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The role of higher education institutions in addressing South Africa's reading crisis in view of sustainable development

Abstract

South Africa has an enormous reading crisis necessitating discernment of the real pedagogic causes of failure to read in Grade 1, and to read English as a Second Language (ESL) with understanding later. In this article will be asked if the phonics approach to initial reading is suited to African learners, and why they have to start reading in two languages simultaneously. The advantages of using the syllabic approach to reading will be indicated, as well as the use of communicative language teaching for learning ESL (rather than the form-focused teaching in use), so that learners will be able to benefit from English medium education. Higher Education Institutions are in a position to make a difference, for instance by investigating these issues and influencing policy documents accordingly.

Keywords: *approaches to initial reading; reading crisis; communicative language teaching; 'Straight for English' schools.*

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are in a unique position to shape the future of a country by educating and training prospective workers, policymakers and leaders. This article deals specifically with the teachers who educate the country's learners in the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3). There is an immense responsibility for HEIs in this field. If academics make mistakes when writing course material for students, as well as policy documents and teachers' manuals so that learners do not get a good grounding in the Foundation Phase, the future will be bleak.

In this article the present state of education will be evaluated against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in order to probe what the 'future' is to which we are heading now. Goal 4, concerning education, states that every child should have access to "inclusive and equitable **quality** education" (UN, 2015 – emphasis added). In the article is argued that South African government schools are not heading for **quality** education,



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pointing out some problems in the Foundation Phase (FP) which render **quality** education for all learners impossible as long as fundamental changes are not made.

2. The reality of education in South Africa's primary schools at present

This article will focus on the training of Foundation Phase teachers to teach non-English learners to read the home language (HL), and also to acquire sufficient English as a Second Language (ESL) in the FP in order for them to read ESL well and with understanding, and to benefit from English-medium instruction from Grade 4 onwards. More specifically, the article will deal with African township learners (the majority of South African [SA] learners). More than 80% of African Grade 4 learners in South Africa failed the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) test, indicating a lack of "basic reading skills" in the HL, compared to only 4% of learners in 49 other countries who failed the test (Howie *et al.*, 2017: 11). The Department of Basic Education (DBE) acknowledged the poor reading results in a recent report on the Foundation Phase (DBE, 2020).

The PIRLS tests are taken in the HL because the benefit of initial reading in the HL is widely recognised. At the 2012 Language-in-Education Conference in South Sudan, one principle was that only when learners have reading competency in the most familiar language, should additional languages be read (Norton, 2014: 642). When a learner can read in the HL, those skills can transfer automatically to reading ESL (more on this below). The PIRLS tests underscore the findings of Cronje (2021: 1) that, for the last 15 to 20 years, only about 20% of township African learners have learnt to read in Grade 1, compared to 80% of Basotho learners who learnt to read the HL in Grade 1 in the 1990s (Cronje, 1997: 77, 89). This information from the 1990s shows that the poor literacy outcomes should not merely be blamed on the African learners or their teachers. The PIRLS results may indicate that the approaches and strategies teachers are currently using lead to failure.

The PIRLS tests indicate an inability to read the HL. Inability to read ESL is indicated by other tests, for example, the SACMEQ tests of 2007, which showed that about 30% of South African Grade 6 learners were still "functionally illiterate in English" (Spaull, 2013: 4). Some ESL research done in 2013 comprised reading comprehension tests for 4 667 Grade 5 ESL learners from 214 rural schools. The Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) of 1 772 of those learners was also tested. It was found that 41% read less than 40 words per minute (WCPM) correctly, with an average of only 17 WCPM, and were considered "non-readers" in English. The comprehension test average of this group was less than 20% (Draper & Spaull, 2013: 56-72). However, even learners who seem to read English well may understand very little. The CAPS for ESL in the FP prescribes that learners receive a "strong oral foundation" in Grade 1 so that they will understand what they read in English later. It states: "Children are often able to decode in their additional language, but unable to understand what they read." (DBE, 2012a: 16).

