

## How Do We Do It? The English Language Proficiency of Second Language Learners in the Foundation Phase of an English Medium School: Challenges and Strategies

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**ABSTRACT** The language of instruction in South Africa is currently a very controversial issue. As a result of South Africa's political history, English is almost always chosen as the language of instruction. However, in many cases, as is the case in the current study, the learners have not been adequately exposed to English when they enter the Foundation Phase. This study reports research conducted at a former privileged primary school in South Africa with English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). The aim of the study was to explore the practices implemented by the Foundation Phase teachers to teach the learners English, and to ascertain how the school has managed to maintain a consistently high academic standard, despite the language difficulties of their learners. The findings of the study may be of value to schools which are faced with similar challenges as the sample school.

### INTRODUCTION

It is a widely acknowledged fact that competence and proficiency in language are central to educational success (Cummins 2014; Gu 2015). This proficiency entails more than the mere ability to communicate in everyday conversation contexts, but is specifically related to the use of language for academic purposes. Cummins (2015:45) defines *academic language proficiency* as "...access to and command over the oral and written academic registers of schooling". Academic language proficiency is not acquired naturally as basic interpersonal communication skills, but is developed through exposure to formal education (Pop and Sim 2013; Kim 2015). According to Maxwell (2014), teachers in South Africa are not fully aware of their responsibility in meeting the language-related needs of their learners. Moreover, they also lack the methodological skills to promote the effective learning of English as an academic language because they have not had the necessary training in this respect (Manditereza 2015; Brock-Utne 2015). As a result of South Africa's political history and of sociolinguistic influences, the second language

is invariably English (Evans and Cleghorn 2014; Awan 2015). Many parents believe that English is the language of empowerment, and choose to have their children educated in English (Lemmer and Manyike 2012, despite the fact that these children may not have the necessary proficiency in English to succeed academically. This poses the question: How do second language (L2) Foundation Phase learners manage to acquire English for academic purposes? Specifically, the following research questions guided the study:

- ♦ *What challenges are indicated by the learners' lack of proficiency in English in the Foundation Phase, and what are the implications for teaching and learning?*
- ♦ *Which strategies are the Foundation Phase teachers implementing to improve the proficiency of their learners in English?*

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INVESTIGATING THE PROFICIENCY OF FOUNDATION PHASE LEARNERS IN ENGLISH

The main problem addressed in this study is the fact that L2 learners of English receive their instruction in English at the level of a first language or mother tongue, despite the fact that they lack the necessary proficiency in English for academic purposes. Research conducted overseas by Bailey and Carroll (2015), and in South Africa by Evans and Cleghorn (2014), provide strong evidence to suggest that learners develop academic language proficiency more

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effectively in their home language (mother tongue), or alternatively, in bilingual or multilingual educational settings where teaching occurs in both the first and second languages. The acquisition of a second language, therefore, also impacts teaching and learning. Many studies have been carried out since the 1950s to explain the language-cognition link. For the purposes of this study, the works of two theorists, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Jim Cummins (2014, 2015) are regarded as appropriate theoretical and practical points of departure that encapsulate the challenges of English language proficiency in South African schools. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory has significantly influenced education, specifically educational psychology. His most outstanding work comprises the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is regarded as a remarkable contribution in the learning process. Vygotsky (2012) argued that language, as the main tool of communication, promotes thinking, develops reasoning, and supports cultural activities like reading and writing. For him, thought and language are initially separate systems from the beginning of life, merging at around three years of age. His theory stresses the importance of social interaction and communication with others as major factors in the development of a child's language, which then stimulates the development of thought. In particular, it views the important effect that an adult has on the development of a child's language. He stresses the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 2012), which is present in children's interactions with adults. It is described as the "distance between the child's actual developmental level determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance" (Vygotsky 2012: 27). This guidance by an adult is referred to as *scaffolding*. In order for *scaffolding* to be effective, it has to match the learner's developmental level, to the extent that the learner feels comfortable to use the guidance, which may present enough of a challenge to reach the next level in a particular area (Vygotsky 2012).

The implications of Vygotsky's theory for teaching and learning are significant. Instructional strategies that promote literacy and communicative competency across the curriculum play an important role in the Foundation Phase learner's construction of knowledge, as is the combination of individual and group coaching and independent learning. The teacher plays the

important role of a facilitator, creating an environment where directed and guided interactions may occur. In essence, Vygotsky recognized that learning always occurs in, and cannot be separated from the social context. Consequently, instructional strategies that promote the distribution of knowledge where the teacher's role is reduced over time and the learners collaboratively work together in their academic endeavors create optimal learning opportunities. His theory proposes that the emphasis on collaboration during instruction helps the learners understand and see how interactions within a social instructional network are crucial for their cognitive and linguistic development.

