

Teachers' influence in English language learning: A quantitative analysis

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Abstract

Although many South African learners are not fluent in English, they are required to study subjects in this language due to resource limitations and the global importance of English for educational and career advancement. With this study we explored learners' perspectives on the influence of teachers in learning English as a second language, focusing on teacher competence, instructional strategies, and classroom practices. A quantitative research design was employed, targeting individuals who completed Matric (Grade 12) within the past 5 years. Data were collected via social media-based questionnaires, yielding 100 responses. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse Likert-scale items measuring teacher qualifications, subject knowledge, proficiency, and use of task-based learning. Findings reveal that while 56% of participants agreed their teachers were well qualified, 38% disagreed. Only 54% felt that their teachers provided comprehensible input, and 50% reported receiving feedback to improve their English. Furthermore, 44% indicated that task-based teaching was used, while 42% disagreed. These results highlight inconsistencies in teacher preparedness and instructional quality. We recommend enhancing teacher training and refining policies of the Department of Basic Education to strengthen English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and to improve literacy outcomes.

Keywords: English Second Language (ESL) learners; second language acquisition; second language learning; teachers

Introduction

Although mother-tongue education is widely acknowledged as pedagogically beneficial, persistent inequities involving indigenous languages, such as unequal resourcing, limited teacher training, and inadequate curriculum support, have sustained English as the dominant language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in South African schools. From Grade 4 onwards, the Department of Basic Education ([DBE], 2020) mandates English as the primary medium of instruction, despite policy commitments to multilingualism. This dominance is not merely a legacy of colonialism but also a strategic choice shaped by English's role in anti-apartheid mobilisation, its global economic utility, and its entrenched presence in governance, commerce and the media (Chetty & Mwepe, 2008; Wallace, 2023).

English functions as the language of assessment, textbooks, and cognitively demanding subjects, making proficiency essential for academic success (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). At the tertiary level, English remains the default LoLT, further reinforcing its gatekeeping role in higher education and the knowledge economy. In this context, learners with limited English proficiency face systemic barriers to achievement, as their academic performance is closely tied to their ability to comprehend and produce English. The knowledge economy, which prioritises intellectual capital and access to information, further amplifies the importance of English, especially in a developing country like South Africa where digital and economic participation often hinges on English fluency (Oxford Reference, 2023).

While multilingual education has gained attention in recent scholarship, few studies have examined the specific pedagogical and institutional factors contributing to learners' inadequate English proficiency – particularly the role of teachers in shaping language learning outcomes. Most existing research focuses on curriculum reform or language policy, with limited attention to the micro-level dynamics of classroom interaction and teacher effectiveness. Yet, teachers are central to the language acquisition process. They serve not only as facilitators of content but also as linguistic models, motivators and mediators of classroom discourse. Their qualifications, subject knowledge, language proficiency, instructional strategies, and feedback practices directly shape learners' experiences and outcomes.

In multilingual classrooms, where learners navigate complex linguistic landscapes, the teacher's ability to provide comprehensible input, encourage meaningful output, and employ task-based learning becomes even more pivotal (Ellis, 2003; Krashen, 1985; Swain, 1995). Teachers who lack fluency or pedagogical preparedness may inadvertently hinder learners' acquisition of English, while those who employ effective strategies can significantly enhance learner engagement and proficiency. Despite this, there remains a lack of empirical data on how learners perceive their teachers' influence in English language learning, particularly in South African contexts marked by linguistic diversity and educational inequality.

With this study we sought to fill that gap by investigating learners' perspectives on how their teachers have influenced their English language learning. Grounded in a quantitative research design, we targeted individuals who completed Matric within the past 5 years, capturing recent experiences across diverse educational settings. Specifically, we examined teacher-related factors such as qualifications and subject knowledge, English language

proficiency, use of comprehensible input and feedback, motivational strategies and learner engagement, application of task-based and interactive teaching methods.

By analysing learner responses to a structured questionnaire, we aimed to identify patterns in perceived teacher effectiveness and their correlation with English language outcomes. The findings inform recommendations for teacher training, curriculum development, and policy refinement within the DBE.

The objectives of this study were to

- 1) assess learners' perceptions of their teachers' competence and preparedness in teaching English as a second language;
- 2) evaluate the extent to which teachers employ effective pedagogical strategies, including task-based learning and comprehensible input;
- 3) examine the role of teacher feedback and motivational practices in supporting learner engagement and language development; and
- 4) generate evidence-based recommendations to enhance English language instruction and improve literacy outcomes in multilingual South African classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore learners' perspectives on how their teachers influenced their learning of English as a second language in South African schools. We aimed to understand the role of teachers in this context, particularly focusing on their effectiveness and proficiency in the teaching of English. By gathering data from recent matriculants through questionnaires, we sought to identify both positive and negative impacts of teachers on learners' English learning experiences. Ultimately, we recommend improving teacher training and refining educational policies to enhance English learning outcomes and literacy rates. The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section 2 contains the literature review. Section 3 details the research methodology, describing the procedures and steps used to gather and analyse the data. Sections 4 and 5 focus on presenting the results and discussing the findings. Finally, Section 6 concludes the study, summarising the key insights and implications derived from the research.