3. Consequences of the reading problems

Most learners can only pass the lower grades by memorising lessons and pretending to read, which is fostered since preschool (Grade R) by instructions such as that learners should pretend to read, adopting a "reading voice". In Grade 1 the teacher should read to the learners (shared reading), then guide groups to read the lesson again, many times, with paired or independent reading later (DBE 2012b: 39, 56). Le Cordeur (2010: 83-84) mentions basically

the same strategies, e.g. teacher modelling and assisted reading, as strategies “to improve reading fluency” in Grades 4–6, while assuming that those learners have acquired basic reading skills. It is questionable to prescribe the same strategies for Grade 1 learners, who still have to learn to read, as for Grade 4–6 learners. The most likely result is that learners learn lessons by heart and are never motivated to read by themselves. Why struggle and read slowly, if there are other ways to ‘read’ fluently, as is required? Thus learners memorise lessons which they cannot read or understand, or both, impairing future reading at school.

According to Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019: 4-6), approximately half of SA learners do not complete secondary education, and of those who do write the matric examinations, a quarter fail. The authors blame insufficiencies in the lower grades. Murray (2016) writes that 25% of students who registered for tertiary education dropped out in their first year, despite programmes to help students transition to tertiary education. However, Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019: 9) write: “In 2015, the South African government spent about 20% of the budget and 6% of the nation’s GDP on education, exceeding many SSA countries.” (Sub-Saharan African countries).

Failure to teach literacy and ESL in the FP does not only put certain learners at a disadvantage, but harms South Africa as a whole, especially economically and socially. Good education can reduce poverty and wage inequalities, making a nation more prosperous (Mlachila & Moeletsi 2019: 4). Spaul and Pretorius (2019: 18) also hold that getting reading “right” is essential for “national economic prosperity”, as a country cannot prosper when half its citizens cannot contribute much for lack of foundational skills. South Africa probably has the highest percentage of jobless citizens in the world, with the 2021 third-quarter Quarterly Labour Force Survey citing an unemployment rate of 34,9% (Statistics SA, 2021). Significantly, the Sustainable Development Goals see education as an “enabler of upward socioeconomic mobility”, and state as Target 4.4 that by 2030 the number of people who have relevant skills, e.g. vocational skills for employment and entrepreneurship, should be increased substantially (UN, 2015).

Perry (2009: 59-60) states another concern, stating, “literacy is a politically loaded activity” that can be “used for domination and control”. According to Bamgbose (2000: 1-5), languages can create two distinct classes: the included, knowing the elite language empowering them, and the excluded, who are “second-class citizens”. He sees a lack of literacy as “perhaps the most devastating source of exclusion”, since literacy is a prerequisite for success. This raises the complicated problem of classist discrimination. Perry (2009) adds that due to this status division, parents zealously want their children to learn ESL, not knowing that an English-only policy is not beneficial for learners who still have to learn reading and ESL. Below, this article will explore ways in which poor SA learners are kept semi-literate, while pretending to act in their best interest by teaching **written** English early.

4. Aims and objectives of this article

The main goal of this article is to inspire HEIs to do more purposeful empirical research in lower primary schools, especially in township schools. Two specific questions are asked:

- How should initial reading be taught in African languages as HL?
- How should ESL be taught at primary school?

To answer each question, current problems at schools will be investigated, assuming that academics carry a certain responsibility for prescriptions which are detrimental to learners.

5. Methodology

The methodology for this article is a literature survey, augmented by personal experience during about 20 years of unofficial investigations in Foundation Phase township classrooms, where the author observed the difficulties faced by learners.

5.1 Design

Section 1: Background knowledge on South Africa's reading crisis

Section 2: The aims and objectives of this article

Section 3: The responsibility of HEIs regarding South Africa's reading crisis

Section 4: The responsibility of HEIs regarding ESL teaching at school

Section 5: The role of HEIs regarding South Africa's reading crisis henceforth

6. The responsibility of HEIs regarding South Africa's reading crisis

6.1 Causes of the reading crisis

Many factors contributing to the poor achievement in reading tests have been mentioned, for example Spaul (2016: 7) mentions home background, the quality of teachers and of school management, socio-economic status and historical disadvantage. Of these, HEIs can directly influence only the quality of teachers. Fleisch (2008: 32-37) says that the reasons for the crisis cut across economics, politics, health and other sectors, yet comments, "but above all else, reading and math achievement is determined by what teachers and learners do in classrooms". Aitchison (2018) challenges the notion that poverty is at the root of the poor test results: If only 25% of learners could not read, this would be explained by the fact that 25% of South Africa's people live in great poverty; however, 78% of learners cannot read. The notion that all the above factors are equally responsible for the poor literacy results is also challenged by the information that in the 1990s, when resources were not more abundant or teachers better qualified, 80% of Grade 1 township learners in the city of Welkom learnt to read (Cronje, 1997: 77, 89).

