

A case study of teaching English as a second language in three rural primary classes

Funke Omidire^{1*} Liesel Ebersöhn¹ Marisa Leask¹ Deslea Konza²

Anna-Barbara du Plessis¹

¹ Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, South Africa

² Fogarty Learning Centre, School of Education, Edith Cowan University, Australia

*Corresponding author, email: funke.omidire@up.ac.za

Abstract: Assessment results from rural schools have shown little improvement in over a decade, mainly because many of the barriers to learning, such as poverty and limited resources, still prevail. Without the necessary English language skills, language can become another barrier to learning. The assessment results of Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) in 2011 and 2016 reinforce the need for instructional practices to address the difficulties learners' experience with English in primary school. The aim of our study was to provide a detailed analysis of how English as a second language is taught, to guide policy makers in developing the instructional skills of teachers in rural settings, and consequently to improve the educational outcomes of the learners. A comparative case study was used to provide evidence-based descriptions of the teachers' instructional practices from three Grade 3 classes. Findings indicated that language instruction appeared to focus on the structural components of language, compromising the development of the independent academic language skills needed to make the transition in Grade 4 to English as the language of learning and teaching. The results of this research can inform the planning and monitoring of future literacy development initiatives, and thereby, improve assessment results of learners.

Introduction¹

The success of language policy initiatives globally requires an understanding of what is happening in the classroom. This is more so in multilingual contexts where English is used as the language of teaching and learning, and is taught as a second language (L2). In these instances, the curriculum clearly defines the tasks and achievement goals for teaching to help bridge the gap in learner achievement. However, for policy and the curriculum to be effective, the government must have the capacity to implement them (Department of Education [DoE] 2010), and the baseline of where learners and teachers are in the process of literacy development has to be measured (Gambrell, Morrow and Mazzoni 2011). Without baseline information, there is little to guide the planning and monitoring of future literacy development initiatives in schools or to aid teacher education (Howie et al. 2008). This study thus aimed to describe how English L2 is taught in Grade 3 to help inform L2 instruction. Knowing what happens in the classroom will help identify training gaps.

International research findings indicate that in English L2 instruction, both language form and communicative competency must be taught using an eclectic blend of instructional practices (Larsen-Freeman 2011). In other words, no specific model or method is better than any other to teach L2. Instead, the teacher should use various strategies and techniques to meet the diverse needs of their learners and the curriculum requirements (Brown 2007; Nel and Nel 2012).

Most of the international research on L2 learning based on literacy levels in the first language (L1) has limitations in the South African context and with immigrant populations, as it overlooks populations without L1 literacy and/or with low alphabetic print literacy (Ball 2010; Howie et al. 2012). Many learners who enter school have not mastered their L1 and experience difficulties with language across the curriculum (Nel and Theron 2008). This is confirmed by research that shows that literacy achievement levels in rural areas are significantly lower compared to their urban peers (Howie et al. 2012).

Not only are some learners not proficient in L1, but they are also taught in English. English is the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) for about 80% of learners from Grade 4 upwards, even though only 9.6% of the population speaks English at home (Howie et al. 2012). English language instruction in the foundation phase does not prepare all learners to transition from English as L2 to English as LoLT in Grade 4. Learners' poor performance has been attributed to poor language skills and difficulty to think critically in English (DoE 2015).

Unfortunately, the ambiguous interpretation of policies allows for pedagogically inappropriate language practices in education. One of the underlying principles in the Department of Education's 'Language in Education Policy' (DoE 1997) is to maintain the L1, while acquiring another language or other languages. Simultaneously, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that children have the right to education in any official language(s) of their choice, even if their choices are not their L1 (Constitution of RSA 1996). Besides policies, practices also influence the LoLT in schools. With the task of building a nation, the government cannot provide education in L1 across the foundation phase and further phases. Additionally, many parents choose English as LoLT for their children, even though, pedagogically, their L1 is more supportive of academic achievement. The result is that English is the LoLT in many schools (DoE 2010).

Other challenges that face rural schools may include inadequate physical resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient learning materials and books (Howie et al. 2012). The communities of these areas also have to cope with poor health, malnourishment, the erratic supply of basic needs and services, poor infrastructure, educational backlogs, disrupted schooling, violence and unsupported home environments (Ebersöhn 2010; Van Staden 2010).