Literature Review

The acquisition of English as a second language in South African schools is shaped by structural, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic factors, with teachers playing a pivotal role in mediating learner outcomes. In this review we critically examine three interrelated domains, namely the societal significance of English, teacher proficiency in English, and instructional strategies. This is done to establish a framework for understanding teacher influence in multilingual classrooms.

Significance of English language in South

English functions as the dominant language of communication across key societal domains including education, governance, business, media, and science (Olaoye, 2013; Sawir, 2005). In South Africa, it is widely regarded as a language of economic empowerment and social mobility (De Wet, 2002). It serves as the primary medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards, and is the language of assessment, textbooks, and cognitively demanding subjects (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). At the tertiary level, English predominates in teaching, learning materials, university prospectuses, and administrative documentation. Given English's central role in academic and societal success, learners must acquire sufficient proficiency to navigate these domains effectively.

Recent policy developments underscore this imperative. The DBE's Strategy for Teaching English Across the Curriculum (DBE, Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2017) emphasises the need to strengthen English as the LoLT across all grades, particularly in light of the withdrawal of the language compensation policy. However, persistent challenges remain. For instance, Kgooho (2023) found that the early introduction of English LoLT in the Intermediate Phase often undermines learners' acquisition of English First Additional Language (EFAL) skills, particularly in reading and writing. Similarly, Mkhize and Balfour (2021) argue that while English is positioned as a gateway to academic success, its dominance marginalises indigenous languages and exacerbates linguistic inequalities in classrooms. These systemic tensions highlight the need to examine how English is taught and the role that teachers play in mediating learner access to the language.

The English proficiency of teachers

Effective English instruction depends on teachers' linguistic competence and pedagogical agility. Teachers require fluency and a strong foundational knowledge of English to deliver effective instruction, facilitate classroom interaction, and adapt to learners' diverse proficiency levels. While Britten (1985) and Mahlobo (1999) emphasise the importance of cultural knowledge in teaching second language (L2) literature, contemporary scholarship calls for broader competencies. Moodley and Aronstam (2016) highlight the need for continuous professional development in language pedagogy, especially for teachers working in linguistically diverse classrooms. The Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], RSA, 2020) also advocates for multilingualism while reaffirming English's dominance in academic discourse, placing pressure

on educators to balance linguistic inclusivity with English proficiency.

Empirical studies have begun to quantify the relationship between teacher proficiency and learner outcomes. S Taylor (2019) demonstrated that teacher language competence was a significant predictor of learner reading scores. These findings suggest that teacher influence can be measured through observable performance metrics and reinforce the importance of examining teacher-related variables such as subject knowledge, fluency and preparedness.

Learning techniques and teaching

Learning strategies for language learning are meant to support linguistic development. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define learning strategies as behaviour that students use to help them learn new information. Different types of strategies can be used to learn a language. These strategies are cognitive (thinking and understanding), memory (using your memory to remember what you learn), meta-cognitive (thinking about how you learn), compensation (finding ways to help yourself when there is something you do not understand), social (involves interacting with others) and affective (dealing with your emotions) (Oxford, 1990).

Teachers need to know the strategies that learners use to learn a second language. Knowing these allows teachers to arrange lessons in a way that maximises learning. If teachers are knowledgeable about their teaching strategies and how they align with the learners' strategies, this might have an impact on the learning process. Competent teachers introduce strategic choices to learners. However, when working with intermediate learners, it is the teacher's duty to help them choose the strategies that are most appropriate for them as individuals and for their course of study (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). The teacher plays the role of the facilitator with more advanced learners because they are able to manage the learning process by themselves.

In multilingual South African classrooms, this alignment is particularly vital to mitigate language barriers and promote equitable learning. Setati and Adler (2000) emphasise that teachers must be able to navigate code-switching and multilingual discourse to support learners' cognitive development in English-medium instruction. Task-based learning has emerged as a particularly effective approach. Ellis (2003) defines task-based learning as a communicative method that uses real-life tasks to promote meaningful language use. Kim (2008) and Sholeh, Salija and Nur (2021) demonstrate that task-based learning enhances learner engagement and supports authentic language production. Teachers who incorporate task-based learning, provide opportunities for output, and offer constructive feedback foster deeper processing and learner motivation (Oxford, 1990; Swain, 1995).

The literature reveals that teacher influence in English language learning is multidimensional. It encompasses structural competencies such as qualifications, subject knowledge, and English proficiency, as well as relational practices including motivation, feedback, and strategy alignment. These dimensions interact to shape learners' access to comprehensible input, opportunities for output, and engagement with language tasks. While English's societal dominance creates pressure for proficiency, it is ultimately the teacher's role that mediates how learners experience and acquire the language. We built on these insights by examining learner perceptions of teacher influence through measurable constructs, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of L2 acquisition in multilingual South African classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by three foundational theories in L2 acquisition (SLA): Krashen's input hypothesis, Swain's output hypothesis, and task-based learning. These theories offer conceptual tools for understanding how teachers influence learners' English language development through the quality of the input they provide, the opportunities they create for output, and the tasks they design to facilitate meaningful interaction. Each theory informs the key constructs of this study, namely teacher proficiency, instructional strategy, feedback, and learner engagement, as measured through the questionnaire.

