



Article

# Trial and Error? An Inquiry into Implementing a 'Straight-for-English' Approach with Foundation Phase Students with Inadequate English Proficiency

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## Abstract

The language of instruction in South Africa is currently an extremely controversial issue. As a result of South Africa's political history, English is almost always chosen as the language of instruction. However, in many cases, students have not been adequately exposed to English when they enter the Foundation Phase. This study reports on research conducted at an Ex-Model C (formerly privileged) primary school in South Africa where an immersion-type model is followed with English as the instructional language. The aim of the study was to explore the practices implemented by Foundation Phase teachers to teach students through the medium of English, and to ascertain how the school has managed to maintain a consistently high academic standard, despite the language difficulties of their students. The findings of the study can make a significant contribution when similar strategies are implemented in schools which are faced by challenges similar to those of the sample school.

## Keywords

Language of instruction, Foundation phase, English language proficiency, immersion models, advantaged and disadvantaged communities

## Introduction

In the majority of countries, the need to become fluent in a second language is indispensable to gain effective access to education, the labour market and broader society. South Africa is a leading example of a country facing the dilemma of how best to develop second language fluency among large parts of the population. As a result of its political history and socio-linguistic influences, the

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second language in South Africa is invariably English (Evans and Cleghorn 2014; Nkosana, 2011), and most parents, particularly parents of African language-speaking students, go to great lengths to have English as the sole medium of instruction for their children (Busch, 2010; Cummins and Hornberger, 2007; Lemmer and Manyike, 2012; Msila, 2005; Wolfaardt, 2010). This ‘linguistic magnetism’, as Evans and Cleghorn (2014) term it, is inextricably linked to South Africa’s colonial history and the current capitalist economic system. High levels of proficiency in English persist as ‘the distributor of power’ and upward mobility (Nkosana, 2011:11), and, although parents’ choices with regard to their children’s schooling are not always simple, their preference for English stems from the goals they entertain for their children’s future – goals which often do not fully consider the consequences of their choice.

Sadly, the reality is that South African children perform very poorly in international assessments of educational achievement. Taylor and Coetzee (2013) report that The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) surveys of 2006 and 2011, as well as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) surveys of 1995, 1999, 2003 and 2011 have consistently demonstrated that South Africa’s performance is among the lowest of all participating countries. Many researchers attribute this dismal performance specifically to learning in a second or additional language (Jordaan, 2012), and there is almost complete agreement that the language dynamics in South Africa are a key determinant of the academic performance of students in general (Brock-Utne, 2013; Heugh, 2009). This situation correctly presents a problematic policy issue for education authorities in South Africa.

When a language policy is formulated, many options are usually considered. Among others, decisions have to be taken regarding when and how the teaching of English should be introduced in schools, and when and how a transition from the home language of students to English as the instructional language should be implemented. Several models of learning an additional language have been applied in different parts of the world, each with numerous variations. At one end of the continuum are the so-called ‘immersion models’ (Taylor and Coetzee, 2013), in which children learn in the second language from the start of their schooling. The ‘straight-for-English’ approach (Gallagher and Leahy, 2014: 60) can be regarded as a type of immersion model. At the other end of the continuum, there are various types of bilingual models (Gu, 2015), in which both the L1 (first language) and the L2 (second language) are used as the medium of instruction. Transitional models (Kim, 2015) are near the midpoint on the continuum, because they are compensatory models that provide the incidental benefits of some development of language and literacy skills in both the L1 and the L2, as a by-product of bilingual language instruction. There are also various models of ‘additive’ or ‘subtractive’ bilingual instructional models (Cummins, 2009) in which the first and the second language are used alongside each other to achieve proficiency in a second, and usually socially dominant, language. In essence, students are adding a language to their repertoire, thus the term ‘additive’. In contrast, *subtractive bilingualism* occurs when a more prestigious language gradually (or not gradually, as is the case explained in this study) replaces the first language (Cummins, 2009). Subtractive bilingualism is in contrast to additive bilingualism, in that the students learn a second language at the expense of the first language, which has serious implications for the acquisition of an L2 for academic language proficiency.

### *The South African context explained*

Despite the fact that a significant number of researchers who studied immersion models have found them to be failures, especially in Africa (Banda, 2000), some form of an immersion model is often used in South Africa in the so-called Ex-Model C schools – formerly advantaged schools situated in historically white areas which cater for African language speaking students. This state

of affairs poses specific challenges and is notorious for causing considerable frustration among teachers. In schools in which these immersion approaches are followed, there is, in the majority of cases, no formal academic or linguistic base, nor conscious theoretical instructional models or methods being implemented – these seem to be more cases of ‘trial and error’, in which teachers follow tried and tested general teaching methodologies. This situation can be traced back to a lack of linguistic skilling in pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes and also to a lack of educational will and funding on the part of the authorities to invest in staff development in this area. This is understandably a matter of grave concern. Jordaan (2012: 82) summarises the essence of the problem: ‘educational linguistics is a specialised area that has regrettably been neglected in teacher training programmes, and subsequently few teachers have sufficient knowledge of the complex, multidimensional nature of language and the implications for language-learning and language-teaching processes in either L1 or L2 contexts’.

