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Teaching and learning English as a Home Language in a predominantly non-native English classroom: A study from KwaZulu-Natal[1]

A B S T R A C T   This study focuses on a secondary school in an Indian-African suburb of Merewent in KwaZulu-Natal, an example of a suburban school where English as a Home Language (EHL) is taught to a majority of non-native English learners from township schools. The EHL classrooms were investigated for 'communicativeness' and then compared to English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. It might be expected that EHL classrooms would exhibit an affinity with ESL classrooms. However, although non-native EHL has many aspects in common with ESL, there were significant differences between the two. The most important difference from the standpoint of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was in the learning content selection, with the EHL settings using more literary works, and so focusing less on the direct teaching of grammatical forms. However, a disturbing pattern was the inability of the learners in both sets of settings to take full advantage of CLT, which suggested that the learners might not be at the appropriate level of language development.

Keywords: English as Home Language (EHL), non-native English learners, township schools, English as a Second Language (ESL), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), language development

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1. Introduction

The proclamation in 1990 of the Clase Model schools led to the migration of many African learners from township schools into former white, Indian-African and 'coloured' schools (Metcalfe in Walters, 1994:177). Clase Model A, B, C schools resulted from the adoption by white public schools of any one of the admission policy options announced by then Education Minister Piet Clase, by which they could become private schools, remain segregated or admit learners from the other population groups. Model C schools are the majority of white public schools that admitted learners from other population groups (Hofmeyr, 2000:5-6). The label 'Model C' has since tended to be loosely used for all public multiracial schools, including those that fell under the House of Delegates and House of Representatives, which respectively administered Indian-African and 'coloured' affairs under the 1984 apartheid era tricameral parliament (Hofmeyr 2000:7). The designation 'suburban schools' is used in this study to refer to all public multiracial schools, including ex-Model C schools, that did not fall under the administration of the erstwhile Department of Education and the education departments of former homelands, which administered the education of African learners. While ex-Model C schools are still expected to have better physical resources, and well-trained and experienced teachers (Walters, 1994:180), the reclassification of schools has brought changes to the resource-base of all suburban schools as they now have to compete for the scant resources with other public schools (Hofmeyr, 2000:7). The most distinctive feature of suburban schools is that they offer English as a Home Language (EHL), rather than the traditional English as a Second Language (ESL), to African learners, which Walters (1994:176) calls a 'bizarre combination'. This was necessary initially as English home language learners were in the majority. However, the demographics of some of these schools now show an African learner majority (Hofmeyr, 2000:7), which may point to the need to consider some changes.

The aim of this study, which focuses on a secondary school in an Indian-African suburb of Merewent in KwaZulu-Natal, was to establish whether the African learners in this school ended up with an improved educational experience from that in their former schools, given the expectations associated with suburban schools. The research question was: What distinguishes a suburban EHL classroom wherein non-native English learners are in the majority from a typical township ESL classroom? The unit of analysis was classroom communicativeness, as realised in teacher-learner interaction, learner-learner interaction, and content-learner interaction, which led to a description of the EHL classrooms, which were then compared to ESL ones. Proponents of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) believe that, the more communicative the classroom, the more effective the language teaching. Therefore, if the EHL classes were found to be more communicative than ESL classrooms, it could be concluded that it is worthwhile for the African learners to travel long distances to attend suburban schools.

2. English Language Teaching in the National Curriculum Statement

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) distinguishes between English as a Home Language (EHL), English as a First Additional and English as a Second Additional Language (Department of Education [DoE], 2007:16). English as a First Additional Language replaced English as a Second Language, but the latter term is preferred in this study because of its international entrenchment. The NCS further endorses Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and text-

or genre-based language teaching. A contentious issue in English language teaching has for a long time been the integration of EHL and ESL.