Jim Cummins is another theorist who developed both a linguistic and socio-political theory concerning the teaching of bilingual learners. He begins with an established understanding that language plays a central role in a child's educational development, and seeks to uncover ways that language can be developed to facilitate educational success. He differentiates between *basic interpersonal communicative skills* or BICS, and *cognitive or academic language proficiency* (CALP). BICS refers to the language that students use in casual face-to-face communication, while CALP refers to the specific literary language that is required in academic settings (Cummins 2015). With the exception of severely retarded or autistic children, all children acquire basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) in a monolingual context in their L1 [first language], regardless of their IQ or academic aptitude. Individual differences, however, do exist in the extent to which literacy skills are developed (Cummins 2015). BICS is said to occur when there is contextual support for language delivery. Face-to-face 'context embedded' situations provide, for example, non-verbal support to secure understanding. Actions with eyes and hands, instant feedback, cue and clues support verbal language. Typical situations for BICS include informal interactions with teachers and other learners outside the classroom, for example, during play activities. CALP, on the other hand, is said to occur in 'context reduced' academic situations. Where higher-order thinking skills (such as, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) are required in the curriculum, language is 'dis-embedded' from a meaningful, supportive context. Where language is 'dis-embedded', the situation is often referred to as 'context reduced'. Formal instruction in the classroom is a typical CALP scenario, where uninhibited communica-

tive interaction does not exist and where more challenging cognitive tasks are required. Thus, the language abilities required for academic success (CALP) are very different from those in an everyday conversational context (BICS).

In addition to Cummins' BICS and CALP propositions, are his postulations of "additive" and "subtractive" bilingualism (Cummins 2009, 2015). In "additive bilingualism" the teachers incorporate the learners' first language (L1) into their instructional practices. Ideally, the learners get to know the curriculum through their native language while simultaneously learning English. Described as complementary, additive bilingualism enables the learners to learn a second language while reinforcing their first language. In essence, the learners are adding a language to their repertoire, thus the term "additive". In contrast, subtractive bilingualism occurs when a more prestigious language gradually (or not gradually, in a number of cases) replaces the first language (Cummins 2014, 2015). *Subtractive bilingualism* is in contrast to *additive bilingualism* in that the learners learn a second language at the expense of the first language, and this has serious implications for the acquisition of a L2 as the LoLT. In the same vein, Cummins' (2015) notion of the "threshold hypothesis" indicates that a child can be inadequately competent in either the L1 or L2 as a result of the negative consequences of bilingualism, or experience the benefits of bilingualism positively on a "required level" of minimum competence in the L1 and L2. The level of mother tongue competence already reached by the learner determines if he or she will experience either cognitive deficits or cognitive benefits from schooling in the second language. This means that there has to be a certain 'threshold' in mother tongue competence before the benefits of studying a second language can develop. This *threshold level* has usually not been reached in the case of learners who start schooling in the second language while their mother tongue is not fully developed, as is the case in this study. Cummins (2015) further claims that there is a threshold for the second language as well, which has to be attained in order to allow the potentially beneficial aspects of second language learning to influence a learner's cognitive and academic functioning.

In summary, the above theories each contains elements that are important for exploring

the English proficiency of L2 Foundation Phase learners. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory highlights the social and collaborative aspects of learning and the importance of *scaffolding* in the teaching-learning situation, while Cummins' interrelated concepts of BICS and CALP, additive and subtractive bilingualism and the threshold hypothesis, shed light on the different types of language proficiencies needed for varying social contexts, and how significantly the learners' command of their mother tongue impacts their proficiency in the LoLT.

With the above as background, the next section describes the research methodology followed to explore the challenges posed by the insufficient English language proficiency levels of L2 Foundation Phase learners. Some strategies incorporated by the teachers to address the problem effectively will also be indicated.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative design was deemed most appropriate for the study because it would give a clear understanding of the participants' views and capture their perceptions in their own words (Babbie 2015). The design involved both an interpretive perspective, because it was primarily concerned with meaning, and a constructivist perspective, because it focused on the feelings and beliefs of the participants. The case study method was the research method used as the strategy of inquiry. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explain that a case study examines a *bounded system*, or a case, over time in depth, employing multiple sources of data found in a particular setting. Mills and Gay (2015) indicate that case study research is an all-encompassing method, covering design, data-collection techniques, and specific approaches to data-analysis. A researcher should, therefore, choose the specific type of case study relevant to his particular research.