Against this background, questions arise as to how those who are falling prey to flawed policy implementation and a lack of support by education authorities can take action to minimise the consequences of their predicament. The present study reports on an in-depth case study inquiry at a primary school in South Africa which makes use of a ‘straight-for-English’ model. Specific reasons existed for selecting this school. All the students are African language-speaking, and the majority entering the Foundation Phase over the past few years have demonstrated very limited proficiency in English, if any at all. The teachers are faced with the reality of attempting to teach the students the language of instruction (English) *through* the language of instruction. This situation is not unique in South Africa. What provided the impetus for the inquiry at this school, however, was the fact that the school is regarded as a top-achieving school in an education district in the Free State Province, and has received several Top Primary School Awards in recent years. Students have moreover consistently performed very well in the Annual National Assessment (ANA) tests. These tests are standardised national assessments for language and mathematics in the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6) and for literacy and numeracy in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3). All Foundation Phase teachers at this school are either Afrikaans or English L1 speakers and have very low proficiency levels in an African language, if at all.

The effectiveness of mother-tongue instruction has been reported consistently by various researchers (Banda, 2000; Brock-Utne, 2013, 2015; Sireci and Faulkner-Bond, 2015) and it is not the aim of this article to advance an argument in favour of implementing an immersion-type model of instruction. Rather, it wishes to offer a glimpse of an environment in which L2 students display very little proficiency in English and in which teachers have not been exposed to specialised training in sophisticated instructional language teaching methods. It is argued that a collaborative approach is desirable for achievement in such a setting and that it is possible to create a strong support system despite systemic challenges. To this end, the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1896–1934) provides an appropriate framework for investigating the topic and interpreting the findings.

## Theoretical framework

Sociocultural theory, originating in the socio-historical and cultural-historical work of Vygotsky and his Russian colleagues in the early decades of the twentieth century (Gu, 2015; Van Lier, 2004), is a notion that emphasises relationships between people, contexts, actions, meanings, communities and cultural histories. According to Vygotsky (1998, 2012), cognitive development is seen as occurring through children’s participation in the activities and practices of their community (Lidz and Gindis, 2003), is integrated with and constituted by social relationships (Kim, 2015), and is mediated by means of cultural tools (also referred to as artefacts) as components of psychological functioning

(Pop and Sim, 2013). These cultural tools may be psychological (used to direct the mind), or technical (used to bring about changes in other objects) (Pop and Sim, 2013). Commonly cited examples of cultural tools include language, different kinds of numbering and counting systems, writing schemes, mnemonic technical aids, algebraic symbol systems, art works, diagrams, maps, drawings and many sorts of signs (Lidz and Gindis, 2003). Within sociocultural approaches, attention is paid to how specific tools and artefacts of a community serve to transform knowledge, rather than transmit knowledge (Kaufman and Burden, 2004). In the context of the setting of formal education, it implies that learning is shaped by the social and cultural contexts of the learning environment (community) and the multifaceted human activity structures (social relationships) within them at any given time. Thus, when adopting a sociocultural approach, the context, relationships, culture and activities in which children participate, and the tools and artefacts they use need to be examined if one wants to determine and understand their ideas. The core of sociocultural theory is clearly outlined in the constructs of mediation, self-regulation, internalisation and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

*Mediation* is a central theme that runs throughout Vygotsky's thinking, according to which human contact with the social and physical world is not direct, but is indirect or mediated by artefacts. It suggests that the child's cognitive activities are mediated by symbolic artefacts such as language (the most powerful cultural artefact to mediate connections to others and to the self), concepts and logical argumentation, as well as material artefacts and technologies (Lantolf and Thorne, 2000). In Vygotskian terms, learning in this way is inherently social. The cooperation between the child, the adult (teacher) and the tool (language) is a typical triangular learning situation. Thus, interaction from a sociocultural standpoint suggests that learning originates, and is observable, through the social relationships of joint activity, in which partners within a situated context (teachers and students in a learning setting) use mediation tools (language, objects, activities) to interact with each other in order to perform actions together, with the prospect of completing them individually at a later stage (Kim, 2015).