3. Can EHL and ESL be integrated?

The premise for the defining difference between a home and a second language is the vexed construct of a critical period for language acquisition, which posits that the acquisition of a first language is completed by the age of five (Berman, 2007:347). Traditional home language learning, therefore, uses in school the same code that is spoken at home. Since the learner already has the fundamental knowledge of the sounds and structures of the language by school-going age, home language learning consists in vocabulary development and in exploring spoken and written rhetoric (Saville-Troike, 1989:257). Whereas second language learning may now begin earlier, it traditionally begun in school after the learner was five years old. The second language learner already has mastery of his/her home language by school-going age, but is required to learn, and learn in, another language. Because the second language learner needs exposure to every aspect of the target language, the syllabus pays equal attention to all language aspects marked for instruction. This theoretical thinking reflects in the primary outcomes for either level in the national curriculum. For EHL Grades 10 to 12, the outcomes are reading and viewing, and writing and presenting, with listening and speaking, and language structure as secondary outcomes. For ESL, they are listening and speaking, reading and viewing, and writing and presenting, with language structure as the secondary outcome (DoE, 2007:8), included "to ensure that the learner is able to use language structure and conventions appropriately and effectively" (DoE, 2007:16).

Because of the learners' mastery of oral language skills, home language classrooms are characterised by more interaction than second language ones, which experience interactional encumbrances because of the learners' initial limited language proficiency. This may partly explain why EHL and ESL have continued to be separated as curriculum options. Integration of the two has been attempted before in the form of submersion, which refers to language programmes in which a few minority language speakers attend the same classroom with a numerical majority of home language English speakers for the entire school day without language support, in the hope that they will learn the language by association; and immersion, which refers to language programmes in which the learner's introduction to English is executed in a guarded manner and at varying times (Freeman & Freeman, 1992:187-188). Their outcomes so far have been inconsistent and unflattering, resulting in more questions such as: What conditions would have to exist for EHL and ESL to be successfully integrated?

One of them would have to be the advanced oral language skills of the ESL learners being integrated into EHL classrooms, as it is these skills that will facilitate the acquisition of academic literacy (Di Pietro, 1987:109). Research has revealed that it takes five to seven years of effective schooling in English for children to score in the native-speaker range in oral language proficiency (Paradis, 2007:393). Cummins (2009:1) suggests that it takes two years for language minority children in the US to acquire oral language proficiency, and an additional five years to reach the age/grade-appropriate academic literacy level, as measured against the language majority learner. This will vary in different contexts since the place of instruction, which distinguishes between foreign language, second language and bilingual environments,

is another input variable to consider (Brown, 1994:277). However, this still means that after seven to ten years of effective schooling in English, ESL learners could be integrated with EHL learners. It therefore appears as if the division between EHL and ESL in Grades 10 to 12 is based on superficial grounds that are motivated by social segregation and ineffective ESL teaching in earlier schooling. Advanced ESL learners ought to have sufficient communicative competence to allow for their integration with EHL learners. Any communicative competence shortcomings making this undesirable will be attributable to ineffectual teaching and learning. It would therefore appear as if the arrangement of language curricula into rigid levels is responsible for language-based segregation in multilingual societies (Levine, 1990:5). The language levels imply a hierarchised view of language education, by which EHL is the prestigious level and ESL the average one. Such a conception of language education perpetuates education-based discrimination by ascertaining different learning conditions for groups of learners based on language privileges (Skutnabb-Kangas in Ellis, 1994:222) and is contrary to the NCS principles of social transformation and integration (DoE, 2007:8). Thus, as is happening in South Africa, non-native English speakers may be discouraged from ESL because some native English speakers view it as inferior (Levine, 1990:5). Educationists such as Mpepo (1998:87) have called for the de-nativisation of ELT, in recognition of the world-language status of English.

4. Meaningful interaction as the goal of instruction in CLT

Instruction, defined by Ellis (2005:9) as "an attempt to intervene in the process of language learning", is important if it leads to interaction since it is the latter that supports effective language development through the negotiation of meaning (Ellis, 1994:573). Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1980) claims that engaging in interpersonal, oral interaction in which communication problems arise and are negotiated, facilitates language acquisition (Ellis, 1994:244). Wagner (1997:20) defines interaction as an interplay and exchange in which individuals and groups influence each other. The primary role players in classroom interaction are the teacher, the content and the learner, such that there will be teacher-learner interaction, learner-learner interaction and content-learner interaction in the classroom (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:128-131).

