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Challenges to preschool teachers in learner's acquisition of English as Language of Learning and Teaching

Sandra du Plessis and **Brenda Louw**
sandup@discoverymail.co.za; brenda.louw@up.ac.za

Multilingualism in classrooms is currently prompting debate and has significantly impacted on schooling in South Africa over the last decade. At present South African educators face the challenge of coping with and finding solutions to culturally and linguistically diverse urban school contexts which did not exist before. In many South African communities young learners, without any prior knowledge of English, are enrolled in English preschools. Preschool teachers have the demanding task of preparing these multilingual preschoolers for formal schooling in English, and, in addition, are pressurised by parents or caregivers who expect their children to be fluent in English by the time they enter primary school. A group of preschool teachers in a specific urban, multilingual preschool context expressed concern about multilingual preschool learners' academic performances and their future, and requested advice and support from speech-language therapists. To investigate this need, an exploratory, descriptive, contextual research design, incorporating the quantitative perspective, was selected to describe the specific educational context of multilingual preschools in the Pretoria central business district (CBD) and the Sunnyside area. Results indicated that the participants perceived certain personal challenges while supporting the preschool learners acquiring English as Language of Learning and Teaching (ELoLT). These participants expressed a need for knowledge and support.

Keywords: English as Language of Learning and Teaching; multilingualism; urban preschools

Introduction

Over the past decade parents or caregivers have increasingly enrolled black learners in South African urban preschools where English is the only Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) (Du Plessis & Naudé, 2003:122; De Klerk, 2002:21). Many of these parents or caregivers rely on educators to teach their children English. However, the abrupt change from mother tongue (L1) to English instruction has created a challenging environment for both learner and teacher. As learners do not acquire an additional language (L2) effortlessly (Robb, 1995:22), various role-players, such as preschool teachers, need to intervene in ways that stimulate and support language development, always taking into account the specific and unique needs of the preschool learner acquiring ELoLT.

Preschool teachers are viewed to be key role-players in the acquisition of ELoLT by preschool learners (NAEYC, 1996:6). As learners spend many of their waking hours with teachers, their experiences under the guidance of the teachers will have an impact on the learners' social, emotional, cognitive, and

ELoLT development (NAEYC, 1996:6). Preschool teachers have special knowledge, acquired through training, of education in early childhood (preschool phase). They are also knowledgeable about preschool learners as a result of continuous observation of these learners and can assess learners in natural situations (Du Plessis, 1998: 53).

Since the 1990s when South African schools became culturally integrated the question has arisen whether this knowledge was sufficient to teach in the South African situation, where schools became multilingual and English L1 learners attended school with ELoLT learners (Barkhuizen, 1993:269). Preschool teachers were placed in the predicament of teaching in English, knowing that all learners did not comprehend the content of their teaching (Macdonald, 1991:19).

Currently, South African preschool teachers are increasingly faced with more and more demands at all levels (Cunningham, 2001:213). Preschool teachers are expected to have sophisticated knowledge of subject matter and a wide repertoire of teaching strategies (Viljoen & Molefe, 2001:124). Moreover, they need to be familiar with learning theory, cognition, pedagogy, curriculum, technology, assessment, and programmes. The South African context further requires preschool teachers to understand multiple languages, and socio-cultural and developmental backgrounds (Viljoen & Molefe, 2001: 124). It is clear that multilingual classrooms present a challenge to teachers. However, if teachers are familiar with the unique characteristics and needs of learners, they may construct a classroom context accommodating these needs (Cele, 2001:189).

Unfortunately, some teachers (and parents or caregivers) in South Africa appear to be unaware of the importance of L1 in cognitive development and in the acquisition of L2s (Lemmer, 1995:90). Teachers and other decision makers therefore need to be empowered by providing them with information on the benefits of L1. To develop ELoLT in South Africa, L1 needs to be promoted, maintained, and developed to ensure that the acquisition of ELoLT is an additive rather than a subtractive process.

Additive multilingualism is the acquisition of, or gaining of competence in, an L2 while maintaining L1. This implies that the appreciation and reinforcement of both L1 and ELoLT will have a complimentary effect on the learner's cognitive and social development. In this regard, Cummin (as cited by Lemmer, 1995:91) suggested that, because of a common underlying proficiency (CUP), learners' proficiency in L1 is transferred to L2. Teachers as well as parents or caregivers need to comprehend this dynamics of L2 acquisition. Learners may demonstrate higher order thinking such as defining, generalising, hypothesising and abstraction in L1, but lack the ability in English required to employ these same skills. High proficiency in L1, including the above-mentioned complex uses of language, will contribute to the development of L2. It is generally believed that parents or caregivers should maintain and strengthen L1, thereby adding to the learner's existing knowledge and cognitive skills (NAEYC, 1996:9; Lemmer & Squelch, 1993:42). By reinforcing

learners' conceptual base in their L1, a foundation will be provided for long-term growth in English skills.

