Additional Language marks and aggregated means of components of self-reported proficiency for African languages speakers who perceive English as their strongest language in the 2010 study

	Mean	Std. Dev.	r(X,Y)	r <sup>2</sup>	p	n
<b>Composite self-perception of English as strongest language</b>	3.67	0.34				
<b>Grade 12 English First Additional Language marks</b>	60.67	7.16	0.10	0.01	0.23	156

There is a statistically significant correlation between perceptions of English proficiency and final marks achieved in the Grade 12 English First Additional Language examination for African languages participants who perceive English as their second strongest language in the 2010 study; although the correlation is weak ( $r=0,15$  in Table 21).

Table 21: Pearson Product Moment correlations between final Grade 12 English First Additional Language marks and aggregated means of components of self-reported proficiency for African languages speakers who perceive English as their second strongest language in the 2010 study

	Mean	Std. Dev.	r(X,Y)	r <sup>2</sup>	p	n
<b>Composite self-perception of English as second strongest language</b>	3.55	0.42				
<b>Grade 12 English First Additional Language marks</b>	60.79	7.03	0.15	0.02	0.04	185

From the data reported in this section, it is clear that there is a statistically significant correlation between the self-reported perceptions of English proficiency of the Afrikaans and African languages participants and their scores on measures of English proficiency across the three studies. This relationship is stronger for the Afrikaans participants in the two studies where data were collected from them. This finding is not new. Several studies that focused on language perceptions and language proficiency in different contexts found a relationship between self-reported perceptions of proficiency and scores on proficiency tests or qualitative assessments of language proficiency (for example, Oller & Perkins, 1977; Xu, 1991: 567; MacIntyre et al., 1997; Tse, 2000; Camiciottoli, 2001; Yamashita, 2004).

The data across the three studies indicate that the self-perception of English proficiency for Afrikaans and African languages respondents is equally high, although their marks achieved

in an English proficiency test and Grade 12 final marks for English as an Additional Language differ statistically significantly (see Table 16). If marks in the English proficiency test and final Grade 12 marks for English as Additional Language are accepted as indicators of English second language proficiency for these participants, the self-perceptions of proficiency in English reported by African languages users of English are inflated. In the rest of the article, I want to review possible explanations for the inflated sense of English proficiency reported for the African languages participants in these studies and I want to consider some of the implications of an inflated sense of English proficiency for teaching English to speakers of African languages in South Africa.

## **5. Discussion and interpretation of findings**

This section aims to provide explanations for the main finding of this study: the discrepancy between self-reported perceptions of English proficiency and scores on some measures of English proficiency because of inflated perceptions of English proficiency for African languages participants in these studies.

This article will not discuss the findings for Afrikaans participants in detail, because their perceptions of English proficiency are better aligned with their performances on the English proficiency test and their marks in the Grade 12 English Additional Language examination. Separate studies should be conducted to explain this alignment and its implications for teaching English in South Africa better. However, it should be noted that the Afrikaans participants performed better on the English proficiency tests than the African languages participants across the three studies. The African languages participants therefore over-estimated their English proficiency to a greater extent than the Afrikaans participants. This finding is similar to that of Ochse (2005: 339) who found that African students and white students held the same perception of their general academic success, but that African students achieved significantly lower academic grades than white students in that study. Furthermore, it was found that African students over-estimated their future academic performance to a far greater degree than white students (Ochse, 2005: 339; 340), similar to the findings reported in this article. The possible effect of the bilingual experience of the Afrikaans participants (in contrast to the multilingual experience of the African languages participants) and the effect of higher English proficiency levels (as represented in higher scores on the English proficiency test and marks in the Grade 12 English First Additional Language examination for the Afrikaans respondents) should be studied more systematically in relation to their self-perceptions of English proficiency in future studies.