In this study, an in-depth, collective case study inquiry was deemed most relevant to investigate the problem. A primary school in the Free State Province in South Africa was purposefully selected as the site for the investigation. Specific reasons existed for selecting this school, namely it is a former model-C school (a previously 'white' school in a suburban area), and the mother tongue of all the learners was different from the LoLT of the school, which is

English. The majority of the learners entering the Foundation Phase demonstrated a very limited proficiency in English, if any at all, and the teachers are faced with the reality of attempting to teach the learners the language of instruction *through* the language of instruction. This situation is not unique in South Africa. What provided the impetus for the inquiry at this school, however, was the fact that the school is regarded as a top-achieving school in the Lejweleputswa District of the Free State Province, and has received several Top Primary School Awards in recent years.

Eight individual semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately an hour each, were conducted with three Grade 1 teachers, two Grade 2 teachers, and three Grade 3 teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from twenty five to thirty years, adding considerable value to the data collected. Against the socio-political background as discussed earlier, the researchers were interested in establishing how a successful, high-achieving school addresses the problem of the lack of the proficiency of its learners in English in the Foundation Phase. It was hypothesized that the best practices at such a school could be of considerable value, not only to other schools with comparable characteristics, but also to schools in previously disadvantaged areas who opt for English as the LoLT, and who are faced with similar challenges. Apart from the individual interviews with each teacher, the school records and all the documentation relevant to whole school development were also studied.

In order to analyze and interpret the data, a qualitative data-analysis process was followed where the information was coded and categorized. After transcribing the data of each interview, meaningful analytical units, as described by Henriksen et al. (2015), were identified and coded to signify each particular segment. The teachers were identified as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, and so on. The process of *in vivo* coding was followed, where the same codes were reapplied to similar segments of the data. The data was then structured by identifying the main themes and categories according to which the data was interpreted.

The ethical measures included obtaining permission from both the provincial Department of Education and the school principal to undertake the research, before collecting the data, since obtaining permission from the organiza-

tional personnel requires contacting them before the study commences (Creswell 2012; Zadjaj 2015). Likewise, the informed consent from all the prospective participants (teachers) to participate in the study was obtained, after their having been informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, the risks, benefits, alternative procedures, and the measures implemented to ensure confidentiality (Johnson and Christensen 2011; Brock-Utne 2015). To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the researchers employed member checking. After the analysis of the data, and before conclusions were drawn, the participants were furnished with the interpreted results to verify the correctness of the interpretations. This process coincided with the aim of the study which guided the development of the main themes, and which subsequently assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the content.

The following themes and categories emerged from the data:

The focus, as indicated in Table 1, was on the main themes that emerged from the reading of the verbatim transcripts. Mills and Gay (2015) indicate that the task of interpreting data is to identify the *important* themes or meanings in the data, and not necessarily *every theme*.

**Table 1: The main themes and categories**

<i>Theme 1:</i>	<i>The language proficiency of the Foundation Phase learners</i>
Category:	Problems experienced with regard to the speaking and understanding of English
<i>Theme 2:</i>	<i>The strategies implemented by the teachers to improve the language proficiency of the learners</i>
Category 1:	General strategies employed
Category 2:	Listening and speaking
Category 3:	Reading and phonics
Category 4:	Writing and handwriting
<i>Theme 3:</i>	<i>How the teachers accommodate the learners who are on different levels of language proficiency</i>
Category 1:	Group-work
Category 2:	Assessment
Category 3:	Intervention strategies

## DISCUSSION

### Theme 1: The Language Proficiency of the Foundation Phase Learners

The language proficiency levels of Foundation Phase learners, as defined in the introduc-

tion, form the core of this theme. In short, a person's language proficiency measures the extent to which he/she has mastered a language (Wallace, 2014).

### ***Problems Experienced With Regard to the Speaking and Understanding English***

For effective instruction to take place, it is important that the learners are able to understand and speak the LoLT. The reality is that, with the current language situation in South Africa, many Foundation Phase learners who receive their instruction through the medium of English have not been adequately exposed to the language when they enter Grade 1 (Baker 2015). This is the case in the sample school. All the participant teachers indicated that the majority of their learners do not understand instructions and questions in English when they start their school careers, and this poses extreme challenges and creates significant frustration for both the teachers and the learners. The frustration of the learners who are incapable of speaking and understanding functional English finds its roots in the South African Education Policy Act (Act 27 of 1996), which encourages the use of a language of international status (English) in addition to the home language. The responsibility for determining a school's language policy is subject to parental choice via the School Governing Body. Due to the social status of English, a clear language hierarchy has emerged over the past two decades, with English at the top, particularly as the preferred LoLT at school, irrespective of the school context (Kluger 2013; Ghenghesh 2015).