One form of mediation is *regulation*. Vygotsky (1978, 2012) observed that children are mediated very early in life by other more experienced humans into using symbolic tools. Through this reciprocal relationship, children develop the ability to use symbolic tools to regulate themselves in physical, as well as mental activities. Vygotskian theory explains that human cognitive development involves passing from a stage of object regulation (where behaviours are controlled by a person's immediate field of perception) to other regulation (when, for instance, a person acts under the direction of another person), and ultimately to the stage of self-regulation (characterised by the ability to mediate oneself through symbolic tools) (Vygotsky, 1978). In a formal learning setting, regulating by means of instruction is aimed at achieving *self-regulation* to the extent that the students are able to accomplish activities with little or no support. Self-regulation is made possible by *internalisation*. Vygotsky saw internalisation as an approach to unifying what have generally been regarded in psychology as two distinct spheres – the social and the mental. 'Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpersonal interaction between 'I' and 'You') and then inside the child (intrapersonal between 'I' and 'Me') (Vygotsky, 1998: 56). The key to internalisation resides in the child's capacity to imitate the intentional activities of others, for example, their teachers (Lantolf and Thorne, 2000) and is in essence a goal-directed cognitive activity.

Vygotsky's most outstanding work is the concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development*, a culmination of the sociocultural constructs above – mediation, internalisation and self-regulation – and a concept that is commonly regarded as a remarkable contribution to the learning process (Pop and Sim 2013; Maxwell 2014). Vygotsky (1978) contended that language, as the foremost tool of communication, develops reasoning, promotes thinking and supports cultural activities such as

reading, writing and playing. His theory stresses the importance of social interaction and communication with others as major elements in the development of a child's language, which then stimulates the development of thought. In particular, it views the important effect that an adult has on the development of a child's language. The ZPD is described as the 'distance between the child's actual developmental level determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance' (Vygotsky, 2012: 27). This guidance by an adult is referred to as *scaffolding*. In order for scaffolding to be effective, it has to match the learner's developmental level to the extent that the learner feels comfortable in using the guidance. This should then present sufficient challenge to reach the next level in a particular area (Vygotsky, 2012).

The implications of sociocultural theory for teaching and learning are significant. The teacher plays the important role of mediator, creating an environment where directed and guided interactions may occur. The teacher's responsibility is to stay ahead of the student and provide a *scaffold* in order to enhance the next step in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). The scaffold is temporal and is often the artefact that the teacher brings into the process to visualise or concretise the issue at stake. When two students, for example, enter into a dialogue in the classroom, the teacher is responsible for choosing the tool to enhance a 'triological' situation (Kim, 2015) to help them move to the next step in the learning process. Instructional strategies that promote literacy and communicative competency across the curriculum play an important role in the Foundation Phase learner's construction of knowledge – as does the combination of individual and group coaching and independent learning.

In brief, then, sociocultural theory recognises that learning always occurs, and cannot be separated from, the social context. Consequently, instructional strategies which promote the distribution of knowledge and in which the teacher's role is reduced over time and in which the students collaboratively work together in their academic endeavours, create optimal learning opportunities. This theory proposes that the emphasis on collaboration during instruction helps the students understand and observe how interactions within a social instructional network are crucial for their cognitive and linguistic development.

With the above as background, the next section describes the research methodology followed to explore challenges posed by inadequate English language proficiency levels of L2 Foundation Phase students; some strategies incorporated by teachers to remediate the problem; and, importantly, the integrated and collaborative approach followed by the school to create a support system as a strengthening measure to compliment learning and teaching activities in the classroom.

## Research design

A qualitative, contextual, and explorative research design was used in this study. An inductive approach was followed, as it would give a clear understanding of the participants' views and capture their perceptions in their own words (Babbie, 2015). The case study method was used as the strategy of inquiry. The design involved both an interpretive perspective, primarily concerned with meaning, and a constructivist perspective, focusing on the feelings and beliefs of the participants. These perspectives are presented in Table 1.

### *Ensuring validity of the research*

The validity of any study should ensure that there is congruency between explanations of the phenomena which are studied and the realities of the world. Validity in qualitative research includes issues of reliability and objectivity, as well as internal causal inferences and capacity for external

**Table 1.** A simplified scheme of the different perspectives, research strategy and data collection and analysis utilised in this study.

Paradigm	Ontology	Epistemology	Data collection
Interpretive	Reality can be understood and interpreted but not predicted and controlled	Knowledge arises from observation and interpretation	Interpretative inquiry: participant observation and interviewing
Constructivist	Reality can only be known by those who personally experience it	Knowledge is constructed through a process of self-conscious action by those who are personally experiencing such action	Case study: Personal narratives, lived experience in a single shared setting

Source: Adapted from Eloff, Maree and Ebersöhn (2007).

generalisation. The validity of qualitative designs thus includes the degree to which the interpretations and concepts used have mutual meaning for both the participant and the researcher. Both parties should therefore agree on the description and composition of events and, most importantly, on their meanings (MacMillan and Schumacher, 2010). Table 2 depicts the strategies used to enhance validity during the study.