In this study, differentiated instruction was used together with the Classroom Observation Schedule-Revised (CLOS-R) to present a description of how English L2 is taught in rural primary classes. Differentiated instruction was seen as the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study as it can be applied to teaching language in diverse contexts (Nel and Nel 2012). It encompasses a variety of instructional and assessment strategies that increase opportunities for all learners to access the curriculum (Walton 2011). Differentiated instruction is a responsive instructional approach in which the teacher differentiates language instruction in four areas: content, learning process, product, and learning environment, according to each learner's readiness, interests and learning profile (Santamaria 2009). The purpose of instruction is to maximise the capacity of each learner by using techniques that help the learner bridge gaps in understanding and skill (Tomlinson and Edison 2003). It focuses on the strengths of learners and encourages teachers to take responsibility for the academic success of each learner (O'Meara 2011). Furthermore, differentiated instruction is recommended as an instructional method for learners who learn in English as an additional language (Rothenberg and Fisher 2007).

The CLOS-R is based on 27 effective English L2 instructional practices divided into six broad dimensions: respect, knowledge, orchestration, participation, support, and differentiation. The CLOS-R has strong psychometric characteristics ($r = 0.87$) and effectively measures the presence or absence of effective teaching practices (Louden, Rohl and Hopkins 2008). Therefore, it is seen as a reliable instrument to measure teachers' instructional practices, as it meets the criterion of instrument reliability (Maree and Pietersen 2007). This instrument was developed from the observations of learners who were not all using English as their L1 as literacy education occurs in a 'culturally and linguistically diverse environment' (Louden et al. 2005: 8). The diversity of the learner population has increased since then.

Second language instruction

The starting point in English L2 instruction is to determine the purpose of language instruction, which influences both curriculum content and classroom instructional practices relating to L2 (Hansen 1995). In many South African schools, English is the LoLT that requires instruction for academic competency. Learners are required to achieve academic competency in English; therefore, language instruction aims to provide learners with the 'cognitive academic skills that are necessary for thinking and learning, which will enable them to learn effectively across the curriculum' in English (Nel 2011: 169).

Language instruction has to simultaneously include content knowledge and language proficiency, and the integration of both to achieve academic competency in English. The instruction of language content focuses on language knowledge, text structures and functions to develop literacy skills so that the learner can infer meaning from various sources across the curriculum (Hernández 2003; Rothenberg and Fisher 2007; Brisk 2010). In L2 instruction, particular emphasis should be placed on linguistic form through explicit instruction in the context of purposeful learning across subjects (Lucas, Villegas and Freedson-Gonzalez 2008). Equally crucial in L2 instruction is building vocabulary to access curriculum content (Zimmerman, Howie and Smit 2011; Nel and Nel 2012). To enable learners to read text requires alphabetic knowledge instruction (Konza 2006), a more literate vocabulary, text-structure awareness and organisational cues (Grabe and Stoller 2011). As learners' language proficiency increases, metacognitive skills can be taught, particularly with older learners (Konza 2006).

The role of L1 in the classroom is important in L2 instruction. Research findings support instruction aimed at developing both L1 and L2 simultaneously, particularly in younger learners (August, Goldenberg, Saunders and Dressler 2010). The use of L1 can facilitate explanations and support the teacher's understanding of the learners' knowledge of L2 (Ball 2010). Seiler (2018) concurs, and reiterates the common practice of employing the strategy of linking L1 concepts to the development of L2. Target vocabulary should be presented in the context of the meaningful text in both L1 and L2 to build on the learners' existing knowledge of L1 (Bedore, Pena and Boerger 2010), and help learners compare the two languages for better understanding. Deep orthographic languages, such as English, have many irregular sound-letter correspondences and require language-specific instruction to develop phonological awareness (Grabe and Stoller 2011), the requisite alphabetic knowledge (Konza 2006), metalinguistic awareness (Koda 2007) and the exposure of learners to cognates (words that have similar meaning and sound in two different languages).