4.1 Teacher-learner interaction

The teacher attempts to influence the course of learning through instruction (Littlewood, 1984: 60). The role of the teacher has been "to provide corrective feedback and correct models to set tasks", and that of the learner "the rather passive one of coming up with the correct target language forms" (Nunan, 1989:85). Teachers control learning content and the direction of the discourse by asking questions and reformulating learners' answers (Fisher, 1994:159), and teacher talk accounts for about 70% of classroom time (Cook, 2001:144). Classrooms dominated by teacher talk employ a listening-based or telling style, by which more value is placed in learners extracting from what they hear than in speaking themselves (Cook, 2001:145). Classroom interaction is characterised as occurring according to the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern – that is, the teacher initiates the exchange, the learner responds and the teacher gives feedback (Foley & Thompson, 2003:161). Such a pattern, along with activities such as drills, rote learning, grammatical explanation and translation, give more power and control of the classroom to the teacher. The communicative style, however, emphasises the

learner's dual roles as listeners and speakers (Cook, 2001:149). Communicative activities such as role plays, problem solving and simulation seek to give equal control of the classroom to the learner and the teacher (Nunan, 1989:86). This CLT principle of the equality of classroom participants is viewed by some scholars as a weakness (Cook, 2001:222). Cook (2001:222) argues that, since CLT relies on a dynamic classroom situation and on and the learners' taking advantage of learning opportunities, they must be given an opportunity to accept or reject its use. This would be difficult within the constraints of a nationally predetermined policy such as the NCS. However, learners can be consulted on syllabus matters by means of representations through their national and on-site representative bodies, and the continual administration of questionnaires and interviews.

4.2 Learner-learner interaction

The benefit of collaborative learning is in its affording "more opportunity for language production and a wider range of language use in such situations as initiating discussion, asking for clarification, interrupting, competing for the floor and joking" (Foley & Thompson, 2003:165). It occasions acquisition-rich discourse when learners interact among themselves (Ellis, 2005:41). Learner-learner interaction may be encouraged through abandoning listening-based methods – those by which the teacher predominates and provides all the information – and embracing task-based methods, whereby gaps are exploited to get learners to work together and be involved in classroom decision-making. Hutchinson and Waters (1987:139) believe that information gaps prompt learners to think – which is obligatory in learning – because of the missing information. They identify these gaps: *information gaps*: one learner has some information, another does not; *media gaps*: the information is available in one medium and needs to be transferred to another medium; *reasoning gaps*: the answer needs to be extrapolated from clues and pieces of evidence; *memory gaps*: the learners need to use their memories to reconstruct some information that they received at some point; *jigsaw gaps*: all the parts are there, but they need to be put together to form a complete unit; *opinion gaps*: these have to do with what is important, what is not important and what is relevant; and *certainty gaps*: they have to do with what is definitely known, what can be presupposed, what can be predicted, and what is completely unavailable (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987:139-140). Kotze (2007:30) counsels that course designers should consider learner, pragmatic and linguistic goals in planning learner-learner interaction tasks.

4.3 Learner-content interaction and Genre-based Language Teaching

Learning is conducted through teacher-talk, the language of textbooks and other learning materials (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:23). Form-focused instruction (Long, 1991 in Ellis, 2005:12), which distinguishes language teaching from other subjects, is divided into direct and indirect teaching of language. In direct instruction, the focus in on teaching grammar; while in indirect instruction, synonymous with the communicative style, the focus is on pragmatic meaning or the message. It is generally accepted that grammar teaching does not produce communicative competence (Ellis, 2005:10), the real goal of language teaching and a complex construct. A meaning-focused language pedagogy, however, is weakened by its drifts into discussions of the social and other issues related to the content, and not even referring to the communicative value of the content's linguistic properties, resulting in little or no language

awareness. The distinction made between real and carrier content (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998:98) tries to address this challenge. The real content refers to linguistic units and the carrier content, or just the content, to the message. It is the linguistic units that ought to be the object of language teaching, and not the content.