### Research method

Eight individual semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one hour each, were conducted with three Grade 1 teachers, two Grade 2 teachers, and three Grade 3 teachers at the sample school. Their teaching experience ranged from 22 to 30 years, adding considerable value to the data collected. Apart from the individual interviews with each teacher, the school records and all the documentation relevant to whole school development were also studied.

### Ethical aspects

Ethical measures included obtaining permission from both the provincial Department of Education and the school principal to undertake the research before collecting the data. Similarly, informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all the prospective participants (teachers) after they had been informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, the risks, benefits, alternative procedures, and the measures implemented to ensure confidentiality (Creswell, 2012; Johnson and Christensen, 2011).

### Data analysis

In order to analyse and interpret the data, a qualitative data-analysis process was followed in which the information was coded and categorised. After transcribing the data of each interview, meaningful analytical units, as described by Mills and Gay (2015), were identified and coded to signify each particular segment. An external coder was assigned to verify data. The participants were identified as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, and so on. The process of *in vivo* coding was followed, in which the same codes were reapplied to similar segments of the data. The data were then structured by categorising the codes and identifying the main themes and categories according to which the data were interpreted. The focus was on the main themes that emerged from the reading of the verbatim transcripts. Mills and Gay (2015) indicate that the task of interpreting data is to identify the *important* themes or meanings in the data, and not necessarily *every theme*.

**Table 2.** Strategies to increase and enhance validity during data collection and analysis in the current study.

Data collection	
Strategy	Description
Participant language: verbatim accounts	Obtained literal statements of participants such as verbatim accounts of lived experiences, transcripts as well as information from documents
Mechanically recorded data	Used digital recorders
Low – inference description	Recorded precise and detailed descriptions of the participants and the context in combination with field notes and reflection directly after each interview
Non-participant observation	Observed with interviewer (moderator) and made field notes on verbal and non-verbal cues displayed by participants
Member checking and participant review	Participants received the researchers' synthesis of all interviews <i>(Adapted from MacMillan and Schumacher, 1997: 407–409)</i>
Data analysis	
Participant validation	Participants were requested to validate the data analysis process by confirming the results of the data analysis throughout the process
Avoiding subjective interpretation	The researchers worked as objectively as possible while analysing the data. Each researcher conducted own field notes for comparison afterwards
Coding of data	Data were carefully coded by researchers and verified by an external coder Generalisations were made by strictly focussing on the data to support any statements
Avoidance of unsupported inferences	Data were not used selectively to falsely verify findings
Avoiding selective use of data	Only data that could be supported by the research data were aggregated a value
Avoiding unfair segregation of data	The researchers guarded against their own expectations and preconceived notions about the research
Avoiding researcher bias	<i>All steps in the data analysis process were verified by an external coder (Adapted from Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000: 116–121)</i>

## Findings and discussion

### *Theme 1: The language proficiency of Foundation Phase students*

*(‘They can’t even ask you anything basic.’)*

The English language proficiency levels of Foundation Phase students form the core of this theme. In essence, a person’s language proficiency measures the extent to which he/she has mastered a language (Wallace, 2014). For effective instruction to take place, it is crucial that students understand and speak the language of learning and teaching. As pointed out earlier, the language realities in South Africa lead to a situation where many Foundation Phase students who receive their instruction through the medium of English have not been adequately exposed to the language when they enter Grade 1 (Baker et al, 2015 ; Busch, 2010; Jordaan, 2012). This is the case in the sample school. All the participant teachers indicated that the majority of their students do not understand instructions and questions in English when they start their school careers – this poses extreme challenges and creates significant frustration for both the teachers and the students. This frustration finds its roots in the South African Education Policy Act (Act 27 of 1996 [Republic of South Africa

**Table 3.** The profiles of the teacher-participants.

Teacher	Age	Total number of years' experience as a teacher	Total number of years' experience as a Foundation Phase teacher	Number of students in the class at time of study	Grade
1	44	22	22	32	1
2	53	30	28	37	1
3	61	38	38	37	1
4	54	33	33	29	2
5	51	30	25	37	2
6	63	38	37	39	3
7	64	31	26	34	3
8	63	30	20	41	3

1996]), which encourages the use of a language of international status (English) in addition to the home language. The responsibility for determining a school's language policy is subject to parental choice as determined by the School Governing Body. As a result of the high social status of English, a clear language hierarchy has emerged over the past two decades in South Africa, with English at the apex as the preferred language of instruction, and irrespective of the school context (Nkosana, 2011).