In contrast, language loss may occur if the level of proficiency in L1 is not maintained while acquiring L2, i.e. L2 will gradually replace L1. This phenomenon is called subtractive multilingualism. Subtractive multilingualism implies that, as L2 is learned, skills and fluency in L1 are lost (Driscoll & Nagel, 2002:513; Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2000:4). In South Africa, The Language Plan Task Group (LANGTAG) (1996:31) voiced its concern that some African language groups like SiSwati, IsiNdebele, SeSotho, XiTsonga and TshiVenda are marginalised, not only by English, but also by the larger African language groups such as IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, SePedi and SeTswana. The danger exists that the former group may lose speakers, as these languages are not predominantly used for communication.

Language loss seems to follow a classic pattern, where a monolingual community becomes multilingual, followed by a language shift towards monolingualism in the new language. A full language shift may occur when a cultural group gradually changes its language preference to the dominant language of the community. This shift may take place intra-individually or even inter-generationally (August & Hakuta, 1998:17).

In the event that schools do not support L1 skills, causing L1 to deteriorate, and ELoLT skills do not develop sufficiently, the result may be *double half-literacy* or *semilingualism*, and learners may wrongly appear to be slow (Romaine, 1996:595; Roseberry-McKibbin & Eicholtz, 1994:161). If learners are taught exclusively in English and it replaces L1 completely, negative consequences may be suffered, such as the loss of confidence, social isolation, as well as the potential loss of identity and the feeling of belonging to a community (Makin, Campbell & Diaz, 1995:51). The loss of L1 may even result in the disruption of family communication patterns and the loss of intergenerational wisdom, including cultural traditions, values, and attitudes as the values, beliefs, and needs of a community are reflected in its language (Kaschula & Anthonissen, 1995:15; Makin *et al.*, 1995:101). Without language no transfer of culture between generations is possible, as parents or caregivers communicate to their children the cultural values that underlie language. In this way, L1 is tied to the learner's culture, and loss of L1 may lead to the loss of significant social relationships and cultural knowledge and information. Parents or caregivers need to encourage L1 usage at home and educators need to *allow* and *encourage* L1 in informal discussions *inside* and *outside* the classroom to support the maintenance of L1. At school, code-switching needs to be allowed as a positive force in maintaining multilingualism and preventing language loss.

Code-switching refers to the switching from one language to another over phrases or sentences (Lawrence, 1999:266; Zulu, 1996:105), as opposed to *code-mixing* that can be defined as switching for individual words from one language to another in one utterance (Owens, 2001:433). Romaine (1989:186) made a distinction between code-switching, where a certain level of language

competence is needed, and code-mixing as it occurs in the early stages of language acquisition. In the literature, both phenomena are often grouped under the term code-switching.

Historically, code-switching has been viewed as a sign of inadequacy or inefficacy on the part of the speaker owing to a lack of education, laziness, bad manners, and improper control of languages (Lawrence, 1999:265; Romaine, 1996:599). In South Africa, code-switching has been disapproved of by certain multilinguals themselves, as well as by schools and education departments (Peires, 1994:15). Over the past decade, however, researchers have debated the use of code-switching internationally and nationally. Many researchers challenged the view that code-switching lowers communication standards and highlighted its potential in the teaching and learning process. The literature increasingly reflects the view that code-switching is normal, useful, and widely used in the discourse of multilinguals. (Lawrence, 1999: 266; Zulu, 1996:104; Peires, 1994:15).

Although both adults and learners use code-switching, older multilinguals appear to have control over the amount of code-switching in their communication. Code-switching in adults appears to be influenced by contextual, situational, and personal factors, and is used more frequently in informal communication situations between people with shared interests (Zulu, 1996:108). Multilingual learners also mix languages for their own purposes. They will often code-switch between class and playground, or revert to L1 when they feel threatened (Viljoen & Molefe, 2001:124), and even when they want to exclude adults from their conversations (Hoff, 2004:353; Heugh, 2002:189). According to Heugh (2002:188), children from Africa and India, who are usually multilingual, have a remarkable ability to negotiate their way around multilingual neighbourhoods, using code-switching and code-mixing in their communication. It appears that learners in multilingual situations draw on their language sources by code-switching to accommodate each other. It may in fact be a strategy for effective communication.

In the ongoing debate on the use of code-switching as teaching strategy for ELoLT acquisition in South Africa, the one viewpoint that features prominently in the literature is that code-switching may be used as a tool in learning (Lawrence, 1999:266; Zulu, 1996:104; Peires, 1994:15). Code-switching in the classroom may lead to better understanding and communication with ELoLT learners and prevent communication breakdowns between teachers and learners. However, if teachers are to employ code-switching in urban ELoLT classrooms in South Africa, they need to learn African languages. Bearing in mind that South Africa has 11 official languages, and that, theoretically, all of these languages may be represented in a single classroom; the language learning task of the teacher becomes overwhelming.

Teachers who want to employ code-switching as teaching strategy in their classes, but cannot code-switch themselves, may employ peer-tutoring (Lemmer & Squelch, 1993:83). Peer-tutoring is a promising coping strategy for teachers of black learners in urban South African schools, by which indivi-

dualised help may be provided to learners in a large group. Learners are involved to assist in conveying the teacher's instruction, or summarise the lesson in a structured manner, by code-switching to the L1 of fellow learners. Usually peer-tutoring is done on a one-to-one basis, but can also be effectively employed in small groups (Lemmer & Squelch, 1993:83; 84). Through peer-tutoring, L1 may be a resource in an English-only environment where teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of the learners' L1.

