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A language enrichment programme for South African Grade 4 ESL learners with limited English proficiency
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South African educators express feelings of ineptitude as they do not know how to support ESL (English Second Language) learners with limited English proficiency. This litany emphasises educators’ need for supportive and preventive intervention. A language enrichment programme was compiled after a research study was conducted into the needs of educators teaching Grade 4 ESL learners with limited English proficiency. An intervention research method was then followed to test the efficacy of this programme. Forty teachers implemented the language enrichment programme 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 the programme positively. Rural participants suggested some refinements to the programme. The overall conclusion is that the programme makes a useful contribution to ESL practice. (In this article English Second Language Learners refer to learners attending school where English is the Language of Learning and Teaching, but it is their second or third language)

Introduction

English is the dominant language of communication, academics, business and technology in the world (Vermeulen, 2001:134; Cele, 2001:184; Mulholland, 2006:18). Consequently, it is one of the main reasons many parents/caregivers believe that English is the best choice of LOLT for their children (Mboweni-Marais, 2003; Nkabinde, 1997; Bosman & Van der Merwe, 2000; Radebe, 2004:4), albeit their second or third language. A result of this choice is that many ESL learners experience barriers to learning, because of limited English proficiency (NCSNET & NCESS, 1997:17; Nel, 2005:151; De Vries, 2006:6; Nel). Heugh (as quoted by De Vries, 2006:6) affirms that most learners learning in their second language are not skilled enough to learn mathematics, science, geography or history in this language.

It seems that Grade 4 is crucial for ESL learners in that learners must adjust to additional Learning Areas and different educators for the various Learning Areas. Furthermore learners are expected to work more independently. Both the curriculum challenges and the need to work independently lead to language proficiency being more taxed (Nel, 2004). There is evidence that learners who transfer from their mother tongue to second language learning in Grade 4 show poorer academic performance until Grade 12, than learners continuing learning in their mother tongue (Heugh as quoted by De Vries, 2006:6).

Lamentably, most educators lack the training, knowledge, tools or time to support ESL learners with a limited English proficiency to ascertain that these learners achieve to their full potential (Nel, 2004).
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 rouse stronger feelings among educators than class size. Educators believe that the quality of their teaching and interactions with learners decline 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 priority for parents, the stimulation of and exposure to English for their children, will be very last on their list. Many of these parents are illiterate and would therefore not read to their children in their mother tongue, and definitely not in English, to develop their children’s literacy; and 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 who 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 tongue. To provide support for the ESL learner with inadequate English proficiency, it is more to the advantage of the learner and the educator if the educator has knowledge of his learner’s languages (Marais, Du Toit and 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 a learner’s cognitive ability is determined in his 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 much 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 the ESL learners’ immediate living environment, which limits their exposure to and use of English as 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 between educators and learners, as well as between learners and learners exists (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); and  
• no tailor-made comprehensive South African classroom preventive intervention programme for supporting ESL learners with limited English proficiency is available (Nel, 2004).

Based on these needs and learning circumstances a language enrichment programme for Grade 4 educators teaching ESL learners with limited English proficiency was compiled (Nel, 2004). A summary of the components included in the programme is provided in Table 1 below. The table presents the building blocks of the program in no particular priority, as they are all interrelated and all play essential parts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes Based Education:</th>
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<tr>
<td>The assimilation of the following principles of OBE (National Education Department pamphlet distributed in 1997) in the language enrichment programme:</td>
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<td>• learners are actively part of the teaching and learning process;</td>
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<td>• 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 &amp; Olshtain, 2000; Vakalisa, 2003).</td>
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<td>• critical thinking, reasoning, reflection and action must be encouraged;</td>
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<td>• knowledge and skills have to be integrated in different learning areas,</td>
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<td>• the content and activities should be connected to real life situations to make language real and relevant;</td>
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<td>• prior knowledge: important for understanding of current learning;</td>
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<td>• learners take responsibility for their own learning;</td>
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<td>• learner based and paced; and</td>
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<td>• flexible time frames allowing learners to work at their own pace.</td>
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<th>Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.</th>
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<td>ESL learners learning in English need to be skilled in both.</td>
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<td><strong>BICS:</strong> Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are skills needed for everyday conversations using informal, colloquial language.</td>
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<td><strong>CALP:</strong> Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency is the formal, more sophisticated command of language schools use, which is necessary for success at school (Cummins, 1997).</td>
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<th>Vocabulary and concepts add</th>
<th>Prior knowledge is important for</th>
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<td>Learning styles and preferences: learners</td>
<td>Perception and learning: language</td>
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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.