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

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

The *threshold hypothesis* (Cummins, 2007) proposes that the level of mother-tongue competence already reached by learners by the time they enter school will determine whether they will experience cognitive deficits or cognitive benefits from schooling in the second language. The argument maintains that there has to be a certain 'threshold' in mother-tongue competence before the benefits of studying a second language can develop. With regard to this study, the threshold levels of students have arguably not been reached, since their competence in their mother tongue has not been fully developed – at age six they cannot read and write fluently in their mother tongue. Furthermore, the immersion approach that is followed points to a situation of subtractive bilingualism, as English is learned at the expense of the students' mother tongue, which has serious implications for the acquisition of both the L1 and L2. The implication is that substantially more advanced skills or very different learning areas are unattainable for them, because the links to existing skills have not been established. Consequently, if a certain level of language proficiency and understanding of the principles of literacy (e.g. decoding text) has not been reached in the First Language (in which a child already possesses a substantial oral vocabulary), then academic mastery of a second language will be beyond the so-called zone of proximal development.



## Theme 2: The strategies implemented by the teachers to improve the language proficiency of the students

(‘A lot of time should be spent on listening and speaking before reading and writing commence.’)

*Listening and speaking.* Pronunciation and vocabulary are two aspects of listening and speaking that can assist students to become fluent in English in everyday situations (Cummins, 2015). The identification of sounds, the building of words and the use of consonant blends are indicated in the Foundation Phase curriculum that is followed in South Africa. Participants noted that while their students do listen, in quite a number of cases they lack the proper understanding to react appropriately. A strategy that seems successful is calling upon the stronger students in the same level to assist the weaker ones. Moreover, the focus is on group work, as well as individual work in reading, phonics and mathematics, and includes problem-solving. This process of calling on stronger students to help weaker ones and making use of group work is in line with Vygotsky’s views (1978) on the benefits of mediation, internalisation and ultimately *scaffolding*, for successful learning in social settings such as small groups.

Teacher 4, a Grade 2 teacher, employed the following strategy:

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

*Reading and phonics.* Written texts are a reliable source of academic English (Awan, 2015; Cummins, 2014; Ntshangase, 2011), but need to be presented with instructional support if they are to aid language development. Hence, teachers need to help children acquire the academic language register by discussing not only the content, but also the language used in texts. Teachers can transform text into usable input by helping children to make sense of what they read and drawing attention to how language is used in the materials they are reading.

Emergent literacy involves the awareness of written language and of phonological awareness (Maxwell, 2014), both of which are based on normal oral language, specifically the development of vocabulary. In turn, age-appropriate oral language development is required for the development of reading competence, and therefore oral language proficiency is regarded as predictive of reading achievement, as well as of written language at a later stage. Adequate print-related language (e.g. familiarity with books and visual symbols) is necessary for continued oral language development (Mbatha, 2014).

Teacher 2 (Grade 1) follows a readiness programme with her students, in which they first learn single sounds by means of sight words. From the single sounds, they learn to build words. From these ‘look-and-say’ words, a more detailed reading programme is introduced. Her students start ‘reading’ from a book in the eighth week of the first term.

Similarly, Teacher 4 (Grade 2) starts reading at the very beginning with so-called ‘Monkey tricks’, in which the teaching of the correct words is accompanied by pictures of the objects they represent. Phonics is also started from the first week, beginning with the initial sounds, namely ‘a’, ‘b’ and ‘k’. Blending commences once the students can identify these letters and sounds. Very basic pictures with three words are used first when the construction of sentences are taught, e.g. ‘The dog is on the log’.

The majority of participants mentioned the advantages and effectiveness of employing different reading strategies. Two very useful strategies which were pointed out are those of group/guided reading and shared reading. The latter refers to an ability group-reading teaching strategy where all the members in the group read the same text under the direction of the teacher. This is a good example of mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). Guided reading occurs where the teacher plans the lessons to include a range of 'word-attack' strategies that the children will learn to apply when meeting challenges in the texts. The 'text talk' (Teacher 7, Grade 3) between the teacher and the students, and the students with one another, is central to this approach (regulation).

And later ... when I do our group reading when we are together and with the guided reading ... that is when the teacher can pick up little problems. Perhaps you haven't picked it up when they were all doing shared reading. So I think that is a very good strategy.

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

Independent reading and paired reading also form a significant part of the reading programme in Grade 3. Independent reading (a self-regulated activity which, in accordance with sociocultural theory is made possible by internalisation) is done once a week, usually on a Friday. Formal reading lessons (Teacher 7, Grade 3), which include a series of scaffolding activities progressing from mediation to regulation, are conducted on a daily basis. For example, after sounding the words, formal reading is done in groups, consisting of five students at the most. *'We have an intensive lesson on understanding the words and reading the lessons together ... then they have it for homework'*. In the afternoons, reading is done first in her homework class.

All of us read it together. We repeat it a few times in class. They must then sit down and they read silently. They must read the lesson at least five times. Each child comes back to me to read the lesson and if I feel the child is still struggling, I help them again until I'm satisfied. That's how we do formal reading.

