

Critique of a language enrichment programme for Grade 4 ESL learners with limited English proficiency: a pilot study

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Some Grade 4 educators have expressed feelings of ineptitude regarding the support of ESL (English Second Language) learners with limited English proficiency as they do not know how to support these learners effectively. Their litany emphasises ESL educators' need for supportive and preventive intervention. A Story-based Language Enrichment Programme (SLEP) was compiled to suit the needs of educators teaching Grade 4 ESL learners with limited English proficiency. The programme was designed to maintain or improve the English proficiency of ESL learners. An intervention research method was followed to test the efficacy of SLEP. Forty teachers implemented SLEP over a six-week period. Thirty-nine teachers provided constructive feedback at the end of this period. Between 92% and 100% of the participants rated SLEP positively. Rural participants suggested some refinements to the programme. The overall conclusion was that SLEP makes a useful contribution to ESL practice.

Keywords: English Second Language learners; language enrichment programme; limited English proficiency

Introduction

Universally, English is the dominant language of communication, academia, business, and technology (Vermeulen, 2001; Cele, 2001; Mulholland, 2006). One consequence of this is that many parents/caregivers believe that English is the best choice of LOLT (Language of Learning and Teaching) for their children (Mboweni-Marais, 2003; Nkabinde, 1997; Bosman & Van der Merwe, 2000; Radebe, 2004), albeit their second or third language. A result of this choice is that many English Second Language (ESL) learners experience barriers to learning, because of limited English proficiency (NCSNET & NCESS, 1997; Nel, 2005; De Vries, 2006). Heugh (as quoted by De Vries, 2006) affirms that most ESL learners are not skilled enough to learn mathematics, science, geography, or history in their second language. Lamentably, many educators lack the training, knowledge, tools and/or time to support ESL learners with a limited English proficiency in attaining their full potential (Snyder Ohta & Nakaone, 2004; Prinsloo, 2005).

In response to the above, we compiled a Story-based Language Enrichment Programme (SLEP) for Grade 4 educators of ESL learners with limited English proficiency. The aim of SLEP was to provide Grade 4 ESL educators with a ready-made teaching tool that would improve their teaching practice and simultaneously enable their ESL learners.

Our aim is to document the usefulness of SLEP by reporting on the pilot phase of intervention research conducted with 40 volunteer rural and urban Grade 4 educators in Gauteng province. The intervention research aimed at

determining potential strengths and deficits in SLEP in order to improve it for future use. The results of this study were constructive to ESL educators, district support teams, and policy makers involved in supportive policy design and implementation, in that they highlighted which components of SLEP could enhance ESL educator practice, but also the risk of considering a one-size-fits-all intervention for ESL educators.

Educators' needs as well as learning circumstances of an ESL learner

ESL educators face specific professional challenges (Reagan, 1987; Eastman, 1990; Westley, 1992; Baine & Mwamwenda, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994; Barkhuizen & Gough, 1996; Mda, 1997; Heugh, 1999; Brock-Utne & Holsmardottir, 2004; Prinsloo, 2007). These challenges include:

- The large number of learners in classes, which makes the effective use of time to support ESL learners with barriers to learning difficult. Van Wyk (1999:83) stresses that few issues arouse stronger feelings among educators than class size. Educators believe that the quality of their teaching and interactions with learners declines with an increase in the size of the class.
- Different socio-economic circumstances from poor to good among learners, which influence prior knowledge and skills, as well as the availability of resources. As economic survival is the priority for parents, the stimulation of, and exposure to, English for their children, will be very low on their list. Many of these parents are illiterate and cannot therefore read to their children, even in their mother tongue, and definitely not in English, to develop their children's literacy; most of these parents have inadequate English proficiency and would therefore not be able to develop and stimulate their children's English (Lemmer & Squelch, 1993; Louw, Van Ede, & Louw, 1998).
- The lack of essential support of parents/caregivers at home, reinforcing the support provided in the classroom. Parents are the primary caregivers of the child (Donald *et al.* 2005) and therefore need to play an important role in the support of the ESL learner that experiences barriers to learning because of inadequate English proficiency.
- ESL learners usually have diverse home languages. In a multilingual classroom it is almost impossible for educators to have knowledge of all their learners' mother tongues. To provide support for the ESL learner with inadequate English proficiency, it is more advantageous for the learner and educator if the latter has knowledge of the learner's languages (Marais, Du Toit & Steyn, 1999).
- Most ESL learners are only really exposed to English in Grade 1 and do not have a formal pre-school exposure to English at home or at a pre-primary school (SA, 2002).
- Many learners learn in their mother tongue in the Foundation Phase and are then only exposed to English as LOLT in Grade 4 (Rademeyer, 2005; Tancred, 2006).

