

## Research Article

# Is the Reading Crisis in South Africa Sustained on Purpose?

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Only about 20% of township children in South Africa learn to read in Grade 1, and the 80% failing to read there make little progress afterwards, as indicated by the international PIRLS tests. However, in the 1990s about 80% of African children learnt to read in Grade 1. How can reading be improved again, and learners also be helped to *understand* written English Second Language (ESL)?

These questions are answered with the help of research in township classrooms regarding:

- The suitability of the phonics approach to initial reading, prescribed now, compared to the syllabic approach used formerly for reading African languages.
  - The suitability of using an untested *Lesson Plan* for ESL, a document which contradicts Government's instructions by prescribing much written English in Grade 1, confusing African children with two writing codes.
  - The different results of two conflicting approaches to ESL teaching: form-focussed teaching and communicative language teaching (CLT). This comparison indicates that the *Lesson Plan* hinders the acquisition of sufficient ESL, though ESL is needed as education medium from Grade 4 onwards.
- It is concluded that grave injustice is done to poor children by keeping them semi-literate, so that most can only pass their grades by memorising lessons they cannot really read and understand.

## Introduction

It is widely known that South Africa has a reading crisis, as acknowledged in a Department of Basic Education (DBE) report on teaching reading in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3). It mentions the "poor reading performance" especially of African language learners (DBE, 2020). Most children do not learn to read well and with understanding in the home language (HL) as well as in English second language (ESL). For more than a decade only about 20% of township African children have learnt to

read in Grade 1, as Cronje (2021) found on testing Grade 2 learners at numerous rural and city township schools. Children who do not learn reading in Grade 1 make little progress later, as shown by four Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) tests. The 2016 PIRLS showed that approximately 80% of SA Grade 4 children do not have “basic reading skills” in the HL (Howie *et al.*, 2017:11), and even more Grade 4 learners failed the PIRLS 2021 tests, tests taken in the HL (DBE 2023). **However, if non-English children can learn to read their HL well and with understanding in Grade 1, they have many reading skills that can later be transferred to reading ESL** (Probert and De Vos, 2016: 9).

The failure to learn to read in Grade 1 should not be blamed on the children or their teachers. In the 1990s approximately 80% of Grade 1 African children learnt to read the HL, according to Cronje (1997:77; 89), who tested children’s reading at township schools in the city of Welkom in the Free State. Why do only 20% learn to read now? There are two crucial differences between teaching received then and at present:

Then, teachers used the old **syllabic approach** to reading, as well as **graded readers**. At present teachers have to use the **phonics approach** and *ungraded* workbooks that are translations from English. (Approaches are explained below).

Then, Grade 1 children were given no ESL, whereas at present large amounts of **written** ESL are given from early in Grade 1, confusing children with two different sets of letter sounds – in their HL and ESL.

Findings that most SA learners cannot read ESL with understanding, to be discussed below, are particularly disturbing, as about 90% of children use ESL as medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards. Even when some eventually learn to decode English and say the words, most children cannot **understand** the ESL that they read or memorise.

Three under-researched pedagogic factors relevant to South Africa’s reading crisis are discussed in this paper:

- The prescription of the phonics approach for initial reading in African languages, without any empirical research having been done on it (Cronje 2021).
- The simultaneous introduction of reading in both the HL and ESL, meaning that children have to deal with two different sets of letter sounds which may be confusing to them. No research seems to

have been done on this, as explained in par 6.3 in an article about the responsibility of universities regarding this issue (Cronje 2022).

- An out-dated approach to ESL teaching resulting in insufficient acquisition of English for children to understand what they later read or memorise (Cronje 1997). No other research on approaches to ESL teaching seems to have been done in township primary schools in SA.

At present the last two pedagogic factors can both be attributed to the DBE *Lesson Plan* which most Grade 1 teachers have to use for teaching ESL. The *Lesson Plan* is in stark contrast to the Government's policy statement (CAPS) for ESL in Grades 1–3, which instructs that in Grade 1 children should read only in the HL while learning ESL only orally. It warns that if children do not get a sturdy oral foundation in ESL while in Grade 1, they will not understand the English they read in later years, adding that learners are “often able to decode in their additional language, but unable to understand what they read” (DBE CAPS for EFAL 2012:16). Yet the *Lesson Plan*, used since 2011 without any research on it being done, instructs that **written** ESL is introduced early in Grade 1. It is discussed below.

