

# Exploring Learners' Conceptions on Teachers' Assessment Policy in the Intermediate Phase English First Additional Language Classes in a South African School.

Takura Sigobodhla

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.803106S>

Received: 01 May 2024; Revised: 21 May 2024; Accepted: 25 May 2024;

Published: 29 June 2024

## ABSTRACT

The study explored Grade 6 English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners' conceptions on the teachers' assessment strategies in Grade 6 EFAL classes in South African schools. This research focused on Grade 6 EFAL in the intermediate phase. In this research, the term strategies was used to mean policy. Vygotsky's 1978 socio-cultural theory underpins the study. This is an ethnographic inquiry using a single case study design. Data were collected using focus-group interviews with Grade 6 EFAL learners. Data was analysed thematically. The results confirmed that these learners enjoyed learning the language and using it as a LoLT. The results show that positive attitude of learners promoted, encouraged and motivated them to learn. The results revealed that most learners at Grade 6 level are not proficient readers. It can be concluded that lack of resources adversely affects teaching and learning, negatively affecting learner performance. It is recommended that the independent school establish a library and ensure that there are enough books for all learners to improve their reading proficiency skills. More reading time should be allocated by DBE to provide learners with ample time to practice reading. Teachers must be properly trained in order to understand assessment and assessment strategies. Universities training teachers should teach 'assessment' as a module not as a component.

## Key terms

### Assessment

Assessment is a process, which involves planning, recording and collecting information, analyzing and interpreting results, reporting and decision-making (Dylan, 2017). Similarly, assessment assists teachers, parents and other stakeholders in making decisions about the progress of the learner.

### Assessment policy

Assessment policy is a tool to inform curriculum planning and learning programs. In addition, it describes practices and regulations governing assessment of a learner and guides teachers in conducting assessment. In this study assessment, policy refers to guidelines and approaches that are used by schools in their assessment practices. In South Africa, assessment policies are formulated in line with the CAPS (Mkhize & Balfour, 2018).

### Assessment strategies

Assessment strategies are techniques used to check how much learners have mastered a certain concept, for example, tests, and examinations (Chapman & King, 2010). Similarly, assessment strategies provide valuable information to both teachers and learners. In this study, the term assessment strategies refers to a wide variety of methods or tools that teachers use to evaluate the academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of learners (DBE, 2011b).

### **English First Additional Language (EFAL)**

In South African schools EFAL is a separate subject that caters for learners who do not speak English as their home language or first language (DBE 2014; Stoop 2017). In addition, EFAL is used as a LoLT in many South African schools

### **Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT)**

The LoLT means the language of teaching and learning chosen by a school's governing body in consultation with parents for the purpose of teaching and learning. It is the language teachers use to instruct and to assess and the language of the textbooks provided by the school.

### **Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)**

A single comprehensive and concise policy document in South Africa that provides details on what teachers teach and assesses on a grade-by-grade and subject by subject basis (Du Plessis & Marais, 2015).

## **INTRODUCTION**

Assessment is the key element of teaching and learning. It is through assessment that teachers know what learners know, what they have achieved, where they are in the teaching and learning process, how effective the assessment strategies have been, and if there are instructional challenges (Regier, 2012; Yambi, 2020). Similarly, assessment strategies are techniques used to check how much learners have mastered a certain concept, for example, examinations, Socratic seminars and instruction (Westbroek, Van Rens, Van den Berg & Janssen, 2020). The effective use of assessment strategies by teachers can have a significant impact on improving teaching and learning (Regier, 2012; Brown, 2019). Similarly, assessment strategies assist in determining learners' progress. For example, where they need extra help or additional teaching. This study explores Grade 6 EFAL learners' conceptions on teachers' assessment strategies in a South African school.

Many countries worldwide are developing classroom and formative assessment policies and initiatives (Perry, 2013; Garrison, & Ehringhaus, 2013). In countries such United States of America, Canada, Australia, and Japan have used multiple forms of assessment (Hammond & McCloskey, 2013) to enhance learners' academic success. In Africa, most assessment rarely emphasize classroom assessment but focus on summative assessments such as exams and tests (Mogboh & Okonye, (2019), for example, Ghana, Malawi and Zambia (Perry, 2013).