- Learners need to have mastered their mother tongue to be able to learn in a second language. Since learner's cognitive ability is determined in their mother tongue, the learning of a second language depends on the maturity of the first language as foundation (Vermeulen, 2001; Roodt, 2002). Many ESL learners have not mastered their mother tongue before entering the formal school setting and are likely to have difficulties with language across the curriculum (Lemmer, 1995; Gauteng Department of Education, 2001).
- Learners may not be fully literate in their mother tongue, leading to difficulties in learning to become literate in English. Formal literacy learning is far more difficult than informal social learning. Research findings indicate that to acquire successful second language literacy, second language learners have to first master strategies for negotiating meaning in print in their first language (Collier, 1990).
- Although English is a high-status language in South Africa, it is not likely to be used in ESL learners' immediate living environment, which limits their exposure to, and use of, English as a medium of communication (Roseberry-Mckibbin, 2001).
- In many cases English second language educators with a limited English proficiency teach ESL learners (Mati, 2003; Donald *et al.*, 2005; Sweetnam Evans, 2001).
- An English proficiency disparity and mother-tongue mismatch exists between educators and learners, as well as between learners and learners (King & van der Berg, 1993; Macdonald, as quoted by Wessels, 1996; Nkabinde, 1997; Rossouw, 1999; Alexander, 2000; Buchorn-Stoll, 2002).
- The ineffective training of educators in addressing barriers ESL learners, with limited English proficiency, experience (Cele, 2001; Waddington, 1999; James *et al.* 2000; Rees, 2000).
- No tailor-made comprehensive South African classroom preventive intervention programme for supporting ESL learners with limited English proficiency is available (Nel, 2004).

These challenges were used to guide the development of SLEP. For an intervention to be optimally successful it needs to suit the recipients for whom it is intended and must therefore be shaped according to their needs and circumstances (Mash & Wolfe, 2005). SLEP was compiled to suit the needs of Grade 4 educators of ESL learners. Grade 4 was especially challenging for the ESL learners in this study since their schools followed the policy of transferring from mother tongue to second-language learning in Grade 4. There is evidence that learners who transfer from their mother tongue to second-language learning in Grade 4 show long term poorer academic performance, than learners continuing learning in their mother tongue (Heugh as quoted by De Vries, 2006). Grade 4 learners also have to adjust to additional Learning Areas, as well as to multiple educators. Furthermore learners are expected to work more independently. Both the curriculum challenges and the

need to work independently lead to their language proficiency being more taxed (Theron & Nel, 2005).

A story as the programme basis

We decided to use a story as the medium for the language enrichment programme. Our decision was informed by the following:

- Stories provide a well-structured language experience (Houston Mitchoff, 2005; Wessels *et al.*, 2002);
- given their reliance on words, stories provide thorough exposure to language (Wright, 2002) and so promote language development (Buchorn-Stoll, 2002; Celce-Murcia *et al.*, 2000; Gauteng Department of Education, 2001);
- stories encourage the development of literacy skills (Buitendag, 1994:13; Craig, Hull, Haggart & Crowder, 2001; Gauteng Department of Education, 2001);
- stories are a fun way of learning (Celce-Murcia *et al.*, 2000); and
- stories strengthen culture and communication (Mhlope, 2003).

There are, however, certain fundamentals that are critical for the successful use of stories to augment language:

- The story must be relevant to the learners' living circumstances, interests, and cultures (O'Connor as quoted by Lessing *et al.*, 1999; Killen, 2000; South Africa, 2002; Lindeque, 2003; Gawe, Vakalisa & Van Niekerk, 2003). Since many classrooms in South Africa are multilingual and multicultural the story has to bear the South African context, prevailing values, and political tension as well as cultural links and cultural diversity in mind (Gibbens, 2000; Combrink as quoted by Gibbens, 2000; Mhlope, 2003).
- Stories need to capture learners' attention. In order to do so, the story has to be an aesthetic experience (Gibbens, 2000). This is characterised by creativity, technical competence, and a good plot with an exciting climax (Hill as quoted by Gibbens, 2000).
- To foster optimal language development, opportunities for active classroom language interaction must be created (Donald *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, educators should read stories in an interactive manner and move away from the passive school-story format: educators read and children listen. Children must participate (Craig *et al.*, 2001:46). Interactive use of stories includes:
 - a discussion of the characters before and/or after the reading;
 - a prediction of story events;
 - explanation of unfamiliar vocabulary;
 - a discussion and comparison of personal expression in relation to the story;
 - the use of puppets and other creative resources; and
 - a re-enactment of the story.