Due to the *Lesson Plan* mentioned above, Grade 1 township SA children, most of whom know virtually no ESL, have to learn ESL in its **written** form. (For the pre-school classes no ESL is prescribed). Using written SL is the worst of the form-focused approaches to teaching a second language (SL) to children. Many studies have been done comparing form-focused SL teaching to communicative language teaching (CLT), finding that for young children formal SL teaching is never successful (Pica, 2005: 2).

Two questions are asked in this paper:

- What is the best approach for teaching initial reading in African languages?
- What is the best approach for teaching ESL in the early grades?

The methodology used for answering these questions is a literature study, augmented by informal investigation in Grade 1 classrooms over approximately 20 years. The first part of this paper discusses the failure to learn to read in Grade 1, and the second part deals with the problem of learning ESL, augmented by a summary of empirical research done in the 1990s which compared the results of form-focused ESL teaching to CLT.

The **main purpose** of this paper is to **expose the injustice done to township children**, the majority of SA's children, with prescriptions that superficially seem to be good. It is true that children should start learning a second language as soon as possible, but to be effective it should be done in the correct way, e.g. by giving much oral/aural ESL in pre-school classes.

## Section 1: Initial reading in African languages

How do 80% of SA children pass to Grade 4 and beyond if they are not able to read? They pass their grades by memorising lessons and pretending to read. This does not mean that most children do not eventually start decoding, but for most it is demanding, mechanical decoding, without attention to meaning even in the HL.

### 1.1. *Research on reading in African languages*

The information above comes from personal observation, as well as the few descriptions we have in the literature on how reading is done in lower primary classes. A few examples:

- Reeves *et al.* (2008), on studying literacy teaching in Grade 1–4 classes in Limpopo Province, write that “reading aloud together” was the usual way to read even in Grade 1. Opportunities to read alone were scarce and many children apparently repeated from memory with no attention to the text, some probably having “absolutely no clue” as to how other children were reading.
- Rule and Land (2017:4–6) describes the traditional way to teach reading, adding that in reading assessments marks were given only for pronunciation and fluency, not to reading comprehension. If attention was given to meaning, the focus was on single words rather than on larger pieces of text.
- Spaul and Hoadley (2017:80) found the same in recent classroom observations, saying that to make a difference a new curriculum will have to address problems such as a lack of comprehension and of opportunity for individual reading

### 1.2. *Teachers’ prescriptions regarding initial reading*

One pedagogic cause of the reading crisis is that the approaches presently used to teach reading to African children are not suited to African children and languages. The CAPS documents for the nine African home languages are mere translations of prescriptions for teaching English as HL. De Vos, Van der Merwe and Van der Mescht (2014: 3) report on many irregularities in the CAPS for isiXhosa, which was translated with no “consideration of language specific structures”. As prescriptions for teaching initial reading are informed only by research done with European children, phonics (starting with letter sounds) is prescribed for all SA children.

Discussing certain differences between European and African languages will explain why phonics is not suitable for learning African languages. English has more than 20 vowel sounds but African languages have only a few, for example isiZulu has five. This means Zulu children can say a letter such as “B” in only five ways: *ba, be, bi, bo* and *bu*. Most African children, and some teachers, cannot say the “B” with the neutral vowel that Europeans use when they think they say the “B” alone (although “B” cannot be said alone). Because using phonics is a requirement, some teachers teach the letter “B” as *bu*, and Grade 2 learners were found trying to read *bana* as *bu a n a*, getting no further. With the syllabic approach the word *bana* is taught as *ba na* (Cronje 2021:4).

