

# The Development of Strategies to Teach Listening and Speaking Skills to English Second Language (ESL) Learners in African Society: Insight from the Pinetown District, KwaZulu Natal

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**Abstract:** Listening and speaking proficiently in English Second Language teaching is a perennial problem in South Africa. While scholars in the domain of ESL acknowledge that there is a severe challenge with teaching listening and speaking skills, there is a shortage of literature in this sphere. Although English is not the home language for most Black learners in South Africa, they are compelled to use English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). This serves as a hindrance in developing learner's proficiency in listening and speaking, which is further exacerbated by poor ESL teaching performed by teachers whose own ESL proficiency is limited. This paper seeks to explore the strategies used by teachers to teach listening and speaking skills to ESL Grade eleven learners' in selected township schools in the Pinetown District, KwaZulu Natal. Township, in South Africa, refers to racially segregated and often underdeveloped urban areas created for people of color during the apartheid regime. Data was generated using individual semi-structured interviews with eight participating teachers and observation of classroom lessons and document analysis. A significant finding revealed that the claims made by the ESL teachers about their pedagogical practices tallied with the requirements of the Continuous Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and their lesson plans but contradicted the ESL teachers' actual practice in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Township, strategies, ESL teachers.

## INTRODUCTION

According to a comparative study of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (2014: 47- 48):

Both the NCS and the CAPS assume that the teachers are highly proficient in English and can teach English skills to develop mother-tongue proficiency in English. The curricula further consider that teachers are experienced, capable, and creative to the extent that they can choose and incorporate texts from a wide range of subject fields. And can discuss the social and political issues referenced in those texts, identify the language issues, and convey that knowledge to the students.

However, Mkhize and Balfour (2017:17) decry the fact that in South Africa, there is no support for access to English.

Mkhize and Balfour (2017:10) further note that:

Most South African schools choose English as a medium of instruction, but most teachers using the language are

additional language speakers of English. The vast majority of children using the language are also second-language speakers of English. From whom are these children learning English? Mostly from teachers who do not understand the language.

Speaking about the issue of teacher ESL competency or lack thereof, Bertram, Appleton, Muthukrishna, and Wedekind (2006), in a study on teachers' ability to read English, discovered that many teachers in a postgraduate program at the University of KwaZulu-Natal had problems with reading to learn. Furthermore, in a separate study, teachers who used ESL as a medium of instruction lacked knowledge and skills to teach the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Uys, Van der Walt, van der Berg & Botha (2007). These teachers also ignored the importance of methodological skills.

In a significant distance education university in South Africa, most enrolled students showed that they were not competent to teach their ESL learners adequately. Their limited proficiency in English resulted in the transfer of their poor language skills to their ESL learners. This further affected their learners' understanding and usage of English (Nel & Swanepoel, 2010).

Marinova – Todd, Mayo and Lecumberri (2003) postulates that the best outcomes in L2 are achieved

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when there is good availability and access to L2 input and instruction. This assertion brings the teacher and their role in the English language classroom to the fore. Marinova-Todd *et al.* (2003:70) conclude that "appropriate circumstances and quality instruction lead to native-like competence in L2 in younger and older learners".

Researchers and the public have a common perception that ESL teachers in South African schools are not competent enough in teaching English (Lattor, 1998; Nel and Muller, 2010). This is important to note as it highlights that inadequately trained ESL teachers and the severe implications recreate similar teachers who tend to teach pupils the same way they were taught. Thus, poor pedagogic practices are perpetuated in a vicious cycle.

There are still arguments that some teachers cannot design classroom activities to facilitate the acquisition and confidence of speaking English as a Second Language amongst learners in township schools (Khamkhien, 2010). Research has shown that some teachers have difficulties selecting materials that match the learners' speaking ability and content of the language. Their practices are entrenched in dry teaching styles that focus on grammar details, also known as grammar-translation. The emphasis is put on grammatical competence, patterns of drills, and rote memorization of isolated meaningless sentence construction (Khamkhien, 2010). It is undeniable that learners must be conscious of grammatical features. However, there should be a platform for learners to associate those features to their functional stage in producing their spoken language (Khamkhien 2010).