In accordance with the above, we wrote a story (Tsatsi and Maria) that was

suited to a multicultural Grade 4 ESL classroom and planned a language enrichment programme around the story.

Summary of the Story-based Language Enrichment Programme

The story was central to SLEP. The ethos of SLEP was influenced by the basic tenets of Outcomes-Based Education (pamphlet distributed in 1997 National Education Department) and the Natural Approach of Krashen and Terrell (Krashen & Terrell, 1995), as delineated here.

Outcomes-Based Education

The following principles of OBE (from the above pamphlet) were assimilated into the language enrichment programme:

- Learners are actively part of the teaching and learning process;
- educators need to take a facilitative role in the classroom and expect learners to be more independent, to make choices and to initiate learning (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Vakalisa, 2003);
- critical thinking, reasoning, reflection and action must be encouraged;
- knowledge and skills must be integrated into different learning areas;
- the content and activities should be connected to real life situations to make language real and relevant;
- prior knowledge is important for understanding of current learning;
- learners take responsibility for their own learning;
- must be learner-based and -paced; and
- flexible time frames allow learners to work at their own pace.

Natural Approach of Krashen and Terrell

These key principles, as foundation elements for the enrichment of a second language (Wessels & Van Den Berg, 2002), were incorporated into SLEP. In line with this approach the educator must:

- Encourage learners and build up their self-confidence by not expecting too much or too little;
- not focus on errors but on achievements;
- focus on fluency rather than accuracy;
- provide understandable input; and
- use key vocabulary items, appropriate gestures, context, repetition and paraphrasing.

The following components were purposely addressed through the story and follow-up activities:

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

ESL learners learning in English need to be skilled in both BICS and CALPS.

BICS: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are skills needed for everyday conversations using informal, colloquial language.

CALP: Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency is the formal, more sophis-

ticated command of language schools use, which is necessary for success at school (Cummins, 1997).

Vocabulary and concepts

These add meaning and context to the augmentation of English. "No text comprehension is possible, either in one's native language or in a foreign language, without understanding the text's vocabulary" (Laufer, 2000:20). According to Nation (2001:9) studies of native speakers' vocabulary suggest that second-language learners need vast vocabulary acquisition. The augmentation of English vocabulary and concepts within a context in the most stimulating way is crucial.

Prior knowledge

This is important for understanding of current learning which is essential for adequate language augmentation. The ability to recognise, interpret and attribute meaning to information is influenced by previous knowledge (Lambani, 2001; Van Rooyen & Van der Merwe, 2003).

Language learning

The content of the language learning setting should be relevant, as well as interesting to the learners' lives and yet also move them beyond what they already know (South Africa, 2002; Lindeque, 2003; Killen, 2000).

Learning styles and preferences

Learners do not all learn in the same way (Winkler, 1998). Learners have varied strengths and weaknesses. They differ in their cognitive, communication, physical and social development. Their sensory abilities differ. They differ in the way they approach learning activities and their ability to learn different activities (Schmidt & Harriman, 1998).

Perception and learning

Language is the means through which the things we experience through perception can be named, described, and talked about.

Although all the senses are part of language development, the visual and auditory senses are the most important perceptual skills that children need for developing proficient language (Lessing, 1986; Van Rooyen *et al.*, 2003).

Parental involvement

Parents are the primary caregivers of the child (Donald *et al.*, 2005) and therefore need to play an important role in the support of the ESL learner who experiences barriers to learning because of limited English proficiency.

Activities

The activities of the language enrichment programme consisted of individual and group activities and games purposively centred around:

BICS (Listening and speaking activities); and CALP (Reading, writing, as well as thinking and reasoning activities).

The games were designed to be interactive and stimulating, yet constructive and challenging. These games also attempted to address different levels of English language proficiency to ensure all the learners' involvement and language proficiency improvement. The story of Tsatsi and Maria was used throughout as frame of reference and kept all activities in context. The following were also included as recommended activities:

- The development of a language corner to provide added opportunities for learners who needed to hear and see and experience more of the story, vocabulary, concepts, and activities or just needed to have more discussions;
- role play which is of great value for encouraging interaction; and
- the availability of books and magazines for the learners on their language and interest level in the classroom.