### *1.3. New approaches and strategies for teaching initial reading*

In the 1990s, when most children learnt to read in Grade 1, the syllabic approach was used to teach initial reading. However, this approach has fallen out of favour and is only referred to “anecdotally and derogatorily as the ‘ba-be-bi-bo’ methodology”, according to De Vos *et al.* (2014: 14). The only mention Cronje found of the syllabic approach was by Williams (1998: 71), who wrote that it was widely known in Malawi and Zambia. It was equally well known in South Africa and should be given its due credit – and be used for teaching Grade 1 African children to read. African languages are relatively easy to read, having only a small number of possible syllables for each consonant and consonant cluster. It is also easy to segment words into syllables because each syllable ends in a vowel, with a few exceptions, e.g. the single-letter-syllables M and N.

Other problems also hinder initial reading in Grade 1, for example that learning to read is not the priority. Children are not only confused by written English, but also by the great number of written HL words given early in other subjects, for example the written names of days and numbers. As long as children cannot read, they should do most learning orally. However, before they even know the five vowels, many letters and words are given to children each day. It is essential for them to know the vowels, as there are only five. If they make a mistake with a vowel, this may mean they “read” a different word and cannot understand the text.

Many scholars recommend that the proportion of time spent on reading should be increased, for example Howie *et al.* (2017: 12). Grade 1 children need more than one reading lesson per day at first, and easy graded lessons with which they can cope. Some easy lessons have been developed for Sesotho. Lesson 1A consists of eight sentences using only M with the vowels, and Lessons 2–5 add one consonant each. The sentences are presented as pairs to create a context so that children learn to read

for meaning from the beginning, for example from Lesson 1: *mimi o a ema. o mema mme* (Mimi stands up. She invites/calls Mother) The sentence pairs are first memorised on the board and the eight sentences then read in mixed order on an A4 sheet of paper. A trained group leader moves a piece of paper with a window cut in it over the sentences, and each group member reads the sentence that can be seen through the window. In this way, children are given many opportunities for individual reading, real reading, with all the groups reading at the same time eventually. It is also a solution for the problem of very big classes, if introduced in such a way that the teacher can keep discipline at all times.

Instead of using the phonics approach, the consonants are tested in syllables with *-a*, for example *ma, la, na, ba, ka* – read and written in mixed order instead of: *m, l, n, b, k*.

#### *1.4. Grade 1 teachers' prescriptions regarding ESL*

A great cause of our reading crisis is not mentioned in the literature: the fact that most non-English children are confused by having to do initial reading in two languages simultaneously. Grade 1 African children find it difficult to remember the sounds of their five vowels, which to them sound very similar. They can chant *a, e, i, o, u*, but most cannot read single or mixed vowels unless they learn a simple strategy and practise using it. How can they cope with a second set of letter sounds? Yet that is prescribed in the *Lesson Plan* for ESL in Grade 1, a DBE document that is in direct conflict with the government's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Government policy on education appears in CAPS documents for each subject, but in the case of Grade 1 English First Additional Language (EFAL) there is also a *Lesson Plan* which is enforced as teacher's manual. Extracts from both will indicate the discrepancy:

Extracts from the DBE CAPS for EFAL (2012):

Fortunately, children can transfer many literacy skills from their home language. When they begin to read and write in their additional language, they already know how to decode in their home language. If they learn phonics in their home language, they do not need to learn sound-spelling relationships all over again in English (2012:8).

It is important that in Grade 1 children develop a strong oral foundation in their additional language. Otherwise, they will not understand the words they are decoding in English in Grade 2 (2012:15).

In contrast to this emphasis on **oral** ESL in Grade 1, the *Lesson Plan*, first written in 2011, prescribes numerous new **written** English words per week.

Extracts from the latest DBE English FAL *Lesson Plan* for Grade 1 (2019):

(Week 3): *happy, sad, feel, today, backpack, bag, carry, school, favourite, draw, listen, story, excited, friend, teacher, dog, classroom, read, write, sing*. (20 words). There are also three other “display boards” with “sight words”, “phonic words”, and sentences, e.g. “*I like to play*”. In addition there is also a “*Question of the day*” (2019:58–59) and the following is found on p. 60: “This week they will also start to learn how to read... also start to learn to write”.

