PERCEPTIONS OF GRADE 11 SETSWANA HOME LANGUAGE LEARNERS REGARDING ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN A RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL

Joseph A Azagsiba (https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4800-6061)
University of South Africa, South Africa
Tintswalo V Manyike (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8086-4439)
University of South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

South African learners are among the millions globally who learn English as a second language and use it as the language of learning and teaching at various stages of their educational careers. The literature abounds with views from language and education experts confirming that proficiency in the language of teaching and learning is crucial for academic success. However, the voices of the learners themselves are absent in discussions on this crucial matter. This study investigated the perceptions of Setswana Home Language learners about studying English as a subject and using it as the language of teaching and learning. The research focused on Grade 11 Setswana Home Language learners in a rural public secondary school in the Bojanala Education District, North-West Province, South Africa. Guided by Vygotsky' socio-cultural theory, this single case qualitative study collected data through a questionnaire administered to a purposefully sampled Grade 11 English First Additional Language class, with qualitative analysis of the responses. Findings revealed that learners felt they did not have a thorough understanding of English; lacked confidence in speaking it; had poor speaking and writing skills, preferred Setswana as the language of teaching and learning, were exposed to the use of both their home language and English in the classroom and lacked sufficient access to English in their home environments.

KEYWORDS: English First Additional Language; Home Language; Language of Learning and Teaching; Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills; Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Most South African learners live in environments where access to English as a communicative tool is virtually non-existent. Most learners, therefore, encounter English for the first time upon entering school. The education system then permits the use of the first language (L1) as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) for the first three years of schooling. In Grade 4, the LoLT changes to English (DBE 2011), at which time most learners still lack the required proficiency, even in their L1, to cope with academic content (Dreyer 2017; Makoe & McKinney 2018; Hill 2015; Molapo & Pillay 2017; Manyike & Lemmer 2015). Cummins (2001) urges the use of L1 as LoLT for extended periods because it not only enhances learners' cognitive development but also affirms their cultural identities. He (Cummins 1980) distinguishes between two levels of language competency: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS is conversational fluency which can be attained within two years of immersion in the target language, while CALP is the ability to express academic concepts and ideas in speaking and writing and could take up to eight years to acquire (Khatib & Taie 2016).

The use of English as the LoLT continues to be cited by various researchers and language experts as the main cause of academic failure among most South African English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) learners (Hill 2015; Manyike 2017; Sibanda 2017; Pretorius 2015; Dampier 2017). The geographic distance between suburban areas, where English is more prevalent, and these learners' residential areas means that they are not exposed to native English speakers. Consequently, the BICS and CALP skills of these learners in English are underdeveloped, making it difficult for them to process academic concepts in English. As Molapo & Pillay (2017) point out, this affects the quality of learning and compromises the calibre of learners graduating into the workforce (Hill 2015). Yet, English is legitimised and endorsed through language policies in schools due to its status as a world language (Evans & Cleghorn 2017; Tan, Farashaiyan, Sahragard & Faryabi 2020). Some researchers argue that the dominance of English globally is due to its powerful influence on social and economic mobility (Makoe & McKinney 2018; McKay & Brown 2016; Galloway & Rose 2017; Llurda 2017; Marlina 2018; Schultze 2019).

Against this background, this study aimed to gain insights from those who are directly affected by these language policies and perceptions of language status. The main research question was: What are the perceptions of Grade 11 SHL learners about learning and using English as the LoLT? This question was addressed through a single case qualitative study, with data gathered from one class of Grade 11 SHL learners in a rural secondary school in the Bojanala Education District, North-West Province, South Africa, using a questionnaire. The purpose of the study was to provide recommendations for improving English language teaching and learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is underpinned by the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism views learning as an active process and a social activity. While individuals require prior knowledge to learn, motivation is essential for learning. Learners' internal drive influences their understanding and promotes the learning process (Jenkins 2015; Duff 2015). Constructivism posits that, firstly, children use objects in their environment to assist their thinking; secondly, peers and teachers mediate to encourage their thinking; and finally, children develop the ability to accomplish tasks independently with

minimal external support. Thus, learners who live in communities where the target language is spoken typically develop fluency much faster than learners who only receive input in the classroom (Van der Walt 2017). Exposure to the target language is necessary for second language (L2) acquisition, and learners' output in L1 also impacts L2 learning.