In recent decades, there has been a strong emphasis on a shift from summative assessment to diagnostic and formative assessment to support learning. Among these African countries, South Africa has taken a lead by introducing various forms of assessment in its education system; diagnostic, formative, continuous, baseline and summative assessments (Dixson & Worrell, 2016). These initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of learning in its schooling system, as most learners appear to be unable to compete with their peers in international assessments.

The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) for example, revealed that 78% of grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language (all 11 official languages were assessed), and failed to reach the low international benchmark (Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena & McLeod, 2016). These learners were assessed using PIRLS Literacy passages, which were also translated into 10 official languages. The results further revealed learners inability to locate and retrieve explicitly stated information or make inferences about events and reason for actions (Maluleke, 2015). This point to learners' lack of requisite reading proficiency skills leading to authors amongst others Spaul, (2022) to claim that there is a reading crisis within most South African schools. A lot of research has been conducted on the teachers' assessment strategies however, there is a gap in knowledge on learners' conceptions of teachers' assessment strategies in EFAL classroom. The current study wants to address this identified gap as it reveals learners voices.

Assessment refers to a related series of measures used to determine a complex attribute of an individual or group of individuals (Dlova, 2019; Yambi, 2020). Similarly, assessment involves the gathering and interpreting of information about learner's level of attainment of learning goals (Ronan, 2015; Archer, (2017). In addition, assessments are used to identify individual learners' weaknesses and strengths to enable teachers to provide specialized academic support, educational programming or social services (Caddy, 2015; Dylan, 2017; Yambi, 2020). It provides feedback on the effectiveness of instruction and gives learners a measure of their progress (Dlova, 2019; Yambi, 2020). The quality of assessment tasks determines the quality of learning the learners receive and their cognitive development.

Well-designed assessment strategies play a critical role in educational decision-making and are a vital component of ongoing quality improvement processes at the lesson, course and curriculum level (Dylan, 2017; Yambi, 2020). Similarly, teachers must be conversant with assessment strategies and apply them effectively. In South Africa the teaching and assessment of EFAL proficiency is guided by the CAPS document, which advocates for continuous assessment (DBE, 2011). The CAPS document outlines the language teaching approaches. It emphasises the different language skills to be assessed using varied assessment methods (Du Plessis & Marais, 2015).

This study is underpinned by Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which is discussed in the section below.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIO- CULTURAL THEORY**

Lev Vygotsky propounded the socio cultural theory in the year 1978. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was born to a middle class family in a small town of Tsarist Russia (Verenikina, 2010a). His own background, the social and intellectual context in which he lived and worked, influenced his theoretical views. He started his career as a teacher during the revolutionary change in Russia when the newly formed government of workers was working towards a comprehensive system of education suitable for all classes in society.

The socio-cultural theory had an influence in the field of educational psychology and entire education system (Turuk, 2010). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory shows learning development from early age and how it is shaped by the social contexts in which children are raised (McLeod, 2019; Nardo, 2021). The theory explains how children acquire knowledge of the world around them through interaction or collaboration with society and their environment (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). Vygotsky believes that from the age of two years, development is influenced by children's interactions with adults and members of their extended families in their homes (Vygotsky, 1978). Likewise, Vygotsky suggests that learning should lead to development and emphasised that real learning should advance cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental levels as determined by independent problem solving. It is the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Verenikina, 2010a, p.86; McLeod, 2019). The ZPD is anchored in the social constructivism school of thought which "emphasises the importance of social interaction and co-operative learning" (Brown 2010, p. 65). The term proximal (nearby) indicates that assistance provided should be slightly above the learners' current competence, complementing and building on their existing abilities (Verenikina, 2010a). Vygotsky, (1978) argues for learners' active participation in their learning which assists them to become independent learners (Verenikina, 2010a).

Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the role of mediation in learning. Mediation is referred as the use of tools to scaffold learning (McLeod, 2019). Similarly, Vygotsky believes that culture serves as a mediator in the formulation and development of specific abilities (Nardo, 2021). Furthermore, Vygotsky believes learning is initiated and mediated by the knowledgeable others through active interactions with the learners. The importance of learners engagement in learning is further supported by Kumar (2014); Adams and Lawrence, (2015); Lanttof, (2019) amongst others. Moreover, active interactions allow learners to perform task, which they are not able to accomplish on their own in order to reach a ZPD (Nardo, 2021).

Vygotsky believes that when learners are solving a problem individually, their cultural environments (McLeod, 2019) provide the tools (physical objects or symbolic tools used in thought). These environments

further influences their conception of the world as people are products of their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). However, children growing up within the same culture differ in the way they transform their knowledge depending on their mental capability (Silver, 2011). Furthermore, attitude and beliefs play a crucial role in children's assimilation of the knowledge gained, be it in the classroom or home environment.

Vygotsky further emphasizes the role of scaffolding in learning. According to, Lanttof (2019), scaffolding is the support provided to learners during learning to enable them to achieve their cognitive potential. Similarly, teachers, peers, and capable others play a crucial role in ensuring that effective learning takes place through scaffolding learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding includes providing skills, hints and cues to assist learners to understand concepts taught (Verenikina, 2010a). Effective scaffolding requires teachers to consider learners prior knowledge in order to build on it (Silver, 2011).

According to McLeod, (2019), there are two categories of mediators: human and symbolic. In addition, McLeod, (2019) considers human mediation to involve active adults' involvement in their children's learning to enhance their academic performances. Moreover, Verenikina (2010a) symbolic mediation refers to the use of language to impart knowledge. For example, language is used as a symbol or tool and it is used to transact learning between the learners and their environment (Nardo, 2021).

Vygotsky views language as an essential tool for communication and that culture and behaviour is understood through language (McLeod, 2019). Vygotsky highlighted the role that language plays in cognitive development. Vygotsky argues that effective learning cannot take place in a language that learners are not proficient in as they are unlikely to be able to express their thinking (Turuk, 2010).

### **Implication of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory to EFAL assessment**

The implication of the socio-cultural theory to EFAL assessment is that it needs to be differentiated to meet learners' diverse learning needs. Vygotsky emphasises that assessment should not be based on learners current knowledge but what they can achieve with the assistance of a knowledgeable other. He champions for task to be set at a slightly higher level to motivate them to develop (Vygotsky, 1978). A task/activity that reflects their ZPD will allow learners to expand their knowledge, unlike tasks that are too difficult and give the learner no scope to learn.

Teacher can mediate learning in the classroom and help learner achieve better by interacting with them. Similarly, the teacher can facilitate interactions among learners by producing interactive tasks and activities (Mallillin, Laurel & Crag, 2021). This would imply that teachers can use peers; grouping learners together to discuss ideas in EFAL this can bridge the gap that learners might have in their learning. Likewise, learners can work together and collaborate to solve problems. If learners are engaged in cooperative learning, they will help one another to achieve better in their EFAL assessments. Vygotsky regards learning as an active process and not a passive one, making it essential for teachers to ensure that learners are engaged in activities in collaboration with their peers (Vygotsky, 1978). He sees the role of teacher as that one of a facilitator of the learning process (Daneshfar & Moharami, 2018).

Through the socio cultural theory, the teacher provides support for the learners to practise and consolidate a particular skill. The teacher's support help learners to achieve cognitively and achieve better results in their EFAL assessments, hence, the improved learner performance. Teachers are able to respond constantly to learners' needs during the learning and teaching processes (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers should constantly adjust the tasks and learning goals to meet learner expectations (Gani, Abdullahi, Abdulkareem, Allahmagani & Zaki, 2017). As learners become more proficient, they desire to learn more about the subject. The learners built more confidence that help them tackle tasks that are more difficult

The implication of the socio cultural theory would be that the teacher should emphasize the importance of a language by teaching reading. Reading help leaners to improve vocabulary and be able to express themselves. Improved reading and vocabulary would help learners to perform better in their EFAL assessment tasks (Cliff, 2015). It would imply that the EFAL learners should be taught reading following the reading process and using the correct reading methods (Cliff, 2015; Mkhize & Balfour, 2018). Teachers should equip learners with

comprehension skills, using words in context, vocabulary, deducing meanings and inferring meanings (Nudlemann; Wolf, 2017).