Two key pedagogic causes of the crisis were not mentioned in the literature before 2021:

- The phonics approach to initial reading is prescribed for all, although African learners cannot say the letter-sounds the way Europeans do, as will be explained. An approach to reading much better suited to African languages is the syllabic approach, which was used until about 1996.
- Most non-English learners in South Africa have to learn reading in two languages simultaneously, their own and English. It is likely that learners are confused by the two sets of letter-sounds as they find it hard to remember the sounds of their five vowels, which seem to sound rather alike to them. Most can chant *a, e, i, o, u*, but cannot read the vowels when single or mixed, unless they know a certain strategy. Learning two sets of letter-sounds simultaneously must be perplexing. Up to 1995 only the HL was read in Grade 1 (Cronje 1997: 70).

Learning to read in two languages is largely due to a *Lesson Plan* for ESL, a DBE document which contradicts the government's Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and is enforced on Grade 1 teachers. The CAPS and *Lesson Plan* should align, both being DBE documents, but they are opposites, as can be seen in the two sets of extracts below. The CAPS for ESL states that in Grade 1 learners should learn English only orally and read only in their HL.

6.2 Extracts from CAPS English First Additional Language (EFAL), Grades 1–3

Fortunately, children can transfer many literacy skills from their home language. When children begin to read and write in their additional language, they already know how to decode in their home language. If they learn phonics in their home language, they do not need to learn sound-spelling relationships all over again in English.

It is important that in Grade 1 children develop a strong oral foundation in their additional language. Otherwise, they will not understand the words they are decoding in English in Grade 2 (DBE, 2012a: 16).

Despite this emphasis on **oral** ESL in Grade 1, the *Lesson Plan* prescribes much written ESL, e.g. 20 new **written** English words per week as vocabulary, besides other work:

6.3 Extracts from Grade 1 Lesson Plan for EFAL, Term 1

Week 3: *feel, happy, favourite, backpack, carry, school, teacher, listen, excited, classroom.* (Plus 10 more words, "I like to play", a 250-word story, and more).

Page 60: They will start to learn reading and writing in Week 3.

Week 4: *playground, ball, throw, bounce, inside* (plus 15 more) (DBE, 2019: 59-79).

This voluminous *Lesson Plan* has 243 pages for Term 1, and is enforced by learning facilitators. Learners who cannot read and could not attend expensive English crèches, have to learn English as a **written** language – something impossible. It amounts to stark discrimination against the poor. In the previous two years, the author has challenged academics to indicate where and how the *Lesson Plan* was put to the test before it became used as teachers' manual, but no-one did it. The first *Lesson Plan* was written in 2011, consisted of 202 pages, and had 15 new vocabulary words per week. Since about 2012, the author saw the old *Lesson Plan* at Theunissen and Brandfort schools, teachers saying they were assessed on its prescriptions. (Soon after the beginning of each school year, teachers used to attend a week-long workshop in school time.) At the beginning of 2020, the author saw the new *Lesson Plan* being used in Bloemfontein: Grade 1 learners received an A4 page with 4 big English words every day.

7. The responsibilities of HEIs regarding initial reading

Although HEIs cannot do much about some factors contributing to South Africa's reading crisis, the under-researched pedagogical factors mentioned above can probably be addressed only by HEIs. Spuall, Pretorius and Mohohlwane (2017: 1) write that linguists acknowledge the importance of learning to read in the home language, yet "reading acquisition in African languages remains under-researched and under-theorized", adding that a "strong empirical base" is needed to understand initial reading in African languages. However, when wanting to do research in Grade 1 classrooms, the author experienced that some universities are not

keen to do empirical research, e.g. UP and UNISA, the former turning her application down when she insisted on doing empirical research. Spaul and Pretorius (2019: 2) bewail “the dearth of research on reading in African languages.” Yet, despite this dearth, they say the poor test results can be avoided because the knowledge and teaching practices essential for teaching reading “are known and well understood internationally”. Their solution is knowledge of letter-sounds, stating, “if these skills are taught methodically and clearly, they can develop quickly, adding that most learners should read a transparent orthography within a year (Spaul & Pretorius, 2019: 3, 13). Yet 80% of learners do not learn to read – thus their ‘solution’ cannot be correct. Due to assumptions such as indicated above, the phonics approach is currently prescribed in South Africa and deemed the only possible way to start reading.

