

Acquiring Reading Skills in English as Second Language: Listening to the Voice of Grade 1 Teachers in South Africa

Anna J. Hugo

*Department Language, Arts and Culture Education, College of Education,
University of South Africa, PO Box 392, Pretoria, 0003, South Africa
Fax: 27 12 664 33 74, E-mail: hugoaj@unisa.ac.za*

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ABSTRACT The research discussed in this article investigated the acquisition of reading skills by Grade 1 learners who are English Second Language (ESL) speakers in South African classrooms. A questionnaire was used for data collection and both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained. Issues that arose from the quantitative data were the class size, the number of ESL learners in a class and the variety in competence in English of the ESL learners. From the qualitative data the following themes which influenced the acquisition of reading by ESL learners became evident: a lack of vocabulary influences comprehension, the influence of the sound system of the English language, auditory perception, parents and the home environment and the socio-economic and socio-cultural background of learners.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine yourself entering a classroom in a school for the first time in your life and listening to a teacher speaking a language that sounds like a “jumble of odd sounds” (Gordon 2007: 93) or as “an incoherent stream of cranky wails and cries” (Gordon 2007: 93). Imagine having to master the intricate skill of reading without understanding what the teacher is saying. This is what some learners in South Africa who enter formal schooling for the first time experience. These learners are faced with a double challenge: they have to master the language of learning and teaching while having to master the art of reading. This article reports on Grade 1 classes where English is the language of teaching and learning and the teachers have to teach reading in English to non-English speaking learners.

There are eleven official languages or home language in South Africa. Young learners in South Africa are taught in their home languages in Grades 1 to 3. From Grade 4 onwards learners are taught in English or Afrikaans as the language of learning and teaching. But some parents and caregivers opt to send their children to schools where English is the only language of instruction. This means that the children have to start their formal schooling in Grade 1, learning through the medium of English as their Second Language (ESL) or as it is known in the South African school system through their first additional language. Thus they go straight into

English classes. Often these children do not understand a word of English when they enter school.

In the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) of the Department of Basic Education (2011) First Additional Language [second language] teaching in Grades R–3 was implemented in 2012. As much time as possible should therefore be devoted to the teaching of English (Department of Basic Education 2011: 8). In Grade R (pre-school) and Grade 1, teachers are advised to expose the first additional language learners to lots of oral language in the form of stories and classroom instruction. The learners should react to simple instructions, making use of the Total Physical Response method. Initially learners’ spoken language should be formulaic language consisting of memorised songs, actions rhymes, poems and formulaic language learned in chunks. The learners’ emergent spoken language should be scaffolded (Department of Basic Education 2011: 10–11). But how should a teacher teach ESL learners in Grade 1 if they have not mastered English yet to understand English and also help them to master reading?

In the CAPS document it is also written: “When children begin to read and write in their additional language, they already know how to decode in their home language ... What they need in their First Additional Language phonics class is practice in applying this knowledge to learning to decode text in English” (Department

of Basic Education 2011: 16). But what about the young ESL learners in Grade 1 who have not been taught to read in their home language or mother tongue?

It should always be considered that in order to use ESL as the language of learning and teaching, academic competency in English is required. A distinction should be made between BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Communicative Academic Language Proficiency). Cummins' image of an iceberg portrays the difference between BICS and CALP very well. Above the surface are language skills such as comprehension and speaking. Underneath the surface are skills of analysis and synthesis. Above the surface are the language skills of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Below the surface is the deeper, subtle language of meaning and creative composition (Baker 1996: 151). The Grade 1 ESL learner who is in the process of mastering BICS abilities in English, is at the same time expected to learn content and skills such as reading which requires CALP competence. It is also said that it takes six to seven years for a young learner to attain CALP proficiency in a second language. According to Cummins learners may have an academic disadvantage if they do not have CALP in either their home language or in an additional language (Aukerman 2007: 626).

Learning to read is a complex task. Certain skills such as perceptual skills which can be considered as pre-reading skills have to be intact to make a success of mastering reading. These perceptual skills include visual perceptual skills such as form identification, visual discrimination and visual memory. Here, auditory perceptual skills such as auditory memory and auditory discrimination (which includes the ability to discriminate specific sounds of letters and to blend sounds into words) also come into play. Auditory perceptual skills have to be mastered as well and eventually have to be paired with visual perceptual skills (Deiner 1999: 400). Well-developed auditory perceptual skills are necessary when the sound system of a new language has to be mastered.

But other skills such as the ability to use and understand the language are also fundamental to reading. If a person does not understand the language, "then the words in a book are just gibberish, even if he can read them" (Bardige and Segal 2005: 8–9). The two authors propose

that children who do not speak English as their home language, should have enough experience with and exposure to English so that they become familiar with the English sound system. Children also need to master the vocabulary that will enable them to understand the reading of text (Bardige and Segal 2005: 10). Comprehension and reading are so closely linked that there are researchers who believe that the words "reading" and "comprehension" are synonymous (Bouwer 2004: 94).