The constructivist paradigm was chosen to underpin this study because it aligns with the qualitative research approach, which emphasises participants' perspectives on their experiences. The questionnaire data facilitated a thorough analysis of responses and deep contemplation of participants' opinions and viewpoints on the subject (Creswell 2019).

THE LANGUAGE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION

The LoLT refers to the language used by teachers and learners in the classroom for teaching and learning subjects across the curriculum. This language may be the home language (HL), also referred to as L1, or an L2. English serves as an L2 for most South African learners who predominantly use it as the LoLT in most South African schools. In addition to serving as a language of aspiration, national unity and liberation among black people, English has also become the primary language of higher education, commerce, and government (Evans & Cleghorn 2017; Tan, Farashaiyan, Sahragard & Faryabi 2020; Manyike & Lemmer 2014). South African education policy mandates the introduction of English as the LoLT for learners as early as Grade 4 (Molapo & Pillay 2017; Pretorius 2015; Van Wyk 2017; DBE 2011). Consequently, learners in South African classrooms continue to develop proficiency skills in English while simultaneously using it to acquire knowledge in other subject areas (Manyike 2017).

Since 1994 the South African government has systematically dismantled the apartheid education legacy and replaced it with a more egalitarian system (Fairhurst & Nembudani 2014; Ntombela 2016; Evans & Cleghorn 2017). These efforts were mainly driven by the policies emanating from the 1996 South African Constitution and its attendant Acts such as the South African Schools Act (SASA) (Department of Education [DoE]1997), the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) (DoE 1997) and the Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS) documents for various subjects (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011). However, the sustained dominance of English as the language of preference in schools, coupled with a persistent lack of support for home languages as LoLTs, highlights a disconnect between policy objectives and classroom realities. Nevertheless, there has been a growing awareness among South African learners and students that the dominance of English cannot be tolerated and should be challenged. South African university students, during the nationwide protests of 2015/2016, demonstrated their recognition of the importance of indigenous languages in their pursuit of knowledge. This prompted them to advocate for the use of indigenous languages as LoLTs in South African schools and universities (Munyaradzi & Manyike 2022).

The South African Constitution grants official status to nine indigenous languages, and learners typically enter school with varying degrees of proficiency in one or more of these languages but without prior knowledge of English or Afrikaans (DBE 2011). Despite this, the South African curriculum, CAPS, mandates that learners acquire sufficient BICS and CALP in English within three years of exposure. This proficiency is necessary for them to use English effectively in studying and achieving in other subjects across the curriculum (DBE 2011). Nonetheless, the

literature reveals that a significant number of South African learners are academically underperforming because they are taught in a LoLT that is not their L1 (Hill 2015; Manyike 2017; Sibanda 2017; Pretorius 2015; Dampier 2017). However, most existing literature on this subject primarily reflects the perspectives of teachers and language specialists regarding learners' English proficiency as the LoLT. The voices of learners are notably absent, either due to unintentional oversight or intentional neglect.

With this perspective in mind, the research aimed to explore learners' personal experiences with using and interacting in English as a LoLT. Essentially, the study sought to understand learners' perceptions of their speaking and writing proficiency skills in English, the LoLT. Data were collected from a sample of Grade 11 learners in a rural secondary school using a questionnaire (see Addendum). The goal of the study was to provide recommendations for improving language teaching and learning, particularly in the use of English as an LoLT and to enhance learners' awareness of their own abilities in the LoLT.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This single case qualitative study utilised a questionnaire approach to gather data from 30 Grade 11 SHL learners, comprising the total number of participants. Purposive sampling was used to select both the site and participants, ensuring the collection of rich and meaningful information for analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2015; Creswell 2019; Rule & John 2016).

The questionnaire was prepared and printed for participants to complete independently in the presence of the researchers (Rule & John, 2011: 66). It aimed to gather data from Grade 11 learners regarding their understanding of EFAL and to assess the development of their writing and speaking skills. Specifically, it sought to determine the extent to which learners perceived their speaking and writing skills as beneficial for knowledge acquisition and social interactions with peers and teachers.

The questionnaire was structured to first identify learners' home and second languages. It then assessed the levels of their speaking, writing and comprehension skills in English using a scale ranging from "Fair" to "Good," "Very good," and "Excellent." Additionally, it inquired about the language(s) learners used to communicate with peers, family members, friends and teachers in various settings, including in and out of class and at home.