Formal and informal assessment provides the teacher with insight regarding the learners' knowledge and how the learners respond to instructions (O'Meara 2011). In this way, the teacher can support and enhance the learning process by adapting instruction to meet the needs of the learner and the curriculum goals (O'Meara 2011; Lerner and Johns 2015).

Second language learning

Research on instructional practices acknowledges that learning L2 is more complicated than learning L1 as language proficiencies, context and the effects of language transference (Grabe and Stoller 2011) are more prominent. In their analysis of the critical period for L2 acquisition, Hartshorne, Tenenbaum and Pinker (2018) found that there is a critical, well-defined period in childhood for optimal language acquisition, which makes the focus on effective approaches in the early years essential.

The interactionist approach to learning was used to guide the study as it includes the cognitive and social functions of language learning, as well as the context and diverse needs of learners.

Cognitively, language is seen as an integrated system that consists of speaking, reading, listening and writing (Richards and Rodgers 2001), where competency in one language can be transferred to another language, and where the facilitation of learning and understanding abstract concepts occurs (Lerner and Johns 2015). From a social interaction perspective, learning is a cooperative process (Brown 2007) that occurs through social action and interaction (Oregia 2011). Instruction, therefore, must be meaningful to the learner, build on previous knowledge and allow for reflection (Larsen-Freeman 2011). The knowledge and experience the learner brings to the classroom, and the context in which learning occurs needs to be included in language instruction (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana 2010; Seiler 2018). The role of L1 is seen as a resource for learning L2 (Hall 2011), and both languages can be used in classroom instruction to facilitate learning.

The interactionist theory of learning sees the role of the teacher as a facilitator who creates opportunities to help learners to bridge gaps in understanding and skill (Tomlinson and Edison 2003). As a facilitator, the teacher fulfils two roles: learner expert, and knowledge specialist. As a learner expert, the teacher must have a good understanding of childhood developmental stages to ensure that information is presented and practised at the right cognitive and affect level (Murray and

Christison 2010). The teacher's role as a knowledge specialist is framed by the teacher's assumptions of learning theory and language theory (Richards and Rodgers 2001). The knowledge is applied in the classroom according to the purpose of English in the curriculum. Aligned with facilitation is providing an environment where the learner feels safe enough to make mistakes and engage with other learners (Nel 2011). L2 instruction, therefore, needs to consider language development, the way in which language is learnt, the learners' context, curriculum design and classroom instruction. In order to address any challenges in the delivery of appropriate L2 instruction, particularly in rural areas, there is a need for a descriptive analysis of the current processes.

Methods

A concurrent embedded mixed-methods study was used to describe how English is taught as L2 in two rural schools. The primary purpose of this study was to use a comparative case study from non-participative classroom observations, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and documents to provide an evidence-informed dialogue to document existing English language teaching practices. The secondary purpose was to collect descriptive quantitative data, using CLOS-R to support and enhance the qualitative data. The research design was a comparative case study in which the 'case' represented the three Grade 3 classes observed where English was taught as L2. This study aimed to describe teaching practices in a specific context and was not designed for the findings to be generalised.

Two schools were selected because they were existing partner schools in the Flourishing Learning Youth (FLY) project, which began in 2005 as part of a community service learning programme for Master in Educational Psychology students at a South African university. Three classes were observed: two classes in one school and one class in the second school in the same area. The two schools were conveniently located, and research at these schools was done simultaneously with other FLY initiatives to be both cost-effective and time-efficient. The Grade 3 classes were purposively selected as the English instruction in this grade is expected to prepare learners to make the switch to English as the LoLT in Grade 4. The L1 of most of the learners in the two schools was siSwati.

All three teachers confirmed that they had received Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) training and were familiar with the requirements of CAPS. The teachers all had different qualifications with more than two years' teaching experience in the foundation phase. Teacher 1 only had adult literacy training; Teacher 2 was studying towards her Early Childhood Development (ECD) Diploma; and Teacher 3 was studying towards an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE). Although the three teachers had received departmental training, none had specialist knowledge to teach English in the foundation phase.

Each Grade 3 class was studied individually, as well as comparatively, to focus on the similarities and differences among the three teachers. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently from four field trips, each of one week's duration, over two years. Qualitative data sources included observational data, field notes, audio-visual recordings of classroom interactions during lessons, photographs of learners' exercise books, teachers' lesson plans, and verbatim transcriptions of interviews with teachers. The quantitative data collected from CLOS-R allowed for the different aspects of the teaching instruction that were observed to be quantified.

