

**RHODES UNIVERSITY**

**EDUCATION DEPARTMENT**

**Vocabulary development in a grade 7 class  
using dictionary skills: an Action Research project**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the**

**Degree of  
Master of Education**

**by  
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## **Declaration**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

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Date

## **Abstract**

As I was involved as a voluntary, part-time teacher in a local, semi-rural school in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, I became increasingly aware of the learners' lack of English literacy. I therefore decided to do a practical research on vocabulary development, focusing on dictionary skills.

In this thesis I describe how I implemented a vocabulary development programme as an Action Research project. My research group was a grade 7 class of English First Additional Language learners who had minimal exposure to English at school and in their communities. The class was a mixture of Afrikaans and isiXhosa home language speakers and the medium of instruction was Afrikaans. The school served a low-income community and was poorly resourced.

As dictionary skills is a requirement of the national curriculum, I used 10 time-tabled lessons over a 5 week period to introduce the learners to dictionaries. My data sources were a journal detailing my reflections on each lesson; a video-recording of the lessons; small group interviews after each lesson which were audio-recorded; task-sheets on the work covered in class and questionnaires asking the learners for written responses to the lessons. The class teacher who filmed the lessons was also asked for feedback during and after the programme.

My goals were to assess my teaching approach in these circumstances and to what extent the outcomes were positive for the learners. As I had come from a background of English Home Language teaching in good, well-resourced schools I found I had to question many of my assumptions. Although I was an experienced, qualified and confident teacher, I was continually having to reassess my teaching methods which were being challenged by very different classroom conditions. The outcomes of the research show why I was not able to achieve what I had thought I could in the time given.

## **Dedication**

The motivation to see this through to the end came from my dear friend, Jenny Croly. She was behind my being asked to join the group of volunteers at the school where I did my research and she followed my progress every step of the way. I always felt encouraged by her genuine interest which stemmed from her passionate concern for the education of these young children.

As her own life became increasingly difficult I felt compelled to finish this task because she has shared so much of it with me.

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I wish to express my deepest appreciation to the Principal and the English teacher at the school. They supported me and accommodated my needs all the way through the research programme.

I have left to the last the most important: the main players in this research. The 2009 grade 7 learners gave me so much. I looked forward to every lesson with them and was in awe of their spirit for life and learning despite their adverse circumstances. Thank you.

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# CHAPTER 1

## 1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I describe why I became interested in teaching vocabulary to a grade 7 class in a semi-rural school in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. I briefly contextualize the research problem in four areas: 1) The learners, the school and the community in which the research took place; 2) The challenge of literacy in South Africa; 3) The national curriculum position on vocabulary development and 4) The literature on vocabulary development. I then introduce the goal of this research, its rationale and why an Action Research approach to the study was selected. I conclude with an outline of the thesis structure.

## 1.2 A personal encounter

In 2008 I started teaching English First Additional language one lesson a week to grade 7s in an impoverished, semi-rural school near where I live. I am one of a group of ten women who spend a few hours a week, on a voluntary basis, providing learners from grade 3 to grade 7 with English enrichment.

I had taught English Home Language to grades 8 - 12, inclusive, for over twenty years before embarking on this new challenge. I had previously taught in South African schools, both government and private, where resources and teaching aids were readily available: libraries, computers with internet access, overhead projectors, photocopying machines, DVD players, boards on which to put posters and learners' work and the support of colleagues.

Although the grade 7 learners at this school had been studying English as an additional language since grade 3, their ability to understand and use English was extremely limited. Only a few in the class were able to communicate in English and not with any confidence. I questioned whether there was some sort of intervention that could help improve their English literacy levels.

The Principal at this particular school believes in the importance of English. As well as seeing the long-term benefits of being able to communicate in English, he realises the importance of the children's achievement in English as it fulfils the requirements of the education policy that children must study two languages, English being the first additional language at this school.

### **1.3 Context: The school, learners and community**

The learners in my research were the senior class in a semi-rural, primary school which had originally been a farm school. With the growth of the population of permanent residents in the area the school's facilities have become inadequate for the number of learners. The buildings and grounds are in a bad state of disrepair; in a number of classes multi-grade teaching occurs; the classes are overcrowded; there are no electric points in the classroom so there is no possibility of using an overhead projector or a video machine and there is little evidence of visual stimulation in the classrooms in the form of pictures or posters.

The school has limited resources and the shortage of English books impacted on the English vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of the grade 7s I was teaching. The class did not have any English text books or class readers. There is no real library except for a small number of books in a metal cabinet which the volunteer teachers collected and manage. The learners look forward to exchanging their books on a weekly basis.

At the time of the study, approximately sixty percent of the learners at this school were isiXhosa speaking and forty percent Afrikaans speaking, with the medium of instruction Afrikaans. An added difficulty in these multi-lingual classes was the wide range of academic ability of the learners. The English teacher was Afrikaans speaking and had not specialized as a language teacher. He asked me to support him in implementing the curriculum for English First Additional language. The grade 5 and 7 classes were taught most of their lessons in the same classroom but I was able to extract the grade 7s for my lessons.

The class was time-tabled to have had 8 lessons in a 10 day cycle from grades 3 - 7. I was, therefore, surprised at their lack of competence in English.

The learners come largely from a socio-economically disadvantaged background and have limited exposure to books or printed texts in any language. Having only a few books in the home with reading not encouraged from an early age, is not uncommon for children from a working class community (Robertson, 2008). Advertising boards, newspapers and magazines, being able to watch films in English or hearing people on the streets or in the shops speaking English is limited in this community. The most English these children might hear is from television. Fleisch (2008) describes the lack of English in some South African rural areas as being like learning a foreign language:

For rural schoolchildren with very limited reading material available in English or other languages, few opportunities to hear or speak English, and teachers with limited English proficiency, these learners inherit a world in which English is essentially a foreign language. (p. 111)

Most of the pupils at this school live in an environment where English vocabulary is not implicitly acquired.

#### **1.4 Literacy in South Africa**

When I started working with this group of learners I was alerted to how inadequate their English literacy was. I wondered what the level of home language literacy was for the isiXhosa and Afrikaans speakers respectively. As Afrikaans was the language of learning and teaching in the school this further compounded the problem of literacy for the isiXhosa speaking pupils where English was in reality a second additional language. The isiXhosa speakers had no lessons in isiXhosa, their ability to communicate in English was very limited and it would be interesting to know what the Afrikaans literacy competence of the isiXhosa learners was.

I did not directly measure either the Afrikaans or isiXhosa literacy of the learners but one can infer that the literacy level of the Xhosa students in their home language was probably low for two reasons. Firstly, they were taught in Afrikaans from grade 1; the class teachers are Afrikaans speakers and there are no isiXhosa classes at this school.

The literature argues that a lack of literacy of learners in their mother tongue disadvantages the children in their acquisition of literacy in an additional language. Cummins and Swain (1986) propose that children need a deep understanding of their mother tongue before learning an additional language.

## **1.5 The national curriculum and vocabulary**

The Revised National Curriculum for additional languages expects a learner to “demonstrate an understanding of between 4000 and 6500 common spoken words in context by the end of grade 7” (Revised National Curriculum Statement, Grades R-9, p. 110). The curriculum also expects learners by the end of grade 9 (Senior Phase) to be proficient in both their home language as well as their additional language. The curriculum requirements for additional language vocabulary are discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

Although the curriculum expects schools to introduce learners to their additional language in grade 1 (or, where this exists, grade R), the school where I worked only began English classes in grade 3. Up until 2010 policy allows schools this choice. The disadvantage of having lost three potential years of vocabulary development would have a negative impact on learners' literacy levels.

I chose to do this project with grade 7s not only because this was a class I was already teaching but also because I believed the issue of literacy was important to address before the learners went to grade 8. In the national curriculum grades 7, 8 and 9 are grouped as the senior phase, however grade 7 is typically in a different school from grades 8 and 9. This physical separation of the grade 7 class from the other two grades of its phase, results in a lack of continuity adding to the difficulties encountered by the English teacher and the learners in grade 8. Any

improvement in the literacy levels of grade 7 could help the transition into grade 8. The further behind the learners are, the more difficult it will be to catch up with the rest of the class who could have come from various feeder schools, or to be able to reach the academic level required by the curriculum. Many learners with limited literacy skills flounder when writing external examinations in grade 12.

## **1.6 The role of vocabulary in literacy development**

There is a close relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Pearson, Hiebert and Kamil, 2007). The grade 7 learners in this school were not able to make sense of simple English texts with their lack of word knowledge. They needed to improve their English vocabulary in order to read with comprehension and to express themselves with some level of confidence in their additional language.

Much of the educational and linguistic research on literacy focuses on the importance of *explicit vocabulary learning* (Johnson & Gu, 1996; Pikulski & Templeton, 2004; Pearson et al., 2007). Given the social and academic consequences of poor literacy, I identified a need for intervention in the form of explicit vocabulary teaching. For vocabulary to be taught or learnt explicitly it needs to be part of the lessons and the pupils need to be taught vocabulary learning strategies so they are empowered to learn independently. I thus decided to investigate the outcomes of a programme teaching English vocabulary to additional learners.

Substantial research has been done on the value of explicit teaching of vocabulary and the importance of word-learning strategies such as *dictionary* use, as part of a vocabulary development programme (Johnson & Gu, 1996; McWilliam, 1998; Nation, 2001; Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006; Flynt & Brozo, 2008). With a limited number of lessons available to me I wanted to see if it were possible to make any impact on vocabulary learning by focusing on one word-learning strategy. I chose to look at *dictionary skills* as this is not only a useful tool for any language acquisition but it is also a requirement in the national curriculum for grade 7

English First Additional language. Dictionary usage is also a useful generic skill whereby learners can continue to improve their vocabulary knowledge, independently, in all their learning areas.

Because dictionaries provide access to so many words, and to so much information about them, Nation (2002) recommends spending an adequate amount of dedicated classroom time teaching learners how to use a dictionary. He suggests that up to an hour a week over several weeks is justifiable. I used 10 time-tabled lessons over 5 weeks to introduce the learners to dictionaries.

Although teachers might not see the need to focus on vocabulary development, Abadzi (2008) emphasizes the importance of teaching vocabulary:

The focus on (reading) fluency is often seen as retrograde and conservative, particularly for the poor. Ironically, poor students need more explicit instruction to catch up in vocabulary, while the better off students perform better and thus have spare time to spend on comprehension and more attractive activities. (p. 599)

## **1.7 Research goals**

- to implement a participative classroom research project aimed at developing grade 7 learners' English vocabulary
- to qualitatively evaluate the process of teaching and learning and its impact
- to reflect on the implications for practice
- to further my own understanding of teaching vocabulary to additional language learners

While my interest was in the implementation of a vocabulary development programme, I also felt the importance of assessing the efficacy of my vocabulary teaching methods and my role as a part-time, voluntary teacher. I realized that my previous teaching experience as an English Home Language teacher in good, well-resourced schools had not prepared me for teaching English as an additional language in such a poorly resourced school. Being a volunteer with my kind of professional

background, I wished to explore and understand teaching language in this context which posed different challenges.

## **1.8 Action Research**

As I was already concerned with a particular group of learners in a local school and as I wanted to understand my part in the process of vocabulary development, I chose Action Research as my research methodology.

Although I could not effect any change in the children's stimulation in their homes, I wanted to see if some sort of intervention programme at school could help raise their literacy levels. Somekh (2006) believes that educational practices can be improved when the research is one of systematic intervention. I decided to investigate ways to develop vocabulary and to look at the effectiveness of my part in the process.

My research took the form of individual Action Research (Calhoun, 1993; Arias, 1995; Warner & Adams, 1996). My primary objective was to qualitatively evaluate the process of teaching and learning and its impact on a specific group of learners. I was interested in practically investigating a solution to a particular problem in a specific situation and thus worked within the paradigm of Action Research. I implemented this project in the classroom in the hopes of improving my teaching and the learners' achievements. I also hoped that the outcomes might possibly be of interest to other educators, particularly voluntary educators.

Doing a classroom investigation gave me the opportunity to reflect on the implications of my practice as a teacher and what impact my role as a voluntary, part-time teacher had on learning in this class. Elliott (1991) and Hopkins (2008) describe Action Research as a process of reflective practice on both the process and the product of teaching, both of which are important to improve teaching practice and curriculum development. This combination of real action and research taking place together is described as a worthwhile possibility by Ferrance (2000).

Action Research can take different forms: individual teacher research, collaborative research and school-wide research. My position as a voluntary, part-time practitioner in the school made collaborative research difficult and so I chose to do individual teacher research with the class teacher and the grade 7 learners as active participants. Hopkins (2008) writes of the necessity of assessing the impact of any teaching programme on the learners and to evaluate the success of the learning, stressing that educational theories are only validated through practice.

The vocabulary learning programme which I implemented resulted in many interesting outcomes mostly due to the misconceptions of my preconceived ideas about teaching additional language learners. I had to reconsider what experience as a teacher I could bring to this class.

The fact that I had expected more from the learners made me realise the worth of Action Research as I was not aware of the extent of their limited understanding of my lessons in the first term.

## **1.9 Structure and outline of thesis**

In chapter 1, I introduce my research project. I present my reasons for choosing to implement a vocabulary development programme and my goals in this research. I give some background to the group of learners who were my research sample.

The literature review in chapter 2 looks at research which has been done on additional language acquisition and more specifically on additional language vocabulary acquisition. The research highlights the close link between vocabulary development, reading and literacy levels. Various suggestions of how to teach vocabulary are given. The value of dictionaries and the need to be taught how to use them is discussed. The place of dictionaries and vocabulary acquisition in the Revised National Curriculum is shown.

In chapter 3, I describe Action Research and why this was a suitable methodology for my research. I show how I gathered data and ensured the validity of the research.

In chapter 4, I analyse the outcomes of the research. I show how the disrupted assumptions based on my expectations made me critically aware of my approach to the lessons and to the class of additional language learners. I discuss the outcomes in terms of the expectations of the curriculum.

Chapter 5, I discuss to what extent I achieved my goals. I focus on those factors which had the greatest impact on my teaching experience in this context. The main theme of my discussion is the discrepancies between the expectations and the reality of being a teacher in a semi-rural, South African school environment.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The focus of this research is vocabulary development with grade 7 English First Additional language learners in a semi-rural, Eastern Cape school. The particular interest of this study is the role of explicit vocabulary learning in literacy.

The chapter begins with a review of the importance of literacy in learning, in particular the central role of vocabulary development in literacy learning in both a home and additional language context. The central role of vocabulary development in literacy learning in both a home and additional language context is examined. The research literature suggests that additional language learners whose vocabulary development lags, cannot access the language learning opportunities provided in texts such as readers.

The main section of this chapter examines the importance of vocabulary teaching in literacy development. Recommendations are made to teachers on methods for developing vocabulary in learners in both home and additional language. The chapter flags suggestions which were used in this research with particular focus on dictionaries as a vocabulary teaching strategy. The value of teaching vocabulary, methods of teaching vocabulary and vocabulary items suggested for this teaching are interrogated.

Finally, this chapter looks at recommendations made for dictionary work and vocabulary learning in the Revised National Curriculum Statement, grades R-9, for English First Additional language.

### **2.2 The importance of literacy in learning**

Words are the basic building blocks of communication and language and on a cognitive level, beyond what is needed for oral conversation, the necessary

vocabulary is essential to think, to have ideas or to formulate arguments or opinions and the confidence to express these (McWilliam, 1998). Making sense of the world and obtaining knowledge requires words.

Literacy is an essential component for academic advancement as it is not only important for the learning of languages but for accessing knowledge in all subjects. A large, rich vocabulary and good reading skills are important for educational success (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004). Word knowledge must continue to improve for advanced learning and expected academic growth to be achieved (Cummins & Swain, 1986).

Literacy is not simply being able to read and write but to understand what is being read and to be able to write well. Being able to identify alphabetic letters and phonemes is necessary but not sufficient. Understanding and giving meaning to the text is essential and word knowledge is necessary to decode the words and to comprehend the text. While teacherjoe.us website identifies the 200 most common words used in 80% of oral communication, a more sophisticated vocabulary is needed for reading and writing. With advanced vocabulary development learners will see the power of the correct choice of words in communicating ideas (Scott, Nagy & Flinspach, 2008).

For many children understanding the language used in a school context is difficult: academic language is challenging as it is so different from conversational language (Farkas & Beron, 2001; Scott et al., 2008). Understanding words and the complexities of their meaning can affect a learner's academic progress by having a direct impact on the understanding and learning of all subjects in the curricula (McWilliam, 1988). Instruction in examination vocabulary with repeated opportunities to practise answering questions using the appropriate vocabulary would benefit learners, particularly when the language of the examination is not their home language.

The seriousness of the lack of literacy proficiency in South Africa for the whole education system is captured by Abadzi (2008), a senior evaluation officer at the

Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank. In a review of international reading literacy she reported the following finding:

Since children cannot learn from textbooks until they become fluent readers, the effects of illiteracy may reverberate through secondary and higher education. Illiteracy translates into dropout, grade repetition, and a need for extra resources. The survivors may enter secondary school with a reading speed of 80 words per minute and second-grade knowledge and be unable to catch up over the years. Then universities in low-income countries must deal with students who lack the prerequisites to follow higher-level courses. Illiteracy in grades 1-2 *creates inefficiencies that reverberate all through the education system.* (her italics. p. 598)

In the Umalusi (2004) evaluation of the Senior Certificate examination it was concluded that those candidates who wrote the examinations in English when it was not their mother tongue were seriously disadvantaged. Furthermore the investigation found that when English as an additional language was also the language of all subject examinations, the learners were not adequately prepared in their study of other subjects. Although at the primary school of my study the learners are being taught and assessed in Afrikaans, this would not necessarily apply in senior school or tertiary education.

My concern was for the poor levels of English literacy of these learners in my research group. Their limited ability to read and write in English would affect the possibility of improving their English. Although for many of the learners their home language and the Language of learning and teaching (LoLT) was Afrikaans, not all would be guaranteed a place in a senior school with Afrikaans as the LoLT - forcing a switch to English in grade 8. English competence is also a necessity to communicate in a wider society and it plays a dominant role in access to higher levels of learning.

### **2.3 The impact of socio-economic class on literacy**

Chall (1995) found that children from low-income backgrounds who were taught to read in their mother tongue in grade 1 did not continue to read and comprehend at the required level because of their limited vocabulary (as cited in Biermiller, 2001).

Although learners from impoverished backgrounds can learn to read by grade 3, in many cases they do not continue to advance at the necessary rate and are often not able to read and understand at the required level by grade 7. Without continual emphasis on language development there appears to be a decline in word use and understanding after grade 3 which negatively affects reading and comprehension and ultimately overall achievement (Biermiller, 2001).