In the section below, I discuss the research methods used to collect empirical data.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research design was qualitative in nature and entailed an ethnographic single case. Data for this study were collected from a purposively sampled combined independent school in Nkowankowa Circuit. The sample comprised of One Grade 6 EFAL teacher and 24 Grade 6 learners. This is a multilingual school with learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds although the majority of them are Xitsonga home language speakers. The rationale for the school choice was based on its ranking as a top performing school in the circuit and district in terms of Grade 12 results. The primary school produced outstanding results in the Mopani West District on the 2022 Common Assessments, with pass rates of 98% in EFAL and 95% in mathematics respectively. The choice of the EFAL teacher was based on her qualification as an EFAL teacher. The teacher has an honours degree in English with more than fifteen years of EFAL teaching experience. The twenty-four learners were selected as a class she was teaching and comprised of fifteen girls and nine boys. The interview schedule comprised of fifteen questions.

Empirical data were collected using observations and interviews with the EFAL teacher as well as three focus-group interviews with twenty-four Grade 6 EFAL learners. Three focus-group interviews were held, each consisting of eight learners to allow full participation in the discussion. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore conceptions of learners on teachers' assessment strategies in Grade 6 EFAL class. The interview schedule comprised of fifteen questions.

The focus group interviews took place at the school after school in order not to disrupt the learning activities. Each focus-group interview was an hour long. These focus-group interviews were recorded with learners' permission and parents' written consent. Learners' anonymity, confidentiality and right to withdraw are respected and pseudonyms used to protect their identities. Prior to data collection, the College of Education Ethics Committee, University of South Africa and the Dean of Education at the university granted ethical clearance.

### Data analysis

The collected empirical data were analysed thematically using the following procedure. I took the following steps to analyse the data. I reviewed data from the focus group interviews to establish the frames of analysis, which are levels of specificity within which the examination of data took place. These frames of analysis were used to demarcate segments within the data (Sutton & Austin, 2015; Jovancic, 2019). Each segment received a label with a code – a phrase suggesting how the segment informed the research question or research objective (Birks & Mills, 2015). The coding of the data resulted in the formation of categories.

The categories represent major ideas that are used to describe the meaning of similarly coded data (Sutton and Austin, 2015) Through an interpretative process, patterns and trends emerged from the data, grouped into broad themes (Onwuegbuzie, Gerber & Abrams, 2017). At this stage I prepared an overall narrative through summarising the prevalence of the emerging patterns, and trends, discussing the similarities and differences between them. I compared the relationship between one and more of these. Although the initial research and the theoretical framework suggested some of the expected categories, both researchers were open to categories and themes that emerged from the data.

In this study, data trustworthiness was established ensuring four criteria, namely, credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability. Trustworthiness was enhanced by providing a detailed description of the research context and assumptions, which are central to the research. I kept an audit trail for the study. The research was an ethnography case study thus I was immersed in the participants' world. I spent a period of six weeks collecting data at this school. This assisted me in gaining insight into the context of the study.

The credibility of the study was confirmed with participants own words. I confirmed the study results with the research participants through member checks. I provided an in-depth description of the school context to allow other researchers to apply the results in similar context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysed data three themes emerged which are as follows: *attitude towards EFAL; assessment practices and the importance of effective assessment*. Each of these emerging themes will be discussed under the following three sub-themes; *learners' attitude towards EFAL, adequate assessment strategies/ practices and the importance of effective assessment in EFAL learning* in the section below.

### What is the learners' attitude towards the learning of EFAL?

Responding to a question about their attitudes towards the learning of EFAL, the learner participant said that English helps them to communicate in English with people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. These learners indicated that English was their school's LoLT as such proficiency in it assisted them in learning other school subjects.