Another problem facing young ESL learners going straight into an English class is that they do not have the opportunity to acquire English as a second language along the normal acquisition routes. They have to learn in English before actually understanding the language and the result might be that they are not able to express themselves academically. Ideally young learners should receive input in the classroom that is comprehensible and that is supplied in low anxiety situations (Krashen in Schütz 2011: 1).

Research in South Africa has also indicated that there is a fundamental difference between urban schools and rural schools if the language of instruction differs from the home language. In the multilingual urban classrooms where English is used from Grade 1 as the language of instruction, there is greater access to newspapers, magazines and television programmes and the children are also exposed to advertising billboards in English. For rural schoolchildren there is limited reading material available in English or other languages and very few opportunities to hear or speak English exist. Often the teachers have limited English proficiency (Fleisch 2008: 111).

One can understand why Naledi Pandor, who was the previous minister of Education in South Africa, stated in 2005 that her department had found that English as a language of learning was proving to be a barrier to learning and development for many learners in the country. The then Department of Education needs to ensure that all learners are competent in their language of learning to perform academically well (*Sunday Times* 2005: 13).

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

During 2011 a research project was done in schools all over South Africa. In a questionnaire Grade 1 teachers were asked to give feedback

about the teaching of literacy in their classrooms. A section of the questionnaire was devoted to the progress of and the difficulties experienced by English Second Language (ESL) learners who are taught in Grade 1 in English as the language of learning and teaching. In this section feedback from Grade 1 teachers about the teaching of reading to ESL learners was required and this article reports on this section.

In the research project the researcher made use of students as reliable field workers. Final year BEd Foundation Phase students who were doing their teaching practice were requested to approach a Grade 1 teacher to complete the questionnaire. The student teachers went to selected functional schools all over South Africa and the questionnaire was included in a teaching practice workbook on language teaching. This workbook formed part of students' official documents and had to carry the official stamp of the school. The documents had to be signed by the principal of the school, as well as the students' supervising teachers. The workbooks formed part of the portfolio mark that students obtained at the end of 2011.

In the section of the questionnaire about Grade 1 ESL learners who are taught in English, both quantitative and qualitative data was obtained and thus a mixed method approach was used. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004: 14-16) state that the time for mixed method research has come. When quantitative research coming from a positivist stance is mixed with qualitative research that argues for the superiority of constructivism, it leads to a mixed method approach that has pragmatism as its philosophical partner. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004: 23) argue that although the mixed method approach cannot provide perfect solutions, it can incorporate the strengths of both research methods.

When one considers the various themes that arose from the qualitative data, it becomes evident that the themes relate to various systems within which the individual learner finds himself or herself. To understand the complexity of the influences and the interactions between an individual learner and the many systems the learner has to cope with, it could be approached from an ecological systems theory or systems change perspective. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992 and 1994; Donald et al. 2010: 40) ecosystemic model could be useful. In this model the close relationship between the various microsystems which eventually form the mesosystem is explained.

The Quantitative Data

Of the 395 questionnaires that were returned, 230 contained data about ESL learners. The quantitative data from these 230 questionnaires provided information about the number of learners in a class, the number of learners whose home language is not English and the number of learners who could not speak English when they entered school at the beginning of 2011. The average number of learners per class was 28; the average number of ESL learners was 16 and the average number of learners who could not speak a word of English when they entered school was six. For a teacher to have 28 learners in a class in which English is the medium of instruction and to have 16 ESL learners and six who cannot speak English at all, is surely a very demanding task.

From the quantitative data certain interesting circumstances arose. There were some classes with many learners – in one case 46 learners – but all the learners were ESL speakers and all of them could not speak English when they arrived at the school at the beginning of the year. To a certain extent this is an easier task because the learners are at the same level of English competence and the teacher can employ second language methods and materials for all the learners in the class. But in a class of 40 learners of which 23 were ESL speakers and five who could not speak a word of English at all, to teach everybody in English could be a daunting task for a teacher.

The Qualitative Data

In the open-ended questions teachers were asked to report on the biggest problems that ESL learners in their classes had regarding literacy and especially with the mastering of reading. Teachers reported on specific reading problems that ESL learners had. They also considered whether ESL learners' socio-cultural backgrounds had an effect on the learners when reading was taught.