First-hand knowledge about initial reading comes from the author’s unofficial research during about 20 years of assisting in Grade 1 township classrooms, first trying phonics, then words on small pieces of paper, which is impractical. Phonics cannot work because African languages have only a small number of vowel sounds; some only five. African learners can actually say a letter such as *B* in only five ways: *ba*, *be*, *bi*, *bo* and *bu* (*bi* pronounced like English *bee*, but shorter). English speakers add the neutral vowel to **B**, thinking they say it alone, though *B* cannot be said alone. However, African languages do not have the neutral vowel, and most learners and some teachers cannot use the neutral vowel for saying letter-sounds. Due to the prescription that phonics be taught, teachers teach the letter *B* as *bu*, and some Grade 2 learners were heard trying to read *bana* as *bu-a-n-a*, getting nowhere. With the syllabic approach, *bana* (children) is simply taught as *ba-na*, and letters are taught in syllables, e.g. *ka*, *la*, *ta*, and not *k*, *l*, *t* alone. Learners should also do tests on mixed consonants with *-a*, to establish letter knowledge (Cronje, 2021: 4). The fact that syllables end on vowels means that segmenting in syllables is easy, whereas segmenting in phonemes is quite unnatural in African languages. Expecting African learners to say the neutral vowel before they can read is like expecting English learners to say African click sounds before they can read English.

The syllabic approach to reading was apparently not mentioned in South African literature, but is mentioned by Williams (1998: 71) when writing about Malawi and Zambia. In recent articles, only De Vos, Van der Merwe and Van der Mescht (2014: 14) refer to this approach, saying African learners were taught to recognise syllables, not phonemes, adding that some people refer to this method “anecdotally and derogatorily” as the *ba-be-bi-bo* method. They admit that this procedure may be a sensible response to language structures, “worthy of more research”.

Schaefer and De Vos (2015) report results indicating that the phonics approach is not suitable for African learners. They tested 31 Grade 4 isiXhosa learners, finding that on average they scored about 90% on syllable segmenting and blending tasks, while their average for phoneme segmenting was only 12%, with two-thirds of learners not getting one answer correct. The authors warn against the assumption that African learners can attain phonological awareness the way English learners do. Spaul *et al.* (2017: 12-16) also report a study indicating learners’ problems with phonics, undertaken by the ReSEP team at Stellenbosch University. A number of tests were done by 740 African learners in Grade 3, e.g. on letter-sounds (including digraphs), oral reading fluency (ORF), and oral reading comprehension. The letter-sound knowledge was low, the average being only 28 letters correct per minute (LCPM). Only 25% read at least 40 LCPM, with 25% reading 15 LCPM or less. Comprehension scores were also low, even though learners were tested in the HL. Almost all the learners read 15–20% of the letter-sounds incorrectly and the authors speculated that the results showed teachers did not

allocate enough time to teaching phonics. One may ask whether inefficient teaching is the only conceivable cause for African learners' low scores in letter-sound tests. Other factors may be that some cannot say some letter-sounds, and the fact that mastering the five vowels first is not prescribed by the CAPS for Home Languages (DBE, 2012b). Yet reading the five vowels correctly is important with African languages, as there are only five and a mistake will probably mean another word and no understanding. However, knowing vowels receives little attention in Grade 1 classrooms. The reason is that English has about 20 vowel sounds which are spelled inconsistently, so that little attention to vowels is the correct way to start reading English as HL, but not to start reading African languages.