(Week 4): *ball, kick, throw, bounce, outside, inside, playground* (plus 13 more words here, and all the other kinds) (2019:79).

For children who hardly know any ESL, far too much input is given: for Week 3 in addition a story of 250 words, for Week 4, a 350 word story. Children should rather learn short stories and rhymes that they can understand and remember. If “Total Physical Response” mentioned in the CAPS is used, children quickly learn to listen to directives and obey them. Pairs of children can soon give such directives to each other in real communication.

Teachers say they obey the *Lesson Plan* (having 243 pages for Term 1) because of threats from learning facilitators, who train them at workshops to give the huge amounts of written English. Children have to copy some words in their books as proof that they have covered the work. It raises the question why the learning facilitators take so much trouble to ensure that the *Lesson Plan* is followed.

The use of the *Lesson Plan* has two dire consequences: most children are so confused with two written codes that they cannot learn to read, and children cannot acquire ESL from this formal (written) approach to teaching it. Probert and De Vos (2016:9) advise that children who can read a transparent writing system, e.g. an African language, can transfer decoding skills more easily than children first reading English with its opaque orthography, meaning success with reading the HL will improve reading ESL. Yet it still doesn't happen. Spaul (2013:4) wrote that nearly 30% of Grade 6 SA learners were “functionally illiterate in English”, referring to the SACMEQ tests of 2007 when out of 14 African countries South Africa was placed tenth.

Another great problem is that learners do not acquire sufficient ESL to understand the ESL that they read or memorise. Therefore the way ESL is taught in Grade 1 also impacts our reading crisis and will

be discussed in Section 2.

## Section 2: Teaching English as second language at primary school

The core of South Africa's reading problem is that nearly all children have to use ESL as instruction medium from Grade 4 onwards, yet most cannot read it with understanding. Even children who can read fluently may be unable to understand the English they read, having not acquired enough ESL when young. Some important findings regarding second language acquisition are given below. The term "second language" here only means that it is not the first language.

### *2.1. A short overview of second language acquisition research*

The traditional method of teaching a second language (SL) came from a time when adults learnt Latin in a formal way. When this approach was used for young children, it was quite ineffective (Felix, 1987:156). Audiolingualism, resulting from the behaviourist ideas of Skinner, was thought to be an answer for teaching children. Pica (2005: 2) says language was seen as a system of structures, with drills needed to form SL habits, but the approach seldom worked. Despite years of practising the SL, learners could not understand and use it. The reason is that Audiolingualism followed the same structural approach to language as Traditional Formal Grammar, with the focus on *form* rather than on *meaning*.

Chomsky (1980:239) opposed the behaviourist ideas, rejecting the notion that language is acquired by conditioning. He held that humans are born with a special language faculty that enables young children to acquire their HL easily. It was soon realised that acquiring an SL can be equally easy in informal contexts, because it is not habit formation but internalising abstract rules in an unconscious manner. It was later theorised that there is a critical period for acquiring a language unconsciously. Two Americans successfully upheld this theory with research on adult Chinese people who had immigrated to America before or after puberty (Johnson & Newport, 1989:60–99). One conclusion was that adults and children use different cognitive systems for acquiring languages, implying that teaching methods effective for one group may not be effective for the other (Bley-Vroman, 1990:13). Furthermore, it seems that children can use their age advantage only in meaning-focused circumstances, not where the focus is on formal aspects such as grammar and the written form (Cronje, 1997:28).



## *2.2. The communicative approach to SL teaching, and “Straight for English” schools*

Eventually it was acknowledged that learning an SL should correspond to the way a first language is acquired. New schools for SL teaching sprang up, for example Terrel and Krashen’s “Natural Approach” and Asher’s “Total Physical Response”, a programme using directives as first interactions with learners (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:97). This new teaching was called the “communicative approach”, focusing on meaning and interaction. It was soon recognised as the best approach and was used widely – but not in South Africa.