Effective language teaching also requires a solid foundation in language teaching theory, which influences teachers' decisions, actions, value judgments and organisational patterns (Stern, 1983:27). The knowledge of linguistics equips teachers with the theoretical background necessary for teaching language. Over the years, teaching English as a second language (TESL) has been grounded in the linguistic theory of SLA, necessitating a deep understanding of linguistics (Van der Walt, 1992:8–10). Applied linguistics knowledge allows teachers to fulfil multiple roles as educators, language analysts and language users (Edge, 1988:10). This expertise helps them to model appropriate language use, motivate learners and explain how the language works (Brown, 2000).

As language analysts, English second language (ESL) teachers must be able to discuss the language with their peers, analyse it, understand its mechanics and make judgments about its acceptability when in doubt (Edge, 1988:10–12). As language users, they should be aware of how languages are structured and organised and be able to find, interpret and apply information (Edge, 1988:10–11). Teachers also need to understand the strategies that learners use to acquire a second language. This knowledge allows them to arrange lessons that maximise learning. Aligning teaching strategies with learners' learning

strategies can significantly impact the learning process.

It is concerning that some teachers in South Africa struggle to understand texts due to their lack of fluency and inability to comprehend certain words (Trudell, Dowd, Piper & Bloch, 2012). This leads to learners, starting from Grade 4, learning incorrect pronunciation, poor spelling and misunderstanding the meaning of words (Evans & Cleghorn, 2014; Leah, 2018; Trudell et al., 2012). Consequently, the input provided by these teachers may not be comprehensible, impacting how learners acquire and use the language.

Krashen's input hypothesis

The quality of language input that L2 learners receive is crucial for their success in acquiring a second language (Krashen, 1985). Krashen (1981) posits that language input is the most critical factor in language acquisition. Gass (1997) supports this by stating that input is the primary source of data in L2 learning and learning cannot occur without it. Input is essential for building a learner's language competence. However, Krashen (1981, 1982) emphasises that for language acquisition to take place, the input must be comprehensible.

According to Krashen (1985:2), it is the responsibility of the interlocutor to ensure that their input is understandable by using the appropriate level of language during communication. This means that teachers or advanced speakers of the target language should adjust their speech to match the learners' level of understanding. Stander (2001:108–110) argues that if a teacher's L2 proficiency is not adequate for using English as the medium of instruction, their incorrect use of the language can be passed on to the learners. Comprehensible input is believed to facilitate the acquisition process (Krashen, 1981:1). To provide learners with exposure to language input, opportunities must be created for them to receive it. This can be achieved through extensive reading programmes where learners have access to materials appropriate for their level (Krashen, 1989).

In the context of this study, the role of teachers in delivering comprehensible input is crucial. If learners perceive their teachers as lacking subject knowledge or English proficiency, they may not receive the quality input necessary for effective language acquisition. This aligns with the findings of Chetty and Mwepu (2008), who emphasise the continued dominance of English in South Africa due to its historical and socio-political significance. Conversely, teachers who positively influence learners' learning are likely to provide rich, comprehensible input that facilitates better language development. This study operationalises input-related teacher influence through variables such as English proficiency, subject knowledge, and preparedness, captured via Likert-scale items in the

questionnaire. Learner perceptions of input quality are central to understanding how teachers facilitate or hinder English language development.

Output hypothesis

Another element required for the successful learning of a second language is output (Gass, 2003). The output hypothesis was put forward by Swain (1985). Output may play various roles in L2 learning (Swain, 2000:99). Swain (1995, 1998) suggests that in addition to providing learners with understandable input, understandable output plays a beneficial role in SLA. Production of output is necessary for the L2 learning process because comprehensible input alone is not sufficient for the L2 learning process. Learners are more in control with output than input. By focusing on output, researchers can focus on ways in which learners can play a more active and responsible role in their learning (Swain, 1995). According to Swain (1995), output allows the learners to process language more deeply than input does because more mental effort is put into it. There is something that learners need to do to produce language.

They are required to create linguistic form and meaning to discover what they are capable of and what they cannot do (Swain, 2000). She states that output encourages the learners to shift from the open-minded, semantic, strategic processing common in comprehension to the correct grammar required for accurate production. This means that when learners use language to communicate (output), it seems that it can play an important role in helping them to become better at the language. Teachers can facilitate this by encouraging discussions about language forms and usage, thereby impacting learners' perceptions of their influence (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Furthermore, by encouraging output, teachers can increase learners' engagement and motivation. When learners see the practical application of their language skills, they are more likely to view their teachers as effective and supportive (Swain, 2005). In this study, teacher influence is examined through constructs such as feedback provision, encouragement of learner participation, and creation of communicative spaces. These are reflected in questionnaire items that assess whether learners were given chances to use English, receive corrective feedback, and engage in classroom discussions. Swain's theory helps explain why learners may perceive teachers as either supportive facilitators or passive instructors, depending on the extent to which output is encouraged.