Children from low-income backgrounds tend to have more limited vocabulary in their home language than middle-class children (Farkas & Beron, 2001). The discrepancy in vocabulary and language development between children from higher socio-economic backgrounds, where they have often grown up with rich language experiences and those from disadvantaged backgrounds continues to perpetuate differences in social class. Given the consequences of poor literacy there is a real danger that the social inequalities as well as academic difficulties associated with language deprivation will continue to be perpetuated through school and into the workplace unless there is sufficient intervention in reading literacy development. However, Fleisch (2008) reminds us to question whether failure is due to language difficulties, to problems relating to poverty or because of the inadequacy of the schools.

Children who are read to when very young have a greater chance of success at school because of the opportunities this provides for vocabulary development (Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005). The number of words a child is exposed to in his/her first three years can directly affect life-long learning. Kouraogo (1993) believes that for children who do not have input from early reading experiences, vocabulary must be explicitly taught at school (as cited by Johnson & Gu, 1996). As the majority of South African learners come from homes with fewer than 10 books in any language, it seems likely that the majority also do not have foundational, vocabulary building experiences of reading at home neither in their home language nor in English (Fleisch, 2008). Their proficiency in their home language will affect their ability to learn an additional language.

In South Africa many of the children learning English as an additional language are from a low socio-income background, as were those in my research group. In rural

and semi-rural, South African schools Fleisch (2008) cited the problems affecting English literacy as being: limited reading material available; few opportunities for learners to hear or speak English; the limited proficiency of teachers of English and the fact that classes could be multi-lingual, multi-grade and of mixed ability levels. Many researchers have identified the lack of resources and particularly of reading material as a serious problem in South African schools (Taylor and Vinjevoll, 1999; Murray, 2002; Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005). The learners who took part in my research had Afrikaans or isiXhosa as home languages and the learners occupied a wide range of English literacy levels.

## **2.4 The importance of vocabulary in learning to read**

The extent of a child's vocabulary determines how successfully he/she will learn to read and write. Preschool children have mostly a listening and speaking vocabulary. They start to acquire a reading and writing vocabulary when they begin formal schooling when they learn to see the connection between the sounds they hear and the symbols they see on the page, and between printed words, spoken words and their meaning. In order to develop the necessary word knowledge, the children need to be taught how to decode sounds and words and to understand their meanings (Oakhill & Cain, as cited in Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005).

A reading vocabulary is more formal and complex than a speaking vocabulary and ultimately will be larger. A responsibility of the teachers is to help learners transfer vocabulary skills from one form to another - reading, writing, listening and speaking (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004).

Additional language learners need to develop reading skills and vocabulary simultaneously in order for either to improve. Wide reading, critical for vocabulary growth, will only be effective once comprehension improves, which implies having the necessary vocabulary (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004). Pearson, Hiebert and Kamil, (2007) suggest that because of the close relationship between reading ability, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension, words should not be taught in isolation but in context. Flynt and Brozo (2008) found that explicit teaching of vocabulary

improved vocabulary and comprehension. When explicit vocabulary development is combined with reading relevant texts the two skills, reading and word acquisition, will affect each other positively (Pretorius & Ribben, 2005).

There is clear evidence that learners who read a lot have a better vocabulary, general knowledge, spelling and verbal fluency than those who do not read (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Teachers can help learners by providing reading material which is within their understanding but challenging enough to improve their word knowledge with new words a part of the learners' daily discourse (Johnson & Gu, 1996).

Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) recommend that learners be given opportunities to read:

We should provide all children, regardless of their achievement levels with as many reading experiences as possible. Indeed this becomes doubly imperative for precisely those children whose verbal abilities are most in need of bolstering for it is the very act of reading that can build those capacities

(p. 7-8).

Additional language learners need opportunities to discover and use new words, with continual input from their teachers, more frequently than home language learners. Biermiller (2001) claims that children can learn two to three new words everyday if the words are explained in context. In my experience, learners of English as an additional language, even in the early stages of learning vocabulary, show an eagerness to discover the meanings of words. As word knowledge increases so does the ability to learn more words.

The purpose of teaching should not just be to impart curriculum knowledge but to empower learners to do their own learning. Teaching learning strategies, which can be applied in a broad spectrum, makes good educational sense (Hopkins, 2008). One such area should be in vocabulary development.

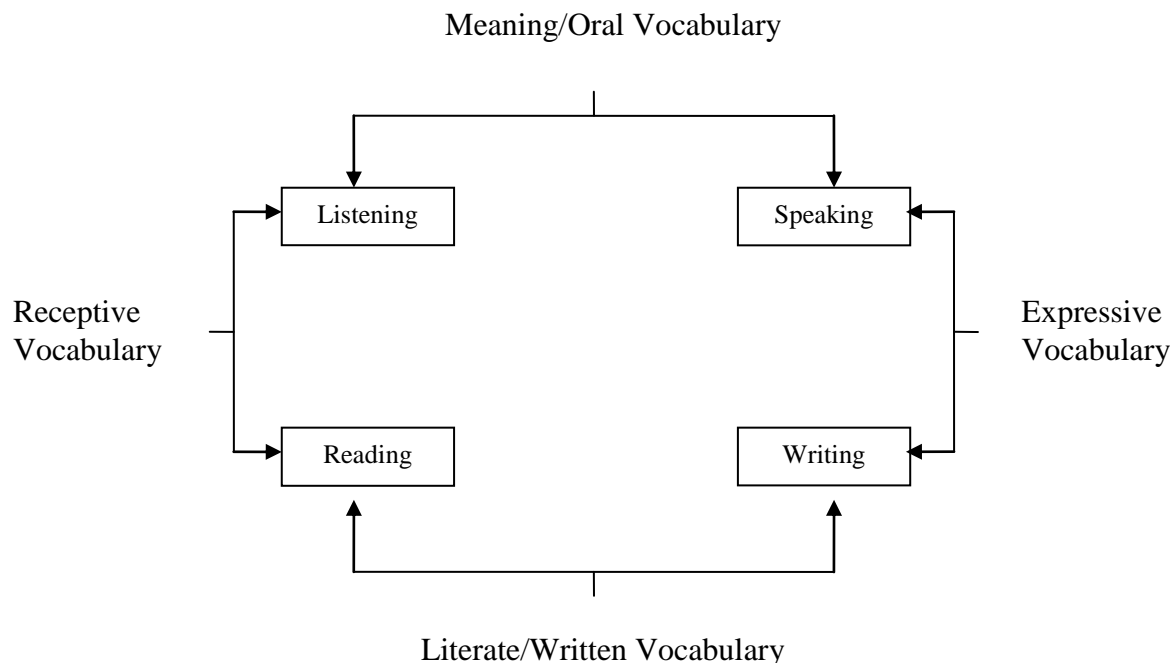
### **2.4.1 The value of teaching vocabulary**

Diamond and Gutlohn (2006) define vocabulary knowledge simply as knowing words and what they mean. The issue in vocabulary teaching is whether it should be taught explicitly or whether it can be learnt implicitly through exposure. Vocabulary is learnt to a certain extent through reading, writing, listening and speaking but improves at a faster rate through extensive reading, explicit teaching of words and word learning strategies (Murray, 2002). A text can only be understood once most of the words in the text are understood. Sometimes the meaning of words can be guessed at in context but for this to happen effectively the text must be largely understood, and this presupposes an already adequate vocabulary (Horst, Cobb & Meara, 1998).

Pikulski and Templeton (2004) explain how listening, speaking, writing and reading affect different aspects of language acquisition. Being exposed to each of these areas is important for adequate learning to take place and for vocabulary to be used meaningfully. Listening and reading allow for vocabulary input while speaking and writing necessitate output, all of which are important for educational advancement in all subject areas.

There is a difference in vocabulary size between words used orally (combining listening and speaking) and literate vocabulary (combining reading and writing). In a school context this has been described as the difference between academic and conversational vocabularies. Adults tend to use a more formal, sophisticated and larger vocabulary when reading and writing than when speaking (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004). In order for children to move effectively from listening and speaking to reading and writing they need to enlarge their word knowledge. (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1: Teaching and Developing Vocabulary**



(Pikulski and Templeton, 2004, p. 2)

Ultimately the purpose of vocabulary teaching must be to enable a word to be used correctly in natural, authentic contexts and to enable a learner to use strategies to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word. It has been shown that words become more meaningful for learners when they can relate the new language to their own experiences at home or in the community, in academic or social situations.

Fleisch (2007) reminds us that many learners from poor, rural communities hear very little English, if any at all, before they have formal English classes at school. If these learners never see English in print or hear new words their vocabulary cannot grow (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Teachers of English as an additional language are therefore responsible for the explicit teaching of vocabulary which should be a significant part of their lesson plans. Without this intervention the children may have difficulty progressing in education and rising out of the disadvantaged communities in which they have been raised.

The Education Department makes specific mention of literacy in the curriculum. The Learning Area Statement of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Languages Grades R-9, English First Additional language reads:

The first additional language assumes that learners do not necessarily have any knowledge of the language when they arrive at school. The curriculum starts by developing learners' ability to understand and speak the language. On this foundation it builds literacy. Learners are able to transfer the literacies they acquired in their support for those learners who will use their first additional language as a language of learning and teaching. By the end of Grade 9, these learners should be able to use their home language and first additional language effectively and with confidence for a variety of purposes including learning. (p. 4)

The scenario described above applies particularly when the first additional language is the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) but it cannot be presumed to be the case where English as an additional language is not the LoLT as was the case in the study reported in this thesis. The learners do not have opportunities to use English in their subject lessons.

The curriculum statement for additional language learners emphasizes the need for learners to know the structure and use of words, to be able to use visual, symbolic and language skills and to have strategies whereby they can help themselves in order to be able to communicate effectively.

#### **2.4.2 Value of teaching vocabulary**

Research has found that explicit teaching of vocabulary improves vocabulary and comprehension (Flynt & Brozo, 2008). Increasing word knowledge is important and vocabulary instruction should be part of the school curriculum in order for learners to achieve academically. The assumption cannot be made that learners will learn vocabulary from other sources but children can learn two to three new words every day if the words are explained in context (Biermiller, 2001). Explicit teaching of vocabulary is particularly relevant at the school where I did my research as English

vocabulary is unlikely to be learnt from other sources since there is very little exposure to English in the homes or in the community.

### **2.4.3 Methods of teaching vocabulary**

The National Reading Panel of 2000 (Scott et al., 2008) supports the explicit teaching of vocabulary but concludes that there is no one particular research-based method for teaching vocabulary. Proposals have been made by various researchers regarding techniques for explicit vocabulary instruction. Although these are aimed at home language learners, most can be adapted to an additional language context.

Although I was limited to 10 lessons for my vocabulary development programme, I did consider many of the suggestions of McWilliam (1998), Diamond and Gutlohn (2006) and Flynt and Brozo (2008 ) as useful. I incorporated some of the following practical recommendations for teaching vocabulary into my lessons:

- Ensure repetition and reinforcement with multiple exposure to vocabulary items; carefully select and highlight target vocabulary to be learnt in a lesson, explaining meanings in different contexts.
- Provide rich, personal contexts in authentic, meaningful texts rather than in abstract terms. Show how to infer meanings from the content to help comprehension.
- Promote in-depth word knowledge. Look for cognate similarities with home language. Explore imaginative and adventurous choice of words.
- Give vocabulary instruction for specific texts. Encourage learners to write for a real purpose or audience, e.g. greetings, celebrations etc.
- Create active participation using words, games and visual aids to communicate in writing, speaking, listening and reading.
- Provide incidental learning through exposure to words using a variety of methods including activities outside the classroom and parental involvement.
- Teach word learning strategies including dictionary skills or other strategies like how to ask questions for example 'What is the word for ...?'

- Provide opportunities to extend word knowledge through root words, word families, collocations, etc.

McWilliam (1998) found that children's success at remembering new words depends to a large extent on their existing word knowledge. When teachers bring the learners' attention to new words their interest is heightened to know more about the word which helps them understand and remember the word. With additional language learners it is necessary to do this often and to regularly review new words.

Pikulski's and Templeton's (2004) suggestions place greater emphasis on wide and extensive reading, using read aloud tapes and audio-tapes and word learning strategies which would be part of vocabulary learning throughout the year.

Reading aloud to the class is important when teaching vocabulary as much meaning can be made of a word when it is heard in context and read with expression. An effective way of teaching vocabulary is to select suitable texts at an appropriate level and to discuss any new or difficult words before and during a read-aloud activity. The learners need to be involved in the activity and not just passive listeners. Seeing illustrations pertinent to the reading helps give the context meaning (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2008).

Although O'Malley's and Chamot's (as cited in McWilliam, 1998) suggestions are not dissimilar to those made above, they provide 4 main principles to develop vocabulary.

- Elaboration** – build on previous knowledge and use personal associations, like home and community experiences.
- Imagery** – use visual aids or even mental pictures. Cummins (as cited in McWilliam, 1998) adds to this by suggesting teaching words in the context of a game, using puppets or introducing words and phrases in familiar routines.
- Transfer** – use what is already known to help understanding.
- Inference** – be able to work out meanings using existing knowledge.

Blachowicz and Fisher (2008) created a list of ideas to make vocabulary learning more meaningful and effective. They suggest word games like pairing words

(synonyms/antonyms), cloze sentences, drawing pictures of the words or writing lists of words in a given time period. Crosswords and scrambled words also help word retention. Johnson and Gu (1996) claim that only by using vocabulary in continual discourse will the methods of teaching vocabulary be successful.

McWilliam (1998) reminds teachers that in addition to making words fun it is also necessary to teach the various meanings of words. By bringing attention to figurative language and idiomatic use, the teacher will show how words are used in many ways. Labeling of objects, animals or people can be fairly easy but less so when describing abstract concepts or understanding compound words, collocations or idioms. There are many difficulties encountered by learners of English as an additional language such as polysemy, homonyms and figurative meanings as well as knowing the way words are typically used together (i.e. collocation). For example the word 'play' can be used in combination with other words to mean a number of things: play a game; play music; perform in a play. The right definition for an unknown word with multiple meanings is not always easy to identify (Scott et al., 2008).

An efficient way to acquire vocabulary is to see words in a text where not only the meaning of the words but other connotative information about the words can be understood. Blachowicz and Fisher (2008) believe that vocabulary is not learnt only through explicit instruction but also through "wide reading, talk, media, first hand and vicarious experiences, and other experiences ..." (p. 33).

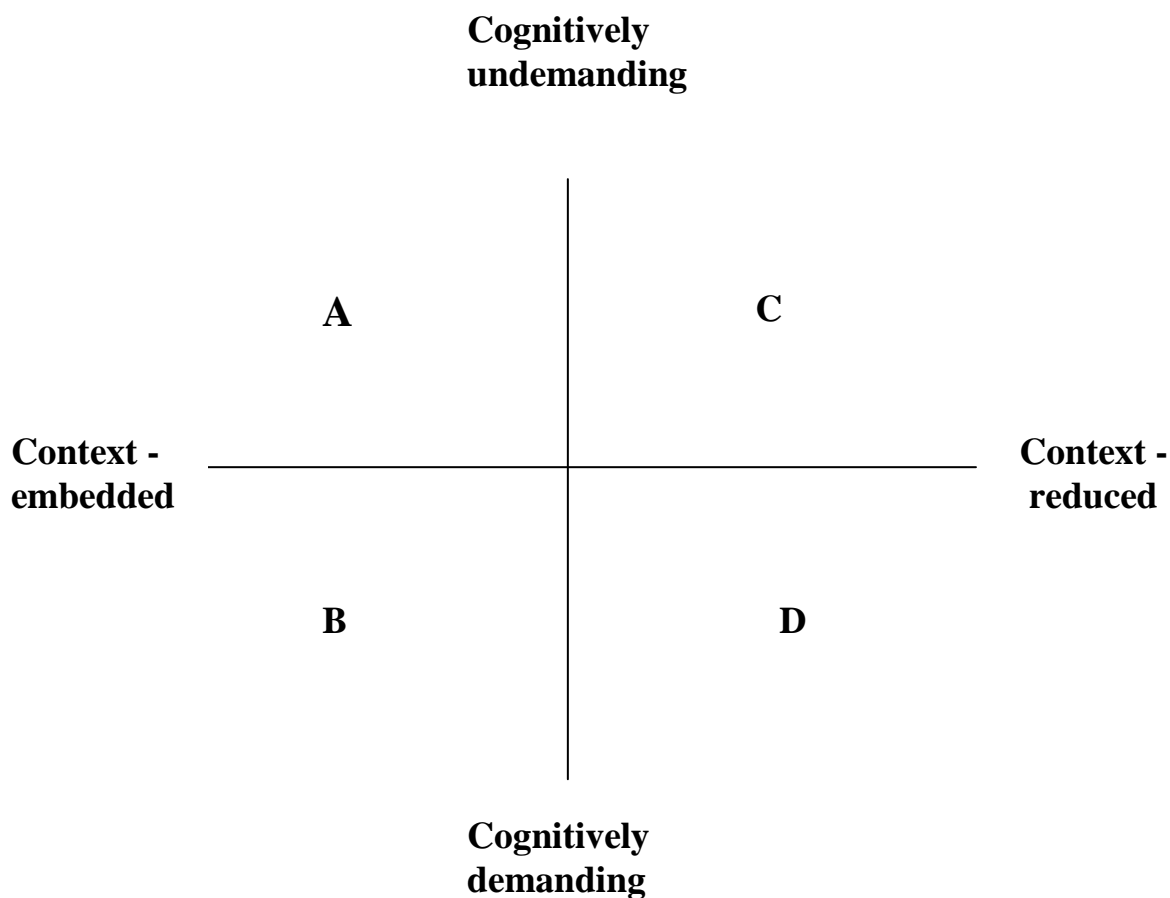
Johnson and Gu (1996) found that using a combination of strategies is perhaps best for acquiring vocabulary, including contextual guessing; seeing a similarity with words in the home language; repeating words aloud; using a dictionary; memorising newly learnt words using retrieval over a period of time with spaced intervals; note-taking and keeping word lists. To review vocabulary often is important as it allows the learners to recall and use words actively rather than merely seeing or hearing them.

Learning isolated vocabulary items is the least successful strategy (Scott et al., 2008). While the definition of a word can be found in a dictionary, it takes repeated usage of the word, experiencing it often in relevant and meaningful contexts, to understand subtleties of meaning and its syntactical and emotional impact (Johnson & Gu, 1996).

Scott et al., (2008) claim "To learn vocabulary students must have opportunities to read it, hear it, and use it to communicate with others. Context and communicative intent play a central role in vocabulary instruction" (p. 195).

