

# The gap between grade 5 learners and their English Second Language competency: Should we be worried?

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## Abstract

*In Namibian (public) schools, Lower Primary learners (pre- primary-Grade 3) are taught through their mother tongue and switch to English as the language of learning and teaching from Upper Primary phase (Grade 4 onwards). Upper Primary phase teachers are therefore faced with the challenges of developing learners' cognitive and academic skills which learners need to study other subjects that are taught in English. This paper explore factors that constraint four different Upper Primary phase teachers from four different schools in the northern part of Namibia to effectively teach their subjects. A qualitative interpretive approach was used to explore the factors that constrain teachers from effectively teaching their subjects. Data collection methods consisted of interviews, classroom observations and document analysis. Analysis of the data reveals that the syllabus are way ahead of learners' actual competency in English Second Language. In addition, data reveals that when learners come into the Upper Primary phase, they have such a poor foundation that they continue to learn little and lag behind grade appropriate outcomes throughout their school careers. The damage seem to start as early as from the first grades and learners are promoted to the next grades without having achieved the necessary outcome for that grade until they reach matric, and this ultimately leads to large annual failure rates of learners in junior and senior secondary examinations. The reason why learners are so far behind the curriculum and why the curriculum is so far ahead of the learners suggest that the level of instruction in the curriculums appears too ambitious relative to learners' skills. These and other findings suggest that there is a need to improve the quality of teaching across the curriculum and allocate reasonable content that can be covered in a comprehensible manner.*

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## Introduction and background

This paper replicates the study carried out in South African by the main author, Julius Lukas, when he was doing his Masters of Education (MEd) at Rhodes University, South Africa. The central goal of his MEd thesis was to investigate how two Grade 5 teachers from two different schools teach writing to their English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners and to identify some of the factors that inform these teachers' pedagogies. Although, this is not a comparative study, the findings from Mr. Julius's thesis prompted us to investigate how fellow Namibian teachers teach their English Second Language (ESL) to their learners. This case study addresses among others issues, the following two questions:

1. How do the selected teachers teach writing to their Grade 5 learners?
2. What informs and shapes their practices in this regard?
3. What in the view of these teachers enables/constrains their teaching of writing to their Grade 5 EFAL learners

Namibia, like many other African countries, has a history of over 100 years of brutal colonialism and racist apartheid ideology. This has resulted in inequalities and inconsistencies in the education system provided to the country's diverse ethnic groups in terms of access, quality, curriculum and resources. In addition, the curriculum content, and pedagogy, coupled with assessment strategies, were not appropriate and did not meet the needs of all children, particularly the black people. Since independence in 1990, Namibia has, however, made substantial advances in ensuring inclusive and equitable education system.

The constitution of the republic of Namibia, adopted in 1990, for example, declared education as right for every child. Thus, primary education in Namibia is compulsory and children are required to remain in school until they have completed primary education or until the age of 16. Until 2013, primary school began at six and covered grades one through seven. Secondary school was five years which covered grades eight through twelve. After grade ten, learners receive the Junior Secondary School Certificate. After twelfth grade, learners receive the Namibia Senior Secondary Education Certificate after taking a final exam that is moderated by Cambridge.

With the current curriculum which was revised in 2014, the Basic Education structure comprises of seven years of primary education; two years of junior secondary education and three years of senior secondary education. A provision for a 13th grade is made for learners who wish

to take subjects at A Level. In addition, the Ministry of Education, in efforts to reform and transform its past fragmented education system, also saw the need to introduce four major national goals of education for all, namely, access, equity, quality and democracy. The goal of accessing education for all has been intensified by the declaration of free universal primary education for all Namibian children from grades 0-7 in 2012. The secondary education in Namibia was also pronounced free in the 2016 academic year, making the entire basic education free.

All these Namibian endeavors and initiatives have resulted from a range of local and international educational laws and policies which aim to promote access to quality education and build a knowledge based society such as; the Education for All (EFA), Education and Training Sector Improvement (ETSIP), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and now the newly adopted Incheon Declaration on Sustainable Education for All by 2030.

After the Dakar conference in 2000, however, the EFA shifted its emphasis on access towards more quality of teaching and learning. This led to many member countries, Namibia included, undergoing various curriculum reform in order to yield established outcomes by EFA. These curriculum reforms stressed two things: the need of changing curriculum contents to suit learners culture and needs, and changing the pedagogies to be more learner- centred (UNESCO, 2000). Despite all the efforts put in to upgrade curriculum contents and improve teaching approaches, attained curriculum the level of learners remains unacceptably low in many African countries.