Task-based learning

By using tasks in the classroom learners can interact with one another. Teachers have been using tasks to teach language for many years and designing pedagogical tasks that are effective has been an

interest among L2 researchers and educators (Kim, 2008). Ellis (2003) defines task-based learning as a communicative approach that uses tasks to make the acquisition of a language easier. Tasks require the learners to be language users, meaning that they need to communicate in the way they would in real life (Ellis, 2003). According to Pierson (2015), this approach encourages the use of language in a meaningful way and enables learners to communicate through it instead of merely mastering discrete skills. The learners are required to complete a task without the teacher's guidance and must use the language in the same way it is used to communicate outside the classroom. Sholeh et al. (2021) add that using tasks to teach English is considered useful in language classes because learners are expected to learn the target language better when they do tasks. These tasks are designed to help learners use language in real-life situations to encourage language acquisition in a natural way.

The learner-centred approach of task-based learning emphasises autonomy and active participation. This can shape how learners perceive their teachers' roles and effectiveness (Ellis, 2003). When teachers act as facilitators rather than traditional instructors, it alters classroom dynamics and influences learners' views of their teachers' impact (Nunan, 2004). Moreover, task-based learnings' focus on engaging and motivating learners through relevant tasks can affect learners' perceptions of their teachers' ability to make learning interesting and effective (Willis & Willis, 2007). The ongoing feedback and support provided in a task-based learning framework help learners feel more supported, which can enhance their views on teacher influence (Skehan, 1998). Finally, by preparing learners for real-world communication, task-based learning helps them to see their teachers as instrumental in their practical language development. In this study we examined teacher influence through variables such as the use of authentic materials, task design, and peer interaction, captured through questionnaire items that assess whether learners experienced task-based learning and collaborative activities. Task-based learning provides a lens for interpreting how instructional choices shape learner perceptions of teacher effectiveness.

Methodology

Research Approach

To reach the study objectives, a quantitative research approach was adopted, employing a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. This design was appropriate for capturing learner perceptions at a single point in time and identifying patterns related to teacher influence in English language learning. A structured questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument, enabling systematic analysis of trends and

associations across participant responses (Punch, 2009).

Sampling and Recruitment

We utilised convenience sampling, targeting individuals who had matriculated within the past 5 years and received English instruction as L2 during their schooling in South Africa. Participants were recruited via Facebook, a platform selected for its accessibility, broad reach, and ability to engage a geographically dispersed population. This method allowed for the inclusion of respondents from diverse linguistic, socio-economic, and regional backgrounds, including urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. While participants reflected on their school experiences, recruitment was not school-based.

Ethical Clearance

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from both the Faculty and Central Ethics Committees of Nelson Mandela University. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all respondents. Eligibility criteria required participants to be 18 years or older and to have matriculated within the past 5 years in South Africa, having received English instruction as L2 during their primary and/or secondary schooling.

Data Collection Instrument

The questionnaire consists of closed-ended and scaled items, designed to elicit participants' perceptions of their English language learning experiences. Likert-scale questions measured agreement with statements related to teacher competence, instructional strategies, learner engagement, and perceived language outcomes.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to summarise participants' responses and identify prevailing trends. The digital format of the questionnaire facilitated efficient data capture and visualisation, reducing administrative overhead and enhancing accuracy (Regmi, Waithaka, Paudyal, Simkhada & Van Teijlingen, 2016). The analysis focused on identifying correlations between teacher practices and learner-reported proficiency levels, with attention to variations across demographic subgroups. Data were processed using Microsoft Excel which facilitated efficient coding, tabulation, and visualisation. While we did not conduct inferential statistical tests, the descriptive results provided a foundational understanding of how learners perceive teacher roles in English language acquisition.

Findings

Analysis of Quantitative Data

This section presents the interpretation, discussion and illustration of the quantitative data. A

questionnaire was distributed to ESL learners to identify the influence of teachers in their English learning. The responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, with results displayed in bar graphs.

The role of teachers in English language learning

The participants were asked to express their views in general or about specific teachers who influenced their learning of English.