Another objective of the questionnaire was to identify learners' preferred language as a LoLT and reasons behind their choices. The frequency of learners' English usage outside the classroom was assessed using a scale ranging from "Never" to "Seldom," "Often," and "Always." The final section of the questionnaire aimed to gather learners' opinions on the challenges they encountered while acquiring skills in spoken and written English.

Using the department's coding system for recording and reporting, a competency scale was established to gauge learners' self-assessed aptitude in English. The scale included moderate achievement (40-49%), adequate achievement (50-59%), substantial achievement (60-69%) and meritorious achievement (70-79%). Descriptors below and above these ranges were excluded to maintain precision and accuracy in assessing learners' proficiencies.

To ensure validity, the questionnaire was piloted with a class of Grade 12 learners, and minor adjustments were made for clarity before it was administered to the Grade 11 participants. Arrangements were made in advance with participants to administer the questionnaire in their class on a designated day. This facilitated data gathering as all the learners were present at school on that day, resulting in a 100% return rate of the questionnaire. The participants felt relaxed and comfortable because they were in a familiar environment. They independently provided their views and opinions, seeking further clarification only when needed.

Before commencing data collection, ethical clearance and written permissions were obtained from the University of South Africa (Certificate No. 2017/07/12/55406955/29MC), under whose auspices the study was conducted, as well as from all relevant educational authorities, parents, guardians, and the participants themselves. Participants were provided with written assurances of anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw or withhold information at their discretion.

The framework approach (Ritchie & Lewis 2003; Smith & Firth 2011) was utilised for systematic data analysis. An inductive coding system was developed from the empirical data, and categories were identified to describe emerging themes (Pope, Ziebland & Mays 2000; Ritchie & Lewis 2003; Braun & Clark 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings from the data collected from the sampled Grade 11 SHL learners. The main themes that emerged from the learners' responses to the questionnaire include: learners' English competence levels, their preferred LoLT, teachers' frequent use of languages other than English in the classroom, and challenges experienced in learning English.

Theme 1: Learners' English competence levels

Based on the department's codes for recording and reporting, 16% of the participants rated their comprehension, speaking and writing of English as moderate, 57% as adequate, 22% as substantial, and only 5% as meritorious. Moderate and adequate proficiency levels ranged between 40 and 59%, while substantial and meritorious levels ranged between 60 and 79%. This study classified learners with moderate and adequate competence levels as having satisfactory BICS, while those with substantial and meritorious levels were considered as having acceptable BICS and CALP skills. In essence, learners' responses revealed that 73% of the participants possessed only conversational competence in English, while only 27% demonstrated some ability to express academic concepts and ideas orally and in writing. Learners emphasised their use of Setswana at home and outside of class, with teachers employing both Setswana and English during English lessons and interactions outside the classroom. Additionally, learners themselves indicated rare or no use of English outside of the English class.

This finding highlights a discrepancy in the CAPS mandate, which expects learners to begin using English as the LoLT by Grade 4, assuming high proficiency in English BICS and CALP by the end of Grade 3 to facilitate reading, writing and knowledge acquisition in the first additional language (DBE 2011). Language scholars suggest that learners can attain oral and conversational skills (BICS) in a language within approximately two years if favourable conditions, such as

interaction with native speakers, are present (Cummins 1979; Khatib & Taie 2016). South African learners, however, lack the necessary English language environments, both at home and in school, to practise speaking and communicating in English (Schulze & Lemmer 2017; Manyike 2017; Manyike & Lemmer 2015).

Theme 2: Preferred LoLT

In terms of the LoLT preference, 80% of the participants preferred Setswana, while only 20% opted for English. Many learners supporting Setswana as the LoLT cited reasons such as Setswana being their HL, their better understanding of Setswana compared to English, and the perceived simplicity and ease of Setswana over English. Below are a few representative quotations of learners' opinions. One such opinion expressed was:

> *"I like Setswana because it will be easy for me to understand some things that I struggle with in English."*

Another noted:

> *"Because Setswana is easy and understandable and it is the language I understand better."*

The same view was expressed thus:

> *"I think I will understand Setswana better because it is my home language."*

Another participant wrote:

> *"Setswana is much easier and I understand it very well, more than other languages. In fact, I am excellent in it."*