Learners can transfer reading skills from the HL to ESL, as mentioned in the CAPS for EFAL (DBE, 2012a) quoted above. In one study isiXhosa learners from two schools, one having isiXhosa as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in the Foundation Phase and the other having English as LoLT, were compared. It was found that learners who can read a transparent writing system, such as an African language, can transfer decoding skills more easily than learners first reading English with its opaque orthography (Probert & De Vos, 2016: 9). As letters and sounds are mapped one-on-one in African languages, learners should learn to read quickly as readers of other transparent languages do (Schaefer & De Vos, 2015: 5). However, this does not happen in South Africa after years of prescribing the phonics approach. With the syllabic approach it is easy to gain automaticity in these languages, as for every consonant (or cluster) there is a small number of possible syllables – five or less. ('Automaticity' refers to recognising words 'at a glance', without sounding them.)

8. How should HEIs confront the reading crisis?

As long as academics do not know more about African languages and learners, HEIs will not be able to train Foundation Phase teachers to achieve better results than the current 20% of Grade 1 learners learning to read, and 20% having "basic reading skills" in Grade 4 (PIRLS). For example, Spaul and Pretorius (2019) write about "complex consonant sounds" in African languages such as *hl*, probably not knowing that *hl* is a single sound, not a diphthong, just as *mpfh* and *ntlh* are not four-letter clusters, because the *M* and *N* function as syllables by themselves. The ReSEP Concept Note (Pretorius *et al.* 2016), compiled for "pre-service and in-service training" of FP teachers, errs in the first place by also advocating learning to read in two languages simultaneously. It says that since South Africa has a bilingual education system, learners should become "not only bilingual but also biliterate", and have to acquire solid literacy skills in their HL as well as in ESL from the "very beginning of schooling". It seems as if they never considered the possibility that it may be confusing to learners. The ReSEP authors (2016: 5) admit that most reading research was done on English, but state they augmented it with research on other "agglutinating languages", e.g. Turkish. The problem is, Turkish has final consonants and African languages do not (Schaefer & De Vos, 2015: 4). Rigorous research activities and capacity building are needed, as well as a willingness to question old assumptions.

9. Research that seems not to have yielded much improvement

An extensive investigation into government schools, started in 2015 in the North-West Province, was reported on by Taylor *et al.* (2017). They compared four groups of schools: about 50 schools on each of three interventions, and 80 control schools. The new learning

materials that all schools received had no new strategies or anything not already in departmental documents.

- Intervention 1: Teachers received the learning materials, a learning programme, lesson plans, and teacher training twice a year.
- Intervention 2: Teachers received, in addition, a “reading coach” who gave basic “orientation” to the materials and monthly on-site visits. The intervention 2 group obtained the best results. (Below are some of their results).
- Intervention 3: It involved parents but was unsuccessful.

9.1 Results found by the study in North-West Province

The first item in data collection was letter recognition. The fact that only 36% could read 50+ LCPM at the end of Grade 2 (Taylor *et al.*, 2017: 67) indicates that in spite of much attention to letter reading, most learners could not do it well. At the end of Grade 2, the fourth subtest was paragraph reading, with four comprehension questions asked. From Intervention 2, 28% of learners could not read one word correctly and 39% from the control group, an improvement of 11%. In the comprehension test, 37% of learners scored zero from Intervention 2 and 46% from the control group, a 9% improvement. Taylor *et al.* (2017: 73-75) state that the “entire distribution” shifted upward with about 10%. The author thinks that a 10% improvement brought by the intervention was not sufficient to “shift teaching practice and learning outcomes at a large scale” (Taylor *et al.*, 2017: 75). It is hoped that this reference to the results of the intervention may lead to more attempts to renew Grade 1 teaching.

10. Suggestions for new research on reading in Grade 1

It is hoped that research will also be done in Free State Province, where some first lessons in Sesotho have been developed already, as well as the three strategies below:

- use references that stay on the board/walls for weeks, e.g. *a, e, i, o, u*. If a child must read, for example, the letter *i*, he matches it with the *i* in the reference and recites the reference up to *i*. (They find matching easy but tend to forget single sounds).
- use able learners as trained group leaders to give ample individual practice in reading mixed vowels, syllables, words and sentences (reading from A4 sheets through a movable ‘window’ cut in a piece of paper).
- teach segmenting into syllables by pointing with one finger under one-letter syllables and two fingers under two-letter syllables. (Learners find this easy).

These strategies may provide solutions to some of the objectives listed in the SIRP HEI Research Report (2019).