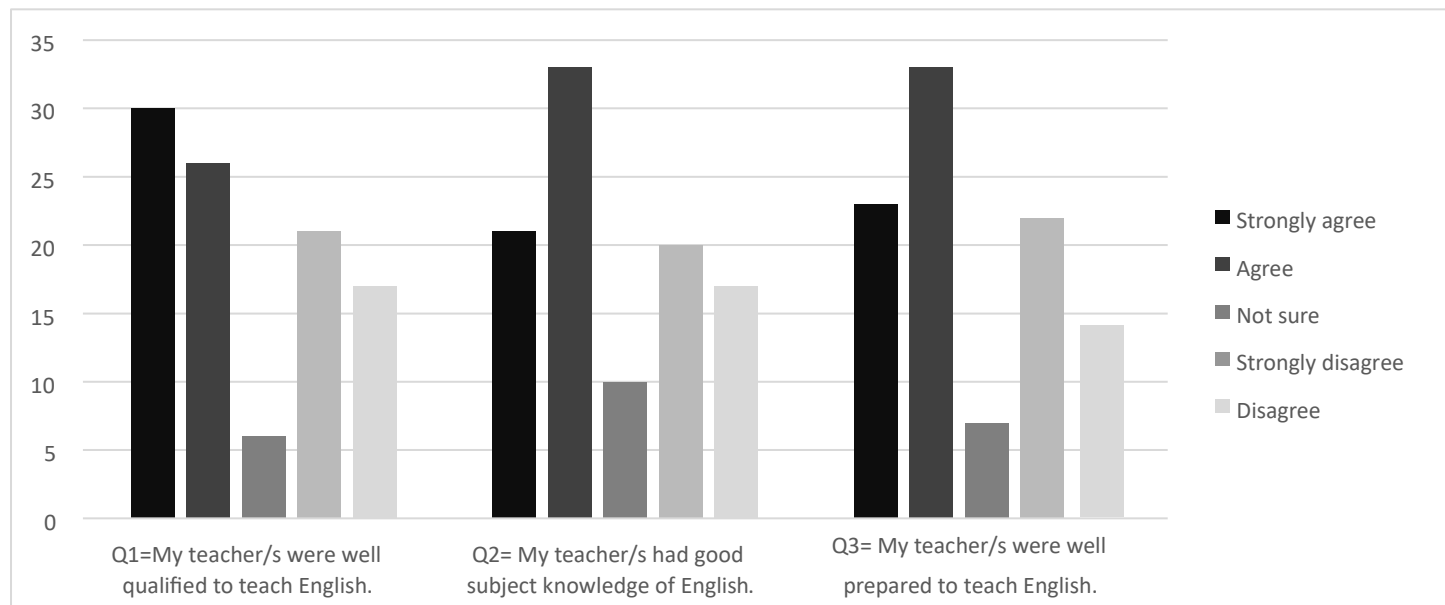


Figure 1 Combined percentages of first three questions of the ESL learners' questionnaire

Q1: My teacher/s were well qualified to teach English

The above figure shows that 56% (30% Strongly agree and 26% Agree) agreed that their teachers were well qualified to teach English and 38% (21% Strongly disagree and 17% Disagree) believed that their teachers were not well qualified to teach English, while 6% were not sure. L2 teachers need to be well qualified to teach learners a second language. If the teacher is not well qualified, the chances of the learner succeeding in the L2 is low. The methods they employ to teach their learners might not be optimal for language learning.

Q2: My teacher/s had good subject knowledge of English

Leah (2018) states that ESL teachers must have the right knowledge to teach learners to be proficient because if they lack such knowledge it could have a negative impact on the learners' learning of English

as L2. Only 54% (21% Strongly agree and 33% Agree) of the participants were happy with their teacher's subject knowledge, with 36% (20% Strongly disagree and 16% Disagree) believing that their teachers did not have good subject knowledge, while 10% were not sure (see Figure 1).

Q3: My teacher/s were well prepared to teach English

Question three shows that 56% (23% Strongly Agree and 33% Agree) of the participants agreed that their teachers were well prepared to teach English, with 36% (22% Strongly disagree and 14% Disagree) disagreeing with this statement and 7% not being sure (see Figure 1). The preparation for teaching is not the same as qualification or subject knowledge. Teachers who are not prepared or organised to teach L2 lessons and to accommodate different learners and situations would disadvantage their learners.

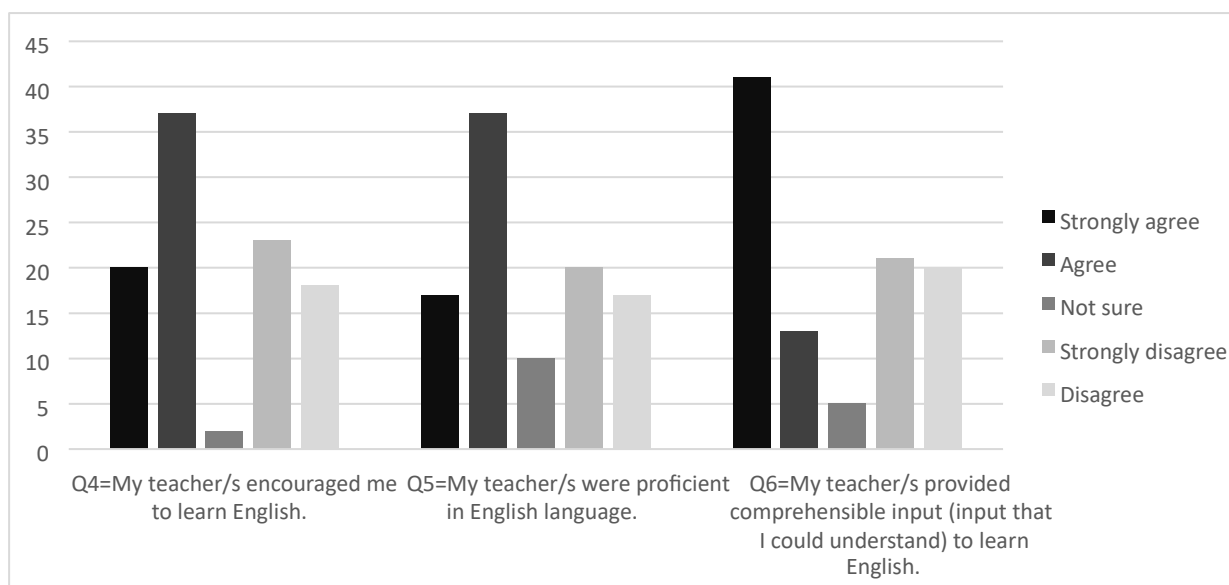


Figure 2 Combined percentages of questions four to six of the ESL learners' questionnaire