#### The excerpt below evidences this:

**LnC4** said:

*I like English because it helps me to communicate in good English and communicate with different races. For example, at this school it helps us to communicate with our foreign nationals and white teachers.*

#### Another learner who said supported this view:

**LnB4:**

*Most of our teachers are white and foreign nationals; we have no choice but to communicate to them in English because they do not understand our language.*

#### Another learner who indicated that raised a divergent view:

**LnC6:**

*My parents want me to learn English that is why they brought me to an independent school.*

#### He further added that:

*In English, I enjoy reading as a class but I hate when the teacher asks me to read alone and homework.*

#### Another learner who said expressed a divergent view:

**LnB5:**

*Learning in English can be very stressful, sometimes you fail to understand what the teachers are saying yet teachers cannot use our HL. Sometimes communication between the teacher and learners is very difficult especially, with the newcomers (transfer-ins).*

Six other learners who felt that the communication barrier frustrates them hence, they feel demotivated, and as a result, their performances are negatively affected echoed the same sentiments.

The comments above revealed the positive attitude most learners have towards the English language. Furthermore, the comments reveal that learners enjoy learning the

Language and using it as LoLT. Learners showed a positive disposition towards English and were aware of the link between English proficiency and academic success. Similarly, Vygotsky, (1978) maintains that attitude and beliefs play a crucial role in children's assimilation of the knowledge they gain, be it in the learning environment of the classroom or outside the school environment.

The participant learners stated that they learn English to communicate with learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory asserts that children acquire knowledge of the world around them through interaction or collaboration with society and the environment (Shabani et al., 2010). Furthermore, Vygotsky views language as an essential tool for communication and that culture and behaviour is understood through language (McLeod, 2019). Vygotsky highlights the role that language plays in cognitive development.

Although learners are aware of the benefits of acquiring proficiency in English, they are also aware that its use creates learning barriers. This finding is consistent with the findings of other researchers for example, Munyaradzi and Manyike, 2022 allude to the challenges of lack of proficiency within most of South African classrooms, which result in little meaningful learning-taking place. According to Vygotsky, meaningful learning can only take place if it is conducted in language which learners are familiar with; I therefore argue that although the teacher in this instance is qualified to teach the language, her learners are still at a disadvantage as they are not proficient as revealed by the research findings.

EFAL is a language that is used for communicative purposes in a society, it is LoLT in education (DBE, 2014; Stoop, 2017). In South Africa, EFAL is not a home language but it is the English taught in most public schools and caters for learners who do not speak English as home language (DBE, 2014). Vygotsky, (1978) views language as an essential tool for communication and that culture and behaviour was understood through language. He highlights the role that language plays in cognitive development. The findings further revealed that most independent schools use English as LoLT. The use of English LoLT with well-qualified teachers assisted learners in gaining proficiency in the language to use it for learning (Mudzielwana, 2014; Maluleke, 2015; Govender, 2018). Vygotsky, (1978) suggests that through scaffolding teachers, peers and adults are able to assist learners to fulfil functions, which they will be unable to achieve without such assistance (Nizonkiza & Van Berg, 2014).

According to DBE (2013), at Grade 3 or Grade 4 level, learners are expected to have mastered the reading skills and at these grades, they are reading to learn. The results further reveal parents expectations for their children to master English in order to succeed academically and in the world of work. Saracho, (2017) and DBE, (2013) who emphasize the importance of proficiency in English for better job prospects support this assentation. On the contrary, learning and teaching in English as LoLT may lead to poor academic performance, as evidenced by the high dropout rates witnessed in many rural schools (Van Staden et al., 2016, Madoda, 2017; Saracho, 2017). The early switch to may cause this EFAL as a LoLT. As such, some learners may have challenges of communication with the teacher.

Most rural learners are not familiar with English and only hear the language for the first time in schools (Sepeng, 2017; Madoda, 2017; Barnard, 2017). In addition, opting for EFAL as the LoLT may hinder the learners' academic potential. Vygotsky argues that effective learning cannot take place in a language that learners are not proficient in as they are unlikely to be able to express their thinking (Turuk, 2010).

The focus group interview findings further reveal that learners understood their EFAL teacher because she did not code-switch during lesson delivery as she was from a different linguistic background without proficiency in learners' L1.