English proficiency in South Africa is quite vast, and it extends beyond the English language classroom. Indeed, what constitutes 'knowledge of English' (Gough, 1996: 53). The differences in proficiency among Blacks generally "range from completely fluent speakers and writers for whom English has become a 'second first language' (de Klerk, 1996) to those who are very low on the learner continuum, with almost no English at all" (de Klerk & Gough, 2002: 358). In Second Language learning, it has been observed countless times that some learners progress rapidly through the initial stages of learning a new language in the same classroom setting. In contrast, others struggle along, making plodding progress.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This case study involved eight teachers from two township high schools – four teachers from each

school. All the eight teachers were university graduates with various qualifications in English as a Second Language. There were 7 female teachers and 1 male teacher. All the eight teachers, who were IsiZulu home language speakers, spoke English proficiently and had different levels of experience in ESL teaching. The number of years of experience ranged from four to seventeen. Two teachers had taught ESL for only four years, three had an experience of 10, 11, and 12 years respectively, and the remaining three had taught ESL for 15 and 17 years, respectively. This study used the qualitative data generation method through semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis. The teachers' ages ranged from 27-51. The study also used document analysis as a means of validating data generated by the interviews with teachers.

### Teachers' Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were in-depth to elicit authenticity (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). For the respondents to "answer the same questions thus increasing comparability of responses and to ensure that data are complete for each interviewee on the topics addressed in the interview" (Cohen *et al.*, 2007:353), used standardized open-ended questions. The purpose of the interviews was to get in-depth knowledge, understanding, and experience about the teaching of ESL learners in the township context. The semi-structured interviews allowed the teacher participants to introspect from a professional perspective to questioning and ratifying their personal beliefs, philosophical underpinnings, and understanding of their professional practice as ESL teachers.

The teachers were met individually. This allowed participants to construct and express their realities without preconceptions being imposed on them by other colleagues. While the interviews were conducted pre-planned and followed a set of questions, there was flexibility and freedom for the researchers to choose follow-up questions (Patton 1987; Cohen & Manion, 2000).

All the ESL teachers interviewed had much to say about their experiences of teaching ESL. The researchers allowed them the opportunity to share "their frustrations with the system," as they put it. As a result, each interview lasted for about an hour. Teachers were either giving answers to the open-ended questions or simply making policy-related suggestions regarding what they thought should be

done for ESL learners to achieve speaking proficiency with ease.

The researchers used the approach advocated by Lacey and Luff (2009), in which, after transcription, organized the data into easily retrievable sections. The researchers gave each interview a number and broke the field notes into sections identifiable by date. The coded data were then provisionally categorized around a particular emergent concept or theme. To analyze the data, the researchers read the transcripts continually to identify the main themes further clustered into categories. The re-coding process was iterative, and it finally led to better-defined classes that resulted in well-defined themes.

As a result of coding patterns, the researchers were able to identify areas of commonality in the data, such as similarities, differences, consistencies, and sequences. The iterative nature of the data analysis process made it easy for the researchers to develop new categories where there were new units of meaning that would not fit an already existing provisional type.

### **Results of Semi-Structured Interviews**

The significance and implications of the mutual dependence between listening and speaking cannot be over-emphasized. The current curriculum document refers to these two skills as co-dependent. Their importance is evident, like some of the responses that the teacher participants in this study gave. Thus, this discussion focuses on the various approaches used by the teachers in this study to teach listening and speaking to Grade 11 ESL learners in a township context.

Initially, some teachers reported that their teaching strategies were moving from the simple to the complex, known to the unknown when teaching. They said using this principle was even more appropriate for the township context, where learners were sometimes found to be functioning at a level far below their current grade in terms of knowledge and skills. Teachers then reported that they usually allow learners to work independently in groups after introducing explanations and demonstrations whenever necessary. They said it was important that learners are adequately prepared before anything is asked of them to fully understand both the instruction and what it requires of them. For example, teachers said it is essential to demonstrate to learners the various roles that a panel discussion requires. Some teachers warned that group work

becomes disruptive when learners are not sure what to do. Teachers said that after groups have worked on a particular given topic, they are given room to express themselves as they make presentations based on their case.

Some teachers raised an essential principle of integration as advocated in the curriculum as the basis for most of their teaching. They said that learners have to listen to instructions such as how to do a panel discussion, and then they have to work in groups sharing ideas as they prepare for their presentations which they will do orally. The preparation stage compels the learners to argue and share ideas while each role player writes down their lines. Teachers explained that by the time a presentation is done, all the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) had been judiciously utilized by each learner involved in the presentation. They further argued that presentations, by their very nature, engender much listening and speaking as learners challenge one another for more clarity on specific issues.