Conversely, learners who favoured English also argued that it was simple and easy to learn, they had a better understanding of English compared to other languages, they were proficient in English and wanted to improve their comprehension of the subject. Additionally, they emphasised that English was a widespread, universal language spoken and utilised worldwide, and that it served as the medium of instruction in higher education. One learner declared:

> *"I prefer English because I understand better when I am taught in it."*

Another noted:

> *"I want to learn more English words and improve my understanding and be excellent in English."*

Another observed:

> *"English is the only international language, so it will be easy for everyone to understand."*

The same sentiment was echoed by another learner thus:

> *"English is understood by all races all over the world so it is easy to communicate with other people."*

Another wrote:

> *"I prefer English because in the universities and at interviews they use only English."*

This finding holds significant implications for language policy implementation within the South African education system. Historically, from the late nineteenth century to the latter parts of the twentieth century, South Africa's education system was characterised by language policies that aimed to oppress black people and hinder the development of indigenous languages (Sibanda 2019; Heleta 2016; Webb, Lafon & Pare 2018). During the apartheid era, indigenous languages were never promoted as potential mediums of instruction but were instead utilised only in the initial years of schooling to facilitate a smooth transition to the English and Afrikaans mediums (Nyika 2019). This pattern has persisted, with English continuing to be promoted, and its hegemony becoming more entrenched (Sadat & Kuwornu 2017; Mbembe 2016; Ramoupi 2017). The learners who prefer English as the LoLT echo the same reasons advanced by the adult world to maintain the dominance of English in education.

Theme 3: Teachers' frequent use of languages other than English in the classroom

Learners indicated that their English teachers used Setswana, English and occasionally other indigenous languages in class. They acknowledged that, outside the classroom and at home, they exclusively spoke Setswana with friends and family. Additionally, all participants mentioned that their teachers primarily spoke Setswana to them outside the English classroom. Furthermore, learners unanimously stated that they rarely or never spoke English outside the EFAL classroom.

South Africa is inherently a multilingual society, with most learners entering school already proficient in one or more languages (Van Wyk 2017; DBE 2011). The CAPS document (DBE 2011) promotes an additive approach to bilingual or multilingual language education, endorsing code mixing and code switching. Therefore, the LoLT should adapt to embrace translanguaging and code switching in the classroom. South African classrooms comprise learners from diverse language backgrounds, often proficient in two or more indigenous languages. Hence, learners and teachers must decide which languages spoken in the classroom should take precedence in learning and teaching. Research has shown that learners encounter difficulties expressing themselves in English for a variety of reasons (Makoe & McKinney 2018; Hill 2015; Molapo & Pillay 2017). Consequently, teachers sometimes resort to using the HL to translate English texts to aid learners' comprehension (Van Wyk 2017). However, teachers must ensure that their translations are understood by all learners, including those who do not speak or understand the translated language. This practice has led to confusion and failure as learners write all examinations set in English.

Theme 4: Challenges experienced in learning English

This theme elicited numerous views from the learners, resulting in the emergence of four sub-themes from the data gathered. These were: learners' lack of confidence, teachers' reactions towards learners' language learning efforts, poor pronunciation skills, and poor spelling skills.

- ***Learners' lack of confidence***

The study revealed that learners struggled with confidence when speaking English. Nearly all the learners expressed feeling intimidated when speaking English in front of their peers, as they often faced ridicule when making mistakes. Below are a few quotations representing their views. One learner wrote:

> *"I have a problem speaking in class because some learners will laugh at me. I know that I am not perfect in English."*

Another learner put it thus:

> *"When I speak English, I am scared that my classmates will laugh at me and make me the joke of the day whenever they see me."*

Another learner noted:

> *"When I practice speaking English, some learners laugh at me and that makes me want to give up."*

This was echoed by another student who wrote:

> *"Speaking English is a huge problem for me because I am afraid other learners will laugh at me."*

One other learner indicated:

> *"When it comes to speaking or presenting in class, I lose self-confidence and become shy to stand in front of my class mates and present a speech."*

Another learner described their experience thus:

> *"When I speak English sometimes I am stammering, I don't speak it fluently."*

Finally, another added:

> *"The challenge that I have with speaking the LoLT is when we do presentations, I become scared to speak because the other learners will laugh at me then I become scared when facing them."*

Learners' lack of self-confidence resulted in their reluctance to participate in class presentations and discussions. They were also unwilling to speak English elsewhere due to the fear of making mistakes. To them, speaking English was not an opportunity to practise, but rather a chance for their peers to notice their errors and use these against them. This highlights the absence of safe classroom environments where learners understand that making mistakes is a natural part of the language learning process and is therefore acceptable. Creating safe language environments where learners refrain from criticising and laughing at their classmates' errors is crucial for fostering their responsiveness to language learning (Manyike & Mukhari 2017).