### **The findings are confirmed by the learners' comments:**

Six other learners who felt that the use of English as LoLT is school policy therefore teachers are compelled to abide by the policy supported the view. In addition, they felt that teachers would be in trouble from the school management and parents.

The findings revealed that both learners and their parents regard the use of home language to scaffold learning as inappropriate. Zainil and Arysad, (2021) whose study finds similar results support this view. It is therefore, an expectation that in an EFAL classroom learners' home language should be avoided. Although, Makalela (2015); Maluleke, (2019) & Pillay, (2021) encourage the use of code switching to emphasise and clarify certain aspects of the lesson, it should be used appropriately. Makalela, (2015) and Maluleke, (2019) argue that most language teachers use it to compensate for their inadequate language proficiency resulting in rudimentary learning.

### **How to implement adequate assessment strategies/ practices?**

The findings revealed that learners were of the opinion that they were receiving adequate assessment activities. The quotations below support this finding.

With regard to assessments, the learners responded as follows:

#### **LnC23:**

*We write English activities in our classwork books daily and we are given homework nearly every day. We normally mark our own books. The teacher only checks the work and appends her signature.*

#### **Another learner who said supported this view;**

#### **LnB6:**

*We mostly write comprehension and language activities, for formal assessments, the teacher inform us about the assessment a week before we write the assessment to allow us to prepare. We are assessed weekly after completing a topic. The teacher usually scores the assessment using a rubric and later she records on the mark sheet.*

#### **LnA20:**

*The teacher uses a variety of assessment methods to assess us, for example, prepared and unprepared reading and speech respectively. We also do oral and writing language structures and conventions, for example, drama, debate, adjectives, verbs, nouns.*

Six other learners who felt that EFAL assessments are too many and sometimes a challenge supported the view for them. They felt that they is no time for teaching and learning, mostly, it will be assessments especially reading assessments.

#### **LnC6:**

*We sometimes read in our groups, in pairs and individually and answer comprehension questions. We also do projects in groups or in pairs assisting each other. The teacher moves around helping and encouraging us to discuss.*

#### **About reading, divergent view was expressed by another learner who indicated:**

#### **LnB3:**

*We are given little or no opportunity to read individually, in groups. Our teacher is always in a hurry in doing things. She mostly read the comprehension passages for us. Sometimes we discuss comprehension questions with her before we write.*

The study reveal that formal and informal are the two main central approaches to assessment, which are relevant to the teaching of EFAL as a subject. According to Westbroek, Van Rens, Van den Berg and Janssen, (2020), informal activities are conducted daily and formal activities are conducted weekly or fortnightly after



completing a topic. Similarly, the comments by participant learners reveal that their teacher monitors and controls their written work to allow feedback.

Assessments are used to identify individual learner weaknesses and strengths so that teachers can provide specialized academic support educational programming or social services (Yambi, 2020). Similarly, assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning process because it provides feedback and helps in the evaluation of learners (Dlova, 2019). The comments from the learners reveal that the teacher uses a variety of assessment strategies to accommodate learners for diverse backgrounds (DBE, 2011). According to Vygotsky (1978), teachers need cater for learners' diverse intellectual, cultural and multilingual needs (Possi & Milinga 2017; Mahlo, 2017). Vygotsky argues that teachers should design assessments tasks, which cater for the different cognitive levels in order to develop learners' critical thinking skills.

The findings reveal that learners are given homework on a daily basis to give them another opportunity to review their work, allow parents to a chance to assist their children and to see what being learned in school. The findings show that learners are informed of the type and date of the assessment ill before the assessment dates. These findings are in accordance with the CAPS document, which mentions that learners must be informed before the assessment date (Ajani, 2021). The comments above show that learner participants understand the importance of assessment. The CAPS document provides better guidance to teachers on the forms of assessment and preparation of assessment activities (Ojo & Mathabathe, (2021). The comments by the participating Grade 6 EFAL learners indicate that the teacher varies assessment forms in the classroom.