Cummins and Swain (1986) believes vocabulary is best taught through the repeated use of a word or words and then gradually moving from a 'context embedded' and 'cognitively undemanding' text to a 'context reduced' and 'cognitively demanding text' (Cummins & Swain, 1986, p. 152). Figure 2 shows the possible movement in levels of difficulty: cognitively undemanding to cognitively demanding and context embedded to context reduced. In a 'context embedded' situation a learner can make meaning of the word item by using cues around the text. The social situation and the possibility of negotiating meaning helps make sense of the words, for example when engaging in a personal conversation. At the other extreme 'context reduced' text relies almost exclusively on the words within the text, as in an academic text. At the same time as making meaning in these different contexts there will also be a demand on verbal competence. One end of the spectrum - 'cognitively undemanding'- suggests little effort at using words while at the other end - 'cognitively demanding' - it will be necessary to use advanced linguistic skills. Strategies, like using a dictionary, could help an additional language learner move from a context embedded/cognitively undemanding text to a context reduced/ cognitively demanding text and make sense of it (Cummins & Swain, 1986).

**Figure 2: Movement in levels of difficulty**



(Cummins & Swain, 1986, p. 153)

As a range of techniques are proposed, it was necessary for me to be selective when deciding how to approach my own research. I tended to refer mainly to Graves' (2004) four step programme in the limited time I had for my research: encouraging the learners to read widely; using authentic texts; teaching a word learning strategy and including word play activities in the lessons (as cited in Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006).

#### **2.4.4 Items suggested for vocabulary teaching**

Teaching learners high frequency words will ensure basic fluency and improvement in reading proficiency (Prichard, 2008). Teachers should start with the most frequently used, useful and learnable words and slowly introduce more difficult words. The

social aspect of learning is an important consideration and learning should take place within the context of a community. Scott et al (2008) contend "that vocabulary instruction should teach meta-linguistic strategies for learning words in contexts that build on the social and cultural lives of students" (p. 193).

The choice of what words to teach to increase comprehension in writing, speaking or reading presents a challenge because each learner will have somewhat different needs. Words selected for learning should be chosen from within the learners' world experiences which will make more sense and be easier to assimilate and become part of the learners' known words (McKenzie, 1990). McCarthy (2004) gives some useful guideline questions to ask when compiling a word list e.g. What are the most frequent words and phrases used in English; the most frequently used tenses; common prepositions; use of can, may and might; formal and informal language and idioms?

When thinking about which words to teach it is useful to think of word lists at different levels (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004):

- Level 1:** words used frequently on a daily basis.
- Level 2:** words learnt through reading and instruction. These words are necessary for general academic achievement.
- Level 3:** academic or professional jargon.
- Level 4:** rare and obsolete words, mostly studied out of interest.

In the case of grade 7s learning English First Additional language, level 1 is important and level 2 at an appropriate level, while levels 3 and 4 would not be relevant at this stage.

Teachers should adapt their teaching materials and evaluation techniques in a way which will help the learners to develop their own learning strategies (Johnson & Gu, 1996). The teacher's task will be to know at what level to extend the learners' existing knowledge and how best to do this. Applying Krashen's theory of Comprehensible Input + 1 (Krashen, 1981) would be relevant. The learners should be able to understand the major part of the text but be challenged to add to their knowledge with a certain number of new words.

Researchers offer many ideas on how to teach vocabulary including word learning strategies (see section 2.6.2 above). An important feature of vocabulary learning strategies is that learners would be taught how to learn vocabulary independently which would also obviate the need to compile a list of what words to teach. One of these strategies is dictionary skills. As this is also a skill required in the curriculum for grade 7 English First Additional language learners, I identified it as an appropriate skill to introduce to the class in the course of my research. The value of this approach is discussed below.

## **2.5 Value of dictionaries and teaching strategies**

As vocabulary is essential for communication it is important to consider how it can be improved, particularly when learning an additional language. Researchers into vocabulary acquisition repeatedly include dictionary skills as an important word learning strategy for additional language learners. A dictionary is a well-established method for learning new words and a strategy which can benefit the learners in all subjects, providing positive learning opportunities including the possibility of looking up problematic words without interrupting the lesson (Scott et al., 2008). The ability to learn new words independently gives learners more confidence in using English.

McWilliam (1998) stresses that it is important for learners to be given “frequent opportunities to explore word meanings in ways which develop their conscious attention to how words work and cultivate their curiosity about words” (p. 99). Looking up new words helps significantly in learning and remembering them because of the attention that has been drawn to the word and the need to find its correct meaning (Peters, Pulido & Robinson as cited in Prichard, 2008). Through repeatedly looking up words, the learner will be exposed to principles of lexicology such as synonymy, collocation, morphology, homophones and antonyms. All of these, as well as basic definitions, can be discovered in a good dictionary and provide a further argument for needing to know how to use one (McWilliam, 1998).

In recent years research has been done on the advantages and disadvantages of using a dictionary. Scott et al., (2008) stress the important role a dictionary plays in improving vocabulary as well as the difficulty of using one without adequate meta-linguistic knowledge. Where a learner does not have a good understanding of the principles of vocabulary the wrong dictionary definition may be applied to a text. When much of the context is not understood it can be difficult to know which words to look up without losing the main point of the passage. Often unimportant words are looked up and important ones ignored which can take up too much time and adversely affect learning (Prichard, 2008).

Grabe and Stoller (2004) suggest that teachers should direct learners to words which are essential to the overall meaning of a text (as cited in Prichard, 2008). Encouraging learners to think about which words to look up helps them to be selective and saves time when trying to understand a text (Prichard, 2008).

Nation (2002) maintains that where learners understand less than 95% of a text they should be given a simplified version to read. Studies by Hu and Nation (as cited in Prichard, 2008) however have shown that when additional language learners understand as little as 10% of a text, comprehension and vocabulary could increase when learners use a dictionary. Prichard (2008) claims that if comprehension is supported by using a dictionary, then context-based, informal learning of vocabulary can take place. Summers (1988) found additional language learners did significantly better in comprehension and vocabulary tests when they used a dictionary though she also maintains it is important to apply other strategies (as cited in Prichard, 2008). Knight (1994) claims that bilingual dictionaries are helpful for less proficient learners whose limited vocabulary affects their ability to comprehend (as cited in Hunt & Beglar, 1998).

Depending on the type of dictionary used, dictionary entries enable additional language learners to:

- understand a word and any constraints on the word e.g. formal or colloquial.
- look up unknown words encountered while listening, reading, speaking and writing.
- confirm guesses from context.

- look up words to help comprehension (decoding) or production (encoding).
- look up the spelling, pronunciation, grammar and collocations needed for speaking and writing.
- discover the history of a word.
- find the interrelationships in word families.
- see subtle differences in usage.
- contribute to an interest in words.

(Pikulski & Templeton, 2004).

Dictionaries are available in many formats and are a relatively cheap learning resource. Unfortunately access to electronic dictionaries is not available in a large number of South African schools, particularly in the rural/semi-rural areas.

Dictionaries in book form need to be made available in schools without computer facilities. Murray (2009) in her 'Tips for Teachers' stresses the importance of choosing a dictionary at the appropriate level for additional language learners: definitions need to be simple with phonetic pronunciation included, as well as the word used in an example sentence. There are a number of dictionaries specially written for additional language learners, for example, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and the Collins Cobuild Student Dictionary. The Longman South African School Dictionary has been specially developed for the National Curriculum and makes use of just 2,000 common words in its definitions.

Besides the definitions the information given for each word in the dictionary is important. Learners can be encouraged to keep vocabulary notebooks where new words are defined and used in sentences and thus start to compile their own dictionary or useful glossary. While this is an assessment standard in the Foundation Phase of the curriculum it should be continued through the senior phases.

McKenzie (1990) made extensive use of dictionary work with his class of advanced additional language learners. Under his guidance they used the following process to compile a word list:

- The learners wrote a sentence on an index card and underlined the difficult word.
- Underneath the word they wrote a meaning which they guessed from the context in the sentence.
- On the back they wrote the dictionary definition, part of speech and any synonyms which would fit the context.

Teaching words as morphological derivatives of familiar words or in family clusters showing how words relate to each other can be helpful. Vocabulary can be developed by guessing at words when prefixes, suffixes and root words are understood. Pikulski and Templeton (2004) made the following points which highlight the benefits of using a dictionary:

- To link spelling with reading and vocabulary acquisition.
- To gather more information about a word making it easier to remember.
- To create an interest in new words.
- To help with the pronunciation of a word.

Learning vocabulary and making use of a dictionary is a complex, cognitive process which requires a conscious effort from the learners and not just a rote learning skill. Nation (2001) argues that it is justifiable for teachers to spend up to an hour a week over several weeks to teach learners how to use a dictionary. Wright (1998) feels that using dictionaries should be part of the lessons throughout the year and not be taught in isolation in a block. In addition, using a dictionary is a skill which needs to be taught gradually with scaffolded practice. Learners need to help one another and be helped by a teacher until they are able to be independent learners (Scott et al., 2008).

Dictionaries are a fairly sophisticated tool and learners need to be taught how to use them in order to fully benefit from them. Hunt and Beglar (1998, p. 6) advise that learners can make good use of a dictionary by simply doing the following:

- Learning the symbols and what information a dictionary can offer.
- Practising looking up words with many entries.

- Using all the information given before deciding on the meaning of a word.
- Knowing the value of good sentence examples.
- Checking the word in its original context before deciding on its meaning.

While there is no simple, mechanical way to learn new words, each of the strategies mentioned can help in improving vocabulary. Dictionary skills are just one strategy for word learning but it is important to ensure that dictionaries are in classrooms as a viable tool for reading and language learning.

## **2.6 Vocabulary learning and dictionaries in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS)**

The South African Education Department curriculum statement for additional language learners emphasizes the need for learners to know the structure and use of words, to be able to use visual, symbolic and language skills and to have strategies whereby they can help themselves in order to be able to communicate effectively. There is little evidence of attention to explicit vocabulary teaching which is important in rural/ semi-rural schools where the children begin school with limited vocabulary in their home language. Without explicit vocabulary development the learners may not be able to achieve the appropriate comprehension skills for their grade which ultimately affects their overall academic achievement (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004).

The RNCS, Grades R-9 (schools) Teacher's Guide for the Development of Learning Programmes, Languages, envisages literacy in English as an additional language building on home language literacy:

- The First Additional Language assumes that learners do not necessarily have any knowledge of the language taken at First Additional level when they arrive at school. The curriculum starts by developing learners' ability to understand and speak the language, and as such develops literacy. Learners are able to transfer the literacies they have acquired in their Home Language to their First Additional Language. The curriculum provides strong support for those learners who will use their First Additional Language as the Language of Learning and Teaching at some point in the GET band. By the end of Grade 9, these learners should be able

to use their Home and First Additional Languages effectively and with confidence for a variety of purposes, including learning.

(p. 20)

However, it is harder to achieve high levels of competency in English First Additional Language in contexts where English is not the LoLT. The learners in such contexts do not have opportunities to use English in their different subject lessons.

**Learning Outcome 6** in the RNCS for additional language Grades R-9 states:

**Language structure and use:**

- \* The learner will know and be able to use the sounds, **words** and grammar of the language to create and interpret texts [My emphasis].
- \* A good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is essential for fluent reading, writing and speech. Grammar and **vocabulary should be taught in context**, and integrated with reading, writing, listening and speaking [My emphasis].

(p. 85)

One of the principles of teaching language in the RNCS is:

- \* **Strategies** should be taught so that learners can become independent language learners [My emphasis].

The following outcomes for grade 7 in the RNCS Grades R-9 (schools) languages English First Additional language make specific reference to vocabulary but only Learning Outcome 6 mentions vocabulary development.

**Learning Outcome 3:**

- \* Show some understanding of how reference books work:
  - Uses contents page and index to find information;
  - Uses a dictionary: understands dictionary entry (spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, meaning);**
  - Uses a simple thesaurus.**
- \* **Demonstrates a reading vocabulary of between 4000 and 5500 common words** [My emphasis].

(p. 100)

**Learning outcome 5:**

- \* **Uses language and literacy across the curriculum:  
Understands some concepts from other Learning Areas and uses the vocabulary associated with them in the additional language (e.g. 'trade' in Economic and Management Sciences) [My emphasis].**
- (p. 106)

**Learning outcome 6:**

- \* **Expands vocabulary (e.g. by working with word families: happy, unhappy, happiness, unhappiness, happily).**
  - \* **Demonstrates an understanding of between 4000 and 6500 common spoken words in context by the end of Grade 7 [My emphasis].**
- (p. 108; 110)

Using the curriculum statement as a guide, I realised that emphasis needed to be placed on teaching vocabulary and providing strategies whereby the learners could help themselves. Teaching of vocabulary needs to take place, particularly in rural/semi-rural schools where the children have limited exposure to English in order to achieve the appropriate comprehension skills for their grade, which ultimately affects their overall academic achievement (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004). Where English is the LoLT, words are constantly explained by teachers (and not only language teachers), however in the school where I did my research few of the learners experience English being used communicatively outside the English class, thus making explicit intervention a necessity.

I focused on dictionary skills as an aspect of vocabulary development because of the positive benefits to an additional language learner and because it is a requirement of the curriculum.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have focused on research which has explored the importance of vocabulary learning and literacy. Vocabulary development is critically important when learning to read and write, particularly in an additional language.

I have discussed the relevance of explicit vocabulary teaching in a South African context. I mention many practical methods which teachers can use when teaching vocabulary. Many of the ideas stress the importance of vocabulary learning strategies, particularly dictionary skills.

I have shown how the Revised National Curriculum highlights vocabulary and dictionary skills in the learning of English as an additional language.

In chapter 3 I explain why I chose to implement a vocabulary learning programme and why Action Research was my methodology of choice.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I describe the research design of the study. I chose Action Research as my methodology and thus give the characteristics of Action Research and justify why it was my method of choice. I give some background to the site of my study and the participants. I give an outline of how I approached the lessons and what data collection techniques I used. I then show how I considered the ethical standards, validity and any limitations of the research. I conclude by attempting to align the goals of my research with Action Research.

### **3.2 Action Research**

Action Research does not start with any predetermined plan or a hypothesis which needs to be proven. A possible solution to a problem can be explored, data collected and evaluated and possible changes or recommendations made (McNiff, 2002). The researcher, who is both a participant and observer, works through cycles of intervention, taking note of the issue or problem as it unfolds and seeing how the situation could be improved. Elliott (1991) emphasises that the process of working towards a practical solution to improve a situation, is of interest to the researcher and is as important as the product. The end results are not of prime concern but rather making meaningful observations during the development is the main interest (McKernan, 1991).

My goal was to critically analyse my implementation of a vocabulary development programme and determine to what extent the learners had benefited. Action Research suited my research as I was focused on a single classroom and my area of interest was my instructional strategy. I wanted to address a problem in a situation specific to me which was to understand my own perspective of the issue, rather than one of the English department or of the school I was working in as a volunteer.

### **3.2.1 Reflective practice**

A central concept in Action Research is praxis where neither the process nor the goal is a fixed variable but changes with "interpretation, understanding and application in one unified process" (Gadamer, 1979, p. 272). Reflecting on the product and the process, Schon (1994) calls 'Reflective Practice' while Elliott (1991) calls it 'Action Research'.

Reflection after each cycle, together with relevant feedback, informs the planning of the next cycle. Feedback can be self-reflection or in collaboration with the learners, other professionals or outsiders. The success of Action Research depends on being able to critically reflect at all stages on the process and to make any necessary changes. Kemmis (1983) stresses the importance of self-reflection for teachers (as cited in Hopkins, 2008, pp. 52-3). The ongoing, critical reflection on teaching practice is important for professional development, curriculum development and improved educational practice. The teacher's aims and methodologies could change as the process takes place.

Above all Action Research is about gaining personal understanding and self-improvement in a professional sense. In an educational environment this would be to understand one's own teaching practice with the ultimate goal being to benefit the learners. Having identified a problem with the pupils' literacy, I devised and implemented a vocabulary development programme focusing on dictionary skills. With rigorous research and inquiry, I assessed the effect of the intervention through what Koshy (2005) describes as "better understanding, improvement, reform, problem-solving, step-by-step process and modification" (p. 9).

### **3.2.2 Series of successive cycles**

Ebbutt, as cited in Hopkins, (2008, pp. 52-3) describes Action Research as a "series of successive cycles" allowing for evaluative feedback, through observation and critical reflection, between each cycle while Koshy (2005) emphasizes the process of self-reflective spirals. No part of the process should be rigid and predetermined but each

cycle should be allowed to unfold in its own way, contributing to the method, data and interpretation of the next cycle. Elliot (1991) warns that self-monitoring can help a teacher anticipate developments but certainly not predict them.

The flexible nature of Action Research means no one model needs to be strictly adhered to though in my study I leaned towards Kurt Lewin's (1948) model of a 'spiral of cycles' of reflection - identifying a problem, implementing some way of acting on the problem, observing and analyzing with critical reflection, and repeating the cycle through each lesson of the research programme (Kemmis, 1980; McNiff, 2002). Each of my lessons was followed by post-lesson reflection using feedback from the research participants as well as my own reflections on what had worked and what needed improving. I constantly evaluated what I was doing and modified the lessons when necessary with each lesson as a separate cycle informing the next (McNiff, 2002).

I began the vocabulary development programme with an idea of what I wanted to achieve in the ten lessons and I planned the first two lessons. I did not set out with a set of ten pre-prepared lessons but each of the lessons evolved as the project proceeded as each was a flexible cycle on which the next lesson was built. I evaluated each of the ten lessons from the point of view of how much the learners had gained from the lesson, whether they had understood the concept I wished them to learn and how effective I had been in my teaching. Looking at the positive and negative outcomes, I saw an immediate need to moderate my approach to the lessons in terms of what I had hoped to achieve. The data collected, as well as my own reflections, were an important part of my determining what strategies to implement in the next lesson. The ten lessons of the programme formed a series of ten cycles of intervention each highlighting how I could improve my teaching of dictionary skills (Hopkins, 2008).

### **3.2.3 Individual Action Research**

Action Research can be collaborative, participative or individual. The people working with the researcher in a collaborative or participatory method, who are an important

part of the research, could be the learners in the class, other members of staff or external observers. The method I used for my research was individual Action Research with a participative dimension (Arias 1995; Calhoun, 1993; Warner & Adams, 1996). The learners and the class teacher were involved in my research as active participants and provided data and feedback in their written and oral responses to the lessons but were not part of the planning or decision making processes as in collaborative research.

Although I initially wanted this to be a collaborative effort with the class teacher, I could see this was not feasible. As I was only a part-time, voluntary helper at the school I could not collaborate with the teacher as an equal partner. The class teacher and I were not employed as colleagues in a working relationship where suggestions and criticisms could have been made easily between both of us. The fact that I was doing this research through a university made the teacher see me as something of a specialist, as the expert in the classroom. Although he did make a few significant suggestions he preferred to tell me that my lessons were fine and that I knew what I was doing.

As we would not be looking at each other's teaching strategies nor doing the research with combined goals, I felt it would be better to make it an individual research project but I anticipated meaningful input from the teacher as a participant in the research. His participation was helpful in that he video-filmed the lessons and gave some feedback. Kvale (2002) considered any investigation in the classroom without input from the classroom practitioner as being invalid and unreliable (as cited in Elton-Chalcraft, Hansen & Twiselton, 2008). This was of concern to me but as a part-time, voluntary practitioner I believe the project did have relevance, particularly in evaluating the value of my role in this classroom.