**Writing and handwriting.** Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), as described by Cummins (2014, 2015) seem to play a significant role in individual and shared writing activities. Participants noted that, where possible, the shared reading text should inform the shared writing, in which the teacher models how to write a text (mediation/regulation). The students engage in the composition of the text, while the teacher takes on the role of facilitator and scribe. The shared reading text can be consulted, in order to provide examples of language patterns, choices or other text features useful in the preparation of new texts. This modelling of the writing process helps to prepare the students for their own writing tasks (from regulation to self-regulation). Eventually the students gain the ability to express themselves in written activities in English (internalisation) by being exposed to sufficient language samples simultaneously.

Participants noted that phonics and writing are interlinked. Teacher 2 (Grade 1) reported that when she teaches the students to sound the 'a', she also teaches them how to write the 'a' sound. They carry this out in wet sand, or with clay, or wherever possible. In this way, the students' senses are reinforced. From then onwards, the students' writing abilities are developed. In the beginning, writing entails copying from the board only, and later short sentences are written.

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

### *Theme 3: How the teachers accommodate the students who are on different levels of language proficiency*

*(‘So, one must make use of what you can in class.’)*

**Group work.** To ensure equal access to academic content, group work is used during group and guided reading activities, which is in line with the requirements set out by the formal curriculum (DoE, 2012). As advised by Gorter (2015), students who are on the same level of language proficiency work together, making use of readers that match their language abilities. Based on their progress, the students regularly change groups – the grouping is therefore flexible. The same content is learned in different ways, when additional practice of essential elements is needed at different levels. The students who struggle with reading and phonics have to read on a daily basis during group and guided reading.

During group reading, *scaffolding* techniques, such as ‘think-pair-share or ‘turn-and-talk’, ‘I do-we-do-you-do’, as well as summarising and reviewing, are constantly applied (Gu, 2015). Shared reading activities, in which the entire class reads aloud, the texts being enlarged and also used by the teachers, are in accordance with the recommendations by Maxwell (2014). During these exercises, left–right directionality, word banks, pronunciation and structures for paired reading are set. It was pointed out that group work is especially effective during group and guided reading activities (see Theme 2, Reading and phonics). During writing activities, some participants often turn a blind eye to the ‘copying’ problem, since sufficient opportunities exist to identify this when the students are assessed individually. For certain activities the reading groups are mixed.

Participants seemed to find the ‘buddy-system’ very successful – students on different levels work in pairs (a good example of mediation and regulation), as advocated by Alam (2015). Teacher 2 (Grade 1) was also in support of ‘supervised’ copying and ‘paired’ learning as effective strategies to improve the reading abilities of weaker students. Teacher 8 explained the benefits of group work as follows:

That’s where group-work comes in. The children who are fast students, are good readers and will be together in a little reading group. Your average ones will be in the middle group, busy with another book. That’s how we try to accommodate them. You can also give the faster students some more work to do, while you are working separately with these [weaker] children.

**General intervention strategies.** For emergent literacy to develop, students first need to develop meta-linguistic skills (Gorter, 2015) in order to identify and analyse the specific sounds which allow them to read and write. Phonological development (including phonological awareness) provides the bridge between language and literacy, whereas higher level phonological skills (e.g. sound manipulation and substitution) facilitate the development of written language in terms of reading and spelling (Maxwell, 2014). Similarly, adequate language development is necessary to facilitate the language required for numeracy.

A major intervention strategy that seems to be effective is homework classes after school – offered from Mondays to Thursdays – in which the basics of reading, spelling and writing are taught while the students are assisted with their homework. Teacher 3 (Grade 1) said:

I can see a difference in Grade 1, in those who are attending homework classes and those who are not. Because we are sitting ... We are doing their sight words, we are doing their spelling. The main thing is to identify the children that really need help with their language. And then form a strategy ... Either the child must come to intervention classes, or join homework classes, then at least something is being done. I don't say we can cover the curriculum there, but if it is part of the homework...

For all the grades, formal intervention strategies for English and Mathematics are done once a week for half an hour. These formal intervention strategies are implemented in addition to the informal strategies that are followed during general daily instruction. Poor readers are accommodated throughout the year in an intervention programme called 'The Reading Club'. Underachieving students at different levels of language proficiency are identified, and receive formal intervention of half an hour once a week after school hours during the third and fourth terms. The intervention programme is monitored by each class teacher, whose input is important when decisions on progression to the next grade are made at the end of the year.

'Special Language Needs' also forms part of the intervention programme, and is addressed on a daily basis. At the beginning of the second term in Grade 1, the students identified as seriously lacking in English proficiency receive extra instruction in small groups, for five periods per week. In Grade 2, the designated teacher for Special Needs (LSEN) visits each class for two periods per day and provides intensive remedial instruction in reading, or whatever is needed. Similarly, Grade 3 students with limited proficiency in English receive intensive remedial instruction for one period per day.