The exact developmental function of code-switching is unknown. It is, however, known that the behaviour is not random and does not reflect an underlying language deficit (Owens, 2001:433; 343). Code-switching by multilingual speakers is currently accepted and recognised as a teaching strategy in ELoLT classrooms. This presents a challenge to teachers as peer-tutoring has to be planned and incorporated in the classroom activities. Another challenge is to ensure that learners master Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), as well as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), both being required for authentic language proficiency.

Proficiency in English should be qualified, either as language proficiency needed for interpersonal communication, or language proficiency required for academic tasks (Viljoen & Molefe, 2001:121). *Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills* (BICS) in ELoLT learners are estimated to take approximately two years to develop and allow learners to communicate through English in everyday situations. This type of language tends to be used in relation to personal matters, real objects, and present events, and includes the *visible* aspects of language like pronunciation, basic vocabulary and grammar, to converse fluently in undemanding situations. These skills are, however, not sufficient for academic success as they do not include the academic language needed for cognitive tasks (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2000:5). Besides the social language skills provided by BICS, an ELoLT learner also needs to acquire academic language skills in English to succeed in a school environment with English as MOL.

According to Roseberry-McKibbin and Brice (2000:5), learners take approximately five to seven years to develop *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency* (CALP), which is the required proficiency in any language to grasp academic concepts for learning and achieving at school. As this type of language is contextually reduced, learners require CALP to use English on a higher level of abstraction. It includes the ability to hypothesise, compare, contrast, and explain (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2000:5).

In South Africa, some learners acquiring ELoLT face the challenge of developing BICS and CALP in English simultaneously within the school context. It is emotionally demanding for ELoLT learners to acquire CALP and to master academic content at the same pace as English L1 learners, and this may be the reason why some ELoLT learners lag behind their English-speaking peers. Many ELoLT learners have acquired BICS in English and can communicate adequately in everyday conversation, but struggle with CALP when there is little context-embedded language to support them. This indi-

cates that these learners have not yet reached the language proficiency levels required to learn in English (Viljoen & Molefe, 2001:121). It is often incorrectly assumed that these learners have language disabilities when, in fact, they are only displaying a BICS/CALP gap (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2000:5-7).

Preschoolers' ability to acquire the proficiency in English that will allow them to follow instructions of school subjects through EloLT (Viljoen & Molefe, 2001:121) requires relationships with adults who can create a positive, non-threatening, language-learning environment (Lemmer & Squelch, 1993:45). This implies that the adults involved with multilingual learners carry the responsibility for meeting these learners' needs. Considering the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the South African population, this responsibility presents a daunting challenge. Many parents in South Africa rely on educators not only to teach their children English, but they also expect teachers to support the cultural values and norms of the home.

South Africa is a multicultural society evolving from a history where multiculturalism could not be celebrated because of the separation of cultures. With schools currently being culturally integrated, teachers need to be sensitive to the cultural and linguistic needs of their learners, as the learners' development may be negatively affected if cultural habits are not further developed in school (Gumbo, 2001:233-236). The teachers' attitudes, knowledge base, and cultural competence may be crucial when setting educational goals of acceptance and appreciation of diversity.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the challenge is to introduce the school's culture, while preserving and respecting the diverse mother tongues and cultures of its learners. Preschools therefore need to strive towards achieving equilibrium between the school and home cultures. Cultivating and developing a multicultural approach to teaching may require a change of attitude and a commitment from some teachers to adapt curriculum content so that it is culturally relevant and appropriate (Lemmer & Squelch, 1993:78).

Although solutions are not evident, these challenges may be viewed as opportunities to respond to the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse learners. Preschool teachers may therefore create a learning environment, which provides conditions for support and creates a challenge to their learners — a positive learning environment for education and learner motivation. ELoLT acquisition, specifically, within the learning environment, requires responsible and responsive adults to provide input according to the learner's needs.

Methodology

Statement of problem and aim of the study

From discussions that one of us (SduP) had with preschool teachers in the Pretoria CBD and Sunnyside area during training workshops, it became obvious that several preschools were struggling to prepare multilingual preschoolers for formal schooling in English. The learners' language deficiencies were reported as being a major obstacle to school readiness. The preschool

teachers expressed feelings of frustration because they could not complete their daily educational programmes and they were also concerned about the multilingual learners' academic performances and future. These teachers requested advice and support from speech-language therapists to respond effectively to the language needs of the multilingual preschool learners. The research was initiated in response to these needs of this specific community, with the following aim:

> To determine the needs and strengths of preschool teachers regarding their role in facilitating communication development in multilingual preschool learners acquiring ELoLT

Research design and method

An exploratory, descriptive, contextual research design, implementing the quantitative research method, was selected for the purpose of this study.

Data collection method

The researchers conducted a descriptive survey to allow them to examine and describe the specific phenomenon with great accuracy as suggested by Leedy and Ormrod (2004:198). In this study, the researchers employed a questionnaire as survey technique to obtain data. The items in the questionnaire were designed to collect information, and to investigate perceptions of preschool teachers in a demarcated geographical area. Items in the questionnaire were both closed-ended and open-ended in format, which provided mostly quantitative information but also limited qualitative data, respectively. The needs and strengths of preschool teachers were determined in a structured and systematic manner, building on theory and previous research to improve the validity of the information.