Foundation Phase learners are in the concrete-operational stage of their development, a stage which is expedited and made more efficient by adequate language use (Piaget 1957). As pointed out earlier, when the learners' mother tongue has not fully developed (which is the case in this study) CALP skills are very difficult to develop (Cummin 2014; Thornbury 2015). According to three of the teachers, not only in Grades 1 and 2, but also in Grade 3, the learners often lack the necessary vocabulary and misunderstand instructions. In this regard, Washburn and Malcahy (2014) claim that an extended period of time is needed to process task-based language in meaning, form and function.

Teacher 3 (Grade 1) expressed the general feeling of the participants as follows:

*"...the first English they're hearing, is when they arrive at my door... and that's Grade 1... and they can't even ask you anything basic, like "May I please go to the toilet?" It's a real problem for some of those children. It is as though they were dropped down from out of the sky in your class and their parents expect them to learn English in one day. Listening skills lack and they misunderstand the teacher... as soon as you ask questions that need a little bit of insight, then they can't understand the concept and finer details of what you are trying to help them to understand... like comprehension. When you ask insight questions: "What are your feelings about something?", or "How do you think this happens?" they don't have the vocabulary and insight to answer the questions".*

The fact that quite a number of the learners did not attend English preschools compounds the challenge of misunderstanding. Although many learners in the participants' classes attended day care centers, most of these 'schools' are run from 'backyards' in the township, and are not registered with the Department of Education as accredited Early Childhood Development Centers. The Foundation Phase curriculum is based on the premise that learners should have mastered the basics such as counting, colors and shapes by the time they enter Grade 1.

*"...(T)hose who have just been playing in the backyard at a preschool, not following the system... Those children are immediately at a backlog. That's a real challenge" (Teacher 2).*

Another problem expressed by some of the participants was the fact that quite a number of the learners live with their grandparents, other caregivers, or even their parents, who are illiterate in English. There is no proper assistance with homework, and this necessarily results in learning problems. Also, the general lack of the involvement of the parents leads to delays in language acquisition. In the words of Teacher 3, Grade 1 learners, in particular, have "a long way to go". In her experience, it takes a learner at least three years to properly learn an additional language.

*"I really feel the parents who want their children to be educated in English should make the effort and plan ahead and start speaking English to those children and make sure that they go to a good English preschool. It would*

*make our job a lot easier. That I feel is a major problem”.*

From the above it is evident that Cummins' (2014, 2015) idea of the “threshold hypothesis” comes into play here. The level of mother tongue competence already reached by the learner determines if he or she will experience either cognitive deficits or cognitive benefits from schooling in the second language. This implies that there has to be a certain ‘threshold’ in mother tongue competence before the benefits of studying a second language can develop. In this study it seems that the learners’ threshold levels have not been reached, since their competence in their mother tongue has not been fully developed (they cannot read and write in their mother tongue). Furthermore, the fact that mother tongue education and the L2 are not introduced simultaneously, points to a situation of subtractive bilingualism, because English is learnt at the expense of the learners’ mother tongue, and this has serious implications for the acquisition of L2.

## **Theme 2: The Strategies Implemented by the Teachers to Improve the Language Proficiency of the Learners**

### *General Strategies*

The knowledge of language is essential for the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, because it forms the foundation for speaking, reading, writing and spelling. For the emergent literacy to develop, learners first need to develop metalinguistic skills (Gorter 2015) in order to identify and analyze specific sounds to allow them to read and write. Phonological development (including phonological awareness) provides the bridge between language and literacy, whereas higher-level phonological skills (such as, sound manipulation and substitution) facilitate the development of written language in terms of reading and spelling (Gorter 2015). Similarly, adequate language development is necessary to facilitate the language required for numeracy.