The empirical data reported in this article confirm the opinions of some teachers that learners of English as a second language elsewhere and in South Africa often overestimate their language abilities (see Littlewood et al., 1996: 76, 78 for a study conducted in Hong Kong; see Stephen et al., 2004: 42 for a reflection on South African students at other higher education institutions). This is particularly true for the African languages participants in the studies reported on in this article. The discrepancy between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English proficiency tests is not reported for the South African context only. Studies conducted in a variety of contexts found that there is some degree of over-estimation of English proficiency in various skills when compared to some other measure of the English skill (see e.g. Blanche

& Merino, 1989; Zun et al., 2006: 912). MacIntyre et al. (1997: 265-266) studied perceived competence in a second language as a function of actual competence and language anxiety and their main finding is that anxious students tended to underestimate their competence relative to less anxious students who tended to overestimate their competence. However, the majority of studies conducted about the relationship between perceptions of language proficiency and measures of language proficiency indicate that learners under-estimate their proficiency (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; MacIntyre et al., 1997: 280; Tse, 2000: 69, 78, 80).

In an earlier article written about the data of the 1998/1999 study I explained the positive perceptions of English proficiency that underlie the discrepancy between perceptions and scores on measures of English proficiency for African languages users in three ways. One of the less important aims of this article was also to review those explanations and to determine if they were still valid today. Firstly, I argued that the multilingual identities of the respondents explained their positive perceptions about their English proficiency (Coetzee-Van Rooy and Verhoef, 2000 181. We argued that multilingual people (especially true of urban African South Africans) are aware of their skills in the different languages they know and that they regard their ability to, for example, read English as high, because they measure it against their ability to read their home languages and the other 3 or 4 languages they know. They are aware that they rarely read in these other languages and therefore they regard their English proficiency in reading positively. The same argument could be extended to the mainly bilingual Afrikaans group that participated in the studies reported on in this article. They are much more likely to read Afrikaans regularly, and they therefore know that they read English well, but they are aware that their ability to read Afrikaans is better. This could also explain their slightly less enthusiastic perception ratings for reading English, when compared to those of the African languages group.

I maintain that this argument is confirmed by data from the 2010 study reported on in this article. If one uses additional data about all the languages known by the 2010 participants, this explanation is supported strongly. In Graph 9, the Afrikaans participants' perceptions of their Afrikaans proficiency (as strongest language) clearly indicate that they are more confident about for example reading in Afrikaans, than they are about reading in English (perceived as their second strongest language) (compare with Graph 3).

Graph 9: Perceptions of proficiency in Afrikaans for the group who regarded Afrikaans as their strongest language in the 2010 study [n = 230]

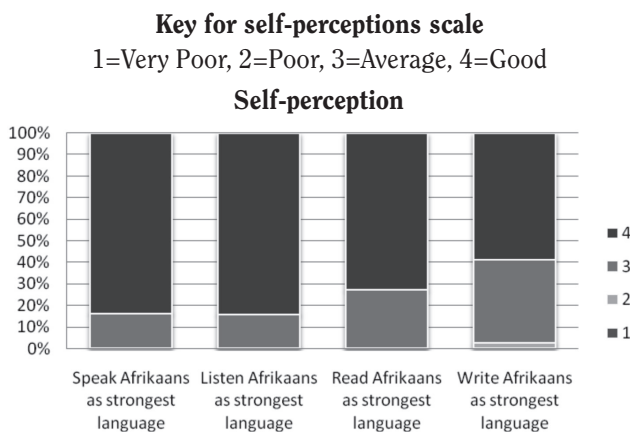


Table 22: Means and standard deviations of data presented in Graph 9

	Afrikaans respondents	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
Listen to Afrikaans	3,83	0,40
Speak Afrikaans	3,83	0,37
Write Afrikaans	3,56	0,55
Read Afrikaans	3,72	0,46

The data for the Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana respondents who regard Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana as home languages, but who also regard English as their strongest language and Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana as their second strongest languages, indicate that they do not believe that they, for example, write and read their home languages very well. This is in contrast to their perceptions of their reading and writing abilities in English as second strongest language as presented in Graph 4.