“Canadian Immersion”, a 1965 experiment in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), was so successful that it became practice and is still used. Thousands of English children in Canada do their last year of pre-primary and the first two years of primary school in French only, having native French teachers who speak no English to them. It means the children learn reading in their SL and only learn to read their HL in Grade 3, after three years of immersion in the SL. They then follow a bilingual school programme and become fully bilingual. However, the same kind of programme did not work when tested in different circumstances. There are conditions to be met for immersion to be successful, e.g. teachers should be (near) native speakers of the SL of the children, should speak only that SL in class and should use communicative methods. Furthermore, it is important that children get a good foundation in their HL at home and are proud of it (Wesche, 2001).

People in favour of “Straight for English” schools for SA children not learning much English pre-school, should heed the above requirements. Broom (2010: 506–528) tested the English reading ability of Grade 3 learners at 20 public schools in Gauteng. She found that the learners who used SL English as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in Grades 1–3 performed far below the learners who used the HL. She warns that an early transition to SL teaching “may be perpetuating the inequalities of the past” (2010:506). A much larger study was done later, specifically in seriously underperforming schools. Taylor and Coetzee (2013) used school records that comprised data on the LoLT of schools over years and combined that with test score data obtained from standardised tests taken by the DBE. Using the data of 827 745 children from 9 180 primary schools, they found that when learners came from schools of equal quality, the learners who in Grades 1–3 used the HL as LoLT performed better in an **English** test in Grades 4–6 than those who used English as LoLT.

The research that I did in the 1990s in South Africa (Cronje, 1997) underscores the superiority of meaning-focused instruction for teaching ESL and is relevant to understanding the current issues

around teaching Grade 1 children according to the DBE *Lesson Plan* with its written English, a formal aspect, and not according to the Government's CAPS.

### *2.3. Empirical investigation: Comparing form- and meaning-focused ESL teaching*

This investigation was conducted from 1992 to 1996 at two schools with African learners and teachers. The schools are 1.5 km apart in a township of Welkom, a Free State city. Both were rated Quintile 3 schools, indicating equal social background. At the time, ESL teaching in SA began in Grade 2 when it was assumed that children could read in their HL already. As most children could not acquire English outside school, e.g. from TV or a pre-school, the pedagogic variables that can facilitate or obstruct the acquisition of ESL could be identified. The input received at School A was wholly form-focused, as is the *Lesson Plan*, and the input at School B was mostly meaning-focused, as the CAPS with its emphasis on oral work in Grade 1 suggests it should be (Cronje, 1997).

#### *2.3.1. Method*

There were two overlapping phases of investigation. Firstly, actual lessons were attended to observe many factors concerning the English input available at each school. Secondly, the English competence of each test group was assessed and the two compared over five years. The two main groups of participants were the learners who were in Grade 2 in 1992 at the two schools. The 99 learners of the School A test group, in two classes, dwindled to less than 30 in 1996, due mostly to failing. A smaller percentage dropped out at School B: 143 in three classes in 1992 fell to over 60. Others, e.g. repeaters, could not enter the groups. Baseline tests of reading ability showed that about 15% of School A learners could not read and about 10% of School B learners. At the end of 1995 Grade 1 learners were tested at a number of schools, giving an average of about 20% who did not learn reading in Grade 1.

The research was quasi-experimental, as intact groups of learners were used and the schools were already on two different programmes for teaching ESL. To compensate for the drawback of having to assume equality between the two groups of teachers and learners, results obtained from the test groups were compared to results obtained from samples of similar learners at other schools on the same programmes (Cronje, 1997: 87–91).

As this research was conducted in the 1990s, the same ethical clearance documents were not required as is the case in South Africa today. Permission from principals was all that was needed and was obtained before any research began. Teachers cooperated gladly.

### 2.3.2. Observation of the input received at School A

At School A the ESL teaching was entirely form-focused, starting with written English from the beginning of Grade 2. They constantly repeated, memorised, did grammar drills and learnt grammar rules. They practised pronunciation and spelling, and the books used for reading had more grammar lessons than stories. Very little attention was given to meaning.

Example of drills on the board:

one	two
<i>chair</i>	<i>chairs</i>
<i>table</i>	<i>tables</i>
<i>girl</i>	<i>girls</i> (mostly ten word pairs)

The teacher pointed with a stick and learners read in chorus, repeatedly.