RESULTS

From the open-ended questions about the progress of ESL learners with regard to literacy certain themes emerged. These themes relate clearly to the various systems within the micro system that form the meso system young learn-

ers are exposed to. The themes are the following:

- ♦ A lack of vocabulary influences comprehension
- ♦ The influence of the sound system of the languages
- ♦ Auditory perception
- ♦ Parents and the home environment
- ♦ Socio-economic and socio-cultural background

A Lack of Vocabulary Influences Comprehension

The teachers in this research project mentioned a lack of vocabulary as one of the main problems that ESL learners in their classroom face. "The limited vocabulary they have makes the memory and comprehension more difficult." Another teacher mentioned that the lack of vocabulary could be overcome, if they could have worked at a slower pace. But it is difficult in classes where there are first and second English language speakers. One teacher considered the influence of a lack of vocabulary and came to the following conclusion. She wrote that "being unable to express themselves adequately could affect social development and writing skills."

Understanding what is said and written, lies at the heart of any reading activity. Radloff and Samson (2011: 3) state: "Reading requires not only rapid and accurate decoding but also the ability to comprehend the writer's intention." One can understand why many of the teachers mentioned that ESL learners did not understand instructions and simple commands.

The Influence of the Sound System of the Languages

The phonological and linguistic demands vary in different languages. This means that content that would not be problematic when learners are learning their home language, might cause difficulties when they learn it in a second language. Teachers mentioned the influence of the sound system of the home language when English is taught and learned. A teacher said for example that "[l]earners will read the English words in SiSwati [an official language]" and another teacher said that "they confuse the sounds of the mother tongue and ESL pronunciation."

Pronouncing vowels and especially "a" and "e" in English can be difficult and thus some young learners "battle to pronounce the vowel letters which in turn affects their blending [of words]". A teacher referred to isiXhosa (an official language) in which "vowels only have one sound: 'a' stays 'a', whereas in English, vowels can be pronounced in different ways depending on the word. This can be confusing." One teacher mentioned the difference in pronunciation of the "ou" sound in words such as fourteen and shout.

Some learners battle with the sound known as a "schwa", but which is actually just an "uh" sound. It appears often in words and is heard in almost every sentence spoken in English. The "a" in apple and the way the "a" is pronounced when one says "a woman" is an example. For a non-English speaking person and even more for a child this could be very difficult. The fact that the other 10 official languages in South Africa are phonetic languages adds to the problem.

Auditory Perception

The development of perceptual abilities is not done separately anymore but it forms part of young learners' development with regard to general skills. "The development of perceptual skills entails guiding learners to use their senses optimally to ensure that they can interpret the messages going to their brains via their senses correctly (Joubert et al. 2008: 119). A distinction is made between auditory, visual and motor perception. The influence of the lack of well-developed auditory perceptual skills was mentioned by the teachers as it had to be dealt with.

Some learners found it difficult to hear "isolated sounds which are unfamiliar to them." One teacher stated that learners "battle to remember certain sound for example 'sh', 'ch-', 'th-'". ESL speakers have for instance a difficulty with the "th" sound and to differentiate between "f" and "th". The "th" sound is also pronounced in two ways in English.

Parents and the Home Environment

Although there is no reference to parents or to learners' home situations in the questionnaire, these themes arose from many of the questionnaires. For most children, the inside of their homes and the immediate surroundings are the first and often the only environments they experience.

rience in their early years. What they experience in these environments, is what they take with them when they start formal schooling. Modern families represent a wide range of cultural backgrounds and it is important that the contributions of the various families should be sought out, acknowledged and used. Often parents forget that they are their children's teachers too and they therefore have to be involved in the children's progress at school. Sometimes parents cannot act as good teachers. A teacher in this research project wrote that the "primary educators are parents – if [their] literacy levels are low then children have the same problems."

Some of the ESL learners in the research project came from homes where they had never been exposed to books. A teacher stated: "Some learners do not know which side of the book they must start reading." Thus many Grade 1 learners "are not exposed to any reading material at home. The only books that they really see, touch and read are at school." Another teacher is of the opinion that it is lack of background knowledge and an inability to make predictions when reading that are causing reading problems among ESL learners. There are also some parents or grandparents who cannot help their children because "[s]ome learners have parents that can't read, so reading practice is done only at school."

When asked about the problems that ESL learners have to face, reference to the "uninvolvement" of parents, the lack of language stimulation and the lack of stories and books were recurring themes that the teachers reported on. Many ESL learners do not receive help with homework and the reason could be that a "parent doesn't always have the [English] language needed when helping with homework." The acquisition of English is clearly not reinforced at home because there is "little support from parents at home" and these children obviously hardly ever hear English outside the school. Another teacher referred to learners' poor sentence construction in English "because the parents use English wrongly and the children speak like their parents."

Socio-economic and Socio-cultural Backgrounds

Because ESL learners come from various backgrounds, they do not have the same experi-

ences. Thus one teacher stated: "Never assume prior knowledge." Teachers first have to enquire about learners' pre-knowledge and then build on this.