Q4: My teacher/s encouraged me to learn English

Of the participants, 57% (20% Strongly agree and 37% Agree) were encouraged by their teachers to learn English and 41% (23% Strongly disagree and 18% disagree) were not encouraged to learn English, while 2% were not sure (see Figure 2).

Q5: My teacher/s were proficient in the English language

Teachers need to be able to speak and know the basics of language. Only 54% (17% Strongly agree and 37% Agree) of the participants had proficient teachers with 37% (20% Strongly disagree and 17% Disagree) not being happy with their teacher's proficiency and 10% not being sure (see Figure 2). Teachers who are not proficient in the language they

teach will not be able to provide meaningful input to learners and might make it difficult for the learners to understand what they are teaching.

Q6: My teacher/s provided comprehensible input (input that I could understand) to learn English

According to Krashen's (1982, 1985) input hypothesis, learners need to understand what they are hearing in order to acquire L2 properly and only 54% (41% Strongly agree and 13% Agree) of the participants received comprehensible input from their teachers, while 41% (21% Strongly disagree and 20% Disagree) did not receive input that they could understand from their teachers while 5% were not sure whether they understood their teacher/s (see Figure 2).

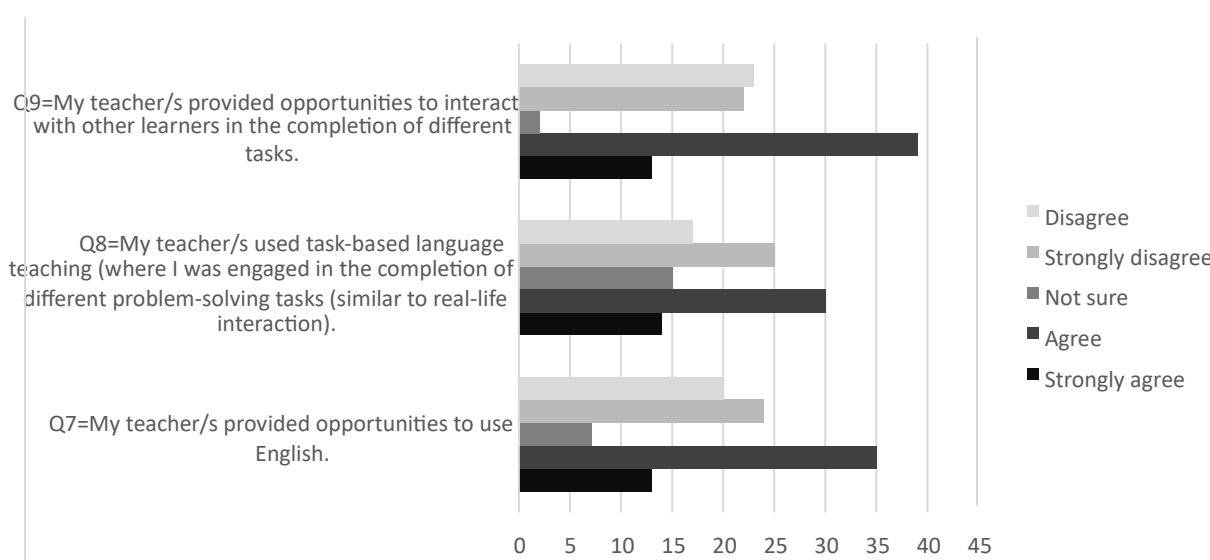


Figure 3 Combined percentages of questions seven to nine of the ESL learners' questionnaire

Q7: My teacher/s provided opportunities to use English

Being able to use English enables learners to receive input, and to produce output, which plays a significant role in L2 learning. Of the participants, 48% (13% Strongly agree and 35% Agree) agreed that they had teachers who gave them opportunities to use English and 44% of the participants said they did not even have this opportunity, while 7% were not sure (see Figure 3).

Q8: My teacher/s used task-based language teaching where I was engaged in the completion of different problem-solving tasks (similar to real-life interaction)

The participants were asked whether they were given opportunities to interact with their peers in the completion of real-life tasks. Of the participants, 44% (14% Strongly agree and 30% Agree) said that their teachers used tasks to teach the language and

42% (25% Strongly disagree and 17% Disagree) said their teachers did not use task-based teaching, while 15% were not sure whether tasks were used in their classes (see Figure 3). Using tasks to teach English is considered useful because learners are expected to learn the target language better when they do tasks (Sholeh et al., 2021).

