

**JO BADENHORST**  
Central University of Technology, South Africa

## **A SOUTH AFRICAN DILEMMA: THE POOR ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF GRADE 4 LEARNERS IN TOWNSHIP AND RURAL SCHOOLS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING**

### **Abstract:**

In South Africa the majority of schools opt for English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), despite the fact that English is not the mother-tongue of most of the learners. This is particularly the case in respect of learners in township and rural schools. Quite a number of studies report on the dismal performance of South African learners in both national and international assessments. These studies report, in essence, that South Africa performs considerably below par in literacy. The fact that even schools in many under-resourced countries performed better than in South Africa underscores the gravity of the situation.

In line with the EFAL (English as First Additional Language) Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement the majority of learners in South Africa start using an additional language, which is often English, as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in Grade 4. From Grade 1 to Grade 9 every effort is being made to assist the learners to improve their skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing, and particular emphasis is placed on using the FAL for the purpose of thinking and reasoning. The intention is to enable the learners to develop their cognitive academic skills. By the time the learners enter the Senior Phase (Grades 7- 9), they should be reasonably proficient in their FAL in terms of both interpersonal and cognitive academic skills. However, the reality is that many learners in South Africa still cannot communicate well at this stage.

This study was framed within the pragmatist paradigmatic worldview, where I took a problem-centered, pluralistic and real-world practice-oriented stance towards the topic. Accordingly, a mixed-methods approach was followed, employing a triangular/convergent design. The aim was to determine the English language proficiency of selected Grade 4 township and rural learners with English as the LoLT in the Lejweleputswa District. The study furthermore explored the teachers' views on different aspects related to the teaching of EFAL in the intermediate phase.

Data were collected by means of three data-collection instruments, namely a rudimentary standardised benchmarking test for Grade 4 EFAL learners, a focus group interview with selected teachers and a closed-ended questionnaire, which was distributed among selected Grade 4 teachers of the eight participating schools. The questions were formulated based on the four language skills as outlined in the English First Additional Language Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (2011), namely Listening and Speaking, Reading and Viewing, Writing and Presenting, and Language Structures and Conventions.

The performance of the participant learners was alarmingly poor, with an average pass-rate of 37%. Language Structures and Conventions rendered the lowest pass-rate (21%). It further emerged that 41% of the participant teachers were not suitably qualified to teach English as either a Home Language or a First Additional Language; however, 48.5% were quite experienced teachers. It emerged that the higher the qualifications and the more EFAL teaching experience the

participants had, the higher their commitment to and compliance with the EFAL CAPS.

Informed by these research findings a number of recommendations are made for consideration by the Department of Basic Education, the SMTs and the EFAL teachers. It is hoped that the findings of the study would sensitise the education authorities and other stakeholders to the magnitude of the English language teachers' task to ensure that learners are offered the best possible means to realise their future academic goals.

**Keywords:**

- Basic Interpersonal Language Skills (BICS), Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP); English First Additional Language (EFAL), English language proficiency, rural primary schools, township primary schools.

**JEL Classification:** I29