The qualitative data analysis consisted of transcribing the classroom observations and teacher interviews verbatim, after which the data collected from each teacher was coded separately. After that, the data was combined for further data analysis. The codes were then re-examined and aligned with the indicators provided by the theory and theoretical framework (Rule and John 2011), using both a priori codes and open codes. Throughout the process, the indicators were examined to see where they may or may not have fitted into various categories (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2008), with the absence of indicators also providing evidence of L2 instruction in this process. Table 1 shows the final themes, sub-themes and respective indicators that emerged.

The quantitative data from the CLOS-R observation was used to substantiate the qualitative data observation using a frequency distribution for the activities observed. The descriptive statistics provided a visual comparison of the teachers' instructional practices against each other and against the evidenced 27 effective practices. The effective practices were grouped into the following six dimensions:

Table 1: Qualitative themes

| | |
|--|--|
| Theme 1 | |
| Second Language Instructional Practices | |
| <i>Subtheme: Content instruction to develop academic language proficiency</i> | |
| Indicators: | Explicit instruction Language proficiency Formative assessment |
| <i>Subtheme: Processes to help learners engage with English L2</i> | |
| Indicators: | Scaffolding Flexible grouping |
| <i>Subtheme: Learner product to demonstrate learning and meeting curriculum goals for English L2</i> | |
| Indicators: | Summative assessment Feedback |
| Theme 2 | |
| Environment that supports English L2 learning | |
| <i>Subtheme: Learning Environment created by the teacher</i> | |
| Indicators: | Physical Arrangement Psychological Climate |
| <i>Subtheme: Home Environment developing and supporting literacy</i> | |
| Indicators: | Economic factors Literacy practices |
| Theme 3 | |
| Role of the Teacher in English L2 instruction | |
| <i>Subtheme: Learner Expert</i> | |
| Indicators: | Readiness Interest Learning Profile |
| <i>Subtheme: Knowledge Specialist</i> | |
| Indicators: | Instructional Knowledge Language Knowledge |

- Respect: The way in which the teacher gains the children's respect and the way in which the children demonstrate respect for her;
- Knowledge: How teachers use their knowledge of literacy to teach essential literacy concepts and skills effectively;
- Orchestration: The manner in which the teacher manages or orchestrates the demands of the literacy classroom;
- Participation: How the teacher organises and motivates children's participation in classroom literacy tasks;
- Support: How the teacher supports learners' literacy learning; and
- Differentiation: How the teacher differentiates tasks and instructions for individual learners, providing individual levels of challenge (Louden et al. 2005: 3–4).

Findings

The integrated results were used to prove the content differentiation learning process, product and learning environment. Together, these areas described how English L2 is taught in the rural schools that were observed.

Content differentiation

Content differentiation was described using the explicit instruction and language proficiency indicators from Theme 1. The supporting quantitative data included instructional practices on the knowledge, support and orchestration dimensions of CLOS-R (see Table 2).

The indicators used to show content differentiation were determined by how the teacher made use of explicit instruction and the development of language proficiency. The supporting quantitative data included instructional practices on the knowledge, support and orchestration dimensions of CLOS-R.

There was no evidence of purposeful instruction, as the teachers did not explain the purpose of the lesson or keep to their lesson plan or the guidelines as set out in the CAPS manual. During the observed lessons, teachers made grammatical references to what was being read and the answers were written down, such as the layout of a letter and sentence structure. The photographs of the learners' books show that grammatical errors were not corrected, and in some cases, incorrect grammar was marked as correct.

Vocabulary development consisted of the teachers explaining English words, sentences and text by translating these into siSwati. In doing so, teachers helped learners to develop their English vocabulary and to understand the text that was read. However, the English vocabulary development lacked depth and breadth; learners did not have opportunities to use the new vocabulary in multiple contexts, nor were variations in meaning explained. For example, when Teacher 2 in School B went through a letter in the textbook, she explained: 'The salutation helps us to see who wrote the letter and to whom'. The teacher did not provide examples of different types of salutations nor did she explain that a simpler word for salutation is greeting. Teacher 1 in School A explained the meaning of 'earthquake' to learners as: 'Some of the things that happen are quite frightening, such as an earthquake. It can be very frightening because buildings are shaken, and they even fall'. The learners were not provided with any further information about what happens in an earthquake.