Evaluative studies such as the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ III) and the National Standardized Achievement Test (NSAT, 2015) focus primarily on monitoring learners' progress (English, Mathematics and Natural Science) than teachers (Miranda, Amadhila, Dengeinge & Shikongo, 2010; Namibia. Ministry of Basic Education, 2015). Statistics from these studies have shown that there is an extreme increase in access to education, especially after the declaration of free education, whereas failure and grade level repetition keeps on increasing across the board in Namibia schools. English stands out to as the subject in which learners performed poorly. Whether or not a learner should be promoted to the next grade is determined by two major factors: the quality of teaching and learning, and the assessment and promotion policy. These studies say little about the approaches used by the teachers teach their subjects. Therefore, there is a need to explore how teachers teach their subjects and if their teaching approaches or any other factors contribute to poor learners' performance.

In trying to better understand poor performance among learners in English Second Language (ESL) in many Namibian public schools, more attention needs to be given to exploring teachers' views and practices. I am of the view that investigating their beliefs and the contextual factors which might influence the way they teach English second language could provide significant insights and highlight important implications for the teaching English Second Language. Research indicates that teachers' beliefs affect both teaching practices and learners' outcomes (Melketo, 2012; Gaitas, 2011). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is of the view that "teachers' beliefs, practices and attitudes are important for understanding and improving the educational process" (2009, p. 89), although it does note that teaching practices are also affected by other factors such as learners' social and language background, grade level, achievement level and social class. Employing a case study design, this paper investigates how 4 teachers teaching English Second Language from two different schools teach their learners and to identify some of the factors that inform these teachers' pedagogies.

### **Teacher knowledge and beliefs**

Fradd and Lee (1998, p. 761) provide a concise definition for teacher knowledge when they assert that "teacher knowledge is the repertoire of knowledge, skills and dispositions that teachers require to effectively carry out classroom practices".

As Cogill (2008, p.1)) claims, "teachers' knowledge is fundamental to pedagogy". Teachers bring far more than just the latest government thinking on how they should teach in the classroom (Cogill, 2008). Shulman (1987) identifies seven categories to provide a framework for teachers' knowledge: 1. Content knowledge (*the knowledge of the subject matter that teachers are teaching*); 2. General pedagogical knowledge (*knowledge of theories of learning and general principles of instruction, an understanding of the various philosophies of education, general knowledge about learners and knowledge of classroom management*), 3. Pedagogical content knowledge (*the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented and adapted to the diverse interest and abilities of learners and presented for instruction*); 4. Knowledge of learners and their characteristics (*a specific understanding of the learners' characteristics and how these characteristics can be used to specialize and adjust instructions in the classroom*); 5. Curriculum knowledge (*the knowledge of what should be taught to a particular group of learners and requires understanding of children's learning*

*potential, national syllabuses, school planning documents and year plans*); 6. Knowledge of educational contexts, and; 7. Knowledge of educational ends purposes and values. According to Shulman, there are at least four major sources of these knowledge categories which he refers to 'teaching knowledge base' (1987, p. 8). These sources are:

...(1) Scholarship in content disciplines (the knowledge, understanding, skill and dispositions that are to be learned by children), (2) the materials and setting of the institutionalized educational process (for example, curricula, textbooks, school organizations, the structure of the teaching profession etc), (3) research on schooling, social organization, human learning, teaching and development and other social and cultural phenomena that affect what teachers can do, and (4) the wisdom of practice.

There are many other factors that affect teachers' pedagogy apart from these categories of knowledge. Teachers' pedagogy may be affected, for example, by the school environment, teachers' position in school, previous teaching experience, teacher training and teachers' own experience of learning (Borg, 2003; Cogill, 2008). These are issues that characterize Borg's conceptualization of *teacher cognition* (2003).

Borg (2003) defines teacher cognition as what teachers think, know and believe and the relationship of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the classroom. Han and Song (2011) expand the definition of teacher knowledge by suggesting that it refers to "teachers beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, knowledge and principles relating to teaching as well as judgments and reflections on the teaching practice" (2011, p. 176). Teacher cognition is considered to be a useful way of understanding how best teaching and learning can be improved. The OECD is of the view that "teachers' beliefs, practices and attitudes are important for understanding and improving the educational process" (2009, p. 89). This includes not only what teachers know and believe but also how teachers' knowledge and beliefs are related to their classroom practices (Gaitas, 2011). According to Borg (2009), the value of understanding is not only what teacher's do but also how they think has been widely recognized and has led to a number of research initiatives.