Some lines read on many days in Grade 2:

*What is the girl doing? The girl is fetching water. What is the woman doing? The woman is making fire.*

These six lines with pictures in the reader were role-played, using a bucket, firewood, etc. and could be understood well. However, they were not treated as communication, but read by the same person (Cronje, 1997:91–96). The resultant learning of “fetching water” is shown below.

Throughout Grades 2 to 6 the School A learners worked hard at learning ESL, but with the focus always on form. They repeated the teachers very often and “spoke” considerably more English than the learners of School B did, but not in real communication. Children never learnt to speak English to each other or to take part in English discussions. Teachers mixed the HL and SL daily, repeating most of their English information in Sesotho, so that learners did not need to understand the English but could just wait for the Sesotho translation. At other schools on the traditional ESL programme, the same was found (Cronje, 1997: 91–98).

### 2.3.3. Observation of the input received at School B

At School B they used a communicative language course, the Molteno Project's *Bridge to English*, developed by Prof Lanham of Rhodes University. Teachers had to do much oral work before children could begin reading ESL. There was abundant real communication, for example the teachers used large pictures and asked children: *How many (cars) do you see?* (to teach the plural “-s”). Children discussed pictures in full sentences, e.g. *The boy is digging – with a spade in the garden* (the extending remark given by fast learners). They learnt short stories, worked in groups, played shop, etc. The use of the HL in English lessons was not permitted, so that teachers did not translate to Sesotho.

The teacher mostly spoke to one child at a time in class discussions and as no chorusing was allowed, children did not have nearly as many opportunities to “speak” English as at School A. However, they listened to real communication and could take part. Stories were often read and many questions asked, including “Why?” and “How?”. The children started reading English in the second half of Grade 2. The *Bridge to English* reader constantly tests understanding, e.g. learners have to match sentences and pictures. The Grade 2 book was also used for the whole of Grade 3, as the second *Bridge* book had not yet been published (Cronje, 1997:98–104).

### 2.3.4. Evaluation of the English acquired at Schools A and B

At these schools, and some others, many tests were taken over the five years, e.g. questions and oral answers, five compositions, three comprehension and two grammar tests (Cronje, 1997:132–168). Since no standardised tests existed, the investigator had to make her own tests but used pictures only from School A's books – the usual departmental books. **In all tests, the children of School B were more than significantly ahead in understanding English and in using it correctly.**

### 2.3.5. Some test results: Compositions

#### *Composition 3: The Snake at the Tap*

This composition was written in 1995 when the test groups were in **Grade 5**. At each of Schools A, B and F, 30 randomly chosen children wrote the story of a series of three pictures, pictures not used previously. Only 9 of the 30 stories at School A were rated successful, compared to 24 at School B; and 15 children at School A completely failed to convey the story, compared to only 3 at School B.

The learners were numbered according to Gr. 4 school marks, with number 1 at each school being the best, so that a low number indicates good school marks. Child 52 of School B was far down the line to 99, yet his work shows the direct manner frequently found at School B:

*B52: a Father sit on the cheir out side. Mother work [walk] with her children to fach some water. They saw a snake and ran away. Father came with her stick to kill that snake.*

Compare it to the work of one of the “best” School A learners:

*A5: The house and trees the man sitting outside the house. The woman walk in to tep and two children. green grass. Father is ran and mother and children carry they see a snack the bucket is down.*

The use of some words was counted, finding that the 30 School B learners used the three verbs *fetch*, *kill* and *want* correctly 33 times and wrongly only 4 times, while the School A learners used them correctly only 4 times and wrongly 5 times. As shown above, a first line excessively drilled at School A was on *fetching water* (Cronje, 1997: 147–149).