- ***Teachers' reactions to learners' language learning efforts***

The learners also disclosed that some of their English teachers' reactions to their learning efforts were discouraging and demotivating. They observed that these attitudes from their teachers did not inspire them to want to speak English or seek help from the teachers. One learner wrote:

> *"Also some teachers laugh at us when we don't speak English correctly. That is the problem I have of speaking or writing English."*

Another leaner revealed:

> *"Some teachers don't really explain everything to us; they insult us instead of teaching us so that we can understand because we are not the same. They have to understand that they have to be patient with us."*

Yet another learner observed:

> *"When we make mistakes in our writing like some spealings, the teacher comes to class and makes fun of us."*

This was echoed by another learner who wrote:

> *"In writing some spellings will be wrong then the teacher comes to class and makes fun of you."*

Another learner alluded to being afraid of reproach.

> *"Sometimes I do not know the meaning of words but I am afraid to ask the teacher for help because he will shout at me and mock me."*

This aspect of learners' submissions implicates their teachers in the struggle to acquire English proficiency skills. Similar to the learners, teachers contribute to discouraging their learners from making efforts to learn English due to their reactions to learners' mistakes and challenges. One tenet of constructivism emphasises the support and motivation provided by more knowledgeable peers and teachers to learners to help mediate and encourage their efforts (Vygotsky 1978). However, this study found that both peers and teachers failed to provide this assistance and support.

- ***Poor pronunciation skills***

Another sub-theme identified was learners' poor pronunciation skills. Learners expressed frustration with their difficulties in pronouncing English words and how this challenge impacted their speaking, reading and writing skills. One learner wrote:

> *"The challenge I have when I have to speak English is that I can't pronounce some words clearly. I can't speak English in front of everyone because I know that I am not perfect in English."*

This was corroborated by another learner who noted:

> *"Sometimes when we have to present I feel like I am going to pronounce a word wrong and the other learners will laugh at me and I am scared when facing them."*

Another learner stated:

> *"In speaking the challenge is the pronousation of words. I can't talk fluently because I do not pronounce words good."*

In this finding, the Grade 11 SHL learners admitted to experiencing significant difficulties with sound and word recognition, which directly affected their pronunciation and subsequently impacted their spelling and writing proficiency skills. Despite having at least 10 years of exposure to EFAL, the learners acknowledged that they were not proficient in the LoLT as expected. This situation is not unique to South Africa; similar studies in Pakistan have also revealed that after 10 years of schooling, learners' English oral proficiency skills remained inadequate, primarily due to insufficient vocabulary, poor listening skills, dominant L1, and lack of opportunities to practise English both in school and at home (Bilal, Abdur, Rashid, Adnan & Abbas 2016).

- *Poor spelling skills*

Almost all the learners expressed concern over their inability to spell words correctly in the LoLT. This concern was evident in their responses on the questionnaire. Many learners misspelt the word "*spelling*" as *"speal," "spealing," or "speling,"* indicating difficulties with spelling accuracy. Additionally, there were spelling mistakes observed in other words as well. One learner wrote:

> *"My writing skill is very bad because I don't know how to speal words correctly."*

Another noted:

> *"When I am writing English the problem is the speling of words. That gives me a lot of challenges."*

One other expressed the same predicament thus:

> *"I sometimes write wrong spellings for English words."*

Another learner stated:

> *"With writing I forget the spealing and that is where I lose marks."*

The CAPS document for EFAL (DBE 2011) emphasises the importance of spelling as a fundamental language proficiency skill. It posits that once learners acquire phonics in their L1, they should be able to apply this knowledge to spelling in English without the need to learn additional sound-spelling relationships (DBE 2011). Cummins' threshold and interdependence hypotheses suggests that learners who are proficient in both L1 and L2 can benefit from cognitive and academic processes associated with bilingualism through inter-language transfer (Ardasheva, Tretter and Kinny 2016). Learners with strong phonological and orthographic skills in their L1 can

transfer these skills to learning their L2, thereby enhancing their spelling abilities in the L2 (Jansen et al. 2016; Russak & Kahn-Horwitz 2015). However, there exists a significant disparity between spelling and pronunciation in standard British English, where there is no direct correspondence between letters and sounds (Ngula 2017; Al-Badawi 2016). English orthography is characterised by a complex syllable structure, particularly affecting vowel pronunciation, which makes spelling skills in English a lifelong learning process (Russak & Khan-Horwitz 2015).