Yero (2002) delineated four particular aspects (that we can relate to teaching writing in the classroom) embedded in teachers' beliefs. First, teachers' beliefs include a personal definition of education that shapes and circumscribes what the teacher decides to do and not to do. Second, each teacher has a set of beliefs about the nature of knowledge and skills and how learners acquire them. Third, each teacher has a set of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of learning. Fourth, each

teacher has a set of values that determine the priorities in the classroom.

Yero (2002) further gives an example that if a teacher believes a programme he or she has been told to use is based on a solid foundation, and it corresponds to his or her beliefs, he or she will notice ways in which the programme works. On the other hand, if the teacher believes the programme does not work or is useless, that teacher will notice evidence supporting that belief. Similarly, Smith and Sutherland (2007) claim that most of the pedagogical and curricula decisions made by teachers are solidly grounded in their beliefs and that they do not necessarily align with the tenets of the working curriculum.

## Writing

Research has shown that one of the best predictors of whether a child will function well in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level at which the child progresses in reading and writing (National Association for Education of Young Children (NAYEC) (1998). Although the main focus in this study is on the teaching of writing as a specific activity, learners also write when the focus is on other aspects of English; for example, when they are learning to write sentences, spell words, use English grammar, and respond in writing to questions. In other words we are looking at the totality of writing Grade 5 ESL learners do in their English lessons. Raison and Rivelland (1997) describe how writing integrates these various aspects of language and literacy that come together in the act of writing:

...the writer is simultaneously involved with thinking of what to write, coherence and cohesion of the text, formation and legibility of individual letters, spelling, grammar including punctuation, layout, tone and register, organization and selection of appropriate content for an intended audience. (p.4).

Written language together with spoken language and reading contributes to the process of literacy (American Speech-language –Hearing Association [ASHA], 2001). It is often argued that writing and reading are inextricably linked (Bower, 2011); what children write reflects the nature and quality of their reading (Barrs & Cork, 2001, as cited in Bower, 2011, p. 4). Martin (2003) maintains that children who have difficulties with writing are not experienced enough as readers to anticipate the needs of readers of their writing. Unlike speaking, writing is not picked up incidentally; children need careful teaching if they are

to learn to write effectively (Initial Teacher Education [ITE], 2013).

The Ministry of Education has adopted two main approaches to teaching writing: the **text-based approach/genre approach** (which involves listening to, reading, viewing and understanding different types of texts) and the **process approach** (in which teachers encourage their learners to brainstorm, plan, draft, revise and edit their work before they produce their final texts). Some educators claim that a combination of these two approaches suits the teaching of writing to second language learners because together they provide a lot of modeling, support and scaffolding to learners thus leading them to becoming independent writers (Derewianka, 1990; Ho, 2006; Gibbons, 2002).

### **Goals of the study**

The central goal of this study is to investigate how two Grade 5 teachers from two different schools teach writing to their ESL learners and to identify some of the factors that inform these teachers' pedagogies.

The reasons for choosing to focus on the work of Grade 5 teachers is not only because we are also ESL teachers but also because Grade 5 is the first grade in the Upper Primary Phase, and the grade where teaching and learning is done in English. We wanted to explore teachers' views about learners' grade appropriate competencies when learners leave the Lower Primary Phase. In pursuing this research goal, we hope to gain professional insight into the teaching of writing and to inform the way we train the aspiring ESL teachers at UNAM. Notwithstanding the size of this study, as Hoadley (2010) posits, "there are a number of aspects to the classroom environment that can emerge from smaller scale studies [such as this one] which would merit further investigation at a larger scale and using alternative methodologies" (p. 12). Case studies are very good methods for classroom based research as they fill in the gaps left by powerful generalized studies and illuminate by example (Shulman, 1986). We hope this study makes a contribution to the literature on the teaching of writing in ESL and offers insights to other teachers, ESL subject advisors and curriculum developers.

### **Methodology**

The method adopted for this paper is a qualitative case study. Stake described a case study as "a study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important

circumstances” (1995, p. xi). The goal of this study is to investigate how writing in English second language is taught in Grade 5 classrooms at two different schools in Namibia. This would mean keeping English teachers central to explore their practice and approaches of teaching writing, as well as interacting with them to understand their reasons as to why they chose such approaches to teach writing.

When embarking on this study we did not have a preconceived list of hypotheses to test or any list of outcomes that we expected to find. Instead we have tried to find the answers to the research questions as these have emerged from the data. This, as Losifides (2011) suggests, is achievable through the use of rigorous qualitative research methods.