A major intervention strategy that seems to be effective in the sample school and which focuses on phonological awareness, is the homework classes after school, offered from Mondays to Thursdays, where the basics of reading, spelling and writing are taught, while the learners are assisted with their homework. When in-

dicating the role of the homework classes, Teacher 3, however, raised the following concern:

*“The problem is that a lot of the children don’t pitch... that is a problem...there are a few... who think: “So what if my mother pays”... and they don’t come. I can see a difference in Grade 1, in those who are attending homework classes and those who are not. Because we are sitting... We are doing their sight words; we are doing their spelling. So I think the role of a homework class is very relevant. The main thing is to identify the children that really need help with their language. And then form a strategy... Either the child must come to intervention classes, or join homework classes, such that at least something is being done. I don’t say we can cover the curriculum there, but if it is part of the homework...”*

### *Listening and Speaking*

Pronunciation and vocabulary are two aspects of listening and speaking that can assist learners become fluent in English in everyday situations (Cummins 2015). In keeping with Cummins’s view, Yeung and King (2015) indicate that an increased amount of CALP is needed for academic success. The identification of sounds, the building of words and the use of consonant blends are also indicated in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (DoE 2012). When discussing the listening and speaking skills of Foundation Phase learners, the participants noted that their learners do listen, but in quite a number of cases they lack the proper understanding to react appropriately. The participants explained that they often call upon the stronger learners who are on the same level to assist the weaker ones. In order to accommodate the struggling learners, they focus on both group work and individual work in reading, phonics and mathematics, including problem solving. This idea of calling on the stronger learners to help the weaker ones and of making use of group work is in line with Vygotsky’s (2012) views on the benefits of *scaffolding* and learning that is acquired in social settings, such as small groups.

Teacher 3 mentioned that asking questions play a significant role in teaching listening skills. *“So one of the things that I make them do is when I’m doing a sound, or a word, I make them close their eyes...and they must just use their ears to listen. I think that’s very impor-*

*tant. Without listening they will not be able to do any oral. They need to hear that sound. I feel we do not do enough listening and oral work in our curriculum. Once learners have listened to the teacher, they must be given the opportunity to speak back by means of an oral presentation. A lot of time should be spent on listening and speaking before reading, writing and creative writing commence."*

Teacher 4, a Grade 2 teacher, employed the following strategy, "...*(A)gain when they come into my class at the beginning of the year where everything is done orally, I have to start from the beginning of Grade 1 work and I also start with themselves, teaching them body parts, left and right and then we move on to what is around them, so they can start to learn the vocabulary of...the things that are in the classroom. I also teach them very basic phrases like "May I please go to the toilet? Can I please have a tissue? Open your book. Close your book. Put away your book". Very, very basic things, but they repeat what I am saying, so it is not that they are just hearing me. "Put away your book". I have to say, "What are you doing?" "I put my book away"...so that they are verbalizing exactly what I am doing"*.

### **Reading and Phonics**

Emergent literacy involves the awareness of the written language and of phonological awareness (Maxwell 2014), which is based on normal oral language, specifically the development of vocabulary. In turn, age-appropriate oral language development is required for the development of reading competence, and therefore oral language proficiency is regarded as predictive of reading achievement, as well as of other written language at a later stage. Adequate print-related language (such as familiarity with books and visual symbols) is necessary for continued oral language development (Mbatha 2014). A similar reciprocal relationship exists between phonological awareness and reading, as each facilitates and is facilitated by the other (Awan 2015). The learners' language learning is a crucial precursor to literacy. Poor literacy development contributes to later language problems.

In order to be able to apply reading and phonics skills successfully, the learners should possess the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) to achieve an increased amount of

CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) to accomplish knowledge concepts, to recognize relationships, to retrieve information to be analyzed, synthesized and classified, and to articulate the oral and written forms of processed information (Yeung and King 2015). Teacher 2 (Grade 1) follows a 'readiness program' with her learners, where they first learn single sounds by means of sight words. From the single sounds they learn to build words. From these 'look-and-say' words a more detailed reading program is introduced. Her learners start 'reading' from a book in the eighth week of the first term.

Similarly, Teacher 8 (Grade 3) found it helpful to start with phonics. "*The teacher should start with the vowels and with pictures illustrating for example, "a for apple", "b for ball". Learners easily become confused with the words due to the fact that they pronounce the words differently. She expressed the following view: "You will find when you ask spelling with a word "a", they spell it with an "e", that's why they say "epple". It is a round sound. An apple is round and fits with a round sound. Your mouth goes like "e" for "egg". Once they get the vowel sounds right, you go to your consonants, also with pictures"*. The learners also draw pictures or find pictures in magazines that start with the beginning sounds. When the reading or spelling words are done, they have to sound the words by writing them in the air, then on the desk, and lastly in their books.

Teacher 4 starts 'reading' at the very beginning in Grade 1 with so-called "monkey tricks", where the teaching of the correct words is done, accompanied by pictures of the objects. Phonics is also started from the first week, beginning with the initial sounds, namely "a", "b" and "k". Blending commences when the learners know these sounds. Very basic pictures with three words are used first when the construction of sentences is taught, for example, "The dog is on the log".