Elliott (1991) stresses that Action Research allows one to validate educational theory through practice. Evaluating the success of an intervention and sharing any knowledge gained could inform other educators in similar situations (Hopkins, 2008).

### **3.3 The teacher and Action Research**

#### **3.3.1 Professional development**

Action Research is especially relevant to a teacher in the classroom as the focus of the research is looking closely and critically at a particular problem being encountered in the teacher's own situation. Elliott (1991) explains that a necessary precondition of Action Research is the need to initiate change, preferably by the class teacher.

Through inquiry and reflection, a teacher could investigate an area of concern needing some sort of intervention. I hoped to fulfil this by developing and implementing a response to the curriculum through my own experience in this classroom.

Ferrance (2000) describes Action Research as real and immediate action taking place with the possibility of solutions while the research is being undertaken. In evaluating the programme of lessons and my implementation of them any changes needed in my teaching method could be applied immediately.

Even in an informal sense the cyclical processes of Action Research could be beneficial to teachers as they plan their lessons. Constantly reflecting on lessons, teachers can adapt them for each different class of learners in a cyclical pattern of action, reflection, adaptation and action. Teachers' constant, rigorous reflection on their practice is an essential part of their professional development (McKernan, 1991).

Hopkins (2008) prefers the term "classroom research" as he points out that teachers are constantly researching their classroom methods which could be helpful to themselves and their colleagues if analysed as a formal piece of research. The teacher's research need not focus on a specific problem but may be to better understand the teaching situation and to see if there is room for improvement in an interesting and relevant context to fit in with the required teaching and learning of the school. Constantly looking at one's own classroom teaching to see what works and what does not work is a practical way to look for improvement (McNiff, 2002).

I wanted to investigate the problem of English literacy for additional language learners in the classroom and whether I could effectively address this issue. Action was taken by implementing a vocabulary development programme with each lesson fitting into the cyclical process of Action Research. I was able to personally reflect on the process in a meaningful and analytical way. Furthering my understanding of my part in addressing the question of literacy in the educational context in which I was working, contributed to my professional development. Some of my long-held attitudes to my teaching processes and certain expectations I had as an educator had to be deconstructed.

### **3.3.2 Curriculum development**

Action Research has gained momentum in South Africa as teachers have been encouraged to be part of curriculum development. The participatory and democratic approach to teaching requires that teachers should continually be monitoring and reflecting on their own teaching methods and approach to lessons. Classroom Research should be an ongoing process. If there is the possibility of an action which could affect positive change this could be a source of motivation for research to take place. There may be a gap between what is happening in the class and what should be happening, which Hopkins (2008) calls a "Performance Gap".

### **3.4 Why Action Research?**

I chose to do Action Research because I wanted to research an educational problem in an immediate situation, evaluate my teaching methods and to consider practical solutions (Hopkins, 2008). I was motivated by Kurt Lewin (1948) who wrote: "Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, as cited in Janse van Rensburg, 1994, p.1).

For some time the question of literacy in South African schools has been a source of discussion in education circles. I had not had much experience as a teacher of English First Additional Language and I was concerned about what could be done to address the problem, which could help the learners with whom I was interacting. I wanted to

look critically and objectively at my approach to literacy and the curriculum, and I decided Action Research in curriculum intervention would suit my goals.

The flexibility of Action Research suited my project as it allowed me to adapt the process according to the needs of the situation. I approached the problem of low literacy levels with the group of grade 7 learners I was teaching by looking at explicit teaching of vocabulary and introducing this class to dictionaries to see if I could affect change in their vocabulary development. Although I was always conscious of teaching the learners how to use a dictionary, I was more interested in the process and improving my own understanding and practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

I wanted to understand the effectiveness of my teaching in this situation and for this reason I decided to work within the paradigm of Action Research.

This methodology allowed me to look at the problem of literacy in a specific educational environment and to consider the explicit teaching of vocabulary to these additional language learners, assessing my teaching methods. I did not approach the lessons with a tried and tested plan but through trial and error created my own programme. Through self-reflection, observation of the class, the learners' participation and input from the class teacher, I hoped to gain a better understanding of my teaching of vocabulary to this class. As I was teaching at the school once a week, I was able to implement the research project while teaching the curriculum, and I hoped to affect some positive change in my teaching of the curriculum (Nation, 2002).

My research fulfilled Elliott's definition of Action Research where he describes it as integrating "teaching and teacher development, curriculum development and evaluation, research and philosophical reflection, into a unified conception of a reflective educational practice" (Elliott, 1991, p. 54). My teaching and the pupils' learning was the focal point of the research (Hopkins, 2008). This practical and critically reflective process had a direct impact on my teaching.

While dictionary use was the main focus of each lesson, I also included other important vocabulary learning strategies like the use of repetition; multiple exposures

to vocabulary items; involving the learners in active participation and using rich contexts. Each lesson had an interactive-learning component, an oral component and a written task. These written exercises provided evidence of whether the learners understood what was being taught and if learning had taken place. When the majority of the class was not able to show satisfactory understanding, adjustments to subsequent lessons were made.

Learners should be active respondents in any educational research and the success of any teaching programme should be evaluated in a real situation (Hopkins, 2008). McKernan (1991) also stresses that educational theories can only be validated through practice. I could not have predicted the reality of the educational value of the lessons without seeing them in action in a real context.

Elliott (1991) sees Action Research as ultimately influencing educational practice, through philosophical reflection. Observing and reflecting on the educational quality of the learners' experiences in this classroom was of particular importance. Reflecting on the research influenced my teaching of vocabulary.

The difficulty I found with using Action Research was that I had to look objectively, subjectively and critically at myself. I had to create, observe and critically explain my own practice as the subject and the object of the research. I had to question my preconceived ideas about this teaching situation and to radically change some of my ideas. I had difficulty in starting the project without a fixed plan of action but rather to allow the process to dictate its own steps, taking a change in direction when necessary. A further difficulty of Action Research is knowing what data to collect and how to analyze it as qualitative research (Janse van Rensburg, 2001).

### **3.5 Research site and participants**

I chose to do my research with a particular group of grade 7s at a semi-rural school for several reasons. My research came from within the context of the school where I supported the English teacher by taking the grade 7 class for one English First Additional language lesson per week, and I was therefore able to use these lesson

times to implement my research project. The school was close to where I lived making the site both purposeful and convenient.

Although the research was based in a specific context the inquiry went beyond the classroom. In this case there were interesting factors to consider such as the learners having Afrikaans or isiXhosa as home languages; that the language of learning and teaching was Afrikaans and that the learners had limited exposure to English in their communities and at school.

I wanted to see how effectively I could apply an aspect of the grade 7 curriculum, dictionary skills, in such circumstances.

I have described the community, the school and the learners in some detail in chapter 1.

### **3.6 Design of lessons**

I started the vocabulary development programme with the first two lessons planned. In these two lessons I reminded the learners of the alphabet and looked at how words can be listed in an alphabetical order. I then introduced them to the dictionary, its layout and potential for use. Each subsequent lesson was planned according to what had been achieved in the previous lesson (See Appendices 3-7 for lesson plans).

Once the dictionaries had been introduced, each learner had a dictionary to refer to in order to participate in the lesson. The lessons consisted of oral and written work (See Appendices 8-10 for task sheets).

### **3.7 Dictionaries**

The Revised National Curriculum for English First Additional Language Grades R-9 (2002) requires grade 7 learners to show some understanding of how reference books work and in particular to know how to use a dictionary (spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, meaning).

While the Education Department compiles the curriculum, the teacher needs to turn the curriculum requirements into lessons (Hopkins, 2008). There is no one ideal method, but an ever-changing approach to teaching strategies allowed me to use my own creativity in applying the curriculum and at the same time analyse the outcomes for future lessons.

The school had limited resources, particularly in the form of books, and no dictionaries. The project would not have been possible without access to dictionaries. I approached the Ndlambe Education Trust in Kenton who, in response to my request, donated twenty-five Longman's school dictionaries and five Oxford multilingual dictionaries for South African primary schools.

Dictionaries come in many formats and where schools are linked to the internet, electronic dictionaries are popular. In most rural/semi-rural South African schools the pupils do not have access to computers and dictionaries in book form are the only option.

I considered my choice of dictionary using the following criteria suggested by Wright (1998):

- The specific language level: primary school/ additional language learners
- Simple definitions using just 2,000 common words
- Phonetic pronunciation
- Simple grammatical information with example sentences showing the word used in context
- Some illustrations of words

The Longman South African school dictionary fitted these requirements, with definitions for 40 000 words, phrases and examples.

The South African Oxford multilingual primary dictionary, which is aimed at additional language learners from grades 4 to 7, was a useful backup. Each word is followed by its part of speech, a simple explanation and the word used in a sentence, and its equivalent in Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu and Siswati. The design of the pages, interspersed with illustrations, makes it appealing and easy to read. However, it

is limited to 1,500 English words and therefore cannot be relied on to answer all vocabulary queries.

### **3.8 Data**

The results of Action Research cannot simply be based on opinions. Once the purpose and focus of the research has been identified it is necessary to consider what data will be used to validate the research and how this can be attained. The results need to be analysed according to rigorous scientific principles (McNiff, 2002). The data which results from the participation and observation is qualitative rather than quantitative, where the researcher is looking for meaning in what unfolds and must consider which data would be most applicable and manageable. The data can be from journals and field notes, video and audio tapes, task sheets, questionnaires, or other reliable sources (Gillham, 2000)

I used the following data sources in my research:

#### **3.8.1 Observation**

The class teacher video-recorded the lessons which allowed me to observe them objectively, to take note of anything I might have missed while giving the lessons and to take note of any patterns which might have emerged in the lessons. I was able to observe the learners' participation in the lessons and to hear their oral responses as well as observe my input. I had hoped to have stimulated recall discussions with the teacher using the video of the lesson but this was not possible due to his time constraints.

A member of staff from Rhodes University came to a pilot lesson which the teacher filmed while learning how to use the camera. I found it difficult to explain how I wanted him to film the lessons because of his inexperience with this media and so there was a lot of wasted footage. Although the teacher was nervous about filming the lessons as he did not feel competent, I was glad to have his participation by doing the video recordings of seven of the lessons.

The teacher was not always able to be in the class filming as he was sometimes called away for part or all of the lesson. I left the camera running on its own at these times and this worked quite well although it could only film one particular group. When the teacher was able to be in the class it was important for him to do the filming as it gave him a reason to be part of the lesson. His participation and presence were important as I felt he needed to know what I was doing with the class and to be involved in the project. His positive reaction made me believe he felt the learners were learning something worthwhile in these lessons.

### **3.8.2 Written and oral responses**

The learners were given written tasks to do on the content of the lessons. I was able to assess their understanding and progress from these tasks which helped me plan the following lesson.

The pupils started a vocabulary list of new words in the back of their class exercise books.

### **3.8.3 Personal journal**

I reflected on each lesson and commented on what happened in the classroom in my journal as soon as possible after the lesson so as not to forget details. Positive and negative, general or specific comments were noted, for example an observation of a particular child's reaction or participation in the lesson. The journal was a reminder of my observations made in each lesson and was useful in helping me think about how I should approach the next lesson. My personal reflections gave me a better understanding of my teaching practice by looking at my methods objectively which influenced my approach to the problem of literacy.

### **3.8.4 Group interviews**

Hopkins (2008) suggests that interviews with three or four learners are the most productive. He advises that the researcher should be relaxed and remain neutral and for the participants to understand that there is no right or wrong in the discussion. I had small group discussions with three learners from the class after each of my lessons. I asked them to reflect on the lesson and to give me feedback on the positive and negative aspects of the lesson.

The small group discussions were audio-recorded which enabled me to revisit them later to assist me in my reflections on the lessons.

Each group was asked three open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview:

- i) What did you learn today?
- ii) What did you find easy in this lesson?
- iii) What was difficult in this lesson?

The class teacher found it difficult to commit himself to time after school to revisit the videos for stimulated recall discussion so I was limited to a quick response directly following the lesson. He was embarrassed at times about his filming abilities and this distracted him from commenting on the lesson. I felt he was uncomfortable engaging in critical discussion with me, which was unfortunate as I really wanted to probe more deeply to elicit constructive criticism and positive ideas from him.

### **3.8.5 Questionnaires**

In an educational environment it is important to use the learners as active respondents. In order for the feedback to be meaningful all participants need to be aware of the intended outcome of the lesson and what specific aspects of the lesson they should be focusing on in their assessment. At the end of two of the lessons the learners gave written responses to questions asking for feedback on the lessons.

A final questionnaire with three simple questions was given to the learners after the last lesson for feedback on what they had learnt during the programme. The questions were written in English and Afrikaans and the learners were invited to respond in either language. The questionnaire allowed the learners to comment on the lessons which they may not have felt comfortable doing orally.

I gave a questionnaire to the teacher after the ninth lesson asking for his feedback on the vocabulary development programme. He completed this questionnaire in his own time without the anxiety of a formal interview situation. I hoped he would feel more comfortable making comments and criticism on paper rather than directly to me. However, his answers were brief and did not help me look more critically at my teaching methods.

### **3.9 Validity**

While the learning for the teacher is an important part of the process, the impact on the pupils and the success of the learning of any teaching programme should be assessed. The research programme is valid if it helps guide future practice and knowledge. Any significant outcomes of Action Research and how these were arrived at should be shared with others so the learning can continue. Whether the results of such research would have any influence on others is difficult to determine because individual Action Research is unique to a particular person in a particular situation and no generalizations can be made on the grounds of the research (McNiff, 2002). The research is, however, legitimate and can contribute to action taken by other educators. Somekh (2006) warns that "because of its contextualized nature, knowledge generated from Action Research is cautious in its claims, sensitive to variations and open to reinterpretation in new contexts" (p. 28).

The programme's validity was supported by the fact that I was not an outsider or stranger doing research with the class over a period of five weeks. I had been in the school for six months in 2008 and with this particular class for the first term of 2009. The teacher and the learners were, therefore, accustomed to my being in the classroom and so did not find my presence or what I was doing a distraction.

The work covered in the first term was an important preamble to the vocabulary development project. At the beginning of the first term the class teacher and I discussed what he wanted me to concentrate on with reference to the curriculum. Occasionally he asked me to do a specific task like a reading assessment or a poetry exercise. I only took one lesson a week of the additional language period and I did not discuss with him what he taught in the other lessons. He did not stay in the classroom while I was teaching (except during the research programme) as this was a valuable time for him to catch up on other school matters.

When reflecting on each lesson I used the knowledge, skills and values required by the assessment standards of the National Curriculum Statement as a guide. In order to validate the research I used triangulation to monitor the project by collecting data from a variety of sources (Elliott, 1991; Gillham, 2000).

### **3.10 Ethics**

I had a meeting with the Principal and the class teacher before starting the project where I explained what I planned to do for my research and asked for their permission and comments. They were most cooperative and keen for me to go ahead with the project. I also told them that an education trust had sponsored a set of dictionaries for the class. We discussed where these should be kept.

At the beginning of the second term I gave letters outlining my research intentions to the Principal of the school, the chair of the governing body, the class teacher and to each of the learners' parents or guardians. (See Appendix 1-2). The letters to the parents were in less detail than to the other recipients and were translated into Afrikaans as the school's medium of communication. All were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

I followed Hopkins (2008) guidelines to ensure that an ethical protocol was followed:

- The research ensured integrity and quality.

- All participants were informed about the purpose and methods of the research and exactly what their participation involved.
- Participants were ensured anonymity and confidentiality.
- All relevant permission was obtained.
- No harm came to any of the participants.

I could not ask for voluntary participation from the learners as the research was conducted during school lesson times. The learners were not, however, forced to do the worksheets or to give written or oral responses to questions. They participated in the lessons as they would have done in their regular English class.

### **3.11 Goals and limitations**

The goal of my research was to understand and improve my teaching and the pupils' learning. My observations were subjective and my own self-understanding and value base were crucial to the development of the project if it were going to influence some sort of change in my teaching methods and improve my practice (McNiff, 2002; Somekh, 2006). The outcomes should positively benefit the learners in the process and perhaps be useful to other teachers (Kemmis, as cited by Hopkins, 2008).

Action Research allowed me to gain a better understanding of the learning needs of this class and to look more closely at my contribution in this teaching context as a part-time, voluntary teacher (McNiff, 2002; Hopkins, 2008).

In retrospect I would have preferred the research to have been a collaborative effort with greater input from the teacher. I would have liked to have gained more insight from him into the problems encountered by him and these learners in teaching and acquiring English as an additional language. As I am not a full-time, employed member of staff, I worked in isolation and this left a gap in my understanding.

### **3.12 Conclusion**

I started this chapter by defining Action Research in its broadest sense. I then narrowed this down to show how I applied this methodology to my own research,

using individual Action Research. I brought particular attention to the fact that this was a method appropriate for my professional development as a teacher doing research in the classroom.

I gave a brief background to the research site and participants in the research. I described my approach to the lessons and the selection of the dictionaries. I discussed my data sources and explained how I used triangulation to validate any claims I have made in the discussion in chapter 4.

I show that all ethical issues were considered and finally revisit the goals and limitations of this project.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I provide a brief overview of the ten lessons on dictionary skills to give an indication of how the lessons developed and changed as I worked through the programme. I discuss the outcomes of the programme, which highlight my disrupted assumptions and I show how these impacted on my teaching methods. The last section discusses to what extent the learners were able to meet the curriculum requirements for vocabulary and reference books.

### **4.2 Overview of the lessons**

#### **4.2.1 Preparation**

Before starting on the vocabulary development programme, focusing on dictionary skills, I did some preliminary work with the class which I thought would be beneficial for my research project. In the first term of 2009 I revised parts of speech. While the learners should have covered these in earlier grades, they were not able to identify nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. I spent some time on this as I hoped to work with parts of speech as an aspect of dictionary use and to show how this information can be useful when reading and writing in English.

I asked the learners to write a paragraph on each of two different topics. I then looked at how many nouns, verbs and adjectives each learner had used. The paragraphs varied from about half a page of writing in fairly competent English to just a few sentences with limited vocabulary, which gave some indication of the different levels of competence in terms of the learners' word knowledge. (see Table 1). This was a useful guide when I divided the class into groups as these vocabulary tallies did roughly indicate the literacy levels of each learner.

**Table 1: Vocabulary tallies**

<b>STORY ONE</b>	<b>NOUNS</b>	<b>VERBS</b>	<b>ADJECTIVES</b>	<b>STORY TWO</b>	<b>NOUNS</b>	<b>VERBS</b>	<b>ADJECTIVES</b>
<b>Pupil with the highest score</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>Pupil with the highest score</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Pupil with the lowest score</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Pupil with the lowest score</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>

### **4.2.2 The lessons**

The programme began with a simple revision of the alphabet in order to understand how to work with referencing. The class recited the alphabet orally and I followed this up with a work sheet involving placing words in alphabetical order. (See Appendix 8). The learners then looked up words in the dictionary, seeing how quickly they could find them. Guide words, definitions, pronunciation and spelling were explained. Once the class was able to look up definitions of words, I introduced them to keeping wordlists in their class exercise books in order to improve their vocabulary.