Language proficiency requires learners to be provided with frequent opportunities to practise all the language forms: listening, reading, writing, speaking, and meaning-making. It also requires the teacher to provide many opportunities to reinforce concepts, often in different ways (persistence), and to master new literacy learning in the form of homework activities.

Learners listened to a story the teacher read, after which they read the story in groups. Spoken language was made up of one-word answers or very short, simple sentences in response to questions. For example, in School B, when Teacher 2 asked the learners what they saw in the picture, they responded with 'duck', 'I see a frog' and 'I see a tree'. Written tasks presented in the learners' books were short and consisted of repetitive sentences, worksheets that had to be completed with missing words, and linking phrases. Teachers did not give the learners homework, as they were not allowed to take books home. The teachers were 'afraid when they take them home with them, sometimes they come back dirty, sometimes they come back with pages falling out' (Teacher 3, School A). Only Teacher 3 provided significant opportunities to learn when she taught learners about words with an 'oo' sound. She asked the learners to find the words in the text, then they had to identify the words from flash cards, write words on the blackboard, find the words on the wall charts and finally they had to build words from letter blocks.

Table 2: Content differentiation

| Qualitative Data | | T1 | T2 | T3 | | Quantitative Data | | T1 | T2 | T3 |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|----|----|----|---------------|-----------------------|---|----|----|----|
| Explicit Instruction | Purpose | – | – | – | | Purpose | – | – | – | |
| | Grammar | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | Substance | – | – | – | |
| | Vocabulary development | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | Explanation word | ✓ | – | ✓ | |
| | Similarities between L1 and L2 | ✓ | ✓ | – | Knowledge | Explanation sentence | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| | | | | | | Explanation text | – | – | – | |
| | | | | | | Metalinguage | ✓ | ✓ | – | |
| Language proficiency | Listening | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | Oral language | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Reading | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Knowledge | Oral/written language | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Writing | ✓ | ✓ | – | Support | Persistence | – | – | ✓ | |
| | Speaking & Meaning making | – | – | – | Orchestration | Independence | – | – | – | |
| | Homework | – | – | – | | | | | | |

Learning process

The sub-theme 'processes to help learners engage with English L2' was used to demonstrate how the teacher facilitates learning. In Table 3, these indicators and the CLOS-R dimensions support and differentiation are presented to describe the learning process.

The role of the teacher in facilitating learning requires supportive strategies to be used to help learners to better understand and meet curriculum requirements. Mediation is the instructional practice to support learners with specific guidance and input. This support is gradually withdrawn as the learners become increasingly independent, constructing knowledge on their own (Donald et al. 2010). The use of mediation strategies during instruction was evidenced through scaffolding and feedback.

The teachers used only modelling in the class as they corrected learners' answers or their mispronounced words. During the observations, teachers used implicit and explicit affirmations. The implicit affirmations consisted of comments such as 'good' and 'thank you' from the teacher, or the class singing congratulatory songs. Only Teacher 3 used explicit affirmations and made comments such as 'Yes, book is right. Book is right, book and cook. Boot and food.'

The supportive strategies that were demonstrated were not sufficient for learners to develop their independence and take responsibility for their learning. Teachers have to know the learners' readiness, interests, learning profile and the curriculum to provide the necessary support. Learners can then be supported when the teacher connects the learners' existing knowledge with new knowledge (Larsen-Freeman 2011) by performing task-based or meaning-based activities (Orega 2011). Instruction needs to be contextualised to help learners make meaning, and needs to be of interest to allow for meaningful engagement that motivates learners (Rothenberg and Fisher 2007). The teacher should also be able to adapt the curriculum and instructional practices to challenge the learners cognitively by connecting what the learners know to the new information (Louden et al. 2005). There was no evidence of this, as all learners were taught in the same way.