Different reading strategies were singled out, as being very effective, by Teacher 3 (Grade 2). According to her, two very useful strategies are those of group or guided reading and shared reading. The latter refers to an ability group reading teaching strategy (DoE 2012), where all the members in the group read the same text under the direction of the teacher. Guided reading occurs where the teacher plans the lessons to include a range of 'word-attack' strategies that

the children will learn to apply when meeting challenges in the texts. The 'text talk' between the teacher and the learners, and the learners with one another, is central to this approach (DoE 2012).

*"Later on when we're doing our reading, our Shared Reading and our Guided Reading, I think the teacher has to reinforce these...sounds. Every day when you're reading, ask them to point out sounds. Ask them to find it on the page. I think one of the best things they brought in, was Shared Reading. That is excellent. That is one of the very, very good strategies, because it's reading that you do all the time...and I can see a big improvement in the children's reading since we started Shared Readings. So, I think that was a very, very good move. And later when we do our Group Reading when we are together and with the Guided Reading... that is when the teacher can pick up little problems. Perhaps you haven't picked up when they were all doing Shared Reading. So I think that is a very good strategy."*

The participants also group their learners according to their abilities and their language proficiency when group reading, which is 'guided' reading, is done. Vocabulary is tested on a regular basis for the strong, weaker and weakest groups in the class. One teacher noted: *"My groups change regularly, because... Look, your good readers will remain your good readers, but your average and your slow readers, they can turn like this... [she flips over her right hand]. So I test the words regularly and see if I can't move them up."*

'Independent' reading and 'paired' reading also form a significant part of the reading program. Independent reading is done once a week, usually on a Friday. The learners collect their reading books from the reading corner in the classroom, and read individually.

Formal reading lessons are conducted on a daily basis (Teacher 7, Grade 3). After sounding the words, formal reading is done in groups, consisting of five learners, at the most. *"We have an intensive lesson on understanding the words and reading the lessons together... then they have it for homework."* In the afternoons reading is done first in her homework class. *"All of us read it together. We repeat it a few times in class. Now I present the lesson to the children themselves. I teach them the words in class. They must now sit down and they read aloud. They*

*must read the lesson at least five times. During the afternoon classes each child comes back to me to read the lesson and if I feel the child is still struggling, I help them again. I send them out to go and read again and they have to read the lesson until they know it according to my standards. That's how we do formal reading."*

The importance of simple, basic reading books was emphasized by most of the participants.

### **Writing and Handwriting**

Most of the participants elaborated on the importance of writing and handwriting. BICS and CALP seem to play a significant role in individual and shared writing activities (DoE 2012). Where possible, the Shared Reading text should inform the Shared Writing, where the teacher models how to write a text. The learners engage in the composition of the text while the teacher takes on the role of facilitator and scribe. The Shared Reading text can be consulted to provide examples of language patterns, spelling choices or other text features useful in the preparation of new texts. This modeling of the writing process helps to prepare the learners for their own writing tasks. Eventually the learners gain the ability to express themselves in written activities in English by being exposed to sufficient language samples simultaneously.

Phonics and writing are interlinked. One teacher reported that when she teaches the learners to sound the "a" she also teaches them how to write the "a" sound. They do it in wet sand, or with clay, or wherever possible. In this way the learners' senses are reinforced. From then onwards the learners' writing abilities are developed. Basic creative writing activities are started, where a very fine line is resembled between the parallel activities. In the beginning, writing entails only copying from the board, and later short sentences are written. The following methods are typically used when focusing on writing skills:

*"I do it on the board, step by step. We go up, down, a straight line... As I do it on the board the children repeat it with me. Then we practice it in the air, and the spelling as well. We do the sounding of the words in the air, with our fingers. After we have practiced in the air, we start piece by piece in our books. Up and down, up and down. We write the whole*

letter and then the patterns. We combine letters.” (Teacher 7)

“You have to start with very simple basic sentences...and then you first read a little story to them. They must read it a few times. You ask questions about it, and they must answer it...until they understand it. You take about five sentences out of that story and you leave out little words. They must fill in the missing words and it must make sense. Later on, you ask them to write a little thing about themselves by themselves. “All about me”, or something like that. Things that they know about... Hopefully by then they can write it. You take it step by step.”(Teacher 8).

### **Theme 3: How the Teachers Accommodate the Learners Who are on Different Levels of Language proficiency**

#### **Group Work**

To ensure equal access to the academic content, group work is done during group and guided reading activities (DoE 2012). As advised by Gorter (2015), the learners who are on the same level of language proficiency work together, making use of readers that match their language abilities. Based on their progress, the learners regularly change groups; the grouping is therefore flexible. The same content is learnt in different ways when additional practice of essential elements is needed at different levels (group work). According to Maxwell (2014) and Brock-Utne (2015), this method may assist the learner to achieve his or her learning goals. The learners who struggle with reading and phonics have to read on a daily basis during group and guided reading. The other groups read every second day.