Research method

In essence the research conducted in this study was intervention research (De Vos, 2006). Intervention research traditionally focuses on testing an approach /programme designed to maintain or improve the functioning of an individual or group. The ultimate goal of intervention research is to test and refine a given programme/intervention in order to disseminate it to a wider population (De Vos, 2006).

The intervention research had six phases, as summarised in Figure 1 (De Vos, 2006).

SLEP was specifically designed to empower Grade 4 ESL educators to provide better quality instruction for their ESL learners. In order to optimally develop SLEP, it needed to be piloted. The piloting was conducted with 40 purposefully selected Grade 4 ESL educators. A small, purposeful sample is acceptable for the pilot phase of intervention research (De Vos, 2006).

The educators were asked to implement SLEP and then complete a questionnaire on its usefulness. We were aware that self-report questionnaires have limited validity (Kim, 2004) and this was factored in to our interpretation of the results.

The self-report questionnaire consisted of 12 multiple choice dichotomous questions as well as an open-ended, reflective question inviting educators to make suggestions for programme improvement. Each multiple choice question related to one of the basic components of the Story-based Language Enrichment Programme. Both the questionnaire and programme were pre-tested by three educationists at the Gauteng Department of Education's Education Support Services Unit and Curriculum Unit as well as three experienced Grade 4 language educators prior to the participation by 40 educators.

The three educationists at Gauteng Department of Education were approached because

- they were qualified as an Educational Psychologist, Speech and Language

Therapist and Intermediate Language facilitator;

- they had experience supporting ESL learners with limited English proficiency experiencing barriers to learning; and
- they had experience in supporting educators who have ESL learners with limited English proficiency experiencing barriers to learning in their classrooms.

The three educators were approached because

- they had experience and remedial qualifications in supporting ESL learners with limited English proficiency who experience barriers to learning and development; and
- they were easy to contact.

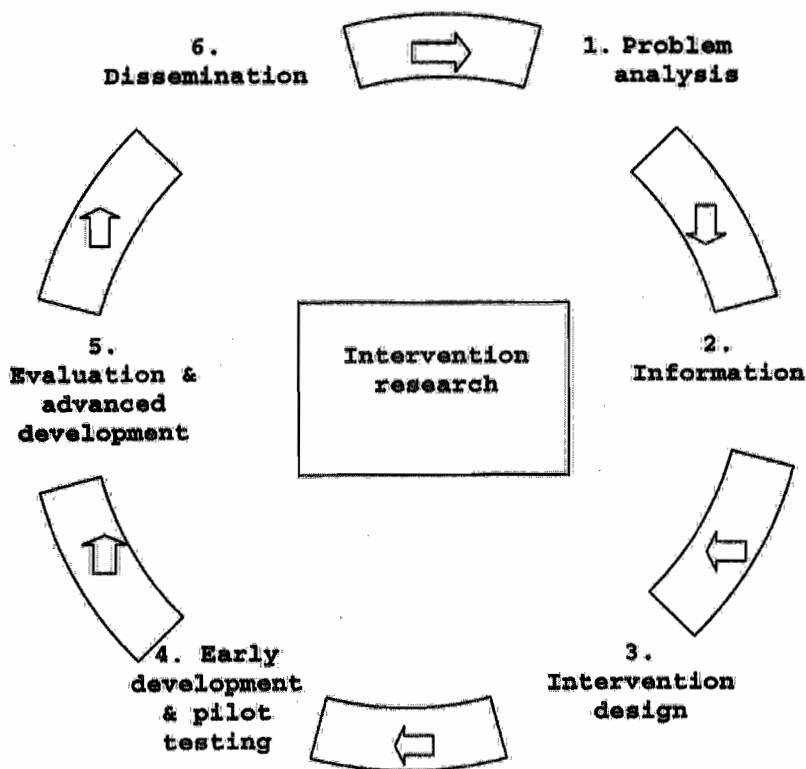


Figure 1 Six phases of intervention research

They were asked to study the programme together with the questionnaire and recommend any changes and adaptations. The recommendations and comments were taken into consideration and some minor amendments were made to the questionnaire and language enrichment programme.