However, the endorsement of genre-based teaching as the authentic content/input provider in the NCS's language teaching approach indicates support for indirect instruction, by which grammatical forms are only taught incidentally or not at all. Besides being criticised for restraining creativity by being too formulaic, genre theory is criticised for giving little attention to lexico-grammatical issues (Henry, 2007:464). Genre is defined as a social activity in which language is used to establish and maintain relationships in order to achieve specific goals (Henry, 2007:463). The NCS 'text' has the wider meaning of genre for referring to "written, oral, audio-visual and multimedia texts, such as posters, advertisements, radio and television programmes, and a range of different written texts" (DoE, 2007:9). Genre knowledge can be used pedagogically to provide a method for the analysis of generic texts and to assist writers to acquire the means of creating their own generic texts (Bruce, 2008:48). The important elements of genre language teaching are learning content, text structure, language style and purpose (Hyon, 2001:421), which the NCS refers to as format, layout, structure, grammar and register (DoE, 2007:9). Through the genre-based approach, the NCS seeks to encourage interaction between the text and the learner and to enable learners to become "competent, confident and critical readers, writers, viewers and designers of texts" (DoE, 2007:9). By definition and practice, home language teaching may be characterised by very little or no grammar instruction at all, while second language teaching may have it in degrees.

5. Research design and tools

5.1 Population

A secondary school in the Indian-African suburb of Merewent in KwaZulu-Natal was chosen for the research with a view to studying Grade 10, 11 and 12 EHL classrooms. The principal of the school informed the researcher that the school opened its doors to African learners in 1984, six years before the proclamation of Clase Model schools. It is now classified as a Quintile Four school, up from Quintile Three, which means that it only receives part of its funding from the government, and raises the rest from parents and donors. It also meant that the Department of Education was satisfied that there was enough managerial capacity in the school for the governing body to take full responsibility for the decision-making. The reclassification of schools in the post-apartheid era has seen schools being ranked into quintiles of disadvantage. The lower the quintile, the more disadvantaged the school and the bigger the subvention from the government. The principal confirmed that the school's majority learner population comprises African learners from the township. The researcher observed that, in spite of this, and except for three African teachers, the teaching cohort remained Indian-African. According to the principal the school had never experienced any social integration problems.

5.2 Participants

The research focused on the observation of Grade 10, 11 and 12 EHL classrooms. It was assumed that the learners in these grades would have spent a number of years at the school, and would

therefore, have had more experience in English as a Home Language at the school. In a focus group consisting of seven Grade 11, and six Grade 12 learners, the Grade 12 learners had spent on average 3.5 years at the school; and the Grade 11 learners, 3.7 years. All the 13 learners except two, confirmed that they came to this school for a good education. One learner stated that his reason for enrolling at the school was "to learn more skills about the english (sic)".

The principal and the three female teachers interviewed were all Indian-Africans. The principal was interviewed for data relating to the management and history of the school and the three teachers for permitting the observation of their classrooms by the researcher. The teachers had 40 years of English teaching experience between them, with two each having 19 and 18 years, and the least experienced, 3 years. Two had a degree in English; and the third – who was also the most experienced - had English 3, an honours and a master's degree in Applied Linguistics. All three teachers were English home language speakers. Two do not speak nor understand Zulu, while one speaks and understands Zulu poorly.

5.3 Data Collection

The qualitative research design was anchored in the ethnographic method of classroom observation because of the capability of qualitative field studies to lend themselves more aptly to studying cases that do not fit into particular theories (Welman *et al*., 2005:188), such as the teaching of EHL to non-native English learners. The empirical data were collected by means of the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) observation scheme devised by Allen, Frohlich and Spada (1983), a focus group and unstructured interviews.

The COLT scheme, which also served as the organising tool for the whole research because of its comprehensive and clear categories, is divided into two main categories: Classroom Activities and Classroom Language, which are each respectively subdivided into five and seven subcategories. The researcher's observations were recorded in the form of comprehensive field notes, which together with the focus group and unstructured interviews, were used to complement the scheme and to clarify its high-inference categories. The researcher came into the classrooms, witnessed their dynamics, described the classrooms and then determined if these dynamics were different enough to those in the English Second Language classrooms described in the Schlebush and Thobedi study (2004), carried out in Thabong Township in the Lejweleputswa District of the Free State Province, to imply an enriched educational experience for the learners in the described EHL classrooms. This ESL study was chosen for its recentness, having been conducted in the current curriculum dispensation, and for the generalisability of its findings, although it was conducted on grade eight classrooms. Two texts of this study were used: the original dissertation (Thobedi, 2002) and the abridged journal version published on the internet (Schlebuch & Thobedi, 2004).