Description of context

Geographical area

The geographical area identified for the study was the Pretoria CBD and adjacent Sunnyside suburb. As the research aimed to target a specific context, all participating preschools had to fall within the specified geographical area.

Population group

As the research targeted black multilingual learners, all the participating preschools had to have black learners enrolled.

Type of schools

Independent preschools, as well as preschools subsidised by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), were included in the research. Convenience sampling was conducted and nine identified preschools were included.

Language of Learning and Teaching

In accordance with the aim of the study, English had to be the Language of

Learning and Teaching in the participating preschools.

Selection of participants

As all preschool teachers at the qualifying preschools were selected as participants, convenience sampling, as a type of non-probability sampling, was done. Participants were selected because of their accessibility. Thirty-six preschool teachers were selected as participants of which 32 returned their questionnaires (a response rate of 88%).

The following selection criteria were posed for inclusion in the research sample:

Language

The preschool teachers had to be proficient in English since they were teaching learners acquiring ELoLT. Proficiency in English was also essential for them to be able to complete the questionnaire that was compiled in English. The questions being fully comprehended by the participants increased the validity of the research and provided better quality results.

Employed as preschool teachers

Irrespective of training and experience, all the preschool teachers teaching at the identified preschools in the Pretoria CBD and Sunnyside area were selected as participants, thus maximising the size of the sample.

A description of the participants is given in Table 1.

Data collection instrument

A questionnaire (available from SduP) was compiled as survey instrument in order to collect information, and to investigate the needs and strengths, as well as perceptions and opinions of preschool teachers. The questionnaire enabled us to gain insight into the firsthand experience of preschool teachers who were involved with multilingual preschool learners acquiring EloLT.

The questionnaire comprised 10 sections, and participants were requested to respond according to a Lickert scale. Open-ended questions were included in sections 1, 2, 9, and 10 to allow participants to comment freely.

A pretest was conducted to increase the accuracy of the questionnaire. The objective of the pretest was to identify potential problems in the questionnaire prior to finalising the content in order to increase the validity and reliability of the research methodology.

Data analysis

Since the nature of the research was exploratory, descriptive, and contextual, descriptive statistics (Leedy & Ormrod, 2004:257) were utilised to describe the data and to illustrate trends within the research context. Statistical computations such as frequency distribution were employed to provide an indication of the perceptions of the participants, and to gain a better understanding of the meaning of the research.

Table 1 Description of participants (N = 32)

Characteristic	Description	Frequency of participants	Percentage of participants (%)
Home language	Afrikaans	27	84
	English	3	10
	SeSotho	1	3
	IsiZulu	1	3
Additional languages spoken*	English	28	87
	Afrikaans	5	15
	SeSotho	3	10
	German	2	6
	IsiZulu	1	3
	IsiXhosa	1	3
	SePedi	1	3
	SiSwati	1	3
	XiTsonga	1	3
	Dutch	1	3
	Sign language	1	3
Language preference	Not provided	1	3
	Afrikaans	26	81
	English	3	10
	Afrikaans and English	2	6
Age	Not provided	2	6
	18 – 25 years	6	19
	26 – 35 years	6	19
	36 – 45 years	9	28
	46 – 55 years	5	15
	55+ years	4	13
Highest qualification	Not provided	1	3
	Lower than matric	2	6
	Matric	1	3
	Diploma	25	79
	Degree	2	6
	Post-graduate qualification	1	3
Teaching experience	Not provided	2	6
	Less than 1 year	0	0
	1 – 3 years	7	22
	4 – 5 years	2	6
	6 – 9 years	3	10
	10+ years	18	56

Table 1 continued

Characteristic	Description	Frequency of participants	Percentage of participants (%)
Teaching experience with multilingual learners	Not provided	1	3
	1 year	5	15
	2 years	3	10
	3 years	4	12
	4 years	6	18
	5 years	3	10
	6 years	3	10
	7 years	3	10
	10 years	2	6
	17 years	1	3
	21 years	1	3

* Some participants listed more than one additional language

Results and discussion

Characteristics of participants

Table 1 provides details of the determined relevant characteristics of the 32 participants. The results illustrate how the participants' characteristics contributed to the complexity of the teaching situation in the research context.

According to Table 1 the majority of the participants (84%) were white and Afrikaans-speaking, teaching in English. The large number of Afrikaans-speaking participants may be attributed to the fact that the majority of white people in the Gauteng Province have Afrikaans as L1 (Census in Brief, 1998), and Afrikaans-speaking teachers are therefore more readily available than teachers with English as L1. Another explanation may be that teachers retained their teaching positions at the Pretoria CBD and Sunnyside preschools, while the population in these areas became culturally integrated. The urbanisation of black families, as well as more opportunities for tertiary education for black students since 1994, may account for the two participants, who had African languages (SeSotho and IsiZulu) as L1, but also taught in English.