Positive categories	School A	School B
Number of different verbs (per child) used per total words	9%	14%
Complex sentences per total sentences	16%	42%
Continuous tense used per total sentences	33%	54%
Continuous correct per total Continuous	48%	66%
<i>to</i> + verb per total sentences	3%	15%
Pronoun correct per total sentences	12%	37%
Negative categories		
Ungrammatical sentences per total sentences	13%	3%
Incomprehensible sentences per total sentences	11%	5%
Words misspelled per total words	13%	9%

**Table 1.** Extract from the linguistic analysis of Composition 3

*Comment: School B scored significantly better than Schools A and F (Cronje, 1997: 251).*

### **2.3.6. Some test results: Comprehension tests**

Comprehension tests were devised to detect the use of the following strategy: Find a sentence with many of the same words as the question and copy it as the answer. Many wrong answers resulted, given by children who did not understand the text or were simply used to “doing comprehension tests”.

Example: *Thabo’s best friend is Sarah’s brother Ben. She is always second in class and Thabo is first...*

Question 1: *Who is always second in class?* Sentence 2 (*She is always second...*) was given as the answer to Question 1 by more learners at School A than at School B. Many irrelevant answers were given by School A learners, e.g. by not answering a Yes/No question with either Yes or No. For a certain question this was done by 60% of School A learners and only 24% of School B learners.

To exclude the likelihood that the School A test group was a very weak group, or that the School B group was an extraordinarily bright group, certain tests were also given to learners ahead of the test groups. For example, when the test groups were in Grade 5, their comprehension test was also given to higher grades at the same school, and at some other schools. (Repeaters were not included).

<b>Grade 5</b>	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>	<b>Schools C, D &amp; E</b>
Correct	20%	36%	15%
Wrong	79%	61%	82%
Irrelevant answers	50%	16%	49%
<b>Grade 6</b>	<b>Schools A, C, D &amp; E</b>	<b>School B</b>	
Correct	33%	51%	
Wrong	58%	40%	
Irrelevant answers	30%	14%	
<b>Grade 7</b>	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>	
Correct	45%	71%	
Wrong	47%	17%	
Irrelevant answers	20%	0	

**Table 2.** Test 1 (Nov. 1995): Results Gr. 5, 6 and 7 learners, Schools A, B and others

As can be seen above, School B learners in higher grades were also ahead of other learners (Cronje, 1997:254). How this affected their schoolwork will be discussed below.

#### *2.4. English-medium teaching, 1995–1996*

Nearly all SA schools had to start with English-medium teaching in Grade 5. The learners of School B were able to profit from English-medium teaching, but the School A learners were unable to profit as they understood too little English. The teachers could not explain subject content in English only, but had to use code-switching. The field notes of 20/03/95 include that the HL was used 17 times in a science period on sprouting bean seeds. Children memorised English questions and answers for tests, mostly not understood and mere parrot work. In comparison, School B learners could take part in class discussions, frequently asking “Why?” To illustrate the difference in ability at the schools, their work in History is discussed (Cronje, 1997:183–187).

### 2.4.1. Grade 5 History lessons at School A

The first lessons were on early inhabitants of South Africa, the Bushmen or San. The School A learners copied 12 long sentences on them, but shorter notes were learnt for tests. The same test questions were asked repeatedly.

Their shorter notes: *“The Bushmen came from the Central Part of Africa. They called themselves San. The English called them Bushmen. They were yellowish in colour, (their faces) triangular in shape, and they were small, 1,5 meters tall. Their weapons: arrows, bows, knobkerries.”*

In the June tests the work of many children showed that the sentences were ill-understood, unanalysed chunks of language, for example: *The Bushmen were in English; They colour this San Brown; yellow wish in color; They are very small and tall.*

	School A	Schools C, D, E	School B
<b>Total number of words of 30 children</b>	1239	1757	1562
<b>Total of History facts given</b>	137	124	216
<b>Ungrammatical sentences</b>	43%	16%	3%
<b>Incomprehensible sentences</b>	15%	15%	5%

**Table 3.** Some History test findings in June 1995

School A learners gave 137 history facts and School B learners 216. Learners at other schools wrote many sentences such as: *I love history*, though asked what they had learnt in History.