The researcher was a non-participant observer in 27 periods of Grades 10, 11 and 12 classes, over a period of three weeks, in February 2008. Each grade was observed three times a week over this period, which translated into 9 periods per grade over the three weeks. By the end of the three weeks, each teacher had been observed teaching three Grade 10, three Grade 11, and three Grade 12 classes. The data was collected in real-time and compounded into field notes guided by the categories of the COLT scheme.

The focus group with the learners and the unstructured interviews with the teachers and the principal were used to complement and clarify the data from the COLT scheme. The focus group was conducted half-way through the observations, as were the unstructured interviews with the teachers. The learners in the focus group were allowed to record their views in writing. The reason for the timing of the interviews and the focus group was the researcher's view that the data provided by the COLT scheme would be sufficient to provide a satisfactory impression of the classrooms being observed. A decision was thus taken to use the data from both the interviews and the focus group selectively to clarify certain aspects according to necessity.

6. Findings

The ESL classrooms in the Schlebusch and Thobedi study (2004) are referred to as the ESL settings, and the EHL settings in the present study as the EHL settings. 'Both sets of settings' is a reference to both settings to eliminate ambiguity.

6.1 Classroom Activities

6.1.1 Activity type

There was an overarching employment of the listening-based style or telling method, with a limited use of spontaneous discussion in the EHL settings. Games, role play and dialogue were not used at all. Whereas learners were made to complete written exercises on the content, they never had to carry out any tasks related to language use in the real world. In the ESL settings, Thobedi observed that the teachers showed a preference for the telling method and that the tasks given to the learners were limited to copying questions from the textbook and the chalkboard and writing answers in their workbooks and on the chalkboard (Thobedi, 2002:107). Group discussions and frequent questioning did not take place and neither did dialogues, debates, discussion or drama and singing, all activities that could involve learners in a co-operative learning environment (Thobedi, 2002:109). In respect of this code, there was similarity between both sets of settings.

6.1.2 Participant organisation

Both sets of settings were characterised by the absence of learner group work, even though the learners had been organised into some kinds of groups. The teachers taught to the whole class and gave no individualised attention to the learners, except during one composition writing lesson when the teacher attended to the learners individually. With 40 to 60 learners on average Schlebusch & Thobedi's ESL settings had more students than the 30 to 40 learners in the EHL settings. The ESL settings were over-crowded (Schlebusch & Thobedi, 2004:40), as were the EHL settings with some of the learners not having places to sit and then having to sit in the front facing their class mates. In terms of this code, there was similarity between both sets of settings.

6.1.3 Content

The lessons in the EHL settings fell into five content types: reading comprehension, composing or writing skills, poetry, drama, and the novel. The title of one comprehension passage was *Is Beauty Skin Deep?*, and had a caption directed at young people, which read, "taken from a web-site for young people, and expresses many feelings and emotions that you may share". The

prescribed novels were *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton, for Grade 10; *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, for Grade 11; and *Nervous Condition* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, for Grade 12. The prescribed drama texts were all by Shakespeare: *Merchant of Venice* for Grade 10; *Macbeth* for Grade 11; and *Hamlet* for Grade 12. One poem was entitled *White Child Meets Black Man* by James Berry, a poet from Jamaica. In the ESL settings, Thobedi (2002:125) observed that the learners did a number of exercises on grammar or copied teacher-prepared summaries from the chalkboard and wrote a few compositions and letters. In regard to this code, there was a stark difference between the two sets of settings.