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, 2001:18; Van Rooyen & Van der Merwe, 2003:244)

do not all learn in the same way (Winkler, 1998:75). 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: 121).

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 children need to be able to develop proficient language (Lessing, 1986:49; Van Rooyen et al. 2003:242)

Parental involvement
Parents are the primary caregivers of the child (Donald et al. 2005:290) 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.

Stories as medium of language enrichment:
- Develop language
- Create awareness of language
- Provide meaning
- Entice interest
- Interactive
- Relevant to lives

Activities:
- language enrichment games to encourage active participation by the learners. Learners should know and understand all the words and concepts in the story and in the instructions;
- the development of a language corner to provide added opportunities for learners who need 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.

Table 1. Components of the story-based language enrichment programme

A story is the ideal vehicle to provide context and meaning for the augmentation of a language. The rationale for this claim will be discussed next.

The rationale for using the story as medium for the language enrichment programme
"Stories have been told for as long as people have lived on earth. We tell both real and imaginary stories to each other" (Ashworth, Beard & Hortop, 1999:114).

In the literature stories are strongly recommended for language learning (Houston Mitchoff, 2005:39). Wessels et al. (2002:312) state that by sharing stories in an
interesting and enjoyable way, learners are exposed to well-structured texts, and that through this exposure, the learner’s own language proficiency is improved. According to Wright (2002:3) stories can be chosen for language learning, because it relies so much on words and offer a major and constant source of language experience for learners.

In many of the studies of early language development, storybook reading is seen to play an important role in language development and emergent literacy at home (Buchorn-Stoll, 2002:25). Many researchers, therapists (remedial therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists and psychologists), educators and parents/caregivers will affirm that stories and storybook reading are part of many a learning situation. Language development informs all learning situations. Therefore, storytelling contributes to the general development of children and to language development in particular (Gauteng Department of Education, 2001:63).

Stories are the main basis for developing literacy skills. Craig, Hull, Haggart & Crowder (2001:46) assert that storytelling helps children connect and experience prior knowledge with the larger world of text.

Learners understand and remember information better when it is in story form (Buitendag, 1994:13). Stories can expose learners to a wide range of ideas, words and ways of using words not yet used by themselves and will enrich their general understanding of English. Through stories, learners practise working out meaning through a context (Gauteng Department of Education, 2001:59). Children are exposed to new language and ideas through traditional tales and stories of real or imagined life (Gauteng Department of Education, 2001:63).

If children find meaning through stories they are rewarded through their ability to understand and are motivated to try to improve their ability to understand even more (Wright, 2002:4). Celce-Murcia et al. (2000:63) confirm that stories are often an engaging way to comprehend and practise grammar and discourse for intermediate learners.

Through stories:
- learners become aware of the general “feel” and sound of a second language (Wright, 2002:5); and
- learners are introduced to language items and sentence construction without their necessarily having to use the second language productively. When the time comes to move language items into their productive control, it is no great problem because the language is not new to them (Wright, 2002:5).

Stories can be used to develop children’s powers of awareness, analysis and expression, to relate to other aspects of the curriculum (Wright, 2002:5).

Telling stories has a certain enticement for most learners. A story:
- inspires;
- makes you think;
- strengthen a people’s culture;
- raises questions and stimulate creative listening in young and old; and
- opens channels of communication between all kinds of people (Mhlope, 2003:1).