Graph 10: Perceptions of Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana participants who regard Southern, Zulu and Tswana as second strongest language in the 2010 study [n=143]



Table 22: Means and standard deviations of data presented in Graph 10

	Southern Sotho, Zulu, Tswana respondents	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
Listen to Southern Sotho, Zulu, Tswana as second strongest language	3,42	0,63
Speak Southern Sotho, Zulu, Tswana as second strongest language	3,53	0,57
Write Southern Sotho, Zulu, Tswana as second strongest language	2,20	1,04

<b>Read Southern Sotho, Zulu, Tswana as second strongest language</b>	2,37	1,01
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The data from the Afrikaans respondents who believe that Afrikaans is their strongest language and the African languages respondents (Southern Sotho, Zulu and Tswana home language users) who believe English is their strongest language, provide empirical evidence that perceptions of language proficiencies in the languages known by bi- and multilingual people are influenced by all the languages they know and use for various skills. The pedagogical implications of this explanation will be presented in the next section of the article.

The second explanation we gave for the positive ratings of perceptions of English proficiency in an earlier article (Coetzee-Van Rooy and Verhoef, 2000: 183) was that participants responded to a different type of English proficiency than the underlying constructs aimed at in some of the perception questions. From other data gathered in these studies, it is clear that the urban African South Africans learn additional languages mainly for one purpose: intra- and international communication across languages, cultures, religions, and races. Examples of this sentiment are expressed as follows by African languages participants in the 1998/1999 and 2010 studies where respondents state that South Africans must learn additional languages, “So that they can be able to communicate with other people of different languages” (respondent 1 in the 1998/1999 study); and “South Africans need to learn languages so that it can be easier for them to communicate to each other and so that there can be peace in South Africa” (respondent 44 in the 1998/1999 study). Similar sentiments are expressed by participants in the 2010 study. Respondent 250 states the following when she provides a reason for learning English and perceiving it as her strongest language: “It is mostly used nationally and internationally for communication. It is one language I can use to communicate with any race”. Similar sentiments are expressed by a vast number of respondents in the 2010 study: “I learnt English mainly because it is my medium of instruction and it is much easier to communicate with anyone despite of their race and international connection” (respondent 297 in the 2010 study); or “My intention was to be able to speak to other People who can’t speak my Home language” (by respondent 328 in the 2010 study). A mere 9 of the 2537 responses to the question “why did you learn your strongest, second strongest etc. language?” in the 2010 study were related to information. The rest of the responses focused on communication as the main reason for learning additional languages. I want to argue that when these respondents rate their proficiency in English, they rate their ability to communicate in the language across cultures and languages. They do not rate their ability to perform “information tasks” in this language. The distinction made by Cummins (Cummins, 1984: 136; Cummins & Swain, 1986: 152; Cummins, 1995: 57) in terms of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) does not underlie the responses of the participants in the various data sets., That is why they rate their proficiency in English as very successful (see Davidson and Henning, 1985: 176 for a similar explanation of the under-estimation of difficulty with English based on self-reports by English second language students at the University of California at Los Angeles).

Thirdly, we argued in the 2000 paper, that these respondents are very proficient in English if they compare themselves with people in their community. In the late 1990s in South Africa, the

African languages respondents were first generation students at universities. When compared to their peers and even parents, these students were aware that they were part of a small elite who made it to university in South Africa. Ochse (2005: 342) reported that the African students in her study used “downward social comparisons” that resulted in unrealistic expectations of the effort that was required to achieve academically in general at university. I argue that these unrealistic academic estimations carry over to estimations of English proficiency in particular, because of the importance of English as the language of teaching and learning of African students.

A potentially more contextual explanation for the positive perceptions of English proficiency of the African languages respondents that participated in these studies has emerged in recent research focused on resilience (defined below), as embedded in a prominent global and South African movement towards strengths based theories (defined below) in psychology, educational psychology and pedagogy (Benard, 1997; Bowers, 2000; Lewis, 1999; Martin & Marsh, 2003, 2006; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Oyserman et al., 2006; Williams, 2009; Zambrana-Ortiz, 2011). Resilience is defined as “the capacity to do well in life, despite significant adversity” (Theron, 2011: 1). Two criteria must be present for a person to be identified as a resilient individual: they must experience significant threat (e.g. poverty); and they must adapt well to significant risk (Theron, 2011: 1-2). Strengths based theories focus on people’s strengths and not on deficits or pathologies, often the focus in more traditional psychological approaches (Theron, 2011: 1).