Some teachers in the research project mentioned that the learners came from poor socio-economic backgrounds and as mentioned earlier they do not have books at home. Many teachers felt that young learners should be exposed to themes from their daily lives. In the past, British readers were sometimes used in schools and in some of the poorer areas this still continues. But as a teacher wrote, reference to "snow" and "reindeer" should be excluded because few children in South Africa know about snow and reindeer. Another teacher dealt with the problem in the following way: "When choosing a book for reading I make sure that the pictures inside are of things that they know so that [in the course of] the reading [it] would become easier to associate the words with the pictures." Thus the solution will be to "ensure reading is relevant to them and tries to encompass their own culture." One teacher commented: "We try to use stories relevant to a South African child, so it relates to life experience."

DISCUSSION

One issue that arose from the quantitative data was the class size and the number of ESL learners in a class. In this research project it surely had an influence on the amount of support that a teacher can provide to ESL learners. Another issue is the variety in competence in English of the ESL learners. It is difficult to deal with second language issues if learners are at different levels of competence in the language to be learned. This should be considered when learners are placed in classes.

Mastering enough vocabulary remains important for any language acquisition. One wonders how young children can learn if they do not understand what is said in the class and as a result they cannot do their class work or assignments. In most cases these young ESL learners possess no English vocabulary. Each language has its specific sound system and when a new language is learned, the different sounds of the new language have to be mastered. In two of the South African official languages, isiZulu and isiXhosa there are for instance "clicking" sounds which are difficult to understand and to learn to

produce correctly. As discussed in the Introduction some of the sound in English might sound very strange to some non-English speaking learners who are not acquainted with English at all.

The sound system of English as the new language that has to be mastered was mentioned by some teachers as a problem. Teachers who teach English to Grade 1 ESL speakers should pay special attention to the correct and clear pronunciation so that their young learners could master the sound system of English. In teaching English attention should not only be given to the individual sounds that make up speech, but also to the way in which pitch, the rise and fall of the voice, is used to convey meaning (Hewings 2004: 3).

The first language that a baby acquires is by listening. A baby has to listen and has to understand sounds before starting to speak. This also applies when a new language is learned and taught. When one speaks to a young child the sounds should be pronounced correctly so that the child hears them correctly before speaking the new language correctly.

Teachers mentioned problems with auditory perception as a possible reason why young Grade 1 ESL learners battle to acquire the necessary language skills in English. Problems with auditory perception influence the way in which information is heard and understood. Problems with auditory perception should not be confused with hearing impairment since there can be many forms, such as auditory discrimination, auditory analysis and synthesis, auditory blending and auditory memory. When a new language such as English as a second language is taught in the classroom, teachers should pay special attention to develop their learners' auditory perceptual skills.

Research has indicated reasons why parents do not become involved in their children's schools and the activities of the school. Quite often teachers and school staff presume that parents and guardians are simply not interested which might not be the case. The following could be possible reasons:

- ♦ too little time because of a tight work schedule or single-parenthood
- ♦ language barriers or a cultural difference
- ♦ social isolation or a low educational level
- ♦ not knowing how to contribute
- ♦ feeling overwhelmed, intimidated or unwellcome (Davies 2012: 1)

Reinforcement at home of what was learned at school is vital in an era where more and more is expected academically of Grade 1 learners. Grade 1 teachers have to be aware of reasons why their learners do not get support at home, be it from parents, grandparents or caregivers. Teachers should, with the help of school management, tackle the issue of non-involvement of their learners' parents, grandparents or caregivers. When dealing with the non-involvement of parents, especially parents and caregivers who are not literate themselves, the reasons for non-involvement should be traced and attended to. Other forms of support such as for instance older siblings or neighbours who can attend to homework in reading could be established.

Seen from the constructivist viewpoint it should be kept in mind that reading is also a socio-cultural issue and that the home background and cultures of the young readers influence their reading performance. If the content that has to be read, is culturally strange to young readers and if they come from homes where they are not exposed to reading or motivated to read, it will surely hinder their progress in reading. Pretorius and Machet (2004: 46) state that reading is "both an individual cognitive-linguistic achievement and also a socially constructed form of human behavior." Thus teachers have to be well informed about learners' social, economic and cultural backgrounds. This applies to many classrooms in South Africa where learners come from diverse backgrounds and diverse circumstances at home and have to learn in English, often a foreign language for them.

CONCLUSION

Many ESL learners in schools in South Africa face difficulties to master the requirements that are expected of them in a Grade 1 class because of a language barrier. Language carries learning in schools and without proper knowledge of the language used in the classroom and understanding of what is said, learning cannot take place. Considering the difficulties that ESL Grade 1 learners in this research project had to face, one realises that they might encounter difficulties to make a success of their early years at school.

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