The study took place in four Grade 5 classrooms at two different schools: Muna Primary School, a rural school in Omaalala village situated in the northern part of Namibia and Tuna Primary School situated in the heart of Katutura in Windhoek. Although, the aim is not to carry out a comparative study we thought that observing similarities and differences between the two teachers teaching the same subject in completely different settings might add to the richness of the data. Each participating teacher from these schools teaches ESL to two classes Grades 5 A and B. There are 35 learners in Grade 5A and 30 in Grade 5B at Muna Primary School and 30 learners in Grade 5A and 32 In Grade 5B at Tuna Primary School. The ethnic make-up of the learner and teacher population at these schools is very different given their geographical locations. At Muna Primary School for example, all the participating learners and teacher (T1) are Oshiwambo speaking. Whereas at Tuna Primary School, the learners’ ethnic make-up consists of Oshiwambo, Damara, Herero, and Rukwangali speaking learners. The teacher (T2) at Tuna is also Oshiwambo by birth but in addition to English and Oshiwambo, she also speaks Afrikaans, Damara, and Otjiherero.

In this case study convenience sampling was used. The participating schools were selected for the following reasons: firstly, both catered for Grade 5 learners; secondly, both schools use English as the medium of instruction from Grade 5; thirdly, Muna Primary School was chosen because one of the authors is a lecturer at HP campus in the northern part of the country which is closer to the school, and the other author is a lecturer at Khomasdal Campus and had easy access to Tuna primary school in Katutura Windhoek.

The three main data collection methods used in this study were interviews, classroom observation and document analysis. Before I began my observation of the two teachers teaching writing to their Grade 5 ESL learners, We decided to have preliminary interviews

with each of the teachers so that We could gain insight into some of their beliefs regarding writing and writing pedagogy, their beliefs about different approaches to teaching writing including feedback, their beliefs about their learners when it comes to writing, plus any other factors that they thought might enable or constrain them to teach writing effectively.

We chose to use non-participatory observation, as it is a “relatively unobtrusive qualitative research strategy for gathering primary data about some aspect of the social world without interacting directly with its participants” (Ostrower, 1998, p. 57), which allows a researcher to concentrate on collecting data without getting pre-occupied by anything else, and to thereby get deep rich information (Wragg, 1999). We are not claiming that my presence had no impact on classroom events, but we did my best to minimize this. Five lessons were observed for each teacher.

According to Dias de Figueiredo, the term ‘document’ is “understood very broadly, including not just texts, but also sounds, photos, video and any materials that carry relevant messages” (2010, p. 29). After each observed ESL writing lesson, we asked the teachers to choose for me 6 samples of learners’ scripts comprised of 3 good pieces of writing, 3 average ones and 3 poorly written ones.

The samples of learners’ scripts were first used to analyse how the two teachers responded to their writing in attempt to find answers to one of the research questions. The scripts were also used to determine if the ESL written activities given by the teachers were congruent with the Grade 5 ESL writing activities recommended in the teaching plans by the NIED documents for that period of time. In addition, learners’ scripts provided insights about how competent they were in ESL writing in relation to the ESL syllabus assumptions.

We assured confidentiality to the schools, principals, the ESL teachers and learners. No real names have been mentioned in this study. We have given pseudo names to the schools as either Muna or Tuna Primary School. Teachers were referred to as either T1 or T2 and simply said a learner(s) without mentioning names.

## **Findings and discussions**

Teachers seemed to use the combination of process and text-base (genre) approach. However, teachers’ focus did not seem to be primarily on the *process* of developing learners as writers but on the hurriedly completed *product*. They pushed their learners’ pace when writing activities so that their exercise books could be marked instantly. They

did this so that learners can have as many marked writing activities as possible to please their superiors who would inspect learners' books.

Both teachers' beliefs and experiences as learners also had an impact on the ways they provided feedback on their learners' work. T1, for example, indicated that the way she marked the friendly letter and compositions was based on her experience as a learner. She believed that giving high grades to learners would result in learners having false information about their writing competencies; she preferred giving low grades so that learners would try to work hard to get more marks.

T2's experience as a learner also appeared to have an influence on the way she provided feedback on her learners' written work. She, for example, commented on how, as learners, she and her peers used to get their books from their teachers red with suggested correct spelling of words, grammar and form as well as grades. They were instructed to use the feedback from their teacher to correct their own written work. These experiences were reflected in her practices when she provided feedback on her ESL learners' written work. She would make a lot of comments on their writing. Neither teacher seemed to have established written criteria for assessing their learners' writing. Although they both explained orally during the interviews what they were looking at in the learners' writing, they did not provide learners with these criteria in writing or orally. Learners did not know what exactly their teachers expected to see in their writing.