## Theme 4: A whole-school approach

*(We follow a very strict routine here.)*

From the interviews, it became apparent that Foundation Phase teachers in the sample school do not operate in a vacuum. Although they are at liberty to use preferred teaching approaches and strategies in their classes, it emerged that a very comprehensive, over-arching quality management plan is implemented to oversee the smooth running of the school.

We follow a very strict routine here. You know exactly what is expected of you ... you comply with instructions and you know it's because they want the best ... you see ... if you do your work, if you buy into the whole thing ... the management is very, very effective. It works. I wouldn't want it any other way ... (A)nd we keep contact with all the parents. I'd say about every two weeks – letters, notes, that kind of thing. But then there is also the parent evenings. We start reminding parents two weeks ahead of each meeting. If they don't pitch we follow-up with phone calls. Look, it is labour-intensive to be a teacher. No time for rest, no free periods ... it can be tough.

When a teacher identifies serious learner problems, the School-Based Support Team (SBST) is notified. The SBST consists of the Head of the Department of Support Teaching and the LSEN teacher. A meeting is set up between the SBST and the teacher, and suggestions are put forward to assist the learner. If no improvement is apparent after this meeting, the parents are called in, and the problem is discussed during a follow-up meeting. If there is still no improvement after a period of time, Occupational Therapy (OT) or external Special Needs intervention is recommended.

It is evident that the quality management system is inclusive and collaborative and all the stakeholders are maximally involved. Monitoring of the learners and the teachers takes place on a regular basis throughout the year. The teachers are required to evaluate themselves, but they also have the opportunity to develop themselves through a personal growth plan (PGP). The School Improvement Plan (SIP) is based on the Personal Growth Plan of every individual teacher and specific problem areas are identified and addressed accordingly.

Active and continuous liaison with the local business sector for funding and fundraising projects provides an even-handed source of income. These funds are earmarked for purchasing resources such as teaching and learning media (appropriate to the various grade levels) and a well-equipped library. In addition, all Foundation Phase teachers have library books in the reading corners in their classrooms.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the responses of the participants and offers an inclusive picture of the collaborative approach followed in the sample school.

## Conclusions

The implicit aim of the study was to establish how a school, attended by students who are notably lacking in English proficiency for academic purposes, manages to implement a remarkably successful 'straight-for-English' instructional model against all the linguistic odds. The findings suggest a rather surprising contradiction to Cummins' (2007, 2009, ) views on constructs such as linguistic interdependence, additive and subtractive bilingualism and the concomitant threshold hypothesis. Without nullifying these suppositions in any way, it is worth noting that the findings reveal that the learning and teaching of L2 students who lack a solid L1 foundation as proposed by Cummins and various other researchers in the field of language learning, may indeed be possible in school environments where a collaborative approach is followed. Such an approach entails a synergy between socially constructed, *scaffolded* classroom activities on a micro-level, augmented by a strong social support network on a macro-level through a whole school approach in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

In particular, the findings create an awareness for considering various perspectives on the challenges posed by the different language instructional models and which appear to be insurmountable. As such, the social nature of language learning was explored, emphasising the environment wherein a child is raised. Significantly, the sociocultural perspective emphasises that it is through involvement in activities with others that development occurs and shared understandings are created. Thus, for researchers and teachers, it is important to consider the contexts in which children are developing, the relevant sociocultural activities within those contexts, and the participation with and guidance and support of others. That being said, in South Africa there may be numerous social, educational, political or ideological motivations behind a school's decision to follow a particular L2 learning approach. In this regard, the study had certain transferability limitations which might influence the effective application of the strategies in other school contexts.

First, it was conducted in a former Model C, quintile 5 school. In terms of the scale of Quintiles 1 to 5, the sample school is on the lowest scale with regard to departmental funding since it is regarded as financially fairly independent and privileged. It is also respected as one of the top primary schools in the Free State Province. Due to a lack of resources and expertise among other schools in similar contexts, for example, disadvantaged schools in township and rural areas, it may not be possible to identify with the educational endeavours as reported in this study. Children raised in poor communities mostly have limited exposure to printed material and other teaching media, and they may consequently have very different attitudes to and experiences of the media being used in urban schools (Phatudi and Moletsane, 2013). Furthermore, only experienced