As seen in Table 1, 90% of the participants were not teaching in their L1. The *language preference* as displayed in Table 1 may provide an indication of the participants' proficiency in English, as language preference is defined in the literature as *self-assessment of the more proficient language* (Dodson, as cited by Baker, 1993:17). The 10% of participants who had English as L1 preferred English as language for communication. Six percent of the participants indicated Afrikaans as well as English as preferred languages and it is postulated that these teachers were fully multilingual. However, 81% of the participants preferred to communicate in Afrikaans, which may imply that *some* of these participants were not fully multilingual, but had better proficiency in Afrikaans than English. Kaschula and Anthonissen (1995:71) explained that perfect multilingualism is extremely rare and that with multi-

lingual speakers one language is more often dominant and the other subordinate.

The difficulties that *some* of the participants experienced with English were evident from the manner in which they provided explanations in narrative questionnaire answers. Informal observations and discussions with preschool principals in the research context revealed that *some* participants were indeed not *fully proficient* in English. This could complicate the teaching situation, as limited English language skills may inhibit conversational exchanges in the classroom (Lemmer, 1995:88; Barkhuizen, 1993:80). As it is commonly held that the quality of exposure to English is important for improving the learners' proficiency, the teachers' command of English also strongly influences the learners' use of ELoLT (Cele, 2001:189). If learners are exposed to a less than ideal model of English, it may influence their acquisition of English negatively (De Klerk, 2002:21).

Table 1 further reflects that the teacher participants' L2s covered nearly the whole spectrum of official South African languages, *excluding* IsiNdebele, SeTswana and TshiVenda, and *including* German, Dutch and Sign language. IsiNdebele and TshiVenda are among the three languages with the lowest percentage of speakers in the Gauteng Province (Census in Brief, 1998), which may explain why no teacher participant spoke these two languages. Another interesting fact that became evident was that some of the Afrikaans-speaking (white) preschool teachers were able to speak African languages as additional languages, enabling them to provide additional support to multilingual preschool learners by code-switching.

It is evident from Table 1 that 88% of the participants had received tertiary education and were academically well qualified. However, informal discussions with preschool principals revealed that their training was not necessarily in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Twelve percent of the participants, employed as preschool teachers by independent preschools, did not have any teacher training. It seems reasonable to suggest that inappropriate qualifications may impact significantly on the participants' competence and theoretical knowledge of preschoolers' cognitive, emotional, social, and language development. The value of increased knowledge of the preschool learners' development lies in a better understanding of the needs of preschool learners. The inequities in the qualifications of ECE educators were also pointed out in White Paper 5 (RSA, 2001a:14), and the possible impact thereof on the quality of ECE was recognised in this document. In the South African context, however, there is currently no mechanism that requires independent preschools to employ preschool teachers with appropriate qualifications or registration with the South African Council of Educators (RSA, 2001a:14). Individuals with inappropriate qualifications may therefore teach at independent preschools.

According to Table 1 the ages of the participants indicated a broad age spectrum. The importance of the participants' ages pertained to the fact that their age could be directly linked to their teaching experience. The participants younger than 36 years had markedly less teaching experience than the

participants older than 36, all of whom had more than 10 years experience. The teaching experience with multilingual learners, however, differed from the participants' general teaching experience and only 9% of the participants had 10 or more years experience with multilingual learners. Although many of the participants (56%) had more than 10 years general teaching experience, 56% of the participants had *less than five years* experience in teaching multilingual classes. These findings indicated that, although many preschool teachers in the research context were already at an advanced stage in their careers, they were only starting to gain experience with multilingual learners.

Perceptions of challenges

The participants' concerns regarding the teaching of ELoLT preschool learners were identified from responses obtained from an open-ended question. The results are presented in Table 2.

The first category identified in Table 2 was *perceptions regarding parents or caregivers*. Participants perceived that they needed the support of parents or caregivers in the development of ELoLT. Parents or caregivers may not be aware of this perception, because of a misconception regarding roles or poor communication between the two groups. Although various barriers to parental or caregiver involvement may exist, Lemmer and Squelch (1993:96) are of the opinion that through support, parents or caregivers could become the teachers' partners in learners' education.

It was clear that the participants questioned whether parents or caregivers who favoured EloLT were not perhaps hindering their children, rather than helping them. Sarinjeive (1999:138) described this decision of parents or caregivers as hardheaded resistance to the common sense of L1 education. The participants perceived the teaching situation to be complex as not all participants could code-switch and English therefore was the only LoLT to many multilingual learners who were in the initial stages of EloLT acquisition, when their English proficiency may often be limited.

Participants expected parents or caregivers to speak English at home. However, such a far-reaching decision is often based on misinformation about multilingualism, as current research highlights the importance of L1 maintenance (Romaine, 1996:598; Makin *et al.*, 1995:73). The sentiment of L1 maintenance is echoed in the position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1996:9). It states that the use of English at home could hinder communication and result in limited and unnatural verbal interaction between the parent or caregiver and learner. The learner hears a restricted amount of language that may limit vocabulary increase and reduce overall verbal expression (NAEYC, 1996:9). In the past, teachers in South Africa often encouraged parents or caregivers with ELoLT to speak English at home to multilingual learners to accelerate the acquisition thereof. Currently, most teachers have discontinued this practice (De Klerk, 2002: 21).