Researchers should test using the syllabic approach and only **oral** ESL in Grade 1, without confusing learners early in the year with many written words in other subjects. The following should be in place simultaneously at test schools:

- Prioritise learning to read the HL, using at least two periods a day for reading in Term 1. All other work should be done orally at first, even Maths for at least two weeks – in the first place to establish the number concept before manipulating written numbers, but also to avoid confusion of numbers and letters (personal observation).
- Give no written English for at least three terms in Grade 1, but use much oral English, e.g. learners should give instructions to one another from Week 3, after obeying many

teacher's instructions from Week 1 onwards. To build vocabulary, discuss the pictures of the ESL Workbook without any attention to the written words.

- Avoid confusion, use graded lessons, and give ample practice in real reading. Start with teaching the vowels while also memorising a short sentence, e.g. *m-me o ama mimi*. (Sentences lead to reading for meaning from the beginning.) Learners then memorise sentence pairs by 'reading' them on the board, actually knowing what is written where. Then they read those six/eight sentences in mixed order to group leaders. (In graded lessons, Lesson 1 would use only one consonant with the vowels, and a consonant would be added with every subsequent lesson.)
- For writing practice, use only letters used in the lessons, not words with other letters. Write dictation daily, starting with the vowels, then words and sentences.

The new lessons are only for Term 1. Depending on how many of the Workbook's words are used in the first lessons, the current Workbook can be used soon.

11. The responsibility of HEIs regarding ESL teaching at primary school

Concerning ESL, it does not seem as if much longitudinal research for primary schools has been done this century in South Africa, and knowledge about second language acquisition (SLA) is lacking among influential people. Even fundamental information seems to be lacking, e.g. that the sooner young learners start with ESL, the better, because no ESL is prescribed for Grade R. Although the author informed academics in 2018 about the existence of two contradictory documents for ESL in Grade 1, and the likelihood of the written ESL confusing learners, they did not challenge the *Lesson Plan*.

In 1991 Stellenbosch University began a structured Master's degree in Linguistics as Distant Education and the author enrolled, specialising in second language acquisition (SLA). That course led to a five-year empirical investigation on SLA in township schools and a PhD in 1997. Before reviewing that study, some other investigations are reviewed below.

12. Differences between child and adult abilities in learning an SL

For centuries 'adults' (people past puberty) used Traditional Formal Grammar to learn Latin, but this structural approach was futile for children, also at school. Audiolingualism, based on the behaviourist ideas of Skinner, was seen as a solution for children, who mainly had to repeat patterns and drills. Yet it did not yield the desired results, because audiolingualism followed the same **structural** approach to language as Traditional Formal Grammar, with the focus on **form** rather than on **meaning** (Pica, 2005).

In the 1970s, new insights into language acquisition were gained due to work by Chomsky (1977), who opposed the behaviourist ideas. He held that children are born with a specific language faculty, 'Universal Grammar' (UG), which makes it possible for young children to learn languages quickly, but subconsciously. Eventually people realised that children should learn an SL in the same way as the HL by using it to communicate, thus focusing on **meaning**. A number of new schools of thought for SL teaching sprang up, e.g. Asher's *Total Physical Response*, which used directives as first interactions with learners. From these schools came Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which advocated a functional view of language. Experiments with CLT showed that the communicative approach was best for SLA and it has been widely implemented since the 1990s (Richards, 2006: 22).

It was hypothesized that there is a critical period for acquiring a language easily, and some studies followed. In a study at an American university, Johnson and Newport (1989: 60-99) assessed the English ability of Chinese adults who had used English at university level in America for at least five years. The results on peripheral language structures showed “a strong positive correlation between age of arrival in America and ESL achievement”. There was a linear decline in achievement for persons who had arrived younger than 15 years of age, and general low attainment for persons arriving later. A second study, which investigated the availability of Universal Grammar principles to children and adults, found the same. It is noteworthy that **formal** English classes attended by children in China before immigrating to America had no effect (Johnson & Newport, 1991:215-258). Findings such as these suggest that teaching methods effective for adults may not be effective for children.

Concerning ESL teaching in SA township schools, it is still mainly form-focused. There is a great need for strategies to improve learners' ability to communicate (Littlewood, 2011), and to help them acquire grammar constructs they find difficult – without having to focus on grammar rules themselves. Only the teacher should do that, for example by using songs to teach the third person singular -s. African learners also find the plural -s difficult, because African languages indicate plural at the beginning of words in a complicate way. It may be worthwhile to purposefully investigate the use of songs and rhymes to establish subconscious knowledge about difficult English constructs.