From the interviews, the teachers seemed to understand the purpose of grouping learners and explained that small groups were created with learners of mixed language levels for the more proficient learners to assist the less proficient learners. However, during the observations, there was no evidence of grouping learners to facilitate different types of learning. The groupings that occurred were aimed at sharing resources, rather than for engagement or connection with the content.

Product

Data from the CLOS-R instructional practices assessment and awareness to describe the product supported the assessment indicators from sub-theme 2 of Theme 1. Products are ways in which the learners demonstrate their learning. Table 4 reflects the findings.

Table 3: Learning process

| Qualitative Data | | T1 | T2 | T3 | Quantitative Data | | T1 | T2 | T3 |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|----|----|----|-------------------|----------------|----|----|----|
| Scaffolding | Modelling | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Support | Assessment | - | - | - |
| | Bridging | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | Scaffolding | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Contextualisation | - | - | - | | Feedback | ✓ | - | ✓ |
| | Schema building | - | - | - | Differentiation | Responsiveness | - | - | - |
| | Text representation | - | - | - | | Challenge | - | - | - |
| Feedback | Explicit error correction | - | - | - | | | | | |
| | Indirect error correction | - | - | - | | | | | |
| | Explicit affirmation | - | - | ✓ | | | | | |
| | Implicit affirmation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | |
| | Explanation of rule | - | - | - | | | | | |
| Flexible grouping | Grouping for content instruction | - | - | - | | | | | |
| | Grouping for process instruction | - | - | - | | | | | |

Continual and varied assessments perform a crucial role in supporting and challenging all learners to meet the curriculum's learning objectives (O'Meara 2011). In differentiated instruction, teachers allow learners to present their knowledge in various ways for the teacher to assess their learning in relation to the desired outcome or objective (O'Meara 2011). It also serves to guide the teacher's instruction.

There was no evidence of instructional practices for learners to demonstrate their learning in various ways, nor of the teachers adapting their instruction to ensure that the curriculum goals were achieved. The assessment of learner knowledge consisted of listening to a story, distinguishing certain vowel sounds, and building sounds out of words. However, these assessments were not sufficient to determine the learners' understanding and adjust instruction accordingly in the classroom.

Teachers use progress monitoring assessment to assess the learners' learning in meeting the lesson's goals. The findings showed that the lesson goals were not clearly defined during the lessons, and assessment criteria in the lesson plans were absent or vague, with statements such as 'make corrections on the board' or 'write classwork'. Furthermore, goals set out in the curriculum were not covered in the lesson plans and the goals in the lesson plans were not achieved during the lessons. In School A, Teacher 1 presented a lesson to the learners that dealt with the weather and nature. According to the CAPS manual, comprehension is assessed by asking questions about nature, the weather, the weather in the story and the photograph in the learners' books (Farrow 2011). The manual explains further which sight words and phonetic sounds must be covered. The lesson plan for the week only had the weather and words ending in 'all'. The lesson plan indicated that a poem would be read as stipulated in the CAPS manual. The poem was not read out, and during the interview with Teacher 1, she said the school did not have any audio equipment to play the poem to the learners, so she left it out of her lesson.

Awareness was incorporated as part of the product, as it goes beyond just managing the class to include the way in which the teacher monitors the learners' progress during activities (Louden et al. 2005). None of the teachers seemed to display an awareness of the learners' understanding of literacy concepts, as they did not adjust or adapt their instruction when it appeared that some learners did not understand what was going on.

Learning environment

The indicators of Theme 3 provided evidence of the learning environments. Instructional practices found in the orchestration and respect CLOS-R dimensions supported the findings (see Table 5).

The context in which learning occurs supports and influences the learners' needs (Brown 2007). The learning environment is determined by the way the classroom works and feels (Tomlinson 2000). The findings on the physical arrangement of the classroom indicated that the teachers did not use the classroom as a resource for literacy development. There were no designated areas for reading or flexible grouping arrangements. The limited literacy resources available in the classroom may impede the learners' literacy development, especially as literary resources in the home environment are scarce. Without sufficient visual support in the classroom, learners could not refer to them during their lessons and an opportunity to reinforce learning was lost.