Thereafter the final questionnaires and programmes were hand-delivered to the participants at mainstream primary public schools in Vereeniging, Sharpeville, Meyerton, and Heidelberg. The participants were purposively selected according to the following criteria:

- They all taught, or had taught, the Language Learning Area for Grade 4 ESL learners;
- they had all attended remedial courses and workshops (presented by the GDE and Non-Governmental Organisations) as well as workshops on how to identify and support learners experiencing barriers to learning, but still voiced difficulty regarding the teaching of ESL learners;
- they were all easy to contact. It was important for the educators to be able to contact the researcher if they had any uncertainties about the implementation of the language enrichment programme; and
- the selected educators represented both suburban (town and township) and rural mainstream schools.

In other words the sample was a non-probability purposive sample (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The size of the sample was restricted by logistical factors and limited resources to 40.

The purpose and process of the study was thoroughly explained to the selected educators. We emphasised that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage. There was only one participant per school and participants were not aware of the other participants. This was done to discourage possible participant communication about their experience of SLEP.

Response

Thirty-nine of the 40 language enrichment programmes with comments and questionnaires were returned (i.e. a response rate of 97.5%). The one questionnaire not returned was as a result of the educator moving. This excellent response rate could be attributed to the critical need that exists for such a language enrichment programme and the voluntary nature of participation.

The Statistical Consultation Services of the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus, analysed and processed the data generated by the questionnaires using the SAS program. The program was used to determine frequencies and percentages per question in order that the data could be qualitatively analysed in terms of dominant educator support needs.

Results

Between 92% and 100% of the participants responded positively towards the programme in totality as depicted in Figure 2.

Evaluation of language enrichment programme for ESL learners

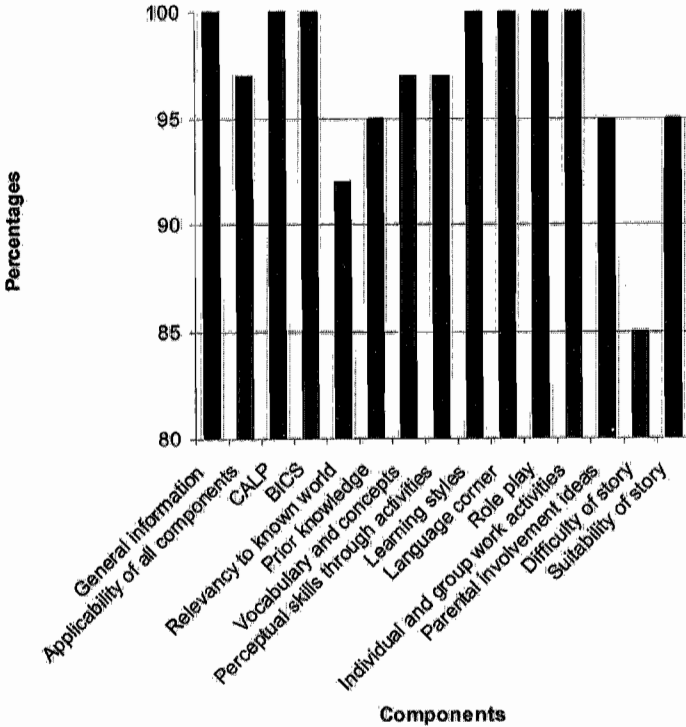


Figure 2 Summary of the evaluation of the language enrichment programme

- The participants were unanimously and completely (100%) satisfied with:
- The general programme information which included topics such as:
 - how to create a speaking environment;
 - the purpose and use of asking questions;
 - incorporating different learning styles;
 - the importance of the development of perceptual skills in language learning;
 - a flexible curriculum: learner-based and -paced;
 - why the prior knowledge of the learners must be acknowledged;
 - why it is important to keep the content relevant to the known world

- of the learner and work towards the unknown;
- why it is essential for the enrichment of a language to augment vocabulary and concepts;
- the significance of teaching dictionary skills for ESL learners with a limited language proficiency;
- the value of group work/co-operative learning in augmenting a language proficiency; and
- alternative routes for learners who have more serious problems than a limited language proficiency.
- the description of CALPS and BICS and why it is crucial for both these skills to be developed for a learner learning in his/her second language;
- the incorporation and use of different learning styles;
- the guidelines regarding the use of a language corner;
- strategies on the use of role play; and
- the individual and group activities provided to augment the CALP and BICS of the learners.

A minority of participants (5% or less) were less satisfied with:

- the applicability of all the components to suit their specific needs;
- the activities relating to the learners' prior knowledge;
- the list of vocabulary and concepts provided as well as the activities provided for the augmentation of vocabulary and concepts;
- practising perceptual skills through the activities;
- guidelines and ideas for parental involvement; and
- suitability of the story for their learners.