Resilience scholars like Masten (2001), Rutter (2007) and Ungar (2008: 218) utilize a strengths-based framework to study the thriving and development of children and family populations that are at risk; in other words they argue that resilience occurs in the presence of adversity (Ungar, 2008: 220). In an attempt to contextualize definitions of resilience, Ungar (2008: 225) proposes the following definition of resilience:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways.

In the South African context, Theron (2007: 357-358) defines resilience as “the ability to live well in a milieu dominated by risk. It denotes the dynamic interaction between an individual, a given milieu, and accessible opportunities, rather than a fixed attribute or personal trait.” There is a lack of research among Afrikaans speaking youth in the resilience field, a fact acknowledged by Theron and Dunn (2010: 233) in their study of post-divorce resilience among Afrikaans-speaking youth in South Africa. In South Africa, the phenomenon has been studied primarily among African youth to date.

It is postulated in this article that the positive self-perceptions of English proficiency displayed by the African languages participants in this study could be explained by their potential resilience. Resilience researchers report positive self-perceptions as a variable among resilient people. In a survey of findings across two models of resilience research, Masten (2001: 231) for example reports that:

Results from variable-focused studies of resilience suggest that parenting qualities, intellectual functioning, SES, and *positive self-perceptions* [my emphasis] have broad and pervasive correlations with multiple domains of adaptive behavior.

Similar findings are reported by Margalit (2004: 47) and Lackaye and Margalit (2006: 443).

It must be noted that no measures of resilience were included in this study and this should be considered for future studies. However, the potentially resilient nature of African youth is reported widely and this phenomenon provides an additional explanation for the overestimation of perceptions of English proficiency documented in this article. The implications of this explanation for pedagogy are considered in the next section of the article.

## **6. Implications of findings for teaching English in multilingual South Africa**

Ochse (2005: 342) argues that her findings of the overestimation of academic expectations and perceptions of South African students are problematic in the context of programmes that aim at empowering people through enhancement of their expectations and self-perceptions. Data reported in this article raise the same concern in the context of perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English proficiency tests.

Most studies about relationships between perceptions of language proficiency and actual performance on language proficiency tests conducted elsewhere in the world indicate that learners displayed low confidence levels with regard to their language proficiency and the pedagogical implications were aimed at raising learners' self-confidence to reduce anxiety in the language learning classroom to facilitate better language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; MacIntyre et al., 1997: 280; Tse, 2000: 69, 78, 80).

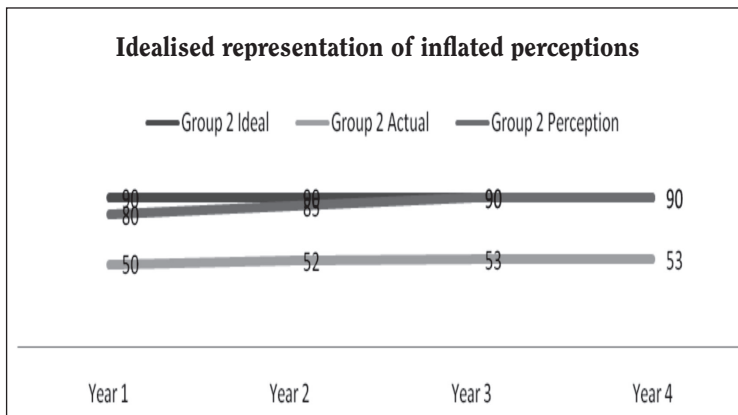
MacIntyre et al., (1997: 279) and Ochse (2005: 342-343) consider the implications of the overestimation of language proficiency or academic ability for pedagogy. MacIntyre et al. (1997: 279) argue that "self-enhancement would probably facilitate language learning while self-derogation would impair progress". Conversely, Ochse (2005: 342-343) argues that "there is little evidence ... to suggest that positive self-perceptions will be translated into real achievement where the criterion of achievement is a test of knowledge and academic skill". Ochse (2005: 242) grapples with the pedagogical implications of the over-estimation of academic self-perceptions, but does not progress beyond the obvious that it is not sensible to suppress over-optimism by crushing self-esteem, because this might influence motivation among other non-desirable effects.