6.1.4 Student modality

Both sets of settings were dominated by the learners' listening to the teacher talking or reading, and their copying questions from some source and writing the answers in their classwork books (Schlebusch & Thobedi, 2004:43). On five occasions in the EHL settings, classwork and homework were given, but were not assessed and reinforced, which reduced the chances for effective writing. The learners in both sets of settings struggled with reading. When this happened in the EHL settings, the teachers took over the reading, while in the ESL settings learner speaking and writing activities were avoided (Thobedi, 2002:110-111). No learner presentations were observed. The learners in the EHL settings only spoke when they gave relatively short answers to the teachers' questions, which translated to less than ten percent of classroom time. However, whereas the learners in the ESL settings struggled to express themselves verbally and failed to produce proper sentences in English, a few in the EHL settings could formulate grammatically well-formed sentences when they were given speaking opportunities. In respect of this code, both sets of settings were different.

6.1.5 Materials

The EHL settings employed literary texts, which are long, complex, non-pedagogic, sometimes pedagogic, written texts. However, there were not enough copies of these texts for the learners. The few copies that the learners shared during the lessons remained in the teacher's possession after the lesson, which meant that the learners could not take them home to study by themselves. Each teacher had just fewer than 40 texts for 120 learners, which was not enough for even one class. About 10 copies of dictionaries were also shared, one dictionary to four learners. Overhead projectors were expected in the EHL settings, but none were observed. Only one teacher used an audio tape of a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which was purchased with her own money since there was not enough provision in the school budget for purchasing extra materials. In spite of the school being electrified, no visual materials were observed in use or storage. The chalkboard, reproduced hand-outs, charts with explanatory notes, and learner classwork books were the most-used teaching and learning materials. Except for the privately purchased audio tape, the two sets of settings were similar in being bedeviled by a lack of teaching and learning materials.

6.2 Classroom Language

6.2.1 Use of target language

The target language, English, was used exclusively in teacher-learner interactions, while those learners who shared a home language, particularly Zulu, used it to communicate among

themselves in class. All the focus-group learners confirmed that the teachers communicated with them and their classmates only in English. One learner reported that s/he used English to communicate with Indian learners, while s/he used Zulu to communicate with Africans in class. The learners who had Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu as their home language, said that they used these languages to communicate inside and outside the classroom with their fellow learners who understood them. Although the teachers did not openly allow or prohibit the learners from communicating in their home language, they did not sanction those who spoke Zulu amongst themselves. One teacher said she encouraged the use of the learners' home language in her English classroom because she believed it enhanced learning. The second teacher said she sometimes allowed the learners to communicate to each other in Zulu, but that, as far as possible, they had to communicate in English during her lesson. The third teacher expressed her lack of comfort with learners' using their home languages because "it would be extremely difficult for any learner to learn English without speaking it." The code-switching conditions in the EHL settings contrasted with the English-only conditions in the ESL settings, where the learners' home languages were only used outside the classroom, even in communications with the English teachers (Schlebusch & Thobedi, 2004:41).

6.2.2 Information gap

Information gaps were used successfully by the teachers in certain cases. For example, the learners responded intelligently to one teacher's question why the characters in *Lord of the Flies* painted their faces by saying that it was "to camouflage themselves" or "to blend in with the environment". However, when the learners could not answer the teacher's questions, the teachers provided all the information. The problem with the teachers' use of information gaps was that they happened within their employment of the telling method, not within the use of the activities they could have designed for the learners in the learner's own small groups. No use of information gaps was reported for the ESL settings. With regard to this code, both sets of settings exhibited difference.

6.2.3 Sustained speech

The EHL settings lacked a focus on the development of the learners' monologic skills. Even though the teachers wanted to share talking time with the learners, the lack of learner response made extended conversation impossible. At best, the dialogue in the EHL settings was limited to the teachers asking questions and getting minimal one-word or one-sentence answers from the learners. In the ESL settings, learner speaking activities were avoided because the learners were afraid of making mistakes as they thought that they could not speak proper English (Schlebusch & Thobedi, 2004:42). With regard to this code, the two sets of settings were different.

6.2.4 Reaction to code or message

Although the focus in the EHL settings was on meaning, the learners were corrected upon making grammatical mistakes. This correction consisted in a teacher intervention with a grammar sub-lesson, a reformulation, or description and explanation of the grammar point. The focus in the ESL settings was on grammar (Thobedi, 2002:112). In respect of this code, the two sets of settings were different.