A breakdown of the lessons is given in Table 2. The times given for completion of tasks are approximate as the lessons were not always a full forty minutes.

**Table 2: Outline of lessons**

Lesson	Lesson plan	Task	Time for task
1 & 2	<p><b>*Revise the alphabet</b> orally with examples of alphabetical order on board</p> <p>*write comments on lesson</p>	<p>*Oral responses</p> <p>*Worksheet - simple exercises using alphabet</p> <p>*Written comments on lesson (Appendix 6)</p>	<p>*30 minutes</p> <p>*40 minutes</p> <p>*10 min.</p>
3 & 4	<p><b>*Introduction to dictionaries</b> - layout and basic terminology</p> <p>*Start word list</p>	<p>*Explanation of terminology - look at various functions</p> <p>*worksheet on guidewords and spelling (Appendix 7)</p> <p>*look up two words and write these with definitions in word lists</p>	<p>*40 min</p> <p>*25 min</p> <p>*15 min</p>
5 & 6	<p><b>*Using a dictionary</b> - consolidate lesson 3 &amp; 4</p> <p>*Words with multiple entries</p>	<p>*Oral response to see who can find a word first</p> <p>*Worksheet - matching columns; multiple entry word (Appendix 8)</p>	<p>*15 min</p> <p>*65 min</p>
7	<p>*Practise looking up meanings of words</p>	<p>*Write definitions of 12 selected words into word lists</p> <p>*Write each word in a sentence showing meaning</p>	<p>*40 min</p>
8	<p>*Practise putting words in alphabetical order</p>	<p>*Put three words, starting with the same letter, in alphabetical order using dictionary to check</p> <p>*Looked at themselves on film</p>	<p>*30 min</p> <p>*10 min</p>
9	<p>*Find meaning of words in context</p>	<p>Examine meaning of words in context - Worksheet (Appendix 9)</p>	<p>40 min</p>
10	<p>*Questionnaire</p> <p>*Complete word lists</p>	<p>*Fill in questionnaire</p> <p>*Continue with words from lesson 7 (Appendix 10)</p>	<p>*40 min</p> <p>*Used remaining time of lesson</p>

## **4.3 Outcomes**

While working through the vocabulary programme I kept a detailed journal of my reflections after each lesson. Not only did this allow me to think deeply about each lesson before planning the next, but also provided the means to revisit the programme as a whole and to determine its impact on my approach to the lessons. I began the ten lessons with a fair idea of what I hoped to achieve and had a rough guide as to what I would include in the lessons. My planning was influenced by my experience as an English home language teacher but I soon found that I could not simply apply my teaching methods as a home language teacher to a class of additional language learners. Many of my expectations and assumptions were misguided and I needed to continually rethink my teaching strategies.

### **4.3.1 Disrupted assumptions**

#### **4.3.1.1 Expectations based on previous experience**

The main impact of this research was the extent to which my preconceived ideas and assumptions were challenged. My experience as a home language teacher had not prepared me for teaching English as an additional language. I was not sure how to cope with a class where some of the learners could not understand or speak any English and others only had a limited understanding.

I was only able to cover one small part of what I had hoped to. I had anticipated being able to teach the learners to use a dictionary to look up definitions, check spelling, use different parts of speech for the same word and perhaps to look at words used idiomatically. However, I spent the majority of the lessons on how to look up words and just touched on being able to check spelling. Only after the eighth lesson did I feel that the majority of learners in the class were able to find a word in the dictionary fairly quickly.

I needed to do many more practice exercises than I had expected. I was frustrated that I only felt ready to move on to words in context in the eighth lesson. This did not leave enough lessons to teach dictionary skills in the depth I had intended. I was not

satisfied when I reached the end of the ten-lesson programme, as I felt as though the concept of the dictionary had only briefly been touched on and that a foundation for further use had not been achieved. I would need to constantly return to vocabulary development and the use of dictionaries in subsequent cycles of teaching.

I will now discuss my disrupted assumptions which impacted on the outcomes of the research under theme headings.

i) **Learners' competence in English**

I expected the learners to have a better grasp of English. In the few lessons I had had with them in the first term, I was aware that their knowledge of English was limited but I had not recognised to what extent.

The learners were not used to listening to a whole lesson spoken in English. Only after the first few lessons did I realise that a further knock-on effect of their poor level of English was that often they did not understand my explanations and instructions. I continually asked the class if they understood and reminded them to ask if they did not, though to question me or to admit to not understanding seemed problematic for them. They may have been uncomfortable speaking to me in English or, because of their limited English, knowing what they did not understand or phrasing a question asking for clarification would have been impossible. In the home language classes I had taught most learners did not feel awkward asking for further explanation when a point was not clear which made it easier to know how to proceed with the lesson.

The video-recordings allowed me to reflect on the learners' participation in the lesson. Initially there were few individual responses to questions I asked but the learners were comfortable giving answers as a group, for example reciting the alphabet together. Individual learners may have been reticent to answer the questions because they did not know the answers but were more likely too shy to answer in English. Perhaps they were more accustomed to answering as a group in other lessons. As a native speaker of English I may have spoken more quickly than their class teacher making it difficult for the learners to keep up with the level and pace of the lessons.

I experienced a similar problem with the small group discussions in that the learners were not forthcoming in the discussions about the lessons. Perhaps the language I used was difficult to understand and expecting a response in English may have been both difficult and intimidating. They were therefore reticent in answering my questions and tended to answer 'Yes' to most of the questions. There were instances when the learners felt that some of the lesson had been difficult but were then not able to elaborate on this. They were encouraging in that they often smiled joyfully when I asked if they enjoyed the lesson. Their responses may have been more spontaneous if the discussions had been in Afrikaans.

In one of the early lessons the class teacher gave me some good, critical feedback when he commented that some of the words I used when explaining to the class were difficult for them to understand. For example in reviewing the video tape I saw that I was using words and phrases such as I was *surprised*; looks like a *trumpet*; might be *confusing*; this is *a bit tricky*; sure means *certain* to happen; *definitely*; *not exactly* and *use words in expressions*. He was comfortable with the speed at which I talked to the class but felt I needed to use simpler words. From then on I was conscious of trying to use very basic language.

I also realised from the video recordings that I needed to talk less and to engage the class in activities more. Brief explanations followed by a short exercise would probably have been more manageable for the learners. When I gave too much information or jumped from one topic to another the learners became restless, particularly as I was not speaking in their home language. I felt I needed to speak more slowly and to give less information.

Two of the girls who appeared to be more competent learners responded positively in the group discussion after the third lesson. They were more forthcoming and said they had enjoyed the lessons and liked the explanations. They were both excited to know how to use a dictionary. Three boys made up the small group discussion after the fourth lesson. Their responses were better than I had been getting. Perhaps they were more confident after four lessons and felt more ready to speak out or these three boys were just more confident learners. One learner said he understood me but did find the

work difficult. One group asked if I could speak in Afrikaans (the language of learning and teaching at this school) which would make it easier to understand me.

An example of the dialogue in these small group discussions went as follows;

**Me:** So, the way I taught the lesson today, was it easy to follow what I was saying or was it difficult?

**Learner:** Difficult.

**Me:** Can you tell me what was difficult? What did I do that made it difficult?

**Learner:** (Silence).

One of the learners thought he needed more time and I picked up on this as follows:

**Me:** Did you need more time to finish the work?

**Learner:** Yes

**Me:** Do you think on Thursday it would be better if we had more time to finish the (work)sheet, to go through it more carefully?

**Learner:** Yes.

**Me:** or can I just go on to the next thing 'cos you understand that?

**Learner:** Yes.

**Me:** I can. I don't need to go through it again. Did you finish those lists?

**Learner:** Yes.

**Me:** - the animals, the colours and the countries. Did you, and you? (to second learner)

**Learners:** Yes.

**Me:** and did you? (to third learner)

**Learner:** Not quite.

**Me:** Did you enjoy the lesson?

**Learners:** Yes.

**Me:** What did you enjoy?

**Learners:** (silence).

I felt that the learners were fairly nonplussed at my asking them to comment on my lessons. Perhaps giving a critical opinion, either positive or negative, particularly

about a lesson, had not been a factor in their education. The classes in this school are still teacher centred and I suspect are not encouraged to engage in discussion or argument.

My use of English was not only problematic in my oral conversation in the class but also in the wording of the instructions and questions on the worksheets. These were too complicated for these learners with their limited understanding, making it difficult for them to know what was required. An example of this was question 2 in the Lesson two worksheet. (See Figure 3a). The learners did not understand that 2 was just an instruction and that 2.1 and 2.2 referred to the word empty.

**Figure 3a: Extract from Worksheet 2**

- 2. Find the dictionary entry for the word empty. (pg 231)**
- 2.1 What part of speech is the word?**
- 2.2 Write the meaning of the word in definition 1:**
- 2.3 Write down the example sentence given for the second meaning of empty.**
- 2.4 Write a sentence of your own using the word empty.**

Perhaps if I had repeated the word 'empty' in 2.1 and 2.2 the questions would have been clearer (see Figure 3b).

**Figure 3b: Revised questions for Worksheet 2**

- 2. Find the word empty in the dictionary. (p. 231)**
- 2.1 What is the part of speech for the first meaning of empty?**
- 2.2 Write the meaning of empty in definition 1.**
- 2.3 Write the example sentence given for the second meaning of empty.**
- 2.4 Write a sentence of your own using the word empty.**

Many of the learners were unable to read in English. I had done an informal reading assessment with them at the end of the first term at the request of the class teacher and we had discussed my marks which he felt accurately reflected the learners' abilities. There were three or four learners who could not read at all, not even the simplest English words. As reading is a prerequisite for using a dictionary, this discovery

highlights the need for an initial diagnosis of the language and reading levels of students.

ii) **Learners' familiarity with the alphabet**

I had planned a quick revision of the alphabet which was not as easy as I had anticipated, forcing me to rethink my approach from the start. I had expected the learners to have a better understanding of the alphabet. When I revisited the video footage of the first lesson I could see that not all the learners were able to recite the alphabet and took their lead from those who could. I spent some time playing a game around where in the alphabet different letters came. Only then could I move on to see how quickly the learners could find, for example, H, N or R in the dictionaries. Many were not familiar with the concept of placing words in alphabetical order.

Simply looking up words was difficult for some which was a problem I had not anticipated. While I had planned to spend about 15 minutes revising the alphabet, expecting the learners to be familiar with it by Grade 7, I used a whole lesson and felt I still needed to follow up with more exercises looking up words alphabetically. It was only towards the end of the second lesson that I felt putting words into an alphabetical order was beginning to make sense. The learner whose name begins with W was obviously delighted to know why his name is always at the bottom of the list! I was able to reassure him by calling his attention to the fact that my name - Wells - is usually somewhere near the bottom, too. I wondered if he had found it frustrating not being able to ever move up the list no matter how hard he tried.

The teacher's feedback was that he liked the idea of using countries, colours and animals to put into an alphabetical list as he said the learners should have been familiar with these making the lesson more manageable.

I had taken many aspects of the learners' understanding for granted. My teaching experience was with privileged children who had a good understanding of English and would have been exposed to the alphabet in so many different ways from a very early age. I wondered to what extent these additional language learners may have been exposed to Afrikaans or isiXhosa texts or dictionaries either at home or at school. In

the small discussion groups only two claimed to have a dictionary at home, one an English dictionary and one an Afrikaans-English dictionary.

### iii) **Learners' and teacher's participation**

By the third lesson the learners were more ready to participate orally than they had in the first two lessons which may have been because they were more comfortable with me or because they had a better idea of what was expected of them in the lesson. The class teacher was positive in his response to the fifth lesson where he felt the learners were showing more understanding and clearly enjoyed doing the tasks. He thought there were only a few lagging but this was to be expected in a class of mixed abilities. He also made me feel positive about the lessons when he said he was picking up "some good tips".

Despite the language difficulties the learners gradually began to participate more enthusiastically, particularly in oral games using the dictionaries. I had several sessions where a "Hands up when you find ..." approach was used. The pupils' ability to do the task, coupled with a hint of competitiveness made the learners eager participants. Perhaps the "hands up" approach and the atmosphere of playing a game made the learners feel more relaxed about participating rather than feeling anxious about possibly being called on individually. They approached the work sheets with similar enthusiasm.

A positive and rewarding outcome of the project was seeing the excitement in the learners when they were able to find a word in the dictionary, check the spelling and work out its meaning. Once a word and its meaning had been found, the learners were not particularly interested in exploring the word further, perhaps because they could not understand the information.

### iv) **Pacing of lessons**

Pacing was the one area where I had to adjust my teaching methodology the most because my initial training and most of my teaching experience, until a few years ago, was as a first language teacher. I assumed the learners had a better understanding of

English and so I expected to accomplish more in each lesson and much more in the overall programme. I realized that I had to speak more slowly and more directly, to give one, simple instruction at a time and to follow up with repeated practice exercises.

At the end of the second lesson I gave the class two tasks to do in one instruction: to copy a list of words from the board and when that was done to complete the three questions at the end of the first work sheet. I realized that I should have given one instruction and waited until that task was completed before going onto the next.

Only three learners managed the second instruction. Their comments were:

**Learner one:** *I did like the work.*

**Learner two:** *The first time I looked at the lesson I taught it was hard but I just looked at it it was very hard but Mrs. Wells explained it to us the it was hard as I taught it was, it was very easy and I just like these lesson very much.*

**Learner three:** *Today's lesson was hard from the start and the next second it was very easy and I enjoy that lesson it was good for all of us.*

The pace of the lessons was not dictated only by the learners' lack of English but also because I had presumed they were more familiar with some of the work I was going to cover. I thought the revision of the alphabet would take half a lesson, expecting the learners to be very familiar with it by grade 7. I used a whole lesson and felt I still needed to follow this up with more exercises using the alphabet.

While I had hoped to cover definitions, spelling, using different parts of speech for the same word and perhaps to look at words used idiomatically in the ten lessons, I actually spent the majority of the lessons on how to look up words and just touched on being able to check spelling. It took eight lessons to accomplish what I had expected to do in the first two lessons.

The slow pace of the lessons made me think more carefully as to how I should structure my lessons with additional language learners. While with home language learners I could use the last five to ten minutes doing a quick, random exercise, this did not work with these learners. While I thought I could end the lesson with the learners adding to their word lists or answering my evaluation questions, these exercises needed to be approached carefully and explained fully allowing plenty of time to complete.

I needed to rethink the level at which to pitch the lesson and my pacing of the lesson. I was used to teaching senior students who understood English and I needed to address my lack of experience with senior phase learners. My explanations and instructions needed to be simpler and to be given more slowly. I needed to repeat myself and to explain in different ways for the learners to understand me. The work sheets took much longer to work through than I had anticipated, which meant I had to carry much of one lesson over to the next. Although I allowed for more time to complete tasks as I worked through the project, I did not time the lessons well.

A factor which impacted on the pacing of my lessons was the delay in starting the lessons. After the first lesson I realized that I needed to have stationery ready and available. I expected grade 7 learners to be able to organize their stationery requirements quickly and easily. Time was wasted sharpening pencils and I had not anticipated that many would not have their own pencils and pens and it could take up to ten minutes to have all the learners settled with their books, a pencil and a dictionary ready to start the lesson. I provided the exercise books and kept these between lessons and the dictionaries were kept in the school office which did ensure that I had the books for each lesson, but these still had to be issued at the beginning of each lesson. It would have helped to have had a set of sharpened pencils for the class, which I could also have kept between lessons.

v) **Code-switching**

Much research has been done on the merits, or otherwise, of code-switching when teaching additional language learners. I thought I should stick strictly to English as I believed this should be the language of learning and teaching in an English lesson.

These learners needed all the exposure to English they could get as their home and school environments offered very little.

However, after the fourth lesson one of the learners in the small group discussions asked if I could teach the lesson in Afrikaans as it would be easier to understand me. Although more than half of the learners spoke isiXhosa as their mother tongue, they understood more Afrikaans than English as it is the language of learning and teaching at this school.

I then tried to give instructions in both English and Afrikaans. Although this was a great challenge for me as I have very limited Afrikaans, I felt as though more was being understood. The learners were amused at but always respectful of my attempts at speaking Afrikaans. I frequently asked them to help me when stuck on a word, which they clearly enjoyed.

As the learners' understanding of English was so limited it did make more sense to explain in both English and Afrikaans. Not only was more understood but my ineptitude in Afrikaans showed the learners that it was good to make an attempt to speak in an additional language, even with difficulty, and to ask for help when needed. Not being able to speak an additional language well need not be embarrassing. However they did continue to be shy to participate orally in class in either language.

I only realised towards the end of the programme how difficult it must have been to follow what I was saying as these learners seldom hear English spoken.

#### **4.4 Dictionaries**

Once we started working with the dictionaries I saw how unfamiliar the learners were with reference books. This book was not like any book they had seen before and it took longer than I had planned to introduce them to the layout and possibilities of a dictionary. I needed to understand that everything I was explaining was new to them.

Having introduced the learners to dictionaries I gave them the following four sentences to complete to see if they had grasped the principles of dictionaries:

1. I would generally use a dictionary to .....
2. One of the biggest problems I have with dictionaries is .....
3. What I find easy about using dictionaries is .....
4. What I need to practise more using a dictionary is .....

The following answers given in their responses show that most had understood the basics of using a dictionary to look up a word and possibly spelling but generally looking up a word was difficult, particularly long words and words with multiple meanings (the example 'anchor' was given by one learner).

**1. I would generally use a dictionary to ...**

- ❖ *See what do a word means or see how to spell it*
- ❖ *Help me fine the meaning of the words*
- ❖ *Look vo word wat I kat no in a dictionary*
- ❖ *Fine the words in the dictionary I kanth ander stand*
- ❖ *Look fore words dat I dont know*
- ❖ *To find the meaning of a word (four responses)*
- ❖ *Find some more words it good to use a dictionary becuase you must learn more about dictionary*

**2. One of the biggest problems I have with dictionaries is ...**

- ❖ *To find the word in the dictionarie*
- ❖ *The biggest problems whit the dictionary is viding the long words and the hard word*
- ❖ *If I don't fine de words that I look fore*
- ❖ *It's like when you come to alphabet A there is anchor 1 and anchor 2 that is my biggest problem I don't understand it*
- ❖ *Looking for the words it is hard to find the words it si not so easy to find the words*
- ❖ *Searching for the words*

### 3. What I find easy about using dictionaries is ...

- ❖ *The turning of the pages*
- ❖ *To find de words*
- ❖ *Is the meaning of the word*
- ❖ *It is easy when you look at the words and read of the words*
- ❖ *It is easy to find a word, because the words are wrighten alphabetikly*

### 4. What I need to practise more using a dictionary

- ❖ *I need to practice more about dictionary*
- ❖ *We need to learn more Afr word*
- ❖ *To find de words easy*
- ❖ *I need to practice to find a word quecly*
- ❖ *It good to learn and read in the dictionary wil give you everything you need its in*
- ❖ *Is to know how to look at some words quick*

Once the learners were able to find the alphabetical placing of words in the dictionary, for example all words beginning with 'd', a problem arose when they needed to go to second or third letters to place it alphabetically, example 'donkey' and 'dolphin'. Understanding, therefore, how a word will be found between the guide words at the top of the page was a difficult concept: that by scanning the guidewords they could easily and quickly find the page on which the word occurred. They would start at the beginning of a section and go through every word. I am sure with practice guidewords would eventually make sense.