In addition, learners have different learning styles and their strengths and challenges in respect to assessment (Garrison & Eringhaus, 2013). By varying the way they assess learners, teachers are more likely to offer opportunities for every learner to illustrate their knowledge and skills (Andersson & Palm, 2017). The use of variation helps teachers to determine what the learners know and do not know. It enhances teaching and learning as it allows one on one interaction. Vygotsky, (1978) posits that assessments should cater for learners' diverse needs based on their ZPD.

According to Vygotsky (1978), socio-cultural theory explains how children acquire knowledge of the world around them through interaction or collaboration with society and their environment (Shabani, et al., 2010). Vygotsky considered social interaction to be a central part of all human learning McLeod, (2019). Similarly, a teacher can use three or more forms of assessment, such as, class projects, exams and multiple-choice questions (Andersson & Palm, 2017). Furthermore, varying assessments forms enable teachers to get a true reflection of holistic performance of the learners.

### **How to achieve an effective assessment in EFAL learning?**

On how more effective assessment can improve the learning of EFAL, the learners made the following responses:

#### **LnC2:**

*We have only one type of textbook prescribed by the school. We do not have the readers, dictionaries and other supplementary books. The school should buy supplementary books to help us improve our vocabulary.*

#### **LnA4:**

*The school should buy dictionaries and storybooks for each learner to help us improve our vocabulary. Some learners do not know how to use dictionary and we do not have a library at school so we cannot read story books.*

#### **Another learner who indicated expressed a divergent view:**

#### **LnB2:**

*Our parents should buy us supplementary books and dictionaries books so that we improve our reading skills and vocabulary.*

Six other learners who feel that parents should assist in the improvement of reading supported the above view by supporting with reading materials and other resources.

**LnA6:**

*I am staying with my grandma she cannot assist me with my homework because she does not know how to help me. I find it difficult to do my English homework alone. It is affecting my performances at school.*

Four other learners who believe that homework plays a crucial role in their learning supported this view and therefore failure to do their homework will affect their performances at school.

The comments on the excerpt above reveal that learners do not have enough EFAL textbook prescribed by the school. In fact, each learner had own textbook. Learners are expected to read and comprehend. Vygotsky emphasises the importance of scaffolding learning through the use of artifacts from the learners' environment (Turuk, 2010). Through scaffolding teachers create a safe learning environment where learners are allowed to explore, create and debate, for effective learning to take place. The learners' ZPD is assessed through interaction and collaboration with other learners as it provides them with opportunities for imitation. In EFAL, learners should be taught reading skills through phonemic awareness (letter-sound knowledge), phonetic sound (group of letters producing one sound), word decoding or pronunciation (Cliff, 2015; Mkhize & Balfour, 2018). Reading proficiency is also requires learners to be exposed to a variety of text genres.

Learners should be equipped with comprehension skills, for instance, silent reading, using words in context, vocabulary, deducing meanings and inferring meanings (Nudlemann, 2015; Wolff, 2017). In fact, learners should read for themselves to enable them to decode. The child to resolve a problem or achieve the target adopts Vygotsky (1978), views mediation as the use of tools and these tools. Vygotsky sees the role of teacher as that one of a facilitator of the learning process (Daneshfar & Moharami, 2018). Furthermore, the comments by the learner participants reveal that the school had no dictionaries and story readers. The use of dictionaries in EFAL learning helps learners to improve in their vocabulary.

According to Ari (2017), the importance of libraries cannot be over-emphasised especially when you consider that six out of every ten South Africans older than 16 live in households without a single book. In addition, lack of reading materials and textbooks was identified as among the main reasons that 78% of South African children in Grade 4 cannot read for meaning (Pretorius & Lephala, 2012).

**On hindrance to effective teaching and learning of EFAL, the learners responded a follows:****LnC1:**

*Most learners in our class cannot read and comprehend. They cannot answer comprehension answer questions. We should be exposed to a lot of reading texts, individual reading helps us to decode words and comprehend. Teachers should give us a lot of homework, it helps us to practice.*

**Another learner who indicated that stated a divergent view:****LnB4:**

*We are not given the opportunity to practice reading and comprehension. The teacher always reads the comprehension passages for us. Given the opportunity, we can read very well. The majority of the learners cannot comprehend.*

The comment above is supported three other learners in the same focus who felt that they were not given enough opportunity to practice reading. They agreed that their teacher was doing most of the reading of comprehension passages.