During group reading, *scaffolding* techniques such as “think-pair-share” or “turn-and-talk”, “I do-we-do-you-do”, as well as summarizing and reviewing, are constantly applied (Gu 2015). The shared-reading activities, where the texts are enlarged, and are also used by the teachers when the entire class reads aloud, are in accordance with the recommendations by Maxwell (2014). During these exercises, left-right directionality, word-banks, pronunciation and structures for paired reading are set. Siceri and Faulkner-Bond (2015) also emphasize its importance in their research on validity in assessment of reading.

It was pointed out that group work is especially functional during group and guided reading activities (see Theme 2, Reading and Phonics). Learners on the same level of language proficiency are grouped together, and they read together. ‘Good’, ‘middle’ and ‘slower’ reading groups are formed, but the learners change groups regularly as their proficiency improves. During writing activities, some participants often turn a blind eye to the ‘copying’ problem, since sufficient opportunities exist to identify the problems when the learners are assessed individually. For certain activities the reading groups are mixed.

“I had a case for example of a child whom I battled and battled and battled with, to let her learn her sight words. One day I called one of my top readers and I gave her the sight words. I said ‘Now Ok. I’ve tried. I want you every day to sit with her for ten minutes. Just there at the desk and just help her’. That child passed at the end of that year, because of the one had helped the other. I couldn’t get it right. Every day, maybe I was getting frustrated. But this other child, who was very clever, had the patience to go and show her...helped her with her sight words. So, one must make use of what you can in class.” (Teacher 3).

Participants seemed to find this ‘buddy-system’ as advocated by Alam (2015) to be very successful when learners on different levels work in pairs. Teacher 2 was also in support of ‘supervised’ copying and ‘paired’ learning as effective strategies to improve the reading abilities of weaker learners. Teacher 8 explained the benefits of group work as follows:

“That’s where group work comes in. The children, who are fast learners, are good readers and will be together in a little reading group. Your average ones will be in the middle group, busy with another book. The children that are struggling will have an easy little book that corresponds to their abilities. The readers who are struggling will read every day, trying to get them to do their phonics and their reading every single day. The other children can read every second day. That’s how we try to accommodate them. You can also give the faster learners some more work to do, while you are working separately with these [weaker] children.”

#### **Intervention Strategies**

The participants indicated various intervention strategies to accommodate learners at dif-

ferent levels of proficiency. Formal and remedial intervention strategies are used as a ‘first-phase’ process in accordance with a specific program. The importance of such a ‘first-phase’ intervention is emphasized by Manditereza (2015). Access to content learning is created by the teachers through speech modification (oral work) with the aim of bringing about a greater amount of ‘comprehensible input’ (Krashen 2013). Comprehensible oral language is thus provided daily in the classroom.

According to Teacher 6, “*You get to know your learners very quickly and then you notice which learners need more attention. Then I will explain and repeat to them many times in order to accommodate them. Individual attention usually solves many problems. Intervention strategies will also help to improve the marks.*”

For all the grades, formal intervention strategies for English and Mathematics are done once a week for half an hour. These formal intervention strategies are implemented in addition to the informal strategies that are followed during general daily instruction. Poor readers are accommodated throughout the year in an inter-

vention program called ‘The Reading Club’. Underachieving learners at different levels of language proficiency are identified, and receive formal intervention of half an hour once a week after school hours during the third and fourth terms. Each class teacher, whose input is important when decisions on progression to the next grade are made at the end of the year, monitors the intervention program.

It is important to note that ‘Special Language Needs’ also forms part of the intervention program, and is addressed on a daily basis. At the beginning of the second term in Grade 1, the learners identified as lacking in English proficiency receive extra instruction, in small groups, for five periods per week. In Grade 2, the Special Needs (LSEN) teacher visits each class for two periods per day and provides intensive remedial instruction in reading, or where needed. Similarly, Grade 3 learners with limited proficiency in English receive intensive remedial instruction for one period per day. The LSEN teacher also specifically assists the learners with more severe Special Educational Needs for two periods per day, separate from the rest of the class (Table 2).