DISCUSSION

The CAPS EFAL document advocates Cummins' (1979, 1984, 2000) BICS and CALP processes in learners' language acquisition skills, stressing the importance of focusing on developing learners' ability to understand and speak the language in the early years of schooling (DBE 2011). The CAPS also promises robust support for learners using English as an EFAL and a LoLT, aiming for proficiency by the end of Grade 9, enabling them to apply English effectively and confidently for learning purposes. However, it acknowledges that many learners still struggle to communicate well in their Additional Language, even in Grades 10 and 11 (DBE 2011). This study confirms that the majority of the Grade 11 SHL learners have not yet acquired the necessary CALP skills required to effectively engage with the school curriculum.

Learners' responses revealed a lack opportunities to practise speaking English both in school and at home. They noted that their teachers sometimes resorted to using the learners' L1 in class, and primarily used the L1 outside class when communicating with them. It appears that teachers occasionally had no choice but to switch to the learners' L1 to ensure comprehension of content. The use of the L1 as a learning resource is supported in bilingual environments as it enhances learners' understanding and also affirms their cultural identities. However, it becomes problematic when teachers overly rely on the L1, especially if they themselves are not proficient in the LoLT (Manyike 2017). Furthermore, research indicates that exposure is crucial to language learning, and the fact that most South African learners are introduced to English for the first time in school, without sufficient exposure to L1 speakers of English, makes it more challenging for them to learn the language effectively (Manyike & Lemmer 2015; Manyike 2017; Lemmer & Schultze 2017).

Learners assessed themselves as having a fair to good understanding of English but confirmed that they lacked self-confidence when it came to speaking and writing English. This lack of self-confidence stemmed from their fear of making mistakes in English, viewing speaking English not simply as an opportunity to improve their skills, but as a chance for other learners to ridicule and make fun of them. It is evident that teachers are failing in their roles as more knowledgeable adults to guide, encourage and assist learners in progressing along their zones of proximal development. Teachers are failing to create conducive language environments where learners feel safe to make mistakes (Manyike & Mukhari 2017). The situation is further aggravated by the teachers' attitudes towards their learners' language acquisition efforts. Learners have indicated that their teachers are not only impatient with them when they make mistakes but also join other learners in making fun of their errors. It is clear that some EFAL teachers lack understanding of the language development process, which recognises that making mistakes is a natural part of language learning. These teachers have failed to create safe classroom environments where learners understand that mistakes are expected and are part of the language learning process. Other learners, and especially teachers themselves, should refrain from criticising or laughing at learners' errors. Instead, they need to understand that as teachers, they should prioritise understanding over accuracy, and accuracy will

develop over time. When teachers over-correct and belittle learners for making mistakes, learners become reluctant to speak the language.

The learners indicated that they had difficulties with pronunciation, which interfered with their self-confidence to communicate in English. This also affected their spelling and writing proficiency skills. The CAPS documents suggests that once learners acquire the phonics of their L1 they would not need to learn any sound-spelling relationships in English but just simply apply the L1 knowledge to the L2 situation (DBE 2011). However, in English orthography and pronunciation, there exists a gap between pronunciation and spelling, where there is no direct correspondence between letters and sounds. Additionally, the indigenous languages of South Africa, which are the primary L1 for many leaners, differ significantly and linguistically from English. The complexity and depth of English orthography make acquiring proficient skills in pronunciation, spelling and writing a lifelong process. Thus, the blanket application of phonics based on the CAPS assumption is not only undesirable but also fundamentally flawed (Dampier 2017; Russak& Khan-Horwitz 2015).