Based on the above-mentioned a story is, therefore, perfect vehicle, for language enrichment, through which the language proficiency of ESL learners’ with a limited proficiency could be augmented in a stimulating and motivating manner.
There are however, certain fundamentals that are critical for the successful use of stories to augment language. It must be relevant to the learners’ living circumstances, interests and cultures to purposively address all the above-mentioned components (O’Connor as quoted by Lessing et al. 1999:52; Killen, 2000: xvi; Department of Education, 2002b:8; Lindeque, 2003:77; Gawe, Vakalisa & Van Niekerk, 2003:162). Since many classrooms in South Africa are multilingual and multicultural the story has to keep the South African context, prevalent values and political tension as well as cultural links and cultural diversity in mind (Gibbens, 2000:105; Combrink as quoted by Gibbens, 2000:102; Mhlope, 2003:1).

To ensure that the attention of the story listener is kept and that the story consequently makes the desired impact, the following elements are essential:

The story has to be an aesthetic experience (Gibbens, 2000:102) by providing a creative spark, technical competence, and a good plot with an exciting climax (Hill as quoted by Gibbens, 2001:111).

Parents asked Einstein what should be done to turn a child into a scientist. He responded by saying: “Fairy stories, Fairy stories, Fairy stories” (Sisulu as quoted by Gibbens, 2000:112). According to Gallagher (as quoted by Gibbens, 2000:113) one of the top selling genres readers enjoy to escape into is that of fantasy. Learners want to escape the crude and violent world.

The following are seen as sources of enjoyment that readers and story-listeners can identify with (Baker as quoted by Gibbens, 2000:119):
- recognition of the self – both real and mythic;
- the feeling that reality can be changed;
- a story that moves the emotions;
- consolidation of what the reader or listener knows;
- stories that reflect a familiar environment;
- stories that extend perceptions and reflect different environments;
- stories with strong atmosphere; and
- stories that stimulate curiosity.

If language is to grow, opportunities for active language interaction must be created in the classroom (Donald et al 2005:222). By reading or telling stories interactive communication can be promoted. Therefore, educators should read stories in an interactive manner and move away from the school-story format that they so often use: educators read and children listen. Children must participate (Craig et al. 2001:46). Guidelines for reading the story in an interactive way includes the following: (Buchorn-Stoll, 2002:35):
- a discussion of the characters before and/or after the reading;
- a prediction of story events (the story was written as a series);
- the explanation of unfamiliar vocabulary;
- a discussion and comparison of personal expression in relation to the story;
- the use of puppets and other paraphernalia; and
- a re-enactment of the story.

To determine if the language enrichment programme addressed the needs of the educators’ as a tool to support the ESL learner with a limited English proficiency an empirical study was conducted.
**Goal of the study**

The overall aim of this study was to provide Grade 4 Language educators with a classroom-based English language enrichment programme which will empower these educators and hopefully also other Learning Area educators to support learners with limited English proficiency in the mainstream classroom.

The overall aim was operationalised as follows:

- to support the mainstream Language educator in the inclusive education situation by creating a story-based English language enrichment programme for those ESL learners who have limited English proficiency; and
- to ascertain the extent to which the language enrichment programme succeeds by requesting purposively identified Grade 4 Language educators to implement the programme and complete a closed questionnaire as means of assessment.

**Research method**

In essence the research conducted in this study was intervention research (De Vos, 2006). Intervention research traditionally focuses on testing an approach / program 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 program / intervention in order to disseminate it to a wider population (De Vos, 2006).

A pre-test was conducted to test the comprehensiveness of the questionnaire prior to the implementation of the programme. The questionnaire together with the language enrichment programme were presented for scrutiny to 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. The colleagues were chosen because:

- they are qualified as an Educational Psychologist, Speech and Language Therapist and Intermediate Language facilitator;
- they have experience supporting ESL learners with limited English proficiency experiencing barriers to learning; and
- they have experience in supporting educators who have ESL learners with limited English proficiency experiencing barriers to learning in their classrooms.

The three educators were chosen because:

- they completed the first study’s questionnaire, determining the needs of educators for a language enrichment programme (Nel, 2004) and knew what the focus of the study entails;
- they have 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.

These colleagues and educators 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 amendments were made to the questionnaire and language enrichment programme.