Some teachers said that they have realized that learners become even more active in class if the teacher compliments and encourages them. They also noted that giving feedback was always necessary to know what was wrong and what was right. The general response from teachers was that they try to follow the curriculum in everything they do. However, some teachers admitted that sometimes they do respond to the needs of the learners and go beyond the curriculum to help learners grasp a particular aspect of the curriculum. To further clarify their strategy of going beyond the curriculum, they gave an example about the use of IsiZulu during teaching and learning. They said that code-switching was not allowed in their classes irrespective of the prevailing situation. They admitted that there are, of course, situations where a learner knows the right answer but lacks the necessary linguistic ability to express it. In such cases, they advised the struggling learner to solicit assistance from other learners next to them to present the answer in English.

Some teachers said they encourage their learners to write, not necessarily what is prescribed in the syllabus, to identify talent. They noted that some learners enjoy this strategy as it exposes more of their abilities than just writing. Learners get an opportunity to speak about what they are writing before they even present what they have written about. Teachers said

that such presentations are done informally. They revealed that everyone, including the shy learners, gets involved when the discussions are informal. Teachers said that such platforms afford them opportunities to entice nervous learners into saying something without the fear of being judged. They agreed that getting learners involved in such discussions is more accessible than during a formal teaching and learning session. Teachers said that learners become visibly happy after contributing to the ongoing informal debate, which keeps them motivated for days. One other strategy that teachers said they were using was making learners give presentations at the assembly. It also encourages the other learners so that they would also want to do the same thing. The teachers said that it provides learners courage to speak like that girl or that boy from that class.

Teachers also mentioned peer teaching as helpful teaching and learning strategy. They said learners sometimes find it challenging to understand their teachers or to ask them questions. However, learners become more active and involved in the lesson if one of them, usually one of the more capable learners, tutors them. Some teachers said they use tutors to pair them up with the struggling learners to help them with homework and other aspects of their learning. In this case, both the tutor and the tutored are made aware that the teacher has to work together. The tutor becomes accountable to a point in terms of the performance of the tutored learner. Teachers said that this strategy has proven to be very useful and rewarding instead of having all the learners relying only on their teacher whose time is limited.

There are many strategies of teaching listening and speaking discussed in this section of the study. Various teachers hold different beliefs about the teaching and learning of ESL in township schools. These beliefs are influenced by their knowledge and understanding of the ESL teaching and learning experience.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

Teachers said that after groups have worked on a particular given topic, they have to express themselves through speaking and listening as they make presentations based on their topics:

*"...Ehm...after doing group work...the classroom also has to listen...after they listen, all of them do understand the topic*

*then I give them a chance to express themselves based on the topic..."* (Teacher 5)

*"I first introduce what a panel discussion is, and make them aware that in a panel discussion for it to be effective...people must listen... or to have ordered, there must be a chairperson...I make them work in groups." (Teacher 7)*

*"I show them what they are supposed to do so that when they have their group practice, they know what to discuss and do." (Teacher 3)*

*"I give them the topic and then.... they start talking about that particular topic...sometimes they can be in pairs or groups.....that way when you get them doing it in a group it's like ....they are interacting with other learners..." (Teacher 4)*

*"The other thing... we also get them doing presentations here at the assembly...it also motivates the others that they would also want to do the same thing. It gives them courage that they can also speak like so and so..." (Teacher 3)*

Second language as a concept advocates listening as one of the most crucial skills that a learner needs if proficiency is achieved (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). Because language-teaching approaches are based on a particular theoretical interpretation of what language is and how it can be learned, it becomes essential to consider the conception through which language is perceived as being taught. For example, suppose the teacher's concept of language is that of a code. In that case, language learning will be limited and involve only the learning of vocabulary and the rules for constructing sentences (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). This narrow approach fails to expose Second Language learners to language as a communicative reality but as an intellectual exercise. However, if the teacher's conception of language is that of social practice, meaning-making, and interpretation, the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary becomes inadequate for the learners (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). According to this conception, learners need to be able to communicate with others and to engage with the communication of others. That, among other things,

requires learners to be able to listen with understanding. Halliday (1993) refers to a similar phenomenon as, 'language as means of access' to particular domains or spheres of social action.