The physical arrangement of the three classrooms was traditional, with all the desks facing the blackboard and the teachers' desks separated from the learners, and placed at the front of the classroom. Although the classrooms were large enough to accommodate different learning areas for the number of learners (approximately 15 learners per classroom), the teachers had only two areas defined: a work area and a storage area for the learners' books at the back of the classroom.

Neither of the schools had a library or reading books for the learners, who had to share photocopies or rely on their teachers to borrow books from nearby schools. Visual support such as posters depicting vocabulary or task guidelines were not utilised to promote literacy learning and did not relate to any specific content being taught. No examples of the learners' work were displayed. During an interview, one teacher reported that she did not know where the artwork in the classroom came from, and only added the names of her class to the birthday posters.

Table 4: Product

| Qualitative Data | | T1 | T2 | T3 | Quantitative Data | | T1 | T2 | T3 |
|----------------------|--|----|----|----|-------------------|------------|----|----|----|
| Formative assessment | Learner assessment to inform instruction | - | - | - | Support | Assessment | - | - | - |
| Summative assessment | Progressive monitoring assessment | - | - | - | Orchestration | Awareness | - | - | - |

Table 5: Learning environment

| Qualitative Data | | T1 | T2 | T3 | Quantitative Data | | T1 | T2 | T3 |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|----|----|----|-------------------|-------------|----|----|----|
| Economic factors | Availability to resources | - | - | - | | | | | |
| | Employment | - | - | - | | | | | |
| Literacy practices | Shared reading activities | - | - | - | | | | | |
| | Educational level | - | - | - | | | | | |
| | Print exposure | - | - | - | | | | | |
| Physical Arrangement | Room design | - | - | - | | | | | |
| | Literacy resources | - | - | - | Orchestration | Environment | | | ✓ |
| | Visual support | - | - | - | | | | | |
| Psychological Climate | Learner participation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | Rapport | - | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Classroom management | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Respect | Credibility | ✓ | - | ✓ |
| | Cultural inclusivity | - | - | - | | Citizenship | - | - | - |
| | | | | | | Structure | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | | | | | | Pace | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | | | | | Orchestration | Transition | - | - | ✓ |
| | | | | | | Attention | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

The psychological climate created by the teachers was organised with specific routines set up. The learners were obedient and well behaved during the observations, but specific strategies to create a positive learning environment where learners could feel safe to initiate discussions was not observed. Learner participation in all three classes was teacher directed, and language practice focused more on structure than on negotiating meaning.

How the home environment supported literacy was mainly determined by economic factors, such as the availability of literacy resources, and literacy practices in the home. The findings of this study suggest that these learners' home environments did not support literacy development. The home environments were rural, challenged by poverty and associated resource constraints, and were categorised by economic risk and limited literacy practice by most or all members of the community.

Learners had limited exposure to literacy experiences, both in L1 and L2. As more than 40% of the residents had not completed primary school (DoE 2011; 2015), many caregivers would not have been able to assist the learners because of their low literacy levels. In some cases, parents or caregivers did not help learners, believing that 'I am not a teacher; I am your mom, let's forget about that', as reported during an interview with Teacher 1. Consequently, learners entered school with conversational proficiency of siSwati and limited knowledge of English.

Discussion

The findings confirmed that teachers used explicit instructional strategies to develop vocabulary and to ensure understanding by translating English text into siSwati, but with little time spent on metalinguistic skills and grammar. The new words learnt were written on the board and then erased, preventing learners from referring back to them later and reinforcing their knowledge. Learners were also not taught high-frequency words in L2, which is important in developing word recognition automaticity – an enabling skill for comprehension and making reading more accurate and fluent (Grabe and Stoller 2011).

Purpose guides the teacher's instruction and is reflected in the learners' 'responses indicating tacit or explicit understanding of the purpose of the literacy task' (Louden et al. 2008: 108). The teachers did not articulate the purpose of the lesson. Additionally, they seemed to lose track of what had to be done and often did not complete the activities stated in their lesson plans. Without a clear purpose to the lesson, learners may find it difficult to determine what is important to learn (Rothenberg and Fisher 2007) and what the curriculum goals are.