Eight percent of the participants were dissatisfied with:

- The information, guidelines and activities regarding the relevance of working with the known world of the learners first and then moving to the unknown.

Fifteen percent of the participants indicated that the story was too difficult for their learners.

Significantly, when participant dissatisfaction was correlated with participant demographics, it emerged that the participants who were dissatisfied were rural educators.

No participants made suggestions for changes to the programme. The comments they made were generally positive and reflected their excitement at having access to a ready-made instructive tool.

Discussion

We acknowledge that our findings were based on participant self-report and that self-report is subjective. Nevertheless, the high level of positive response from participants who were not in contact with one another (and could therefore not influence one another), suggested that SLEP was useful to participants teaching Grade 4 ESL learners.

The participants in this pilot research agreed voluntarily to participate once they were purposively identified as potential participants. It is possible

that they agreed to participate because they believed they were in need of classroom support in the form of a ready-made program or because they felt honoured to participate. If this was their initial perception, it may have influenced them to evaluate SLEP more positively. Future implementation of SLEP should ideally include a greater number of randomly selected ESL educators to determine whether a more diverse sample would still evaluate SLEP as positively.

The goal of Phase Four of intervention research is to refine the intervention. The preliminary research results suggested that SLEP worked well for ESL educators in urban schools, but that refinement was needed with regard to use by rural educators.

From the responses and personal feedback from rural educators, it appeared that SLEP did not cater for the specific needs of rural educators and learners, given the following circumstances:

- In the rural areas most of the educators were ESL educators with poor English proficiency;
- there was a lack of resources with which to augment the language enrichment programme, e.g. books, newspapers, radios, television, or teaching material;
- parents/caregivers were illiterate and/or could not speak or understand English at all; and
- these parents/caregivers worked far from home and school and were not intensively involved in their children's education.

These limitations specific to rural contexts need to be addressed by

- interacting with rural educators to determine their limitations, needs and circumstances with regard to addressing their learners' limited English proficiency;
- workshopping these educators on how to adapt SLEP so that it takes their limited resources and specific needs into account;
- providing extensive in-service training and a demonstration on how to incorporate and implement SLEP into everyday teaching;
- encouraging co-operation with educators who had successfully implemented SLEP;
- modifying SLEP by adding additional resources and further simplifying language;
- providing an easier story by writing the story in co-operation with rural educators;
- encouraging rural educators to start a community project to motivate their learners' parents to improve their English proficiency and literacy skills; and
- encouraging these educators to improve their personal English proficiency.

Although participants did not find fault with the figures used in the story on which SLEP was based, future refinement of SLEP should include sensitivity to story characters. The content and characters of the story of Tsatsi and

Maria, on which the SLEP was based, were purposely cross-cultural, since learners interact with different cultures in the classroom, on the playground, in town, and on television. However, since magical figures were used it is recommended that educators determine beforehand how different cultures view these magical figures in order not to offend cultural beliefs.

Although the programme was compiled for Grade 4 learners the components and related activities can be adapted for other primary school grades by choosing different stories and adjusting the difficulty level of the activities. The impact of such modifications would need to be empirically tested.

In summary, SLEP is an intervention which still needs some refinement. Nevertheless, it can make a contribution to practice in that it provides ESL educators with a ready-made didactic tool. As such it can be provisionally used by in-service educators and form part of the instructive arsenal that pre-service educators equip themselves with.

Conclusion

The general experience of the participants in this study suggested that SLEP has the potential to empower ESL educators. In this sense the programme functions as an intervention for both ESL learners and their English educators. It also supports the notion of inclusive education: the programme provides educators with a tool to empower ESL learners in mainstream education, thereby facilitating responsiveness to diverse needs of learners. It is also in line with the main aims of the Language in Education Policy (i.e. to counter disadvantages resulting from mismatches between home language and LOLT, as well as with the revised curriculum statements). In essence, then, SLEP makes a potential contribution to the practice of ESL educators.

The specific problems experienced by the rural participants reminds us as researchers that we need to guard against a one-size-fits-all approach to intervention. Instead we need to be mindful to mould interventions according to participant needs and strengths.

The initial results reported on in this study suggest general participant satisfaction with SLEP. The initial results also suggest that some minor refinements are necessary to make SLEP more effective for rural educators. Therefore, further programme development is needed as part of the on-going challenge of addressing barriers to learning.

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