Some teachers raised an essential principle of integration as advocated in the curriculum as the basis for most of their teaching. The presentation preparation stage compels the learners to argue and share ideas while each role player writes down their lines. Teachers explained that by the time a presentation is done, all the four language skills had been judiciously utilized by each learner involved in the presentation:

*"Another thing is that they also need to read beyond their prescribed work...so, to control that, they need to tell us a story on the book they have read, they need to do a book review, or they also need to do a film review. This is also part of listening and reading skills, and then when they review, they activate the writing skills. So, the four of them, you cannot separate them, and the grammar is also checked up, in the sense that when they edit, they are checking the punctuation, they are checking the spelling, they are checking sentence construction, they are checking everything." (Teacher 3)*

*"I'd tell them a story...leave it halfway...unfinished....and they need to finish the story in writing...to write the ending of this story. Then they need to give feedback...like read out what their ending was....and then we would ask questions, and they would respond...we then discuss...so that's how I connect listening, speaking, writing, and reading." (Teacher 4)*

*"...Because language is not only focused on speaking, it's also focused on reading and writing...Ehm...in some cases, you find that learners fail because they did not read the instructions carefully." (Teacher 3)*

ESL teachers need to note that integrating the four skills is the solution for creating an authentic classroom situation to teach English in a manner as close to a real communicative situation as possible. According to Su (2007), listening, speaking, reading, and writing should

be treated as integrated, interdependent, and inseparable elements of language during the language learning process. When learners are made to work in groups to problem-solve, all the skills are activated, and each group member is exposed to different styles of expression, verbal or written. The integration of language skills as an approach to teaching ESL is accordant with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that language learning is, primarily, socio-culturally constructed in the learner's community (Liu, 2011: 81). This means that a learner is exposed to various skills almost simultaneously as they interact with members of the community.

Some teachers have realized that learners become even more active and motivated if they compliment and encourage them. They also noted that giving feedback was always necessary so that learners will know what was wrong and what was right:

*"...After that, I believe that it's essential again to praise the learners...to give feedback to the learners as a teacher so that they know what was wrong and what was correct." (Teacher 7)*

*"We also make certificates for that....to motivate them." (Teacher 8)*

*"...and then once they say something like that you know they feel happy about that they have said something...so it's a way of encouraging them and getting everybody involved." (Teacher 5)*

According to Vygotsky (1978), mediation is about adults or more mature adults through an activity using semiotic tools to regulate those less knowledgeable. Thus, when teachers give feedback to their ESL learners, they are involved in the act of regulation. In the process of being regulated, those who know better than those who know less learn to self-regulate, which is the ultimate goal for a language learner. ESL teachers also spoke highly of the value of informal discussions in the ESL class. They said that everyone, including the shy learners, gets involved when the conversations are informal. Teachers said that such platforms afford them with the opportunity to entice the nervous learners into saying something without the fear of being judged:

*"Although some will be shy, then they get to be saying something in the informal discussion or talk shows." (Teacher 3)*

*"When it's informal...everybody is involved...and then during the discussion....I as the teacher have to be checking who is not participating ....who is not saying anything....that's when I also motivate them ...to get involved in the discussion."* (Teacher 6)

The same approach should be adopted in teaching English as a Second Language if learners are introduced to the practical use of the language. The conception of language as social practice views language as something that people use to establish and maintain social and interpersonal relationships even within informal settings. Thus, Scarino and Liddicot (2009) warn that the teacher's understanding of language engenders what is learned in the language classroom. The teacher in the language classroom is also responsible for mediation and regulation during the other-regulation stage until the learner can self-regulate.

The use of the sociocultural theory as a lens through which the study was conducted and the data analyzed brought several discrepancies between the teachers' understanding of their classroom practice. Their ESL learners' expectations of the ESL teaching and learning experience, and the actual reality within the ESL classroom as experienced by both the teachers and the learners respectively. It would seem that the township ESL teachers' strategies of teaching the listening and speaking skills are both inadequate and limited given the stark incongruences that were exposed between the claims they made during the interviews, their lesson plans, and their actual teaching.

## **FINDINGS OF CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS**

This study used a semi-structured observation schedule. It is through observation that some of the claims that participants may have made are corroborated or rejected. The link between observation and other research tools remains crucial, as it is through the former that the precision of the research results is enhanced. The problem of depending on respondents is thus reduced. According to Simpson and Tuson (2003), observation transcends mere looking. It looks systematic and structured as the observer notes people, events, behaviors, settings, artifacts, routines, etc. It is a distinctive technique that offers the observer the opportunity of gathering 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations. Furthermore, Robson (2002: 310) defends the use of

this technique and emphasizes that "What people do may differ from what they say they do." Observational data enables the researcher to enter and understand the situation that is being described.