Table 2 Group's perceptions of challenges in teaching ELoLT preschool learners (N = 27)

Categories	Challenges	Examples of participants' statements
Perceptions regarding parents or caregivers	Caregivers act irresponsibly in sending learners to English schools although they have no comprehension of English (n=5)	Parents cannot expect the child to be ready for an English school next year when we only have one year left
	Caregivers do not speak English at home and are therefore not supporting ELoLT development (n=3)	Another problem is parents who continue to speak Sotho/Zulu and do not speak English at home
Difficulties experienced	Learners do not stay on the task because they do not understand the instructions and often distract other learners (n=6)	Distract others during theme discussions as they do not understand me
	Teachers fail to understand the pronunciation of ELoLT learners (n=5)	Pronunciation
	Teachers find they cannot complete their programme for the day as too much extra time is required for explanations (n=5)	Vocabulary is limited. Much time is wasted. Repetition and demonstration needed
	Teachers fail to understand the messages ELoLT learners attempt to convey (n=3)	They speak to me in their mother tongue and do not understand if you do not react
Concerns regarding EloLT learners	Learners' comprehension of English is insufficient for learning, most notably vocabulary (n=13)	No communication possible
	Learners have limited verbal expression in general terms, as well as in specific aspects, e.g. pronouns (n=13)	They cannot express themselves easily/adequately and are often misunderstood
	Learners rely on gestures and mix languages to convey messages as a result of their limited English vocabulary (n=9)	In the beginning we battle to understand each other. They use lots of gestures

Table 2 continued

Categories	Challenges	Examples of participants' statements
	Learners' behaviours such as distractibility and inadequate task completion are related to inadequate comprehension (n=6)	They show boredom during story time as they do not understand
	Teachers are especially concerned that learners cannot express their emotions (n=2)	When they are hurt they cannot explain to the teacher what happened

The second category identified was *difficulties experienced by teachers*. Table 2 indicates that the participants were concerned about the multilingual learners' communication barriers leading to, among other things, problems with the effective management of their classrooms. The participants recognised the negative impact that the learners' poor proficiency in English had on the flow of activities in their classrooms.

An interesting finding reflected in Table 2 is that participants realised their inability to code-switch to African languages (as also indicated in Table 1), but it appeared that they may not have been aware of the value of this strategy. Translators/interpreters were already available at the preschools in the persons of general assistants and multilingual learners themselves and could therefore be used as peer-tutors. If managed correctly, they could become resources in the multilingual classrooms. Peer-tutoring, where learners are utilised as translators/interpreters to convey the teachers' instructions or summaries of lessons to fellow learners in a structured manner, is a creative way to experiment with language in multilingual classrooms (Lemmer & Squelch, 1993:83), and involves no cost to preschool teachers. In addition, peer-tutoring may be utilised optimally in view of the collective consciousness of people from African cultures and their feeling of responsibility towards each other (Smalle-Moodie, 1997:70).

The third category identified was *concerns regarding ELoLT learners*. Participants were concerned about factors which may impact on the overall development of multilingual learners, such as their receptive and expressive abilities in English and their emotional well-being. From these results it appears that language problems and social behaviour are intertwined in complex ways, and that behavioural problems may be indicative of maladjustment to the learning environment.

Although proficiency in English is important, preschool learners do not only have linguistic needs. Upon entering preschool, multilingual learners have to adapt to the learning environment and the changing language demands of the environment, and often also to a different culture. Life for these

learners entering a new preschool environment may be complicated as they are obliged to communicate and learn in an unfamiliar language while being isolated from their communities and culture (NAEYC, 1996:5). At this young age, preschool learners have to negotiate difficult transitions between their home and educational settings. For learners entering urban preschools in South Africa, it is often their first experience of schooling. With no prior exposure to institutional learning, the learner may be overwhelmed with the expectations and the routines. The home and school environments may have diverse sets of rules, values, expectations, and behaviours, requiring an adaptation between these settings from the preschooler. The recognition that multilingual preschool learners are emotionally connected to their languages and cultures is therefore important (NAEYC, 1996:7).

Perception of own competencies to teach multilingual learners

The results of participants' perception of own competencies regarding the teaching of multilingual learners are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Participants' perception regarding their own competencies to teach multilingual learners (N = 30)

	Perception of confidence in teaching multilingual learners			
	In all circumstances	In most circumstances	In some circumstances	Total
Experienced teachers (5+ years general experience)	6	7	7	20
Inexperienced teachers (1 – 5 years general experience	2	2	6	10
Frequency of teacher participants	8	9	13	30
Percentage of teacher participants (%)	27	30	43	100

Table 3 indicates that 57% of the participants (27% in all and 30% in most circumstances) were confident of their own competencies to teach multilingual learners, whereas 43% of the participants did not have total confidence in their own competencies to teach multilingual preschool learners. It is interesting to note that findings related to general experience versus confidence revealed that the length of teaching experience did not always affect confidence positively. Experienced *and* inexperienced participants experienced confidence regularly, whereas participants from *both groups* perceived in