The pedagogical dilemma is even more pronounced in the context of Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system. Data reported in this article confirm that there is a correlation between self-perceptions of English proficiency and English proficiency scores or marks in Grade 12 English First Additional Language examinations. At a very superficial level, these data provide indirect additional confirmation that there is a relationship between perceptions of English proficiency and achievement in English proficiency. However, the discrepancy between the perceptions of English proficiency and measures of English proficiency for African languages participants is problematic, especially if one keeps the expected "direction" of the discrepancy as postulated in Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System theory in mind. In this theory, it is assumed that

language learners are aware of the discrepancy between their actual L2 self and their ideal L2 self and that such awareness results in sustained motivation and effort that leads to higher achievement in language learning. The data reported in this article indicate that the inverse was true, particularly for the African languages participants. They believed that they already were very proficient in English. In other words, one can predict that they would probably not be highly motivated to sustain efforts in English language classrooms.

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) argue that the ideal L2 self is a powerful motivator under very specific conditions. I want to focus on two of those conditions in this article, because the data reported relate to these two conditions and could inform explorations of appropriate pedagogy. Firstly, the L2 learner must have a desired L2 future self-image. It can be argued that the African language participants in these studies do not display a “desired L2 future self-image” because they over-estimate their proficiency in English and this diminishes their motivation to expend efforts in the English classroom. An “idealized” representation of the effect of this “undesirable L2 future self-image” is presented in Graph 11 below. The representation is “idealized” because it is not calculated from real data, but an extrapolation of the argument presented above, as embedded in Dörnyei’s theory of the L2 motivational self system.

*Graph 11: “Idealized” representation of “inflated” perceptions of English proficiency as displayed by the African language participants in these studies*

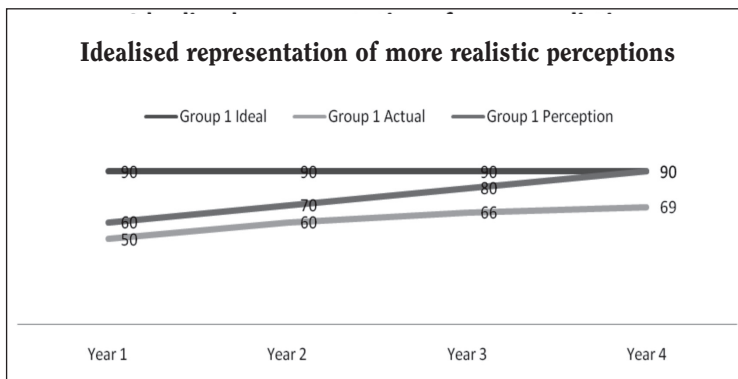


If the “discrepancy” between the ideal and actual L2 selves is small (as presented in Graph 11), the net effect on motivation will be small and therefore marginal gains are to be expected in terms of increased proficiency. Conversely, a larger “discrepancy” between the ideal and actual L2 self (as postulated in Dörnyei’s theory) creates enough energy that leads to increased motivation, sustained effort and increased proficiency (see idealized representation in Graph 12).

Secondly, Dörnyei argues that the desired L2 future self-image must be perceived as plausible and in harmony with the expectations of the learner’s family, peers and other elements of the social environment. It is widely acknowledged that the South African society is multilingual in two respects: many languages are used in the country (societal multilingualism) and individuals in the country are able to use many languages (individual multilingualism). The society is thus regarded as multilingual at the societal and individual levels. Data reported in



Graph 12: "Idealized" representation of "desired L2 self" as postulated by Dörnyei



this article confirm these statements. The “ideal” South African is therefore a multilingual person, akin to Bamgbose’s (1991) very eloquent theorem that an integrated citizen in Africa is a multilingual citizen. I want to argue that this societal expectation governs the nature of skills in English that is aimed at particularly by African languages speakers of English. Participants in this study indicated overwhelmingly that they acquired additional languages to communicate with people across languages, cultures, races and countries. The notion of the acquisition of a language for ideational purposes is not evident in any of the reasons provided by the large groups of African language participants in these studies. When the African language participants therefore evaluated their own proficiency of English, they could well argue that they acquired the English they needed perfectly: they were able to communicate with people across languages, cultures, races and countries. This again confirmed for them that they were very proficient at English.