Q9: My teacher/s provided opportunities to interact with other learners in the completion of different tasks

Vygotsky (1978) claims that, to be internalised sufficiently, all matters relating to learning a new language are based on social activities. Of the participants, 52% (13% Strongly agree and 39% Agree) felt that their teacher/s allowed them to use English, while 45% (22% Strongly disagree and 23% Disagree) did not even get opportunities to use the language and 2% were not sure (see Figure 3).

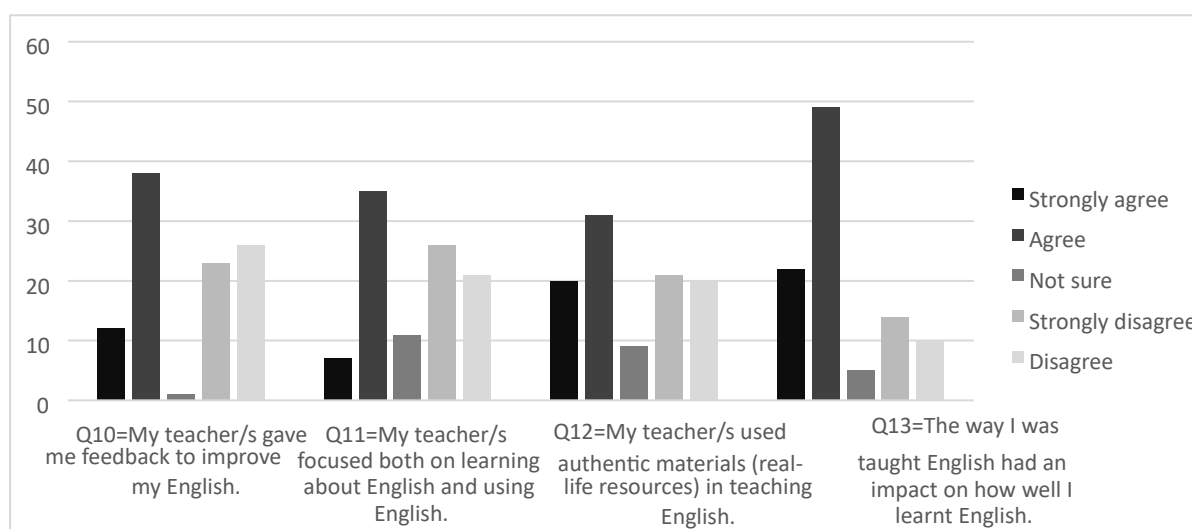


Figure 4 Combined percentages of questions 10 to 14 of the ESL learners' questionnaire

Q10: My teacher/s gave me feedback to improve my English

Of the participants, 50% (12% Strongly agree and 38% Agree) agreed that they received feedback from their teachers and 49% (23% Strongly disagree and 26% Disagree) did not receive feedback to improve their English, while 1% was not sure (see Figure 4). Feedback allows learners to see where they went wrong, so if they do not receive any feedback, they will never know how well they use the language.

Q11: My teacher/s focused both on learning about English and using English

The respondents indicated that 42% (7% Strongly agree and 35% Agree) of their teachers focused both on learning about English and using English, while 47% (26% Strongly disagree and 21% Disagree) of the participants disagreed with this statement, and 11% were not sure (see Figure 4).

Q12: My teacher/s used authentic materials (real-life resources) in teaching English

The use of authentic resources may make learning more interesting and meaningful for learners because it provides real exposure to the language and relates closely to the needs of learners (Richards, 2006). Of the participants, 51% (20% Strongly agree and 31% Agree) agreed that their teachers used authentic materials to teach English and 41% (21% Strongly disagree and 20% Disagree) disagreed that their teachers used authentic materials to teach English, while 9% of them were not sure (see Figure 4).

Q13: The way I was taught English had an impact on how well I learnt English

Of the participants, 71% (22% Strongly agree and 49% Agree) believed that the way they were taught English had an impact on how well they learnt the language while 24% (14% Strongly disagreed and

10% Disagreed) disagreed with this statement, with 5% of the participants being unsure (see Figure 4).

Summary of Findings

The quantitative data reveal a nuanced picture of teacher influence on ESL learning in South African schools. Overall, participants reported moderately positive experiences, with the majority affirming that their teachers were well-prepared (56%), qualified (56%), and possessed adequate subject knowledge (54%). Encouragement to learn English (57%) and the perceived impact of instructional methods on learning outcomes (71%) emerged as areas of relative strength. However, consistent weaknesses were noted in opportunities for learner interaction (48%), use of task-based language teaching (44%), and provision of authentic materials (51%). Notably, only 54% of participants felt that they had received comprehensible input, a critical component of SLA. These findings suggest that while foundational teacher competencies are generally present, pedagogical practices that promote active engagement and contextualised learning remain underdeveloped. The results align with the study aim to evaluate the role of teachers in shaping ESL proficiency and underscore the need for targeted professional development in communicative and learner-centred methodologies.