In November the investigator again took composition tests on the Bushmen, and on South Africa's first white settlers. School A learners performed very poorly, with one of the “best” learners writing:

*A3: The Bushmen from central of Africa the are very small the are 1.5 mერთers tall the are traenguleng [in] shape the are yellowish in colour.*

Omission of the y of *They* occurred often, even in the work of learners who had had the *They* correct five months earlier, indicating that the learnt ESL chunks had deteriorated over time. An example of



unprofitable English-medium education is thus provided (Cronje, 1997:194).

#### 2.4.2. Grade 5 History lessons at School B

The School B learners habitually took part in discussions and were greatly interested in the work, as their test compositions proved. In November, on average, the School B learners gave 7.5 history facts per learner, compared to 3 facts per learner at School A. Each School B child wrote on what fascinated them, e.g. B6 wrote eight sentences on the clothing of the white settlers, B7 had five sentences on the language they spoke, and B28 had three sentences on the fact that the ox wagon was both home and transport (*“they did not pay for transport”*). Some other information not contained in their scanty notes:

B10: *The slaves were sell by R12 each.*

B12: *Van Riebeeck built a halfway station and other buildings.*

B17: *They came to cape because they haven't got much food and no work.*

B56: *Van Riebeeck was love her people and rule them well.* (Cronje, 1997: 188; 196–198).

To close this section, remarks from Cronje (1997:200): When English medium education is introduced before learners can understand subject material in ESL, there is a threefold loss: learners do not advance in acquiring the SL, they do not gain the required subject knowledge and they lose opportunities to broaden their first language conceptual basis.

### 3. Conclusion and Recommendations

Concerning the question of what the best approach for teaching initial reading in African languages is, this article explains why the phonics approach to initial reading should not be used, as most children cannot say some letter sounds. (Though they say difficult click sounds) The syllabic approach is more suitable for reading Africa's syllabic languages.

Concerning the question of what the best approach for teaching ESL in the early grades is, my investigation in the 1990s, and other research, strongly support the superiority of meaning-focused teaching of an SL over form-focused teaching. It shows that where an SL is important for the children's future, form-focused SL instruction can put their future at risk. However, even the School A children in the study had an advantage over SA children today, as approximately 80% of them learnt to read the HL in Grade 1, which means they had many reading skills to transfer to reading English.

Unfortunately they never learnt to read for meaning, as happened at School B due to good exercises in their *Bridge Reader*.

It is concluded that grave injustice is being done to South Africa's non-English Grade 1 learners through the DBE's *Lesson Plan* for English FAL. Its **written** English confuses children, with the result that at least 80% of them fail to learn to read any language in Grade 1. In addition, its incorrect approach to teaching ESL prevents most children from acquiring ESL when young. The consequence is that most SA children are not given any "foundation" in the Foundation Phase.

Do the following facts indicate that poor SA township children, meaning the majority of SA's children, are kept ignorant and semi-literate on purpose so that they can be manipulated easily in future, being unable to read with understanding what is written in a free press?

The existence of two conflicting DBE documents for ESL in Grade 1, the *CAPS* and *Lesson Plan*, the latter still being used although I wrote against it since 2018;

The fact that I was emphatically denied permission to do official research in Grade 1 classrooms in Free State Province, despite being a UNISA second year PhD student having ethical clearance for the research;

The fact that nothing came from my correspondence since 2018 with the SA Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga. In my first letter I explained the dire results of using the *Lesson Plan* for Grade 1, and in her last letter she promised to look into the matter, but then a letter from her to Grade 1 teachers stressed using **written** ESL – the *Lesson Plan*.

## Recommendations

1. New guidelines for teaching initial reading with the syllabic approach, as well as graded lessons and teaching materials, should be developed for each of South Africa's nine African languages, and teachers should be trained in new strategies for teaching children to read.
2. The *Lesson Plan* for Grade 1 should be withdrawn in favour of the *CAPS* for English FAL. Guidelines for teaching oral English, and training, should be provided to Grade 1 teachers.
3. Grade R children should be taught plenty of oral English, and should learn to communicate with each other in English, as the best time to learn an SL is as young as possible.

## Notes

*This study was not completed because the Free State Department of Education refused permission to do empirical research in Grade 1 classrooms, although UNISA had granted ethical clearance for the research.*

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