The application of data from these studies, as related to two of the conditions under which the L2 ideal self could be a motivator for language learning, indicate that Dörnyei’s assumptions provide an explanation for the discrepancy between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English proficiency tests and marks on Grade 12 English First Additional Language examinations for African languages learners in South Africa. These respondents do not hold a “desired” L2 self-image: their perceptions of their English proficiency are inflated, possibly due to the multilingual context in which they learn and use English. Furthermore, their desired L2 self-image is in perfect harmony with the expectations of their peers, family and the society in general. They therefore experience no need to adjust their ideal L2 self-image. This brief evaluation suggests that the theory is potentially useful to explain the discrepancies between perceptions of English proficiency and ultimate achievement of English proficiency as demonstrated by scores on some tests and marks on some examinations. The most attractive line of argumentation is that the theory is able to explain the below average levels of English proficiency achieved and reported for South African learners of English, despite the high status of the language and the assumed high motivation to learn English. The pedagogical implications of this and other explanations and findings are discussed below.

In general, one of the most important issues to consider is how “generous” or “inflated” perceptions of English proficiency influence the motivation of language learners to participate

in language courses. If we do not engage with the pedagogical implications of these findings, it seems that the findings of this study are of very little help to English teachers and lecturers other than they should note that English language learners will use “below average English” with great confidence. Stephen et al., (2004: 42) similarly note that academic staff in South Africa often consider English proficiency as a contributing factor in academic success, although students “often feel they experience few problems with English language. This indicates that many students have a low awareness of their specific problems in this regard”.

One of the most important pedagogical implications is that it is possible that the African language learners are particularly resilient. It is very difficult to ascertain how the effects of a resilient nature will influence learning in general and additional language learning in particular. Furthermore, one should keep in mind that no measure of the absence or presence of resilience was included in this study to date. The concept resilience therefore provides a macro-level explanation for the potential generous or inflated perceptions of English proficiency of participants in this study. Future studies would need to include measures of resilience to ascertain more clearly how a potential resilient nature relates to learning in general and language learning in particular in the South African context.

In the context of pedagogy in its broadest sense, the idea of a pedagogy that attends to therapeutic needs (Lewis, 1999), a “pedagogy of success” or optimism building pedagogies (Bowers, 2000; Williams, 2009), pedagogies that work towards classroom environments conducive for academic resilience (Benard, 1997; Martin & Marsh, 2003, 2006; Zambrana-Ortiz, 2011), and pedagogies related to “possible selves” (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Oyserman et al., 2006) are beginning to emerge. An important issue to consider is that all the above mentioned sources focus on strategies to develop resilience in general or academic resilience in particular, in other words, strategies for enhancing the self-confidence of learners is the focus of this work. Very little of the current work focuses on a situation where there might be an “inflated” or overly-generous perception of self. The pedagogical implications for sustaining resilience in general and academic resilience in particular need more attention.

The main pedagogical approach following from the explanations of perceptions of English proficiency and the discrepancy between perceptions of English proficiency and achievement in some English proficiency tests and examinations, is the raising of awareness. In their discussion of the practical implications of the L2 motivation self system theory, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011: 104-136) provide some pedagogical avenues for exploration along these lines. The most important starting point should be to assist learners to create realistic learner beliefs (2011: 117). They argue that most learner beliefs about language learning would be incorrect and that unrealistic learner beliefs would be detrimental for language learning because they could lead to disappointment or clash with the course methodology and therefore inhibit language learning success. They argue that raising awareness about two issues contribute to a more realistic set of learner beliefs: (a) teachers must assist learners to develop an informed understanding of the nature of second language acquisition and help them to develop reasonable criteria for progress; and (b) teachers should emphasise that mastery of a second language can be achieved in a variety of ways, with diverse strategies and they should assist learners to discover their most powerful language learning approaches. The creation of clear role models that embody

progress in English language learning for individual students is important (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011:131). This requires exercises in which students are presented with different role models that use English in South Africa with a view to make them aware that they are aspiring to similar levels of English proficiency for different tasks (see for example the attitudinal survey conducted by Coetzee-Van Rooy and Van Rooy, 2005). Apart from researching attitudes towards varieties of English in South Africa, this exercise forms the starting point for a discussion about models that inform visions of constructive English L2 selves.