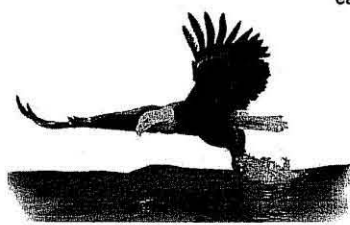
The most excitement exhibited by the learners was when each had a dictionary from which to work. They had been anticipating using the books and responded accordingly, which was a very positive moment for me. Where my expectations of the outcomes of this project were mostly too high, I had underestimated the learners' enthusiasm for learning and for being introduced to a new skill which they could use independently. Although I did not cover as much as I had hoped to with this class, I did feel that the learners were now aware of dictionaries and how they could be used.

I was most gratified when one learner told me that her mother had bought her her own dictionary.

I was really encouraged in the third term, when writing the letters included in this chapter two boys asked to use the dictionary to check some spellings.

Figure 4 An example page from Longman South African school dictionary

eagle
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eagle

**E** **eagle** /eeg-uhl/ *noun* a large bird that kills and eats small animals

**ear** /eer/ *noun* **1** one of the two parts of your body that you hear with ► see picture at HEAD **2** the top part of a plant such as wheat that contains grain **3** the ability to recognize or copy sounds: *I've always had an ear for accents.*

**earache** /eer-ayk/ *noun* a pain inside your ear

**ear drum** /eer-drum/ *noun* a thin piece of skin inside your ear that shakes when sounds reach it

**earl** /url/ *noun* a man with a high social rank

**earlobe** /eer-lohb/ *noun* the soft part at the bottom of your ear

**early** /url-i/ (earlier, earliest) *adjective, adverb* **1** near the beginning of something (ANTONYM late): *They plan to get married early next year.* **2** before the usual or expected time (ANTONYM late): *I was a few minutes early for my appointment.* ► see Thesaurus box at BEFORE **3** at the earliest = not before the time mentioned: *She won't be back until Tuesday at the earliest.* [Origin: Old English *ærlíce*]

**earmark** /eer-maak/ *verb* to decide that something will be used for a particular purpose: *The money had been earmarked for education.*

**earn** /urn/ *verb* **1** to receive money for work that you do: *She earns R200,000 a year.*

**2** to do something that makes you deserve and get something: *He has earned the respect of the rest of the team.* —**earner** *noun*: *He is the only wage earner in the family.*

**earnest** /urn-ist/ *adjective* **1** serious and sincere **2** in earnest = properly or seriously: *On Monday, your training begins in earnest.* —**earnestly** *adverb*

**earnings** /urn-ingz/ *noun* the money that you earn by working ► see Thesaurus box at PAY<sup>2</sup>

**earphones** /eer-fohnz/ *noun* equipment that you put in or over your ears to listen privately to music

**earplug** /eer-plug/ *noun* a small piece of rubber that you put into your ear to keep out noise

**earring** /eer-ing/ *noun* a piece of jewellery that you fasten to your ear ► see picture at JEWELLERY

**earshot** /eer-shot/ *noun* within earshot/out of earshot = near enough or not near enough to hear what someone is saying: *She waited until he was out of earshot before continuing.*

**ear-splitting** *adjective* very loud

**earth**<sup>1</sup> /urth/ *noun* **1** also the earth, the Earth the planet that we live on ► see WORLD: *The earth revolves around the sun.*

**Thesaurus**

**earth** the planet we live on: *The earth moves around the sun.*

**world** the planet we live on – used when you are thinking of the earth as a place where there are people and countries, mountains etc: *This is one of the most beautiful places in the world.*

You can use **earth** to mean “the world”:  
*It's the highest mountain on earth. • It's the highest mountain in the world.*

When you compare the earth's surface to the sea, use **land**: *They finally saw land after five weeks at sea.*

When you compare the earth's surface to the sky, use **earth**: *The space shuttle returned to earth safely.*

**Thesaurus**

**make** to earn or get money: *Deborah makes some money by babysitting.*

**get** (informal) to receive money for doing work or selling something: *How much did you get for mowing their lawns?*

**be paid/get paid** to be given money for doing a job: *I get paid R5.10 an hour.*

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65

As so many of the lessons were spent on simply learning to find words alphabetically and their definition, the more complicated task of moving from nouns to verbs with the same word was difficult to accomplish. I just tried to make the learners notice what part of speech a word was. As the concept of parts of speech did not mean much to most of the learners, I did not spend much time on this aspect of understanding words. Parts of speech and their functions is something which would need to be revisited in later cycles of vocabulary development.

## **4.5 Feedback affecting my teaching methods**

### **4.5.1 Task sheets**

Three task sheets covering work taught in class were given to the learners. The work was not always completed in one lesson and had to be carried over to the following lesson. I encountered many problems with the task sheets which I had not foreseen: the instructions were difficult for the learners to follow; they were not given the time they needed to work through the tasks which affected the outcome of the lessons; they were distracted by the worksheets and once these had been handed out they were more interested in them than in listening to me.

I encountered problems with these task sheets because of my assumption that these learners had a greater knowledge of English than they did. My instructions on the worksheets were often too complicated for their level of literacy, making it difficult for them to understand what was required. As I was used to devising task sheets for home language users, there was much wrong with the first task sheet I compiled: the vocabulary used in the questions; the wording of the questions and the length of the questions. (See Appendix 9). The instructions and questions needed to be as simple as possible, using vocabulary within the learners' understanding.

I felt as though these learners were not used to following written instructions as much of their work is given as a direct instruction to copy off the board. The tasks took much longer to complete than I had anticipated. I hoped to have worked through more

written tasks than I was able to. Perhaps shorter exercises interspersed in the lesson would have been more meaningful than doing a full task sheet at the end of the lesson.

The learners did not seem familiar with using tables or graphs to complete a question although tables and graphs are in the curriculum. An exercise where nouns and their definitions were mixed up in table form was puzzling for them. This was further complicated by the definitions which were not easy to understand although each of the words had been explained. (See Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Lesson two worksheet, question 1.**

Match the list in column A with its definition in column B. (The first one has been done for you).

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
<b>Guideword</b>	<b>a. short form of a word, e.g. – example</b>
<b>Headword</b>	<b>b. set of letters that are used when writing a language</b>
<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>c. the first word of a dictionary entry, usually in dark type</b>
<b>Parts of speech</b>	<b>d. a group of words which has a specific meaning e.g. <i>see red - get angry</i></b>
<b>Definition</b>	<b>e. different use of words in sentences e.g. noun, verb, adjective and adverb</b>
<b>Alphabet</b>	<b>f. the first and last entries on a page, usually printed at the top of the page</b>
<b>Idiom</b>	<b>g. phonetic spelling after the headword to show how to say a word</b>
<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>h. a sentence that explains the meaning of the word</b>

The learners responded enthusiastically to any pictures included in the worksheet. The first worksheet I gave them was a simple drawing which they used to list any nouns, adjectives and adverbs they could identify in the drawing and the second was an illustration of a group of young people with their names on their T-shirts. The task was to divide the group into two teams alphabetically. While many in the class had not finished the worksheet they had all attempted this particular exercise.

The work sheet in lesson 7 was an indication of how difficult it was for these learners to use a dictionary. In an earlier lesson the learners had each been given a word search to complete. The words all related to soccer. I gave them twelve of these words to look up the meanings in the dictionary and to simply copy these words and their meanings in their word lists. (see Table 3). They were then to use the words in sentences to show understanding of the meanings. (see Table 4).

**Table 3: The number of definitions entered in the learners' wordlists out of a possible twelve.**

<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Learners</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 – 3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>

**Table 4: The number of sentences written out of a possible twelve.**

<b>Sentences</b>	<b>Learners</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>

Although these words may have been difficult for the learners, the exercise was about finding the word in the dictionary and copying its meaning into their word lists. Using these words in sentences was more difficult and I would have thought there would have been a greater discrepancy in the results. I was surprised to find the highest number of definitions was 4 while one learner had managed 7 sentences. These results, after seven lessons, showed that I needed to give more time to complete tasks and to allow for repeated practice of what had been covered in the lesson.

Having read an extract from the book "Jaws", I gave the learners five words from the passage to look up their meanings. Each of the learners had their own copy of the passage and this exercise required them to consider the words in context.

The five words in context were:

- a) A hundred yards away from the shore, the fish felt a change in the sea.
- b) Its nerves could feel the movements in the water, and
- c) The nerves sent signals to the brain.
- d) She stopped now and then to check her position by the lights in the house.
- e) The sweeps of its tail got faster.

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These words should not have been difficult for grade 7 learners but proved problematic when there was more than one definition for the same word, particularly when the word was not used in a direct or literal sense. The fact that more than half the group did three or more words showed some positive progress. (See Table 5)

**Table 5: Number of words from extract looked up by learners**

<b>Words</b>	<b>Learners</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>

Despite the difficulties the learners did enjoy the task sheets. They received them with a sense of anticipation and excitement. They did not have text books in their English class and much of their work was copied off the board so these task sheets added a different dimension. A problem was that some learners wrote the same answers as each other. This was fine when working in groups, as I expected them to share their knowledge, however it was not possible to know how much one or other of the learners had understood.

While the task sheets were not always satisfactorily completed, often due to lack of time, I did get a sense of what had been achieved in the lesson from what the learners had done. Their responses were interesting and a reminder of the wide discrepancies in ability in the class. The work sheets provided valuable, qualitative data when I

reflected on the lesson. They helped highlight my mistaken assumptions and gave me direction as how to approach the subsequent lessons.

#### 4.5.2 Feedback from questionnaires

I was expecting much richer feedback from the participants. Their written responses to questions about the lessons were fuller than their oral responses in the small group discussions although not all questions were completed by all the learners.

Three questions were given at the end of the lesson on a worksheet asking for written responses:

1. What did you learn in today's lesson?
2. What did you find most difficult or hard to do?
3. What did you enjoy doing most in this lesson?

The responses to the first question gave some indication that much had been learnt. Many of the learners found the task of listing ten countries, ten colours and ten animals being the difficult part of the lesson rather than putting the lists into alphabetical order. I was not sure what to make of the responses to the third question except their enthusiasm for what they had enjoyed doing.

##### 1. What did you learn in today's lesson?

- ❖ *About alphabet. The lesson was very good today. (Many of the learners wrote an answer similar to this).*
- ❖ *The work was nas. I am so happie vo the wik the aft noon.*
- ❖ *I did learn the names*
- ❖ *I learn a both how to read. I learn a both how to say the alphabet. And i learn how to spel but not realy.*
- ❖ *I learned to put word ito alphabetical words*
- ❖ *That lesson we learn it was good and it was difficult. I was enjoining it*

**2. What did you find most difficult or hard to do?**

- ❖ *Questions was little bet hard.*
- ❖ *The questions and spelling*
- ❖ *It was nat I kat do mo*
- ❖ *The difficult thing I learned is about countries.*
- ❖ *The 5 vowel letters in English*
- ❖ *All the names of the colour*
- ❖ *Its hard to anser the words*
- ❖ *The spelling was very difficult ten animals*
- ❖ *I just found one thing hard just the different animals. The othe's where very easy*
- ❖ *The hard thing to do it was fast and the other things was hard*

**3. What did you enjoy doing most in this lesson?**

- ❖ *I in joy the lesson today.*
- ❖ *The alphabet, the questions*
- ❖ *I lik the six kis (the illustration of the six team members).*
- ❖ *I enjoyed many things like animals, colours and countries.*
- ❖ *I that enjoy how quickly can you aswer these questions.*
- ❖ *Writing all about the alphabet*
- ❖ *I did learn the Team A and Team B*
- ❖ *I love the alphabet and the names of the week and the names of the year.*
- ❖ *The pictures in the paper*
- ❖ *I enjoyed to write and I love the writing*
- ❖ *I enjoy all those lesson I was enjoying it that was great.*

The learners seemed confused as to why I was asking them for their response to the lessons. Their answers were brief or left blank and sometimes two learners gave the same response. It was likely that reading and writing the questions in English was

difficult. In order to get meaningful feedback I should have given the class more time to answer the questions and been clearer in my instructions.

At the end of the project I gave the learners a questionnaire to fill in where I had written the questions in English and Afrikaans and invited them to answer in either language. I also asked the class teacher to explain in Afrikaans what I wanted. The answers did not show much more fluency in Afrikaans than in English. The answers in either English or Afrikaans were mostly brief and inarticulate. I have bolded those answers which made sense and showed some understanding of what I had aimed to achieve with the learners.

### Final Questionnaire

#### 1. What can you do with a dictionary?

- **Ek kan klomp woorde leer in die 'n dictionary.** Ek kan woorde soek wat ek nie ge kan did nie.
- We learn about dictionary. How lean use dictionary an we learn about word in dictionary. And was so very easy in the dictionary and the words is so very easy.
- The dictionary was not too hat to vin words in the dictionary. In the dictionary was words wat me mak nie (?)
- Ek mak die word eek doen fra of sphis reg ek strehf en die (?) ek lester (?)
- Ek kan woorde kysunderw (?) wat ek in word dictionary. Asseflief ant (?) af doen.
- **Jy kan vir woorde soek was jy nog nooit in jou lewe van gewaar het nie.** You can find an word did you don't now wat it mean.
- **Ek ken woorde kry in die wordeboek wat Ek nie verstaan nie wat ek in die lesse gekry het.**
- Wat ons ler en die dictionary is maak.
- We learn about dictionary **how to use a dictionary** and we learn more about word the name of something.
- **As daar n word is wat ek nie vir staan nie kan ek in die wordeboek kyk.**
- Ek kan soek vir woorde. **Ek kan woorde soek wat ek nie vir staan nie.**
- We how learn a dictionary Longman and the dictionary South Africa schools dictionary the school learning the dictionary are our dictionary we must learning our dictionary school.
- Ek het in die boek geleer waar al die woorde in is en ek het ook in die wordeboek geleer.
- **You can use a dictionary to look up word and the meaning of it.**
- **Ek het kan met n worde boek woorde op soek** en hoe om dit ti doen.

- I can find word that I want to find but its not that easy its abeat hard to use a dictionary I still next time to look at it.
- **You can look up words with a dictionary,**

## 2. **What did you learn in these dictionary lessons?**

- Ek het ge leer van noun a noun is mens se name en ek het ge leer om die worde to skryf.
- **We learn about words in the dictionary** and the words did you say. We learn was miss well about dictionary her talk about dictionary.
- The work was not to hat, the work was nas.
- Ek ked geleer die worde altepet worde. Ek leister mey onderwyser se ek leer may ferk en mey onerwyser se na ek mut don meg ferk.
- **Ek het geleer wordeboek lesse geleer**
- Ek het geleer was die volgende woorde meen **En ek het geleer hoe om to spel.**
- **Ek het geleer van worde wat in the wordeboek is wat ek nie verstan nie maar nou verstan ek dit.**
- We learn about more to use a dictionary and we learn about word the name of something someone.
- **Ek het geleer hoe om n word to soek in die worde boek.**
- Ek het baaie geleer en ek het geleer van ander soar te woorde.
- We learning the words you say and you look the book that word you have to say and must listen the teacher he talking about the dictionary was miss walls tell about the dictionary if you don't learn a dictionary is your choce.
- **Ek het ook in die wordeboek geleeer vir nouns, verb, adjective** en ek het ook in die wordeboek uit gewind waar die worde is.
- **I learned about the word I didn't understand.**
- **Ek het geleer hoe om in a worde boek die worde opte soek en ek het geleer hoe om a wordeboek tegebruik.**
- **I learned about word that I didn't know** I use to hear people caling names that I didn't know but now I know it just like pahaps I didn't know that word but now I know what it means it means maybe.
- That you can up words that you don't understand and no what does it means.

## 3. **What did you not understand in these lessons? What was not easy?**

- **Did was nie maklik nie om did to spell nie** en om n sin to ?
- Not easy about the dictionary is not easy about dictionary the dictionary was no easy,
- **Ek het nie geweet nie wat die werk was** nie sor nie is lek om met a dictionary werk.
- Ek kan hierdie lesse verstaan wat ? maklik nie.
- Ek het nie geverstaan hoe om to spel nie maar nou weet ek. **Die spelling was nie so maklik nie en lees.**

- **Ek het in hierdie lesse nie n word verstaan nie maar ek het in die dictionary ge kyk.**
- **What was not easy it was to look at the word you cant find sometimes** its easy sometimes it hard to find more words in the dictionary but the lesson it easy to learn if you learn you will tried to find words in the dictionary.
- **Daar was worde wat ek nie vir staan nie** maar dit was n kleinbietjiemaklik kir uit my
- Hoe om by die woorde yt te kom, hoe om die name van die woorde te kry.
- Not easy the dictionary if you learn the dictionary about the dictionary is ni maklik was ge leer die dictionary is maklik.
- **Ek het alls die lesse vir staan niks swaar nie.**
- **The most thing i didn't understand is the meaning of the words that we learned about** and I use the dictionary.
- **Ek kan nooit the engles vir staan nie.**
- **What I didn't understand was to find word and the head word I didn't understand what head word means but now I know what is a head word.**
- **I do not understand the long words in the dictionary.**

Although I found it difficult to make sense of many of the responses, the questionnaires allowed me another means to reflect on the programme and I believe there were some meaningful responses showing what the learners had gained from it.

### **4.5.3 Group work**

Although I had often used group work in my teaching, I had not thought to use this method with this class. The class teacher suggested I put the learners into groups which he pointed out is a method recommended in Outcomes Based Education, the approach that informs the south African curriculum. I kept the learners in their groups for most of the subsequent lessons as I was able to spend time with each group rather than addressing the class as a whole. The learners had a wide range of abilities and the group work allowed the brighter learners to extend themselves while helping the weaker learners who were then not being left behind. A class of 17 learners and the necessary classroom space made it practically possible to divide the class into a few small groups.

Not only was working in groups helpful when I was explaining aspects of dictionary use but it also facilitated my giving feedback on the tasks. I could address individual problems within the group rather than trying to cover all the problems with the whole

class. Explaining to a group of four rather than to the whole class was more satisfactory.