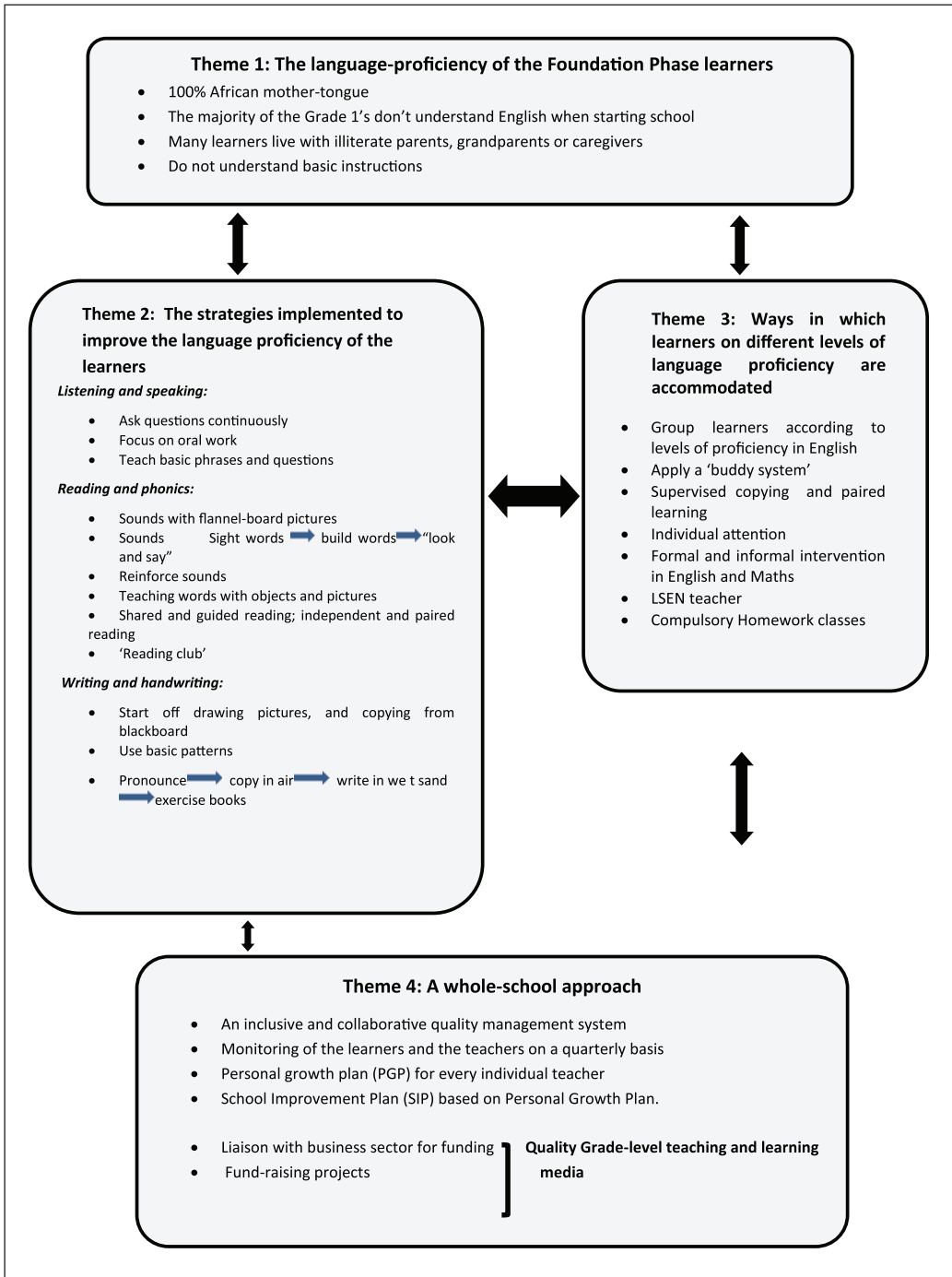


Figure 1. Summary of themes and categories.

teachers participated in the study, and this can also be viewed as a limitation. Given the educational history of South Africa, teachers from the previous political dispensation are generally better

qualified than their African counterparts. We still believe, however, that the findings can make a significant contribution when similar strategies are implemented in schools in less advantaged communities. Various mentoring models can be considered for implementation where practicable. Officials can, for example, make full use of the opportunities at cluster meetings where all schools in a district meet on a quarterly basis to facilitate cooperation between experienced staff from advantaged schools and their colleagues from less advantaged communities. Areas for assistance include lesson planning; first line intervention with students both during and after school hours; implementing a quality monitoring system for staff and students and establishing a functional school support and referral system. This may add considerable value to education at disadvantaged schools

The language proficiency of L2 students in South Africa is very complex, and no ‘quick fix’ is available. As long as parents opt for English as the instructional language, given the current socio-economic, cultural and geopolitical situation in South Africa, it is set to be the preferred medium for education in South African schools for the foreseeable future. The concerted efforts of all stakeholders – education departments, school management teams, teachers and parents – may nonetheless still promote the possibility of success.

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