Discussion

Teacher Qualifications and Subject Knowledge

The survey findings align with Bloch (2009) and Block (2013), who underscore the foundational role of qualified teachers in effective language instruction. With 56% of participants affirming their teachers' qualifications and 38% expressing doubt, the data reveal persistent disparities in teacher training across South African schools. Leah (2018) reinforces that inadequate subject knowledge may hinder learners' acquisition of English, particularly in contexts where English is not commonly used. These discrepancies may reflect systemic challenges in teacher recruitment, uneven access to professional development, and disparities in resource allocation between urban and rural schools (DBE, RSA, 2017).

Teacher Preparation and Engagement

Teacher preparedness emerged as a moderately affirmed strength, with 56% of learners agreeing that their teachers were well-prepared. This finding echoes N Taylor (2012), who argues that preparation is critical for differentiated instruction and learner engagement. However, the 36% who disagreed suggest that lesson planning and responsiveness to learner needs may be inconsistent. This may be attributed to overloaded curricula, limited pedagogical support, and the pressure to use English as LoLT in linguistically diverse classrooms

(Heugh, 2015).

Encouragement and Proficiency

Encouragement was reported by 57% of participants, highlighting the motivational role that teachers play in fostering language confidence. Gkonou (2021) notes that positive teacher-learner relationships enhance participation and reduce language anxiety. However, only 54% of learners believed that their teachers were proficient in English, with 37% expressing dissatisfaction. Evans and Cleghorn (2014) identify teacher language proficiency as a critical barrier in South African classrooms, particularly where teachers themselves are second-language users. This raises concerns about the adequacy of pre-service language training and ongoing support for language development among educators.

Comprehensible Input and Interaction

Only 54% of learners reported receiving comprehensible input, a finding that directly engages Krashen's input hypothesis (1982, 1985). Without accessible language input, learners struggle to internalise grammatical structures and vocabulary. Furthermore, only 48% felt they were given opportunities to interact with peers, despite Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that social interaction is central to cognitive development. These results suggest that teacher-centred approaches may still dominate ESL classrooms, limiting opportunities for collaborative learning and communicative practice.

Task-based Language Teaching

Only 44% of learners experienced task-based language teaching, which indicates limited use of real-world, problem-solving activities. Sholeh et al. (2021) advocate for task-based learning as a means of contextualising language and promoting functional fluency. The low uptake may reflect a lack of training in communicative methodologies or constraints related to curriculum pacing and assessment demands. This gap points to the need for pedagogical reform that prioritises learner engagement and authentic language use.

Feedback and Use of Authentic Materials

Feedback was inconsistently reported, with 50% of learners receiving feedback and 49% not. Swain (1985) emphasises that feedback is essential for refining language output and promoting metalinguistic awareness. The near-even split suggests variability in classroom practices and possibly time constraints that prevent individualised support. Similarly, only 51% of learners reported exposure to authentic materials, despite Richards (2006) highlighting their value in bridging classroom learning with real-world language use.

This may be due to limited access to resources or a reliance on outdated textbooks.

Impact of Teaching Methods

A significant 71% of learners agreed that the way they were taught English influenced their learning outcomes. This finding reinforces the centrality of pedagogical practice in shaping language proficiency. It supports literature that calls for integrated approaches combining teacher competence, learner interaction, and contextualised input (Cummins, 2000; DBE, 2020). However, the data also reveal the following systemic limitations, namely inconsistent teacher training, uneven implementation of communicative methods, and structural barriers such as large class sizes and multilingual complexity.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms the pivotal role that teachers play in shaping learners' proficiency in English as L2 in South African schools. English has the status of a global lingua franca and is central to academic success and socio-economic mobility. The findings, however, reveal persistent challenges in the quality and consistency of English instruction in South African schools. While most learners perceived their teachers as qualified and encouraging, significant proportions reported deficiencies in teacher proficiency, preparedness, and the use of communicative and task-based methodologies. Notably, less than half of the participants experienced comprehensible input, peer interaction, or authentic materials elements, widely recognised as essential for effective SLA.

These findings suggest that foundational teacher competencies, although present in many classrooms, are not uniformly supported by pedagogical depth or contextual responsiveness. The study's reliance on self-reported data and its digital recruitment strategy may limit generalisability, particularly in under-resourced or digitally disconnected communities. Nonetheless, the insight offers a valuable learner-centred perspective on instructional gaps and strengths.

Future research should explore teacher perspectives, institutional constraints, and curriculum implementation to build a more holistic understanding of ESL teaching dynamics. Longitudinal studies could also assess the impact of targeted professional development on learner outcomes. Ultimately, addressing the identified gaps through enhanced teacher training, curriculum reform, and policy support, is essential for advancing equitable and effective English language education in South Africa's multilingual classrooms.

Recommendations

Schools should provide training for teachers to enhance their English language teaching skills. This training should emphasise the importance of providing ample comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). Teachers should use a variety of instructional methods to teach English effectively. Additionally, teachers and learners should be encouraged to use English in other classrooms, not only during English lessons to improve their language proficiency. The increased exposure to the language is essential for achieving English language proficiency.

Authors' Contributions

LN collected and analysed the data and LN and FM wrote and reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

- i. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- ii. DATES: Received: 1 November 2024; Revised: 11 August 2025; Accepted: 5 June 2026; Published: 31 August 2026.

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