Language skills need to be reinforced multiple times and in different ways (Louden et al. 2008) in the classroom and through out-of-school activities. Although all forms of language were used in the classroom, the findings suggest that the teachers did not provide learners with sufficient opportunities to develop academic competency in English L2. There was a strong emphasis on rote learning, and the tasks and activities were performed mostly at a lower cognitive level, and thus did not lead to substantial literacy engagement.

Limited oral language experiences have been identified as one of the reasons for poor literacy achievement levels in South Africa (Howie et al. 2012). The examples of written exercises concur with research done by Heugh (2000), showing no evidence of experimenting with or developing writing skills, suggesting that written language learning was not consolidated. Whereas reading and listening activities provide learners with the opportunity to hear language in context and to gain an understanding of language form (Bernhardt 2010), the classroom observations showed little evidence in this regard. The results from the classroom observations indicated that language use was not sufficient for collaborative learning to take place because the interactions were not meaningful to learners (Nel 2011).

The study's findings further suggest that the home environment of these learners did not support literacy development. Literacy resources were not available at home, owing to economic and social factors, and learners did not receive the support needed by caregivers to develop literacy skills. The Grade 3 teachers had to include the development of literacy in L1, while teaching English L2. These findings were consistent with previous research in rural schools (Fleisch 2008; Currin and Pretorius 2010).

Although the number of learners in a class and classroom design allowed the classroom to be used as a resource for literacy development, this was not recorded during the observations. Literacy development and opportunities to enhance learning were lost, in part, due to the lack of resources and visual support. These observations are consistent with previous research in rural schools, which found that they often lacked instructional material, textbooks and reading material (Christie, Butler and Potterton 2007).

The teachers succeeded in providing an ordered and structured learning context. The learners were well behaved, and teachers managed learning activities and learner placement to reduce disruption in the classroom. The teacher-directed interaction meant that language learning usually focused on language structure (Larsen-Freeman 2011), rather than on literacy development, which may have compromised meaning-making skills. Learners did not initiate or contribute to interactions, but merely responded. This may pose a challenge to developing academic language skills that not only require the learners to understand content, but also to express their understanding in English.

Conclusion and recommendations

The English L2 instructional practices observed did not appear to prepare Grade 3 learners sufficiently to make the transition in Grade 4 to English as the LoLT. Teachers' understanding of the learning process and development psychology is vital in supporting literacy learning. Without formal training and appropriate instructional experience, the teachers in this study lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to assess learners and provide correct support to engage learners in literacy learning. Teachers who lack the required competencies are limited in their effectiveness in teaching language (Zimmerman et al. 2011) and are unable to meet the diverse needs of their learners. This situation is compounded by the fact that most of the learners do not live in an environment where English is the language of communication (Heugh 2009), thereby limiting their exposure to English. Effective instructional practices can only take place when teachers have the required subject knowledge of the subjects they teach (Taylor 2008). Educational programmes need to focus

on content knowledge, learning theory and instructional practices, together with developing skills in L2 teaching (Christie et al. 2007).

Although schools alone cannot change the economic status of their learners, they can change their opportunities for literacy learning and teaching to some extent (Pretorius and Machet 2004). The value of this study is that it provides an evidence-based description of existing English language instruction in two rural schools, representative of many schools in South Africa, which may serve as a baseline for intervention, and contribute to an understanding of the challenges faced in rural schools. This new knowledge could be used to guide policy makers and teacher training. Until the gap between language policy and practice in rural schools in South Africa is bridged, it is recommended that schools start an out-of-school literacy programme (Pretorius and Machet 2004), encourage literacy engagement activities by caregivers (Newman 2010), and support collaboration with other teachers and schools to share resources and knowledge through regular workshops (Pretorius and Mampuru 2007). Teachers without the appropriate qualifications, knowledge, skills and experience are unfortunately a reality in rural education in South Africa. One way forward to address the barriers formed by these circumstances is for schools to take the initiative. There should be further collaboration between universities and schools to provide professional learning for volunteers and teachers without foundation-level training. Training should include how everyday activities and objects could be incorporated into and used to promote oral language.

Government's responsibility to provide finances for the development of L1 across the phases remains essential. Government should make concerted efforts to develop African languages with the full involvement at the provincial and school district levels. In the absence of this involvement, research should continue to focus on how learning and teaching in many languages in one class can be supported.

Endnotes

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