The video-recordings showed the learners interacting well with each other in their small groups as they completed the work sheets. While I could not always hear what language they were using in these discussions, they were free to use Afrikaans or isiXhosa if they wished to. Generally they were inclined to use their home language when not communicating with me. The security of working in a small group as opposed to participating in front of the whole class, as well as the more able learners being able to help the weaker were positive steps in working through the tasks.

A problem with the group work was the difficulty in gauging individual progress. The class was able to work at a faster pace and was more animated about the work, which might have been because the more able learners dominated the groups and it seemed as though all were keeping up. Their positive response may have been because they were able to accomplish something as a group rather than feeling insecure and despondent when challenged as individuals. The group work gave the learners an opportunity to engage with the dictionaries in English and they were able to help each other.

## **4.6 Vocabulary development**

### **4.6.1 Word lists**

I introduced the class to keeping a word list in the back of their English exercise books. The word lists were an add-on activity at the end of a lesson but I should initially have given a lesson on how to use a word list and why it is important to keep one. I was not methodical about adding words to the list and only implemented this when the lesson and time allowed, which was infrequently. I did not expect the learners to take so long to complete the work sheets and I was often rushed at the end of a lesson and so the word list was neglected. The word lists were written in the back of their English exercise books so that it could be added to in their regular classes.

Although I did two specific tasks adding words to the word list, I think such an activity should become routine in every English lesson. Perhaps a word relevant to one of the lessons of the day could be explored at the beginning of the day. Keeping a word list is a habit which requires discipline and I did not introduce the discipline adequately nor did I allow time for its development. Once adding to the word lists becomes a habit, it would probably be easier to make it part of the lesson. The learners were not inclined to add to their list independently as this was an unfamiliar routine for them.

Table 6 shows the number of words entered by the learners at the end of the ten lesson programme.

**Table 6: Number of words entered in word lists per learner**

Words in lists	Number of Learners
16 - 19	1
8	3
5 - 7	4
4	2
2	1

#### **4.7 Thank you letters**

At the end of the programme the learners were shown how to write a letter of thanks. They each wrote to thank the trust which had donated the dictionaries. I have included these here not only to show the learners' appreciation but also to show the different levels of literacy. I find it interesting to see the use of English and Afrikaans in the writing and the influence of Afrikaans words and spelling on the English. I have typed these samples exactly as they were written. (See Appendix 11 for the original letters)

- 1) *We want to Thank you for the dictionaries you gave us. We appreciate you helping us to learn more about English. This is The first time we have used dictionaries Thanks again because we are learning to spell and to read from The Dictionaries We Thank you so much*

- 2) *Thank you for giving the dictionaries to our school to learn words you don't understand. We like to have a dictionary because it's the first time we have to learn from a dictionary how to find words we don't understand.*
- 3) *Thank you sir that you gave this dictionary to us we like so many things in the dictionary thanks for the school there are so many things that you give us food to eat.*
- 4) *I just want to thank you for the dictionaries that you gave to our school. The dictionary helps us to learn more about English. The dictionary helps us to learn new words and helps our spelling. This is the first time that I have used a dictionary. They also help us to read books.*
- 5) *Thank you for giving the dictionaries to our school. We are really appreciating the books. I have learnt a lot of new words and learnt how to spell and read in English. We are looking after the books very well and we are using them every day.*
- 6) *Thank you very much for the dictionaries you gave to our school. We help us to learn from the dictionaries words and help us to learn the dictionaries words. And thank you very much for giving us the dictionaries and help us to learn English. And very sad to give us the books. I can learn English words in the dictionaries. The dictionaries can help us thank you very much for supporting our school.*
- 7) *Thank you very much for giving our school dictionaries. This is our first time to learn new words from the dictionary. It helps us learn English and helps us with the spelling. We really appreciate it. It even helps us with reading books very well. Thank you very much.*
- 8) *Thank you for giving us the dictionaries. We have learnt words. They help us to learn English words. For the first time I read a book and I learn to spell and I learn new words God Blessing you for ever. I am God's Child Sunday School Thank you Sir.*
- 9) *Thank you for the dictionaries The dictionaries help me to learn my English and I love the dictionaries It help me to read books and to spell. I have learnt new words. Sir I love your dictionaries and thank you for giving it to the class. My class love the dictionaries. I have read a lot of dictionaries.*

- 10) *Thak you for giving my school dictionaries. The words in the dictionaries was so nas in a dictionary. I am so proud of the dictionaries. I love the English words in the dictionaries. I am so happy to have dictionaries in my class.*
- 11) *Thankyou for gave the dictionaries and it did help me a lot how to ride the words and it did help me how spellig is and dis book have leen me a lot.*
- 12) *I Would like to thank you for the dictionaries. We have learnt new words and it is helping us learn English and we have learnt meni things.*
- 13) *Thank you for giving us the books we in join it to read your books. And i want to thank you for the books we rait in to, the lesens is very good wat the teger is giving us and we in join it*
- 14) *Thank you for giving us the dictionaries at our school. Weh have learne new words wersgou to se die spelig.*

#### **4.8 To what extent were the learners able to meet curriculum requirements?**

The national Curriculum Statement Grades R-9, English First Additional Language, Assessment Standards for Grade 7 states:

##### **Learning Outcome 3: Reading and viewing**

- \* Demonstrates a reading vocabulary of between 4000 and 5500 common words. Learners who will study other Learning Areas through their additional language should aim for 5500 words.

##### **Learning Outcome 3 continued: Reading and viewing**

- \* Shows some understanding of how reference books work:
- \* uses contents page and index to find information;
- \* uses a dictionary: understands dictionary entry (spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, meaning);
- \* uses a simple thesaurus

Learning Outcome 3 would not be difficult if the learners had the word knowledge expected at this level. The most basic application of dictionary skills requires a fairly good vocabulary. Without this the information given for a word makes little sense. For many of these learners once a word had been found, making sense of the definition was difficult compounded by all the other information given for a word (despite the fact that the definitions were written within a 2,000 word vocabulary).

### **Learning Outcome 6: Language structure and use.**

- \* Demonstrates an understanding of between 4000 and 6500 common spoken words in context by the end of Grade 7. Learners who will do some of their learning through their additional language should aim for 6500 words.

The expected word knowledge in the curriculum for grade 7 was far from the reality in this class which was evident in their oral communication, responses to the task sheets and in their word lists. The learners had difficulty understanding the questions or instructions on the task sheets and their answers were very limited. Had they had a vocabulary of over 4000 words adding to their word lists would have been an easier task than it was. They needed more word knowledge to make sense of the vocabulary they were learning.

I found the word count for the paragraphs enlightening (see Table 1). While this is by no means a definitive piece of data, I was surprised that the best student only managed 33 nouns in his story.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

I have shown in this chapter to what extent the learners' limited English vocabulary was not what I expected and proved a difficult challenge as I worked through the vocabulary development programme. There was so much the learners were unable to do and I could not take for granted that any one step in the process would have been mastered in a previous class. I needed to slow down the whole process with a great

deal of repetition and reinforcement. I have used examples of learners' written responses as well as referred to their oral work to support my findings.

I have included the learners' responses to the questionnaire and their letters of thanks to show their positive reaction to being able to use a dictionary. Their enjoyment of discovering how to use dictionaries made me feel that it was worth persevering with vocabulary development and dictionary skills. I felt frustrated not being a full-time teacher where I could ensure these skills could be applied in all subject lessons.

The vocabulary development programme made me see some of the difficulties when implementing aspects of the curriculum in this school. My expectations of what could be achieved in a ten-lesson programme were unrealistic. I realized that in the time I had given for this project, I could only cover the very basics of dictionary skills and that these should not be taught in a block but throughout the year!

Although I had hoped to achieve much more the learners' enthusiasm was in itself a success of the exercise. While I encountered many difficulties implementing the programme, each of these contributed to my professional growth.

## CHAPTER 5

### 5.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I draw the thesis to a conclusion. I begin by discussing the key themes that emerged from the research, which were reported in Chapter 4. I suspect that the context in which I was working was fairly typical of many rural/semi-rural schools in South Africa and therefore my experiences may provide some insights into the teaching of English in such contexts.

Harley, Barasa, Bertram, Mattson and Pillay (2000) reveal the reality of some of the teaching contexts in South Africa as opposed to the theoretical expectations.

Policy describes the ideal teacher with clarity and precision, but does not see the real teacher and the cultural and material constraints imposed by the classroom reality clearly enough to understand what must be involved in achieving this ideal.

(p. 302)

There is general concern in South Africa about the pacing of learning and its impact on the implementation of the curriculum (Chisholm, 2005; Fleisch, 2008; Shalem & Hoadley, 2009). One of the main themes which emerged from my research was the constraints on the pacing of the lessons. Some of the factors discussed in this chapter which contributed to the problems I experienced with the pacing of the lessons were the learners' English knowledge and levels of literacy, code-switching, group teaching, school management and English resource material.

I then mention some limitations of the research, and conclude with some final words.

### 5.2 English proficiency in low-income, rural schools

Chall, Jacobs and Baldwin (1990) show how American pupils in low-income schools perform below the expected norms in national school assessments. In South Africa,

there is a large difference between levels of English attained by learners in middle-income schools and low-income schools and in achievement by learners in urban schools and rural/semi-rural schools (SACMEQ II, 2001). The learners' level of English proficiency in the school where I worked was lower than assumed by the curriculum for grade 7.

Significant research has been done on the negative effects of poverty on education, which shows that the reading age in poor, developing countries is on average four years behind that of developed countries (Chall et al., 1990). Fleisch (2007) points to the fact that in many schools in South Africa the learners are from socio-economically disadvantaged communities where they encounter "limited enriched language interactions" (p. 62). Shalem and Hoadley (2009) discuss the socio-economic community of the learners, the proficiency of the learners, the standard of the school and teachers as contributing factors to the effective teaching of the lessons.

Sailors, Hoffman and Matthee (2007) found that pupils from low-income schools that did well were exposed to good English texts, the teachers had good levels of English proficiency, there was good parent support at the schools and the schools had a definite English language policy, including the pupils only speaking English at break time.

The professional, education levels and economic situation of the parents has a direct bearing on children's verbal achievements (Chall et al., 1990). Thus I presume that the low English standard of the learners I worked with was fairly typical of learners in a low-income, semi-rural school where many parents are poorly educated and largely unemployed. The lack of literary support in the learners' homes adversely affects their potential academic achievement. These factors, beyond the teachers' control, influence how far and how fast the lessons can go.

### **5.3 Pacing of lessons**

Fleisch (2008) claims that although teachers plan their lessons and should set the pace of the lesson, in a low-income school the pace is largely determined by the limitations

of the slowest learners. The learners might not have reached the expected proficiency in English as required for each grade nor the necessary literacy levels of being able to read and write in English. The teachers allow time for these learners to understand the lesson and to complete tasks, even though some in the class may have completed the work.

Whereas in a middle-income school teachers can largely depend on the pupils having the necessary background knowledge and appropriate literacy levels for their grade, in a low-income school teachers cannot assume that the pupils will be similarly prepared. Mbelani (2007) found that his class of grade 10 learners had not done the required introduction to visual literacy as expected in the curriculum for grades 7 and 8. Many of the learners in my class were lacking knowledge about the alphabet and its possibility for listing and referencing which I presumed they would have by grade 7.

Shalem and Hoadley (2009) argue that teachers who are criticised for not doing enough in their classes "have to invest far more labour, and in fact produce more value than those teachers who generally escape such critiques." (p. 153). Rather than not having done enough preparation, I had to think about how to work with this class to make sure they understood the lesson. I found that my previous teaching experience was not helpful in coping with the problem of pacing. Mbelani (2007) also found he needed more lessons than anticipated to teach a section of the curriculum.

### **5.3.1 The effect of code-switching on pacing**

There is debate around the benefits of code-switching when teaching additional language learners, particularly in multi-lingual schools in South Africa (Faleni & Kgomoewana, 1993; Peires 1994). The new language policy views it in a positive light if it is used constructively as a scaffolding tool in content subjects but cautions against its use in a language class (Murray, 2002). Fleisch (2007) argues that there is the possibility that code-switching does not provide the learners with the necessary language for formal assessments.

Although in the Dinaledi project lecture notes (ISEA, 2007) it suggests that there may be times when code-switching could be useful, it also warns that "it reduces the learners' opportunities to listen to and speak English" (p. 11). Peires (1994) mentions those in education circles who disapprove of code-switching but she maintains that code-switching is widely used and can help learning.

Fleisch (2007) warns that using code-switching to translate every word can double the time it takes to teach a lesson. In order to make myself understood, I found I had to constantly explain myself in different ways, rephrasing what I was saying, which also slowed the pace of the lesson. The learners would often take a long time to respond as they thought how to express themselves in English or found the courage to do so. When the learners made me aware that they could not easily understand me, I tried using Afrikaans although this was a great challenge for me. I have very limited Afrikaans, which did curtail the amount of time I used code-switching in the lesson. I resorted to code-switching when I felt my input would be more comprehensible and it would help keep the pace of the lesson moving.

I was in a dilemma about whether to use both English and Afrikaans in the lessons or not. I could sense the pupils' helplessness when they could not understand me and in a way it was just easier to speak Afrikaans to them and encouraged more active engagement from them. I expect that if I were a full-time English teacher in this class, I would use less and less Afrikaans as their English improved. As these learners hear so little English, I think listening to a whole lesson in English must be very difficult. Unfortunately I was not able to speak to the isiXhosa speakers in their home language and so they had to cope with what little English or Afrikaans they understood. Although Felani and Kgomo (1993) argue that code-switching is for the teacher's sake rather than the learners', I found an added benefit of speaking Afrikaans was that the learners seemed to enjoy my attempts at explaining in their language of learning and teaching and their engagement with me in the lesson changed from confusion to participation.

### **5.3.2 Group work and pacing**

Mbelani (2007) used group work to some advantage in his lessons on visual literacy. While it helped keep the pace going with learners sharing resources, allowing for quicker distribution of materials and being able to attend to individual difficulties within the groups, he also found it problematic in that learners wasted time talking and getting on with the task. Wong Fillmore (1983) warns of the possibility of 'good teacher input' being replaced by 'junk peer input' (as cited by Huizenga, 1990, p. 144).

The Dinaledi project lecture notes (ISEA, 2007) give many positive points regarding working in groups: learners help each other to generate ideas; while learners may feel uncomfortable responding in front of the whole class they are less so in small groups and they learn to work co-operatively. However, there is the possibility that learners may not use the opportunity to practise their English but will converse in their home languages. They do need to be reminded to pace themselves and to keep focused on the task.

I found using groups worked well as it helped to keep the pace of the lesson moving. While the whole class was engaged in a task, with a stronger learner in each group to help the weaker learners, each group was able to set its own pace. I was able to address each small group, checking whether the members of the group understood what was to be done or giving individual feedback. I moved constantly between the groups to ensure that the work was being done and I was making regular contact with all the learners. I believe it also gave the more able learners a chance to extend themselves and gain some confidence by taking charge of the group.

Brophy (1986) supports co-operative learning as it increases "student interest in and valuing of subject matter, and increases in positive attitude and social interactions among students who differ in gender, race ethnicity, achievement levels and other characteristics." (p. 27).

### **5.3.3 The impact of school management and resources on pacing**

Chisholm, Hoadley, waKivulu, Brookes, Prinsloo, Kgobe, et al., (2005) describe the disruptions and loss of teaching time in South African schools, more so in rural/semi-rural than in urban contexts. They observed a constant flow of teachers and learners in and out of classes and time wasted between lessons. Mbelani (2007) lists several examples of disruptions which affected the pace of his lessons. These included lessons not starting on time for various reasons; learners being called out of class for non-academic activities and lack of resources (e.g. paper, glue, scissors and dictionaries).

In my experience, the bell marking the beginning or end of a lesson was unpredictable and learners sometimes came into the class late and had to be introduced to the lesson with as little disruption as possible. Absenteeism affected the pace of the lessons because often work had to be repeated for those who had missed a lesson. Exercise books and dictionaries had to be distributed taking up time at the beginning of every lesson. Learners did not always have the necessary stationery requirements, which in my lessons simply meant a pen or pencil. (Time was also spent waiting to borrow an eraser or ruler even when these were not necessary).

I was able to use the blackboard in the class but it was often covered with the work of other teachers which I did not feel I could erase. Without text books it takes time to write notes or exercises on the board. Fortunately because I had access to other printing facilities besides the one copier in the school office, I was able to use worksheets to a large extent which the learners seemed to enjoy. My class had no electric points so I was not able to use equipment like an overhead projector or computers.

## **5.4 Expectations of the curriculum in low-income schools**

The many difficulties encountered by rural teachers affect the possibility of working through the requirements of the curriculum. Shalem and Hoadley (2009) noted that "in a middle-class school setting the teacher has to expend far less effort in accomplishing the social and cognitive aims of the school curriculum than a teacher in a working-class school setting." (p. 122). Harley et al (2000) criticize policy because

it "assumes that the enterprise of teaching can be neatly packaged and efficiently managed in the implementation of official goals." (p. 299). I found there were many challenges which interrupted the success of achieving the goals.

Chall et al (1990) speak of pupils in low-income schools who in grade 4 are presented with vocabulary beyond their level of comprehension. Without the necessary literacy skills their reading and writing does not continue to develop at the required rate.

Prinsloo (2009) stresses how higher level learning depends on the foundation laid during these early learning years.

At the school which was the site of my research, English First Additional language is only introduced as a subject in grade 3, although there are curriculum assessment standards from grade R onwards. The time-table allocates 8, 50-minute lessons, per 10 day cycle from grade 3 to grade 7 inclusively. By the end of grade 7 the learners would have only covered 5 years of the curriculum instead of a possible 8 years.

English is also not the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) at this school.

Consider then that the curriculum is the same for English additional language learners who have been introduced to English in grade R and who are using English as the LoLT in all their subjects. Fiske and Ladd (2004) found in the review on Outcomes Based Education and Curriculum 2005 that "the impact of outcomes based education cannot be equal in unequal conditions." (p. 172).

Although there should be one curriculum for all, cognizance needs to be taken of the fact that this is not always practical. Shalem and Hoadley (2009) suggest a differentiated approach. A further practical consideration not taken into account in the curriculum policy is the availability of resources at the rural schools, for example the curriculum expects learners to know how to use the contents page and index in a reference book; to understand dictionary entries and to use a simple thesaurus. These skills are impossible to teach without reference books, dictionaries and thesauruses available to the learners, as was my situation, and thus I had to ensure a donation of dictionaries before I could begin the project. Similarly, Mbelani (2007) had difficulties with the resources required for teaching visual literacy in a rural school.

A "reading vocabulary of between 4 000 and 5 500 common words" and "between 4 000 and 6 500 common spoken words in context by the end of grade 7" is expected by the curriculum (Revised National Curriculum Statement R-9, 2002, pp. 100, 110 ). This is perhaps an unrealistic target in a semi-rural school where English as the additional language is not the LoLT. Children acquire this vocabulary only if they are reading extensively in English, and they will only need such an extensive vocabulary to understand the text books at grade 7 level if English is the LoLT. However where this is not the case, perhaps it would be more reasonable to allow the pupils to learn English as a second additional language where they are able to communicate in English but are not expected to achieve a high level of proficiency ( Teachers' guide for the Development of Learning Programmes - languages).