**LnC5:**

*EFAL unlike other subjects such as Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Technology, has no formulas or at times no specific rules, for example, no rule for tenses, (go - went, sit - sat). Sometimes, English is very difficult to understand.*

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**Another learner who indicated that raised a divergent view:****LnC8:**

*EFAL is an easy and interesting subject especially if you are able to read. I enjoy reading stories, drama and debate. There are no calculations in EFAL.*

Similarly, reading and viewing skills help learners to learn successfully across the curriculum (DBE 2014). In fact, reading is essential for language development, for enjoyment and for learning about the world (Magashoa, 2013; Maja, 2015). It is through reading that they learn about written texts. Thus, reading is the foundation of writing. Reading is fundamental for learners who are using English as the LoLT in Grade 4 (Caddy, 2015; Maharajh et al, 2016). Pretorius and Lephelala's (2012) study revealed that most Grade 6 learners are not competent in their home language.

The comments from the participating learners reveal that the learning of EFAL is complicated because unlike other subjects, EFAL has on formulas and rules. In fact, the findings reveal that the teaching and learning of EFAL require support from the teacher in the form of homework.

Bharuthram (2012) posits that reading proficiency is related to home resources that support learning (books and supportive parents), digital devices, parents who like to read. For example, these parents are able to support and help their children with schoolwork. On the contrary, Moyo (2018) argues that there is a decrease in parent involvement in children's education in South Africa, resulting in most learners developing poor literary skills. Vygotsky (1978) posits the important role society plays in the developmental process of children's higher order functions and places most emphasis on the role of culture and interactions in such developments. As such, teachers should encourage learners to read individually in their spare time. The teaching of reading is supported by the DBE. For example, the curriculum gave more attention to reading in schools.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was qualitative in nature and used an ethnographic research design to explore the conceptions of Grade 6 EFAL learners on teachers' assessment strategies in Grade 6 EFAL classes in South African schools. This study used one Grade 6 EFAL class from one primary school in Nkowankowa in Limpopo. It is not possible to generalise the findings of this study because of the small sample. This research study stands to contribute to the small but growing studies that are directed towards assessment strategies used in EFAL in South African schools.

In conclusion, the study revealed that most learners have a positive attitude towards English. Learners enjoy learning the language and using it as a LoLT. The study indicated that learners learn English to communicate with learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It was revealed that the positive attitude of learners promotes encourages and motivates them to learn.

The study indicated that informal activities are given daily and formal assessment activities are conducted weekly or fortnightly after completing a topic. The study revealed that the teacher assesses the skills prescribed by the CAPS document. It showed that learners are given time to prepare for the assessment. It can be concluded that the teacher is following the CAPS document when assessing learners.

The study established that learners do not have enough EFAL textbooks prescribed by the school and supplementary books, storybooks and dictionaries. Moreover, the findings establish that there is no library at the school. It was observed that most learners struggle to read. It can be concluded that lack of resources adversely affects teaching and learning, negatively affecting learner performance.

The study revealed that some EFAL teachers do not code-switch during lesson delivery as they are from different linguistic background without proficiency in learners. It can be concluded that good communication skills promote effective assessment strategies to enhance performance.

It is therefore, recommended that teachers attend in-service training to learn how to teach reading proficiency. Training is also recommended for teachers to assess reading and the types of remedial reading lessons that could be offered to learners who struggle with reading. It is therefore, recommended that the independent school establish a library and ensure that there are enough books for all learners to improve their reading proficiency skills. More reading time should be allocated by DBE to provide learners with ample time to practice reading. It is recommended that teachers must be properly trained in order to understand assessment and assessment strategies. Universities training teachers should teach 'assessment' as a module not as a component. It is recommended that DBE should enforce the use of English as LoLT in schools in order to improve the quality of education in the country. It is recommended that research be conducted on assessment and assessment strategies used in EFAL classes across all grades to obtain a holistic picture of the assessment strategies used in South African schooling system given the link between assessment types and academic achievements

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