Thereafter the final questionnaires were hand-delivered to the respondents. 40 purposively selected educators, experienced in teaching and supporting ESL learners with a limited English proficiency, were asked to provide feedback on the
suitability of the language enrichment programme after a six week implementation period. These teachers teach at mainstream primary public schools in the Sedibeng East District (which includes Vereeniging, Sharpeville, Meyerton and Heidelberg). The schools were situated in town, township and rural areas.

The population and sampling
40 educators were identified to implement and assess the suitability of the English language enrichment programme for the Grade 4 ESL learner by non-probability purposive sampling (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:206) on the following basis:

- they all took part in the questionnaire identifying the needs for an English language enrichment programme for Grade 4 educators (Nel & Theron, 2005);
- they all teach, or have taught, the Language Learning Area for Grade 4 ESL learners;
- they have 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 voice 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 included both suburban and rural mainstream schools.

The size of the sample
The sample for the questionnaire assessing the suitability of the implementation of the language enrichment programme for Grade 4 ESL learners was taken from the first sample of 100 educators which identified the needs for a language enrichment programme (Nel, 2004). According to Stoker (as quoted by Strydom & De Vos, 2001:192) a sample of 45% out of a population of 100 is a good representative sample. Various factors made it difficult to obtain a 45% sample. These factors include:

- the limited number of Language educators, with adequate knowledge and experience of ESL learners, in close proximity to the researcher;
- the limited number of Language educators with adequate qualifications in close proximity to the researcher; and
- the costs of printing and distributing the language enrichment programme needed to be taken into account. The programme has 123 pages in total.

Therefore, only 40 educators could be invited to implement the language enrichment programme and complete the second questionnaire determining the suitability of the implementation of the English language enrichment programme.

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<th>Sample of second phase</th>
<th>Sample for third phase</th>
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<td>100</td>
<td>40%</td>
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Response
39 of the 40 language enrichment programmes with comments and questionnaires were returned. The response rate was 97.5%. The one questionnaire not returned was as result of the educator moving. The excellent response rate could be attributed to the critical need that exists for such a language enrichment programme.

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

**Analysis of results**

Based on the responses of the educators who implemented the English language enrichment programme it could be deduced that the program successfully addressed the dynamics outlined in Figure 1. Consequently, the story-based English language enrichment programme will be a programme that could be implemented usefully in the mainstream classroom to support Grade 4 ESL learners with limited English proficiency. Between 92% and 100% of the selected educators responded positively towards the programme as depicted in graph 1.

Graph 1. Summary of the evaluation of the language enrichment programme

It is acknowledged that some educators (not more than 8%) found the programme (or aspects thereof) unsatisfactory. From the responses and personal feedback from educators in rural areas regarding the suitability of the language enrichment programme, it seems that the programme does not cater for the specific needs of rural educators and learners, given the following circumstances:
♦ in the rural areas most of the educators are English Second Language educators with a poor English proficiency;
♦ there is a lack of resources with which to augment the language enrichment programme, e.g. books, newspapers, radios, television and teaching material;
♦ parents/caregivers are illiterate and/or cannot speak or understand English at all; and
♦ these parents/caregivers work far away from home and school and are not intensively involved in their children’s education.

These limitations will need to be addressed by:
♦ workshopping such educators;
♦ providing extensive in-service training;
♦ demonstrating implementation of the language enrichment programme;
♦ encouraging co-operation with educators who successfully implemented the language enrichment programme; and
♦ adjusting the language enrichment programme by adding additional resources and further simplifying language.

Conclusion
This programme is in line with the move towards preventive intervention. South African learners and educators face many barriers to learning. Donald et al. (2005:1) states that a barrier to learning is any factor which causes a hindrance to a person’s ability to benefit from schooling. Therefore, preventive intervention is necessary to promote optimal learning.

The language enrichment programme supports the notions of inclusive education: it 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).

Although the language enrichment programme for this study was compiled for Grade 4 learners the components were so designed that it could easily be adapted for other primary school grades, by choosing different stories and adjusting the difficulty level of the activities.

Finally, this study provides a ready-made tool for educators with many ESL learners with a limited English proficiency. Educators are faced with numerous professional challenges and this language enrichment programme could lighten their burden and make teaching a more satisfying career.

References


GAUTENG Department Of Education see SOUTH AFRICA. Gauteng Department Of Education.