Finally, learners expressed their preferences for the LoLT, with the majority opting for their L1 as the LoLT. Literature consistently shows that South African learners underperform academically, mainly because they are taught in a language that is not their L1 (Pretorius 2015; Dampier 2017). According to CAPS, however, South African learners use their HL to learn only in the first three years of schooling (DBE 2011). Despite usually having no knowledge of English upon entering school, they are expected to start acquiring English BICS from Grade 1 and then use it as the LoLT from Grade 4. This implies that learners must have reached a high level of competence in English by the end of Grade 3 (DBE 2011). This is in line with research suggesting that BICS can be attained within two years of immersion in the target language (Cummins 1976; 1979; Gu 2015). However, this two-year period was based on the premise that learners were fully immersed in the target language, which cannot be said of the participants in this study (Van Wyk 2017). One could argue that the standards set by the curriculum are therefore unrealistic. The learners admitted to facing serious challenges in their pronunciation, spelling and writing skills, indicating that they are still struggling with their BICS and CALP proficiencies. This suggests that English is not as easy and simple as some of them claimed. Those advocating for English as the LOLT cited its global appeal and its use in tertiary institutions as guiding principles. However, the majority of learners are still striving to attain BICS and CALP skills, as 80% of them assessed their own understanding, speaking and writing of English as moderate according to the competence scale adopted by this study to reflect the department's codes of recording and reporting.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of Grade 11 SHL learners regarding their comprehension, speaking and writing competencies in English, as well as their opinions on using English as their LoLT. This inquiry is crucial for language teaching and learning because English significantly impacts learners who study it as an L2 while simultaneously using it to acquire knowledge in other subject areas. Existing literature highlights significant challenges faced by South African learners in acquiring English proficiency. Firstly, many encounter English for the first time upon entering formal schooling. Secondly, both school and home environments often lack sufficient exposure to English. Additionally, the complex orthography and grammatical structures of English contrast with the more uniform and predictable orthography of the indigenous

languages, making it difficult for leaners to transfer skills from their L1 to the L2, leading to uncertainty and lack of confidence. These factors, among others, contribute to poor academic performance. Despite these challenges, CAPS expects learners to start using English as the LoLT from Grade 4, disregarding the unique language positions of learners, which do not support rapid acquisition of speaking, reading and writing proficiencies in English.

This study, based on the perspectives of learners themselves, highlighted that their lack of competence in English was influenced by additional factors accompanying these general challenges. Recommendations include the simultaneous use of both L1 and L2 as languages of learning and teaching up to the higher grades of school; teacher training programmes that assist teachers to establish conducive classroom environments that encourage English learning and prevent learners from feeling demotivated. Teachers should also be trained to exhibit patience with learners, focusing on meaning before linguistic forms. Moreover, future research should examine teachers' familiarity with language learning processes and how to utilise those skills to create constructive learning environments for optimal language learning acquisition benefits.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Joseph Azagsiba was a senior lecturer in the Department of Language Education, Arts and Culture at the University of South Africa. He holds a PhD in Education from the University of South Africa. His areas of expertise and interest are in second language education, bilingual education and mother tongue education. E-mail: jaakibase@yahoo.com

Tintswalo Vivian Manyike is an English second language Professor and a Chair of the Department of Language Education, Arts and Culture in the School of Teacher Education at the University of South Africa. She holds a DEd in Language Education from the University of South Africa. Her areas of expertise include bilingual/Multicultural education and language policy in education. E-mail: Manyitv@unisa.ac.za

ADDENDUM

LEARNERS' QUESTIONNAIRE   **LEARNER'S CODE:** ☐

Please read all the questions and answer them honestly.

1. What language do you speak at home?

   _____

2. What is the language used to teach you in class (LOLT)?

   _____

3. How would you rate your understanding when you are being taught in the LOLT?

Fair	1	Good	2	Very good	3	Excellent	4

4. How would you rate your speaking skills in the language used to teach you (LOLT)?

Fair	1	Good	2	Very good	3	Excellent	4

5. How would you rate your writing skills in the language used to teach you (LOLT)?

Fair	1	Good	2	Very good	3	Excellent	4

6. If you had a choice what language would, you prefer to be taught in.

   _____

7. Why would you prefer that language?

   _____

8. What language do you speak with other learners outside class in school?

   _____

9. What language do you speak with your family, friends and other learners at home?

   _____

10. What language do your teachers speak with you in class?

    _____

11. What language do your teachers speak with you outside class?

    _____

12. How frequently do you speak English outside the English lesson periods?

Never	1	Seldom	2	Often	3	Always	4

13. Briefly state any challenges/problems that you have with speaking and/or writing the LOLT.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____