6.2.5 Incorporation of preceding utterance

Incorporation of preceding utterances was a constant feature when learners could respond in the EHL settings. For example, in a lesson on *Lord of the Flies* the teacher asked the question: "What is Jack talking about?" One learner answered, "He is talking about a ship that might rescue them". In another instance, the teacher asked, "How did the Egyptians preserve the corpses of their high-class citizens?" to which a learner responded: "They preserved them by wrapping them around with bandages". The teacher reformulated the learner's response by substituting the action-specific word that she had perhaps hoped that the learners might know, which was "embalming", and then explained that the learner had not necessarily been wrong. In the ESL settings, the learners failed to construct proper English sentences (Schlebusch & Thobedi, 2004:42). Thobedi (2002:106) reports that learner involvement by way of effective questioning by the teacher to ascertain their level of understanding was minimal. In this code, both sets of settings were different.

6.2.6 Discourse initiation

The teachers in the EHL settings always initiated discourse. They announced at the beginning what the lesson would be about and everything would be targeted at achieving that. They said that they had to initiate the discourse because the learners' knowledge levels were not such that they could initiate knowledgeable discourse, and that the learners expected them to initiate discourse. In the ESL settings, it was observed that little time was given to learners to express their ideas, as a result of which they seemed unable to think and reason on their own (Schlebusch & Thobedi, 2004:43). In respect of this code, both sets of settings were similar.

6.2.7 Relative restriction of linguistic form

The standard code of the English language was expected in the EHL settings. For example, during a lesson on essay writing, one teacher emphasised that the learners were not to use inappropriate language in their essays. The examples of inappropriate language cited were the use of contracted forms, such as "cause" for "because", and "til" for "until"; incorrect punctuation; the use of slang or any other type of non-standard language. Although learners could use such informal words as "guy" in spoken language, the teacher still corrected them when reformulating the learner's response. In the ESL settings, the teachers directly corrected the learners' language mistakes (Thobedi, 2002: 112) and relied on the 'correct' language of the textbook (Thobedi, 2002:117). In terms of this code, both sets of settings were different.

7. Discussion and implications of the findings

Although the telling style would have helped the teacher cover programmatic units of work, its value to the development of the learners' communicative abilities would have been minimal. The overcrowded classrooms, the teachers' paying negligible individual attention to the learners, and minimal learner-learner group interaction made for an imperfect language-learning environment. However, for the reserved learners, the environment may have been less threatening, and, therefore, of benefit. Drawing content from such other school subjects as Mathematics and Science, and using different media, could have enriched the language learning input by exposing the learners to more registers and topics, in agreement with genre

theory. The use of literary texts was a positive practice, as they exposed learners to language in use, but the learners lacked the capacity to use them to sharpen their interpreting skills, forcing the teachers to provide all the interpretation. The learners' being overwhelmed by reading them was evidence that their readability, which refers to "all the elements in a text that help readers to cope with the text" (Fielding, 2006:198), was beyond the learners' real reading level, as opposed to the age/grade-appropriate level.

The lack of learning materials was unfortunate in the light of the history of resource deprivation in the education of African learners. Because of it, the teachers were limited in their variation of teaching activities. Even though the school governing body at this secondary school bears responsibility for materials provisioning at the school, it is arguably the responsibility of government and parents to ascertain access to the best education practices as a matter of redressing the history of under-provision. The lessons lacked the form-focused instruction that distinguishes a language lesson from other types of lessons in that the contents of the texts became ends in themselves, instead of being the carrier content by which the real content of language could be engaged with in the classroom. It was observed that the teachers employed the story-telling method when using texts as language input, since they seemed to understand the meaning to be the actions of the characters. The lack of form-focused instruction was however consistent with the conception of English as a Home Language, and may therefore not have been misplaced. The learners themselves may have been misplaced in the EHL classrooms.