The inclusion of discussions about how people learn second languages at appropriate levels in language learning courses seems to be an important starting point for a pedagogy aimed at learners with inflated self-perceptions of English proficiency. This “pedagogy of awareness” should be implemented as a “pedagogy of multilingual awareness” for it to succeed in South Africa. In a multilingual society where all people would have a wide variety of language learning experiences in different contexts, activating language learning experiences and experiences about the different functions of languages are powerful resources to draw on. Using these experiences, and relating the how and why for learning a variety of languages could contribute substantially to helping multilingual learners of English in South Africa to form more realistic images that relate to their language abilities and language needs. Once a more realistic language learning self-image is created, an important next step would be to “keep the vision alive”; and to counterbalance the vision with considerations of failure (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011: 132). Activities that assist learners to keep the vision alive could include assisting them to audiotape themselves reading a passage in English, asking them to provide feedback on each other’s recording and repeating these recordings over a period of time so that they could gauge if they are progressing towards the ideal English model they are aiming at. Activities that relate to counterbalancing the vision with considerations of failure could use well-known sociolinguistic knowledge about perceptions of different accents and perceptions of different writing styles and registers as starting point. Feedback would play a very important role in a “pedagogy of multilingual awareness”. Feedback is also noted as an important activity by Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011: 126-129).

Finally, we need to consider which curriculum approach would best support learning when learners believe that they are very proficient in English. In general, we assume that learners who believe they are very proficient at English would not enrol in a general language development course voluntarily and they would not be motivated to attend compulsory general language development courses. An approach that assists them to understand that they might know English for general communication well, but that they should continue to improve their understanding of English for academic purposes might be the potentially more powerful curriculum approach to consider. Raising the awareness of learners that academic language, and specifically the language of their future profession, is an important “code” to learn might improve their motivation to attend these courses and to engage meaningfully.

## **7. Conclusions**

The article attempted to explain the observed discrepancy between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on some tests of English proficiency for African languages participants in South Africa. Three explanations for inflated perceptions of English proficiency and the

resultant discrepancy between perceptions of English proficiency and scores on English proficiency tests were provided: the multilingual nature of the participants, a misunderstanding of different types of possible English proficiency and potential resilience of African participants were discussed. These explanations were proposed in Coetzee-Van Rooy and Verhoef (2000) and confirmed and elaborated on with additional data from the 2002 and 2010 studies reported on in this article. A further deepening of our understanding of the potential social context in which especially African youth learn English in South Africa was explored by integrating initial explanations with new research findings from the field of resilience research.

Following from these explanations, some of the implications for pedagogy were presented. It was argued that a pedagogy of multilingual awareness, embedded in an English for specific purposes curriculum model would be the most effective approach towards learners who are multilingual and who hold inflated perceptions of their English proficiency. The potential explanatory power of Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System theory was discussed briefly and a more thorough review of the applicability of the theory to explain language learning success in the South African context seems promising, though the theory would need to be adjusted in some ways to account for a context in which the ideal language learner is a multilingual person. I would argue that the potential expansion of the theory to accommodate multilingual contexts like South Africa could only improve the explanatory power of the theory to explain second language learning in more contexts. Furthermore, the theory seems promising as a more comprehensive explanatory framework for the persistent below average proficiency reported for English language learners in South Africa, despite motivation to learn English and the indisputable status of the language in the country. Future research should include more qualitative explorations of learners' perceptions of their English proficiency and correlate these directly with motivations to learn English as an additional language in South Africa.

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