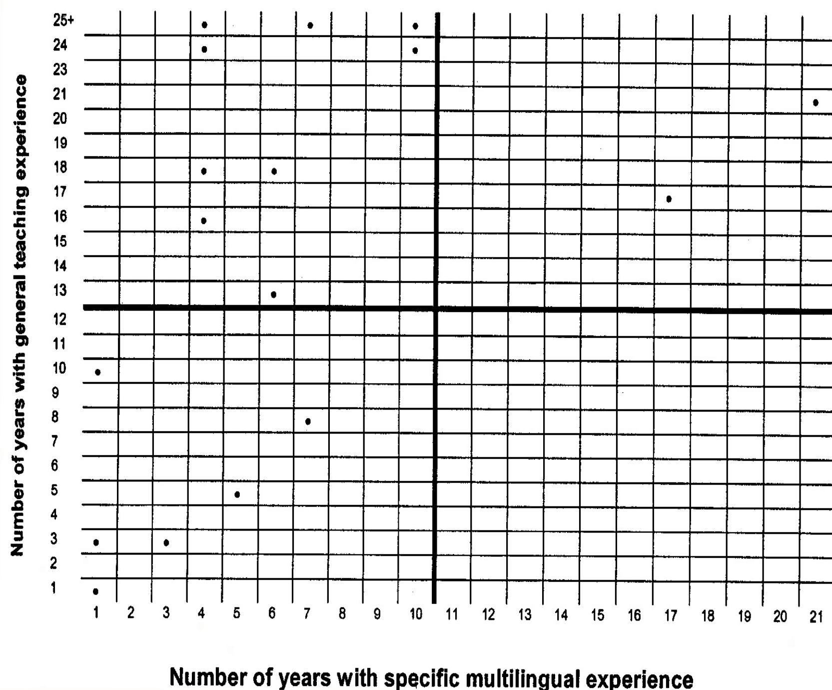

Figure 1 Relationship between general teaching experience and multilingual experience of confident participants (N = 17)

competence at times. The question arises whether the participants' specific teaching experience with multilingual learners improved their confidence. In Figure 1, the relationship is illustrated between general teaching experience and multilingual experience of the 17 confident participants (in *all* and *most* circumstances).

When the results in Figure 1 are considered and compared with those in Table 1, it is clear that all the participants who had 10 years or more experience in multilingualism were confident in teaching multilingual learners. Sixty-six percent of the participants with six to seven years experience were confident, while less than 50% of the participants with less than six years experience were confident. These results provide a clear indication that specific experience with multilingualism affected the participants' experience of confidence positively. These participants, confident of their own competence, may act as resources to aid colleagues in gaining mastery or control over the teaching situation. By working together teachers themselves could become valuable resources and may help to build capabilities through productive staff

development. Such collaboration or working together to develop strategies and programmes is advocated in White Paper 5 (RSA, 2001a:18) and White Paper 6 (RSA, 2001b:47).

If collaboration, as implied above and recommended in the literature (Nieman, 1994:16; Barkhuizen, 1993:273), can build confidence, it becomes necessary to explore whether collaboration in the research context also improved the teachers' confidence.

Table 4 Participants' perception of competencies in relation to collaboration (N = 30)

	Perception of own confidence in teaching multilingual learners			
	In all circumstances	In most circumstances	In some circumstances	Total
Collaborate only with other teachers	1	1	1	3
Collaborate only with speech-language therapists	0	1	2	3
Collaborate with both teachers and speech-language therapists	6	3	2	11
No collaboration	1	4	8	13
Frequency of participants	8	9	13	30
Percentage of participants (%)	27	30	43	100

Results contained in Table 4 revealed that most of the participants who perceived confidence in *all* circumstances were those who collaborated with other teachers, as well as speech-language therapists, whereas most of the participants who perceived only confidence in some circumstances did not collaborate with others at all. The fact that collaboration improves teachers' perception of their competence and contributes to the expansion of knowledge of team members has been documented in the literature (Engelbrecht, 2004: 254; Du Plessis, 1998:63). However, these results may also indicate that the participants who have developed the greatest confidence and, therefore, are least defensive, may also be those who are most open to and most likely to seek out the experience of other professionals.

Participants' training

The questionnaire also addressed the issue of the participants' training to teach ELoLT learners. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Training of participants in multilingualism (N = 30)

	Specific training regarding multilingual learners and multilingualism				
	Formal training	Courses and workshops	Self-study	No training	Total
Age of teachers:					
18 – 25 years	2	2	0	2	6
26 – 35 years	0	0	0	6	6
36 – 45 years	0	3	0	6	9
46 – 55 years	0	0	1	4	5
55+ years	0	0	0	4	4
Frequency	2	5	1	22	30
Percentage (%)	7	17	3	73	100

Table 5 indicates that the majority of participants (73%), most of them older than 26 years, did not receive pre-service training in multilingualism. Lemmer (1995:4) substantiated this and revealed that teachers acquired their training and experience in mono-culture institutions during the apartheid period and were not trained to teach linguistically diverse learners. It is alarming to note that only a small number of these participants, with no basic multicultural training, had attended workshops and courses. Although not all the participants felt confident to deal with aspects of multicultural education, as discussed previously, Table 5 shows that not many had equipped themselves with the suitable training experiences. Even self-study (interpreted as the reading of academic journals by the only responding participant), was not favoured by them. Such low incidents of reading (3%) on multilingualism are confirmed by the research of Elksnin and Capilouto (1994:264), who found that reading journals to obtain information was a least-preferred activity by teachers. This may also point to a passive approach to learning, where participants expect others to tell them what they need to know.