The question needs to be asked what level of proficiency the learners in this school need.

## **5.5 Limitations**

My research is limited in that I have presented one small picture of the actual circumstances of teaching English in a semi-rural school. Although I have attempted to see to what extent this reflects the findings of research on similar situations, I cannot comment on how widespread or general my experience is.

My own understanding of teaching in this environment was limited because of the lack of rich feedback from the participants in the research. The learners did not seem sure what I wanted from them in their discussions or were unwilling to give honest appraisals. I felt that engaging in critical debate was not familiar to these learners. My expectation of feedback being more freely given was also limited because of language difficulties.

## **5.6 Recommendations for further research**

There is much research which can be done on understanding the gap between the curriculum requirements with regard to English and their implementation in the low-income, rural/semi-rural schools. Although classroom research is possible, teachers

will be limited in overcoming the influence of the learners' home lives on their education.

While it is possible to improve some of the conditions in the classroom, such as exposing the learners to more English texts, it is almost impossible to affect change in the learners' homes. There needs to be more emphasis on developing the learners' mother tongue literacy in the homes with books and reading being part of a learner's early life. The parents need to take a more active interest in their children's school life and academics. They would then offer their children more support in terms of home work, attendance at school, punctuality and a positive desire to learn.

I believe there is potential for research to find ways to narrow the gap between the children's literacy experiences at home and in their communities and the expectations at school.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

The main impact of this research was the extent to which my preconceived ideas and assumptions were challenged. I began with a fairly idealistic notion of what I could achieve and I began the lessons confidently based on my experience as a qualified, experienced, English home-language teacher. I have shown in this chapter how I was not able to achieve what I set out to do as I was restricted by circumstances I had not anticipated.

I only understood the extent of my misconceptions once I had done the Action Research where I was able to examine the effects of my teaching in depth and to look for evidence of what I had achieved.

I suspect that voluntary teachers with similar backgrounds to mine may have the same difficulties. The context in which volunteers find themselves are present in the schools before they arrive, as is the pace at which lessons are comfortable. The challenge is to find ways of coping with the limitations.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Letters to the school

30 April, 2009

The Principal

Dear Sir,

I am registered as a part time student at Rhodes University. I have completed the first half of a Master's degree in Education which I started in January, 2008. I am now doing the research component required for completion of the degree. I am very grateful to you for allowing me to use your school for this.

The goal of my research is to look at developing English vocabulary in Grade 7 in collaboration with the class teacher. Because this is such a vast field I have decided to concentrate on dictionary skills as the focus of my study as this is a requirement in the curriculum. I would like to use two lessons a week for five weeks to implement the project. These would be the lessons time-tabled for English in the term calendar. I have asked the class teacher to video-tape the lessons and to have discussion with me after each lesson, giving critical comments and suggestions on the lesson. I will also be using the learners' written work and oral responses, in the class and in small group discussions, as part of the data to validate the research.

The school, class teacher and learners will remain anonymous in the final research report. I also understand that no member of your school is obliged to participate in this project but should do so voluntarily.

Thank you for showing such willingness to cooperate in this project.

Yours sincerely

30 April, 2009

The Grade 7 class teacher

Dear Sir,

I am registered as a part time student at Rhodes University. I have completed the first half of a Master's degree in Education which I started in January, 2008. I am now doing the research component required for completion of the degree. I am very grateful to you for agreeing to work in collaboration with me on this project.

The goal of my research is to look at developing English vocabulary in Grade 7 in collaboration with you, the class teacher. Because this is such a vast field I have decided to concentrate on dictionary skills as the focus of my study as this is a requirement in the curriculum. I would like to use two lessons a week for five weeks to implement the project. These would be the lessons time-tabled for English in the term calendar. I would like you to video-tape the lessons and to have discussion with me after each lesson, giving critical comments and suggestions on the lesson. I will also be using the learners' written work and oral responses, in the class and in small group discussions, as part of the data to validate the research.

You, the school and the learners will remain anonymous in the final research report.

Thank you for showing such willingness to cooperate in this project.

Yours sincerely

27 April, 2009

The Chair of the Governing Body

Dear Sir/ Ma'am,

I am registered as a part time student at Rhodes University. I have completed the first half of a Master's degree in Education which I started in January, 2008. I am now doing the research component required for completion of the degree. I have discussed with the Principal the possibility of using the Grade 7 class.

The goal of my research is to look at developing English vocabulary in Grade 7 in collaboration with the class teacher. Because this is such a vast field I have decided to concentrate on dictionary skills as the focus of my study as this is a requirement in the curriculum. I would like to use two lessons a week for five weeks to implement the project. These would be the lessons time-tabled for English in the term calendar. I have asked the class teacher to video-tape the lessons and to have discussion with me after each lesson, giving critical comments and suggestions on the lesson. I will also be using the learners' written work and oral responses, in the class and in small group discussions, as part of the data to validate the research.

The school, class teacher and learners will remain anonymous in the final research report. I also understand that no member of your school is obliged to participate in this project but should do so voluntarily.

I trust you will be happy for me to use the school for this project.

Yours sincerely

## Appendix 2: Letter to parents or guardian

30 April 2009

Geagte Ouer/Voog van .....

Ek studeer vir my Meestersgraad in Onderwys aan die Rhodes Universiteit. My navorsings vak is die ontwikkeling van woordeskat in Engels as 'n addisionele taal. Ek sal fokus op woordeboek vaardighede 'n verseiste iin Gr. 7 curriculum.

Ek sal 10 Engelse lesse met die Gr. 7 klas doen vir hierdie projek. Die skool en leerders sal anoniem bly en geen name en foto's sal in die verslag gebruik word nie.

Geneem is verplig om deel to neem nie, maar indien wel sal dit vrywillig wees. Indien u enige teenkating het dat u kind deelneem stel asb. Mr .....in kennis voor Donderdag 7 Mei 2009.

Baie dankie

Indie u enige navrae het kontak my asb: (number given)

Groete

30 April, 2009

Dear Parent/Guardian of .....,

I am studying for a Masters degree in Education at Rhodes University. The subject of my research is developing vocabulary in English as an additional language. I will be focusing on dictionary skills, a requirement in the Grade 7 curriculum.

I will be using 10 English lessons with the Grade 7 class for this project. The school and the learners will remain anonymous and no names or photographs will be used in the report.

No-one is obliged to participate but should do so voluntarily and happily. If you have any objection to your child participating please inform Mr ..... before Thursday, 7 May 2009. Thank you very much.

Should you have any queries please call me on:

Yours sincerely,

## Appendix 3: Lessons 1 & 2

### Grade 7 vocabulary development: dictionary skills

#### Lesson one

**Learning area:** Languages – English First Additional language

**Duration:** 40 minutes

**Grade:** 7

**Week:** 1

**Languages learning outcome: LO3: Reading and viewing**

**Assessment standards:**

- shows some understanding of how reference books work:
- uses a dictionary: understands dictionary entry (spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, meaning).

#### Lesson 1 & 2: The Alphabet

**Content:** Given exercises to assess knowledge of alphabet.\*

**Tasks:** To complete tasks individually and in pairs on the alphabet. See Lesson one Tasks

**Resources:** Worksheet

**Teaching approach:** Discuss what the alphabet is.

Orally revise the alphabet.

Do some examples on the board using learners' names.

Give the class time to complete the worksheet.

Mark it together orally.

Allow for time to write comments at end of lesson.

\**Dictionaries* by Jon Wright. Oxford University Press, 1998 (pp. 24-5).

## Appendix 4: Lessons 3 & 4

### Grade 7 dictionary skills: Lesson Plan Lessons 3 & 4

**Learning area:** Languages – English first additional language

**Duration:** 40 minutes

**Grade:** 7

**Week:** 2

**Languages learning outcome: LO3: Reading and viewing**

**Assessment standards:**

- shows some understanding of how reference books work:
- uses a dictionary: understands dictionary entry (spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, meaning).

#### **Lesson 3 & 4: Introduction to a dictionary**

**Content:** Terminology for basic dictionary use – headword; entry; pronunciation; spelling and meaning.

Basics possibilities of dictionaries.

**Tasks:** To apply what is being explained, each using own dictionary.

To write definitions in word list using the multilingual dictionary.

**Resources:** Dictionaries.

**Teaching approach:** Explain the layout of the dictionary and basic terminology.

Provide a glossary of dictionary terms.

Oral explanation and responses.

Hands-on practice.

\**Dictionaries* by Jon Wright. Oxford University Press, 1998 (pp24-5).

## Appendix 5: Lessons 5 & 6

### Grade 7 vocabulary development: dictionary skills Lesson five and six

**Learning area:** Languages – English First Additional language

**Duration:** 40 minutes

**Grade:** 7

**Week:** 3

**Languages learning outcome: LO3: Reading and viewing**

**Assessment standards:**

- shows some understanding of how reference books work:
- uses a dictionary: understands dictionary entry (spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, meaning).

**Lesson 5 & 6: Using a dictionary.**

**Content:** To familiarize learners with the layout, contents and terminology of a dictionary – practicing what was covered in lessons 2 & 3.

**Tasks:** Match dictionary terms with meanings using a page of the dictionary as an example. Jumbled sentences: why use a dictionary?\*

Exercises looking up information to answer questions on dictionary use.\*

**Resources:** Worksheet. Dictionary

**Teaching approach:**

Play around for a while practising finding the correct page. How quickly can you find a word?

\**Dictionaries* by Jon Wright. Oxford University Press 1998 (pp24-5).

*Information skills. Student workbook.* READ 1996 READ Educational Trust.

*South African Oxford dictionary workbook.* Daphne Paizee. Oxford university press.  
Southern African.

## Appendix 6: Lesson 7

### Grade 7 vocabulary development: dictionary skills Lesson seven

**Learning area:** Languages – English first additional language  
**Duration:** 40 minutes  
**Grade:** 7  
**Week:** 4

**Languages learning outcome: LO3: Reading and viewing**

**Assessment standards:**

- shows some understanding of how reference books work:
- uses of a dictionary: understand dictionary entry (spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, meaning).

**Lesson 7: Using a dictionary**

**Content:** Practising looking up the meaning of words

**Tasks:** To write definitions of words selected from the word search exercise into word list using an English dictionary.

**Resources:** English dictionaries.  
Word search list

**Teaching approach:** Explain exercise to each group separately  
Hands-on practice.

*\*Dictionaries* by Jon Wright. Oxford University Press, 1998 (pp24-5).

## Appendix 7: Lesson 8

### Grade 7 vocabulary development: dictionary skills Lesson eight

**Learning area:** Languages – English first additional language

**Duration:** 40 minutes

**Grade:** 7

**Week:** 4

**Languages learning outcome: LO3: Reading and viewing**

**Assessment standards:**

- shows some understanding of how reference books work:
- uses of a dictionary: understand dictionary entry (spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, meaning).

#### Lesson 8: Using a dictionary continued

**Content:** Practising looking up words alphabetically

**Tasks:** Using a dictionary to find the order in which words appear alphabetically

**Resources:** English dictionaries.

**Teaching approach:** Wrote 3 words on the board. Learners looked them up to see the order in which they appeared and raised their hands as soon as they knew.

*\*Dictionaries* by Jon Wright. Oxford University Press, 1998 (pp 24-5).

**Appendix 8:      Worksheet 1**

**LESSON ONE: WORKSHEET *The Alphabet***

Name.....

---

**Answer the following questions on this worksheet:**

1.      Write out the 26 letters of the alphabet in order: .....  
.....  
.....

---

2.      There are 5 vowel letters in English: o i a e u

Put the vowels in alphabetical order: 1: ..... 2: ..... 3: ..... 4: ..... 5: .....

---

3.      How quickly can you answer these questions?

3.1    What is the letter before z? .....

3.2    What is the letter after I ? .....

3.3    Which letter comes after Q? .....

3.4    Which consonants come before and after E? .....

3.5    What are the two letters after U? .....

3.6    Which letter is missing in the sequence: FGHIKLM? .....

3.7    Which letter is missing in this sequence: WUTSRQ? .....

4.1 Complete this list of the days of the week and put them in alphabetical order:

M .... nday. .... esday. .... nesday. .... rsday. .... iday.  
.... turday. .... nday.

4.1 Complete this list of the months of the year and put them in alphabetical order;

... an ... ry; ... eb ... uary; ... rch; ... p ... l; M ... ; ... ne;  
... ly; ... g ... st; ... tember; ... ober; ... ember;  
... ember;

---

5. Now write out in alphabetical order:

5.1 Six different colours .....

.....  
.....

5.2 Ten different animals.....

.....  
.....  
.....

5.2 Ten different countries .....

.....  
.....  
.....

Please answer the following questions:

1. What did you learn in today's lesson? .....

.....  
.....  
.....

2. What did you find most difficult or hard to do? .....

.....  
.....  
.....

3. What did you enjoy doing most in this lesson? .....

.....  
.....

## Appendix 9: Worksheet 2

### LESSON TWO: WORKSHEET

## *Dictionary layout and terminology*

Name .....

The following words help us know how to use a dictionary:

GUIDEWORD; HEADWORD; PRONUNCIATION; PARTS OF SPEECH;  
DEFINITION; ALPHABET; IDIOM; ABBREVIATION.

1. Match the list in column A with its definition in column B. (The first one has been done for you).

A	B
Guideword	<b>a.</b> short form of a word, eg - example
Headword	<b>b.</b> set of letters that are used when writing a language.
Pronunciation	<b>c.</b> the first word of a dictionary entry, usually in dark type.
Parts of speech	<b>d.</b> a group of words which has a specific meaning eg: <i>see red</i> – get angry
Definition	<b>e.</b> different use of words in sentences eg: noun, verb, adjective and adverb
Alphabet	<b>f.</b> the first and last entries on a page, usually printed at the top of the page.
Idiom	<b>g.</b> phonetic spelling after the headword to show how to say a word
Abbreviation	<b>h.</b> a sentence that explains the meaning of the word

2. Find the dictionary entry for the word **empty**. (pg 231)

2.1 What part of speech is this word? .....

2.2 Write the meaning of the word in **definition 1**:.....

.....

2.3 Write down the example sentence given for the second meaning of **empty**.

.....

2.4 Write a sentence of your own using the word **empty**. .....

2.5 What are the guidewords for pages 230 – 231? .....

2.6

**LOOK IT UP IN A DICTIONARY**

Put the words in these sentences in the right order:

- 1 what word that mean does?
- 2 do you how it spell?
- 3 pronounce it you do how?
- 4 the difference x what and y is between?
- 5 why up a look dictionary don't you in it?

---

Please answer the following questions:

1. I would generally use a dictionary to .....

.....  
.....

2. One of the biggest problems I have with dictionaries is .....

.....  
.....

3. What I find easy about using dictionaries is .....

.....  
.....

4. What I need to practice more using a dictionary .....

.....  
.....

## Appendix 10: Worksheet 3

### Guideword

Look for each word below in your dictionary. When you find it write down the page number and the two guidewords at the top of the pages.

<b>Example: chicken</b>	<b>Page 119</b>	<b>Cheerful and chimneypot</b>
Flower		
Pocket		
Test		
Definition		
Short		

### SPELLING

A. Using your dictionary find the word which is spelt correctly. Put a circle around the right one.

- |                |            |            |
|----------------|------------|------------|
| a) ador        | addore     | adore      |
| b) advize      | advise     | edvise     |
| c) airoplane   | aeroplain  | aeroplane  |
| d) admit       | admitt     | addmit     |
| e) adolesscent | adolescent | adolecsent |
| f) suppose     | supose     | surpose    |
| g) favure      | favour     | favor      |
| h) ferst       | furst      | first      |
| i) brother     | bruther    | brudder    |

B. Choose one of these words and write it in the back of your book. Write the meaning from the dictionary next to the word in your book.

## **Please will you answer these questions for me?**

1. Was it a good idea to teach dictionary skills for 10 lessons in a row or should I have spaced them further apart?
2. Please give a reason for your answer in 1.
3. Do you think you could use dictionaries in other subject lessons? How?
4. Did the lessons cover too much/ enough/ not enough? Were they too easy or too difficult? Please give some reasons for your answers.
5. Do you think it is necessary to teach English vocabulary to grade 7 learners? Why?
6. Do you have any other ideas as to how vocabulary could be taught?

## Appendix 11: Letter of thanks

I would like to thank you for the dictionaries. We have learnt many words and it is helping us learn English and we have learnt many things.

Thank you for the dictionaries. The dictionaries help me to learn my English and I love the dictionaries. It helps me to read books and to spell. I have learnt new words. Sir, I love your dictionaries and thank you for giving it to the class. My class loves the dictionaries. I have read a lot of dictionaries.

Thank you for giving us the books we can join it to read your books. And I want to thank you for the books we read in to, the lessons is very good and the teacher is giving us and we can join it.

Thank you for giving us the dictionaries at our school. We have learnt new words. We say to, Se die-spig spelig.

Thank you for giving the dictionaries to our school. We are really appreciating the books. I have learnt a lot of new words and learnt how to spell and read in English. We are looking after the book very well and we are using them every day.

Thank you very much for the dictionaries you gave to our school. We help us to learn from the dictionaries word and help us to can learn the dictionaries word. And thank you very much for giving us the dictionaries and help us to learn English. And very sad to give us the books. I can learn English words in the dictionaries. The dictionaries can help us thank you very much for supporting our school!

Thank you very much for giving our school dictionaries. This is our first time to learn new words from the dictionary. It helps us learn English and helps us with the spelling. We really appreciate it. It even helps us with reading books very well. Thank you very much.

Thank you for gave the dictionaries and it did help me a lot how to read the words and it did help with spelling is and this book have been me a lot.

DEAR SIR  
WE want to Thank you for the dictionaries you  
GAVE US. WE appreciate you helping us to  
learn more about English. This is the first time  
WE have used dictionaries Thanks again. Because  
WE are learning to spell and to read from  
THE DICTIONARIES WE THANK you so much

Thank you for giving the dictionaries to our school  
to learn words you don't understand. We like to  
have a dictionary because it's the best time we  
to learn from dictionary how to find words we  
under stand

Thanks you sir that you given this  
dictionary to us we like so many  
things in the dictionary thanks for  
the school there are so many  
things that you give us food to  
eat

I just want to thank you for the dictionaries that you  
gave to our school. The dictionary helps us to learn  
more about English. The dictionary helps us to learn new  
words and helps our spelling. This is the first time  
that I have used a dictionary. They also help us to  
read books.

Thank you for giving us the dictionaries. We have learnt  
words. They help us to learn English words. for the first time  
I read book and I learn to spell and I learn new words  
God Blessing you for ever. I am God's Child Sunday School