The most disconcerting observation at the school was that the learners did not do sufficient reading and writing activities. They seemed to lack reading capacity because of their undeveloped word recognition skills, which affected their pronunciation and fluent reading. It was a concern that they seemed to resign when they stumbled in reading. The teachers did not offer encouragement and instead deprived the learners of reading practice opportunities by assuming the reading. The lessons were evidence that the communicative approach continues to be misunderstood by the practitioners themselves, the teachers, confirming Long's reference to it as black box learning (in Allen *et al.*, 1983:2). The analogy with a black box – which the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Wehmeier, 2005:140) defines as "a complicated piece of equipment, usually electronic, which is known to produce particular results, but which nobody completely understands" – implies that, while the communicative approach promises a lot functionally, nobody knows exactly what it should consist of. The teachers seemed to understand the communicative approach as consisting of cultivating listening and speaking skills, and thereby discounting the importance of grammar, reading and writing, in spite of acknowledgements by experts that "the more the learner reads and writes, the better their performance" (in Chuenyane, 2008:6). Language learners in school are expected to work out the complex grammatical system by mere exposure to authentic language content, which is not usually the case. The observed lack of learner grammatical sensitivity in the EHL settings may point to the need to implement direct grammar interventions. As in EHL proper, the basis for school language learning ought to be reading and writing. The benefit of reading and writing is that they allow for individual psychological engagement with the content, and thereby add a higher degree of profoundness to the learning experience.

Since some of the learners had enrolled at this school to learn good English, which they expected to acquire from taking EHL, it would arguably have been against their expectations and those

of their parents if teachers communicated with them in a language other than English. Besides, the communicative style discourages the use of any other language than the target language (Cook, 2001:222). Information gaps will always be a challenge for teachers since they require a lot of off-line and on-line planning. It would be easy for a teacher to walk into a classroom with a set book and no lesson plan, and hope to anchor the lesson on spontaneity. If that fails, the teacher is likely to revert to a style that is less stressful, such as the telling style. However, the information gap may not be amenable to use in the context-reduced situations of academic literacy, which require that teachers take more of the leading role. The requirement that learners ought to produce proper English, which seemed to be equated with formal English, was not properly handled. Colloquialism and non-standard English were discouraged without explaining the contextual nature of language use, creating the impression that everyday language and non-standard language are totally undesirable. On the contrary, mastery of everyday language is the building block for the later mastery of other more formal registers.

The concise interactional exchanges between learners and teachers might have facilitated language accuracy and fluency, but they were too occasional to be effective, and involved only a limited number of learners with better-developed communicative skills. The incorporation of preceding utterances was indicative of the presence of mutually comprehensible exchanges between the teachers and the learners. However, it can also be unnatural in spoken language since non-sentence responses are the norm in this kind of language. The teachers controlled discourse initiation. This might have signalled a change of teaching strategy for the teachers, who were faced with a different type of learner whose language proficiency level was not grade-appropriate. When learners are not responsive to the teacher's prompts to communicate, the teacher has to adjust his/her teaching style, which could make a bad teacher out of someone who is otherwise a good teacher.

8. Conclusion

From the perspective of the COLT observation model, a communicative classroom would probably have more group work than the one using the telling method, would focus on meaning, and the participants would choose the topics, the texts would be extended, and the language would be authentic (Cook, 1996:126). The EHL settings in the present study were characterised by the use of the telling or listening-based style with no group work, no use of extended written pedagogic texts, no prohibition of the learner's home language, a limited use of information gaps, a lack of sustained speeches involving the learners, reaction to the message in the learners' responses, incorporation of the learners' preceding utterances, discourse initiation by the teacher, and no restriction of the learner to any linguistic form. These settings were therefore clearly communicative in only three of the 12 codes, namely, *relative restriction of linguistic form, incorporation of preceding utterance, and reaction to code or message*. The *information gap* and *sustained speech* were not employed optimally, while the *target language* was not used in learner-learner interaction. The settings performed particularly poorly in Classroom Activities subcategories, which were all found to have been 'uncommunicative'. The EHL settings were about 25 percent communicatively oriented and when compared to the ESL settings code-to-code, the EHL settings were found to be different in eight codes and similar in four. Both sets of settings were therefore only a third similar.

Following these findings it can be concluded that there is indeed some value to township learners' attending suburban schools where English as a Home Language (EHL) is taught. Even if this school did not offer maximum value in the classroom, it at least had a semblance of orderliness that is necessary for teaching and learning to take place, as opposed to conditions in township schools (cf. Hofmeyr, 2000:5).

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