According to the results, participants younger than 25 years completed modules on multilingualism as part of their teacher training, whereas older participants did not receive any training in the field. The fact that the younger participants received pre-service training may indicate that teacher training in South Africa is currently undergoing transformation. However, four participants in the younger age group did not receive pre-service training, which implies that current teacher training practices vary. The two participants with formal training on multilingualism were the two participants who perceived themselves to be confident in all circumstances, as shown in Figure 1. Their training may have contributed to knowledge and insight regarding the issues surrounding multilingualism and equipped them with skills that empowered them in the teaching context. However, multicultural education is offered to

teacher trainees by many institutions only as a single module within other educational courses, which may not be sufficient and will continue to leave some teachers not fully trained and prepared to teach in multicultural contexts (Gumbo, 2001:240).

The preferred support

The questionnaire determined the preferred support that participants perceived to be important. Table 6 provides a summary of their responses.

Table 6 Variables relating to perceived support needs by participants (N = 32)

	Frequency		
	Yes	No	No response
Advice on how to handle the multilingual learner	25	5	2
Workshops on multilingualism	28	2	2
Formal training on multilingualism	18	12	2
Assistance by speech-language therapists in planning language lessons	24	6	2
Material to use in language lessons	26	4	2
Professionals to help evaluate the language needs of multilingual learners	28	2	2

From Table 6 it is clear that the general trend of the participants' responses was extremely positive towards support regarding multilingual learners in their classrooms. The participants were also in agreement regarding their perception of the manner in which they required support. It is of interest to note that the participants were more in favour of workshops (28), as opposed to formal training (18), which may give an indication of the amount of time and money the participants were prepared to spend on training, as well as their preference for the interactive nature of instruction often prevailing at workshops. The findings of Elksnin and Capilouto (1994:264) substantiate these results that teachers preferred to obtain information by attending in-service training rather than formal courses. These results may assist school principals when planning staff development and training activities, as part of the whole school developmental programmes.

Upon further analysis of Table 6, it becomes clear that participants' responses to three variables pointed to the sharing of responsibilities with other knowledgeable professionals. This sharing includes two components of teamwork, namely, *consultation* (*advice* on how to handle the multilingual learner), and *collaboration* (*assistance* by speech-language therapists in planning language lessons and in helping evaluate the language needs of multilingual learners). However, it appears that the manner of support preferred by the participants indicates inactivity on their side to some extent, as also seen in

Tables 5 and 6. This may imply that educational support professionals will have to take the lead to initiate consultation and collaboration.

Conclusion

The results of the study revealed the participants' perceptions of the impact of certain personal challenges while supporting the preschool learners acquiring ELoLT. Most of the challenges in the research context were in the form of needs, but strengths were identified as well. The participants acknowledged, first, the need for knowledge about additional language acquisition and cultural issues and, second, the need for support. The results indicated that the participants were willing to consult and collaborate with other professionals, including speech-language therapists, in support of the multilingual preschool learners. The participants were therefore prepared to form partnerships in dealing with multilingual challenges. In such collaboration the professionals' respective roles may contribute a unique knowledge base and expertise to the process and intervention practices may converge, to the advantage of the multilingual preschool learner.

Although L1 education is regarded as common sense (Sarinjeive, 1999: 138), this may prove a challenge in urban areas of South Africa. There is general consensus among educators that L1 education alone may not be sufficient and that all South Africans need to have access to a language with broader communication functions, enabling interaction in all spheres of life — social, political, economic, and educational. Exclusive L1 education may increase the social distance between the various groups of people in South Africa and may also provoke tension and conflict between the different language groups (Gumbo, 2001:241). Furthermore, South Africans cannot afford to isolate themselves globally as far as culture and technology are concerned. The electronic media, internet, arts, cinema, and popular music expand and enrich the learners' world and offer limitless opportunities for personal growth. English has emerged as the most likely international *lingua franca* (Cunningham, 2001:201) and holds tremendous potential for unity, freedom of movement, co-operation, travel, and economic development, the last being of great importance to the future of South Africa. To reach long-term economic goals, South Africa needs foreign resources and intellectual capacity. Such international interdependency requires people to be able to communicate in English.

Despite the increasing awareness of the importance of L1 education in South Africa, the acquisition of English needs to be managed effectively. Language planning in education therefore needs to include language acquisition planning, especially the planning of the acquisition of ELoLT. While South Africa is in the process of building an inclusive education system, educational support professionals, such as speech-language therapists, are urged to work in collaboration with preschool teachers as a team to provide multilingual preschool learners with a solid foundation in both L1 and English for lifelong learning and development.

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Co-Author

Brenda Louw is Professor in speech-language pathology, Head of the Department of Communication Pathology and Director of the Centre for Early Intervention in Communication Pathology at the University of Pretoria. Her research focuses on communication intervention, cleft palate and craniofacial disorders, pediatric HIV and AIDS, child speech and language disorders, and research ethics.