**Table 2: Summary of themes and responses**

The language-proficiency of the Foundation Phase learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ 100% African mother-tongue</li> <li>♦ The majority of the Grade 1’s do not understand English when starting school</li> <li>♦ Many learners live with illiterate parents, grandparents or caregivers</li> <li>♦ The majority did not attend English pre-schools</li> <li>♦ They do not understand basic instructions</li> </ul>
The strategies implemented by the teachers to improve the language proficiency of the learners	<p><i>Listening and Speaking:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Continuously ask questions</li> <li>♦ Focus on oral work</li> <li>♦ Teach basic phrases and questions</li> </ul> <p><i>Reading and Phonics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Sounds, with flannel-board pictures</li> <li>♦ Sounds ⇔ sight words ⇔ build words ⇔ “look and say”</li> <li>♦ A, b k ⇔ short words ⇔ short sentences</li> <li>♦ Reinforce sounds</li> <li>♦ Teaching words with objects and pictures</li> <li>♦ Group learners according to their abilities: ‘strong’ readers, ‘average’ readers, ‘weak’ readers</li> <li>♦ Shared and guided reading; independent and ‘paired’ reading</li> </ul> <p><i>Writing and Handwriting:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Start off by drawing pictures, and copying from the blackboard</li> <li>♦ Use basic patterns</li> <li>♦ Pronounce ⇔ copy in air ⇔ write in wet sand</li> <li>♦ ⇔ exercise books</li> <li>♦ Up-down-up-down movements</li> </ul>
How the teachers accommodate the learners who are on different levels of language proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Group learners according to levels of proficiency in English</li> <li>♦ Apply a ‘buddy system’</li> <li>♦ Supervised copying and ‘paired’ learning</li> <li>♦ Individual attention</li> <li>♦ Formal and informal intervention strategies and programmes</li> <li>♦ The LSEN teacher</li> </ul>

### CONCLUSION

Investigating and addressing the problems related to language proficiency in the Foundation Phase may have a major impact on the cognitive development of learners, and particularly on their academic achievement in subsequent grades. It is therefore important to identify shortcomings as early as possible, and to devise strategies to effectively equip learners for their lives in the world of work in the society, specifically in a multicultural society in South Africa.

This study was based on research conducted in the recent past, highlighting the shortcomings and language deficiencies experienced in the Foundation Phase, and indicating the strategies employed by experienced teachers to overcome these deficiencies. It emerged that EAL learners in the Foundation Phase of the sample school found it difficult to understand and interpret English, despite the continuous efforts of experienced, well-trained dedicated teachers. The education environment is appealing for teaching, yet the learners need considerable assistance in very limited time available to meet the requirements of the CAPS curriculum.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is incumbent on the South African Department of Education to take heed of challenges faced by teachers as identified in this study, and to use this information to develop strategies to strengthen and improve teaching for South African L2 English learners. As discussed in the introduction, the language realities in South Africa, particularly with regard to the provision of education, call for intervention on national, provincial and district level in order to meet the needs of both teachers and learners. Practical interventions on district level could inter alia include establishing an electronic resource center focusing on quality materials and resources and best practices advice to aid teachers of L2 English learners from both disadvantaged and privileged schools, thus enabling them to develop appropriate teaching and learning skills. Such a resource center could gather instructional methods, assessment tools and advice from experts in the field of teaching L2 learners in English as academic language. Furthermore, local school districts should put a premium on the

professional development needs of such teachers, recognizing their differing needs as identified in this study. In conclusion, teacher induction and teacher training programs should include a more explicit focus on English Language proficiency education, particularly since the majority of schools in South Africa consist of large numbers of learners who choose English as their language of teaching and learning.

### LIMITATIONS

This study, however, had certain limitations, which might influence the effective application of the findings in other school contexts. The case study was conducted in a former Model C, quintile 5 school. This means that on a scale of the Quintile 1-5, the sample school is on the lowest scale in terms of departmental funding, since it is regarded as financially fairly independent and privileged. It is also respected as one of the top primary schools in the Free State Province. Due to a lack of resources and expertise, disadvantaged schools in township and rural areas may not be able to identify with the educational implications of L2 learners' English language proficiency, as is the case in the sample school. Children raised in poor communities mostly have limited exposure to printed material and other teaching media, and subsequently may have very different attitudes to and experiences of the media being used in urban schools. Furthermore, only experienced teachers participated in the study, and this can also be viewed as a limitation. In the light of the education history of South Africa, teachers from the previous political dispensation are generally better qualified than their black counterparts. We still believe, however, that the findings and recommendations can make a significant difference when similar strategies are implemented in schools in disadvantaged communities. We are fully aware of the fact that the problem of the language proficiency of EAL learners is very complex, and that no 'quick fix' is available. With the concerted efforts of all the stakeholders, there is, however, still the possibility of success.

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