13. An experiment in Communicative Language Teaching: Canadian Immersion

A sure way of making SL teaching meaning-focused is to do subject teaching in the SL, because the focus is on the subject material and not on language form. This insight resulted in experiments with education through the medium of a second language, and the successful ‘Canadian Immersion’, an experiment in 1965 that has become practice. If their parents choose this option, English learners in Canada do their last year of preschool and the first two years of primary school in French only. They have native French teachers who do not speak any English to them. This means the learners learn to read in their SL in Grade 1, and only learn to read their HL after three years of immersion in the SL. They then follow a bilingual school programme and become fully bilingual (Wesche, 2002: 357-370). However, the same success is not experienced when the programme is implemented under different circumstances, and Wesche (2002: 371) warns that there are conditions for success, e.g. that teachers should be (near)-native speakers of the learners' SL, should use only that SL at school, and should use CLT, not grammar teaching. It is also important that learners know their HL well and are proud of it. Wesche speaks of ‘subtractive bilingualism’ if the HL is not maintained.

14. Submersion education and ‘Straight for English’ schools in South Africa

In contrast to Canadian Immersion, which is a bilingual model, ‘submersion’ is a monolingual model where mainly or only the SL is used for education. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2017: 456-464) state that injustice is done linguistically when a “language shift is imposed on individuals and groups”. In South Africa this may be the case in the ‘Straight for English’ schools where ESL is regarded as the HL of the learners, although the majority have an African language as HL, which is then treated as the First Additional Language (FAL). It means that less teaching time is allocated to the real HL than to English. Yet initial reading

can also be introduced in two languages simultaneously (personal observation), unlike the practice in Canada.

Taylor and Coetzee (2013: 1-10) did an extensive study regarding 'Straight for English' in underperforming schools. They used school records that included data on the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) over the years 2007 to 2011, and combined that to DBE test scores that Grade 4–6 learners had attained in 2012 in standardised tests on ability in English (data from 827 745 learners in 9 180 primary schools were used). They found that when learners came from schools of similar quality, those who used the HL as LoLT in Grades 1–3 outperformed those who used English as LoLT. The 'Straight for English' learners were actually outperformed in **English** tests in Grades 4–6, showing that home language instruction in South African circumstances is the best. It was one of a few international studies, and the first done in South Africa, that brought robust empirical evidence to the debate concerning language of instruction in the Foundation Phase (Taylor & Coetzee, 2013).

This kind of longitudinal information is very valuable, and HEIs should be asked what they did with the above results. The authors also write that we need more educational outcomes in the long run, especially regarding SLA, as most studies do not have data over a long enough period to answer important questions.

15. A longitudinal investigation concerning ESL in primary schools

From 1992 to 1996, empirical research on learning ESL was done at primary schools in Welkom, Free State, at two schools already on different programmes for teaching English. The main participants were in Grade 2 at Schools A and B in 1992 (99 and 143 learners, respectively). Mainly due to failure, only 29% of School A's learners were still in the test group in 1996, compared to 43% of the School B learners. (The average pass rate at primary schools was 80%.) Baseline assessment in 1992 showed that around 15% of School A's learners could not read, and 10% of School B's learners could not read. The test groups were observed and assessed for five years, investigations also being done at other schools on the same kinds of programmes to verify that Schools A and B represented specific approaches to SL teaching (Cronje, 1997: 87-91).

At the time, no ESL was given in Grade 1. English teaching started in Grade 2 when most learners could read the HL already. At School A, the ESL teaching was wholly form focused, starting with written English. All attention was given to formal aspects – grammar, spelling, and pronunciation, for example chorus drills on plural -s were done regularly in Grade 2:

one two

door doors

hand hands (mostly 10 pairs) (Cronje, 1997: 91-96).

School B was on a CLT programme, the Molteno Project's *Bridge to English*. A large quantity of oral work had to be done before learners could start reading, and no chorusing and language switching between the HL and ESL were allowed. Genuine communication, with information gaps, occurred daily. For example, to learn plural -s, learners were asked about pictures: "How many (cars) do you see?" Although the School B learners did not 'speak' as much English as the School A learners did in chorus repetitions, they significantly outperformed School A on every count, including eventually the plural -s (though not in the first years). The fact that so

many weak School A learners did not take part in later tests makes the good results of School B even more significant (Cronje, 1997: 125, 181).