The level of proficiency in English for Grade 5 assumed by the syllabi is beyond most of participating learners' actual levels of competence. Teachers referred to learners' lack of grade appropriate competence in ESL as one of the contextual factors that prevented them from teaching writing effectively. Because of this, teachers expressed low expectations for their learners – giving not only limited work but also lowering the teaching standards. Learners also appeared to be complacent with what they know.

T2 for example indicated that she had resorted to giving her learners a limited amount of work because most of them were struggling with writing and unable to finish on time. T1 even went to the extent of using a Grade 3 textbook to give a comprehension activity claiming that she was adjusting to her Grade 5 ESL learners' level. What was even more interesting with regard to T1's observed Grade 5 ESL learners was that, even if the comprehension activity consisted only of four questions in which they had to select a single correct word and was extracted from a textbook which was two years lower than their current Grade level, only about 43% (15 of the 35 learners) got all the answers correct (4 out of 4). The rest of the learners got from 1 to 3, but none of the learners

got zero. This implies that most of the learners were still unable to do an activity extracted from a grade that they had long passed. The data revealed that most of T1's Grade 5 ESL learners' written language in the longer pieces of writing sampled was incomprehensible with a lot of spelling and language errors, and they were not producing written work at an appropriate level for a Grade 5 learner.

Both teachers singled out learners' poor foundation and the late introduction of English as factors that contributed to their poor level of writing competence. These findings confirm those of other studies conducted in South African schools (Brock-Utne et al., 2010; Navsaria et al.; 2011; NEEDU, 2012). These studies have documented similar findings across all the phases (Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase and Senior Phase) that not only do learners do very little writing but they also do not have age and grade-appropriate reading and writing skills. In its recent national report NEEDU, for example, claims that many Primary Phase teachers in their study "do not understand the importance of extended writing and seemed to be unaware that it is prescribed in the curriculum and even if they do, learners do little writing, and the gradient is so flat that the level is more often than not, already too low by Grade 3". This implies that when learners come into the Upper Phase, they have such a poor foundation that they continue to learn little and lag behind grade appropriate outcomes throughout their school careers. The damage starts as early as from the first grades and learners are promoted to the next grades without having achieved the necessary outcome for that grade until they reach matric, and this ultimately leads to large annual failure rates of learners in matric examinations (Navsaria et al. 2011).

Similarly, in their working paper titled 'The negative consequences of overambitious curricula in developing countries', Pritchett and Beatty (2012) observed shallow learning in grades 2-5 in developing countries from Latin America, South Asia and Africa. These authors found that the relationship between the number of years that learners spend in school and the measures of their learning content mastery is "far too flat", claiming that learners "learn so little from each year of instruction that the completion of even basic schooling leaves children lacking necessary skills" (p. 1). Pritchett and Beatty (2012) argue that the reason why learners are so far behind the curriculum and why the curriculum is so far ahead of the learners in many countries is because the "level of instruction in the curriculums is overambitious relative to learners' skills" (p. 10). These authors defined an overambitious curriculum as the one that "covers too much, goes too fast and too hard compared to the initial skills of the learners" [which subsequently leads to poor results in schools] (p. 10).

Another notable finding was codeswitch. Both teachers did a lot of oral code-switching during their teaching. They explained most of the instructions in their learners' vernacular and then ask them to write the activities in English. It is not illegal for teachers to code switch in their ESL lessons. In fact, even the Namibian Language policy is silent on the use of code switching in ESL lessons or any other language, however, the extent to which teachers in this study used it seemed to be contradicting the way many writers advise how it should be applied in bilingual/multilingual classrooms to develop and promote biliteracy.

## **Conclusion**

These findings reaffirmed the views about teacher knowledge and teacher cognition. The main contribution of this study is that it provides depth to our understanding of how the four ESL Grade 5 teachers teach writing and why they do it in this way. This is very much the purpose of case studies: to illuminate by example, and try to fill in gaps left by large scale generalized studies (Hoadley, 2010; Shulman, 1986). The study is sensitizing us that teaching writing in ESL is problematic. This triggers the question: Should we be worried?

The study only focused on the work of two teachers. Therefore, to get a complete picture of how ESL is taught in Namibia, further research should take into consideration a larger sample size which will contribute to the potential generalizability of findings such as those contained in this study.

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