In carrying out the observation in this study, each of the eight Grade eleven classes was observed four times over two school terms. The researchers tried to behave in the same manner in all the eight classes followed. To eliminate issues of power relations in the ESL classroom, the researchers were participant observers since the researchers' aim was not to judge the teaching approaches but to share experience and knowledge about the phenomenon, as the researchers were also ESL specialists.

Much as used an observation schedule, the researchers did not allow it to confine their observation to a point where other vital aspects of what was developing during the lessons would be overlooked. Each study observed covered a different part of the English language curriculum. All the practical classes were tape-recorded, and field notes were also taken during the observation to illuminate further the issues that were initially part of the schedule.

Overall, the observations established incongruences between what the teachers had claimed in the interviews, their classroom practice, their lesson plans, and the CAPS requirements. It would seem there is a need for ESL teachers to remember that listening and speaking are generally integrated with real life (Byrne, 1991).

## **Document Analysis**

A document analysis was performed for the researchers to have a broad sense of the teachers' ESL pedagogical practice and the learners' English language proficiency level. Learners' writing-task exercise books, their portfolios, and their teachers' planning files were analyzed. The learners' written work was analyzed against their teachers' daily lesson plans, which were studied against the Grade 11 English First Additional Language FET curriculum document (CAPS). Some form of cross-validation was made between the learners' workbooks and what the teachers claimed they were doing in class, what observed them be doing, and what the CAPS suggested should be done.

The teachers' planning files and other planning material were analyzed in terms of their relevance and

matching to what the teachers had claimed they were doing in class, what they were doing (Noor, 2008), and what should be done according to the CAPS. This enhances the reliability and validity of the findings and adds to the weight of evidence.

Subsequently, analyzing the documents in terms of teaching the listening and speaking skills did this against the various claims that the teachers had made during the interviews.

Essentially, teachers must remember that it is important that speaking should be taught explicitly in language classrooms since "Simply doing" speaking activities is not the same as learning the knowledge, skills, and strategies of speaking" (Burns, 2012: 166).

### **FINDINGS OF THE DOCUMENT ANALYSIS**

The researchers spent time going through the relevant documents that are part of the ESL teachers' armory regarding the teaching and learning of English as a First Additional Language. The following documents were analysed for congruence with the other participants' evidence in the study: the CAPS document, Teachers' Planning Files, Learners' Portfolios, and Learners' Workbooks.

To establish congruence between what the teachers claimed they were doing in the ESL class, what the teachers were doing, and what the policy documents instructed them to do, the researchers analyzed the records mentioned above to establish areas of discrepancy and/or synergy. Document analysis revealed inconsistencies between the CAPS document, the teachers' lesson plans, and what transpired in the ESL classroom. Some of the texts in the learners' workbooks did not recognize the learners' township context experience. The teachers sometimes used books prescribed for Home Language learners of English, which did not make it any easier for the township ESL learner to master ESL proficiency.

Regarding listening, presented no lesson even though all the participating teachers had been extensively appraised about the study's objectives. It had become evident that the teaching and learning of the listening skills were only incidental. All of this was contrary to the tea analyzed interview responses, their assessment program, and their daily lesson plans according to which listening lessons were prepared and taught weekly. In one of the lessons in one of the two schools, a teacher played a song in class in what

should have been a listening lesson. However, since they had not been adequately prepared, the learners were given no particular listening task except listening to the song. By the time the lesson ended, it had deteriorated into an informal class discussion with the teacher doing very little to manage the situation.

It remains doubtful whether there was any language learning during these sessions as feedback from the teachers during lessons was limited and only focused on the content relevance of the learners' contributions as opposed to their linguistic correctness or communicative competence. Shumin (1997) further reiterates that several elements are involved in effective speaking, including listening skills, sociocultural factors, affective factors, and other linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. Such as grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. The ESL teachers in the study did not consider all of these elements.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings revealed a disjuncture between some of the claims made by the teachers in the interviews and their actual practice.

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this study:

- Continual in-service ESL teacher training is crucial for both novice and seasoned in-service ESL teachers to address the effective implementation of the ESL English curriculum (CAPS document), particularly the teaching of the listening and speaking skills in the township context.
- Department officials, subject advisors, and other stakeholders should revisit the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to address the ESL curriculum goals.
- Teacher training institutions should equip pre-service ESL teachers with relevant teaching strategies that will address the teaching and learning of ESL and the realities of the township ESL classroom context.
- Township ESL teachers must be specifically trained on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach if the Department of Education realizes its ESL curriculum goals.

- Further research is needed to address the teaching and learning of ESL in the township context.

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