15.1 Test results

Data gathering included elicited speech in Grades 2 and 3, five compositions, three comprehension and two grammar tests, and history compositions in 1995 when the test groups were in Grade 5 receiving English-medium education. Compositions were analysed in 30+ categories. Also when in Grade 5 Composition 3, *The snake at the tap*, was written by 30 learners at each school on a series of three pictures. Only nine stories were rated successful at School A, against 24 at School B, whereas 15 learners at School A completely failed to convey the story, against only 3 at School B. Test groups were numbered in accordance with Grade 4 school marks, the best learner at each school being No. 1. School B learner B52 was well down the line to B99; yet his directness was typical of School B:

B52: *a Father sit on the cheir out side. Mother work [walk] with her children to fach some water. They saw a snake and ran away. Father came with her [sic] stick to kill that snake.*

At School A, one of the 'best' learners wrote:

A5: *The house and trees the man sitting outside the house. The woman walk in to tep and two children. green grass. Father is ran and mother and children carry they see a snack the bucket is down.* (Cronje, 1997: 147-149).

All test results showed that most of the School A learners could not benefit from English-medium education, which started in Grade 5 in the 1990s. School A learners did not know enough ESL to understand their lessons without much translation into the HL, e.g. according to the 20/03/95 field notes the HL was used 17 times in a lesson on sprouting bean seeds (Cronje, 1997: 183-187). At School B, learners could benefit from English-medium education as they were used to taking part in class discussions. They were greatly interested in history and for Cronje's last composition-test learners wrote on what fascinated them. B28 wrote about the ox wagon being both home and transport: *They did not pay for transport*. B6 wrote eight sentences about the clothing of the white settlers; B7 wrote five sentences on their language. B10 wrote: *The slaves were sell by R12 each*. B12: *Van Riebeeck built a halfway station and other buildings* (interpreting history with what he knew). Other sentences not in their notes: B19: *They came to cape because they haven't got much food and no work they were very ill of food they eat*, and B56: *Van Riebeeck was love her people and rule them well*. (Cronje, 1997: 188, 196-198).

In contrast, the School A learners could only write what they had memorised since earlier that year. From one of the 'best' learners:

A3: *The Bushmen from central of Africa the are very small the are 1.5 merters tall the are traenguleng [in] shape the are yellowish in colour.*

Omission of the *y* in *they* occurred often, even with learners who had written *they* correctly five months earlier. Their learnt ESL chunks had deteriorated over time, indicating that their form-focused ESL teaching in Grades 2 to 4 did not prepare them sufficiently for English-medium education (Cronje, 1997: 186, 194).

16. Discussion: The role of HEIs regarding South Africa's reading crisis henceforth

The indications that education in South Africa is at a low level do not reflect favourably on the training that teachers have received, although other factors are also at play, e.g. the shutting down of teacher training colleges so that universities could take over their function. Nel (2011) says the burden of expert literacy teaching has been "seriously underestimated by universities". Spaul and Hoadley (2017: 79) write that little explicit attention is given to reading when teachers are trained. Though reading is the essential skill that learners have to learn in the Foundation Phase, less than 10% of the credits needed to teach in FP are about literacy, according to them. However, it may be necessary for academics to acquire more knowledge about African learners and languages, and about SLA, and to revise some courses.

17. Conclusions and recommendations

This article indicates that South Africa's reading crisis causes undesirable consequences, and it points out that more empirical research in lower primary classrooms is urgently needed. Such research should include:

- Investigating initial reading in African languages. The phonics approach prescribed for all South African learners is shown to be unsuitable for African learners. The syllabic approach should be considered.
- Investigating reading practices in Grade 1, comparing the present instructions of the CAPS HL to using new strategies and graded reading lessons, while prioritising reading.
- Investigating the learning of ESL at school, including research about ESL in preschool, research about the EFAL *Lesson Plan* for Grade 1, and research on how to turn current primary school ESL teaching into Communicative Language Teaching.
- Investigating 'Straight for English' schools.

It is hoped that HEIs will do it.

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