

Improving South African student teachers' English language skills: an argument for the assessment strategies of the PrimTEd language teaching project

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Abstract

South Africa is a linguistically diverse and educationally complex country. Most student teachers in Bachelor of Education programmes who are preparing to teach in primary schools do not speak English as a mother tongue. The medium of instruction for B.Ed programmes is English. Foundation Phase teachers will be expected to teach learners English (as a) First Additional language (EFAL). Intermediate Phase teachers will be expected to use English across the curriculum as English is the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) from grade 4 upwards. As such, it is important that newly qualified teachers entering primary schools can engage with English texts, have a competent understanding of English and communicate fluently in English.

As one way of making a positive intervention in future teacher competency, this paper argues for the use of language and literacies assessment in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) at universities. The Primary Teacher Education project (PrimTEd) has developed a set of Language and Literacy standards for teachers, as well as assessments for primary school student teachers' knowledge of English. These assessments are designed to occur at two points: entry level (first year) and exit level (fourth year) of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree. Methodologically this paper considers the complex background conditions in language education which led to the PrimTEd project's work and then sets out how the PrimTEd project's assessment strategy may offer a hopeful intervention in these circumstances.

Keywords: English First Additional Language, initial teacher education, South African language context, English language testing, PrimTEd project.

Introduction

South Africa lags behind other countries in terms of language performance at school, as well as having poor school results overall, and some of the many reasons for this, including lack of parental involvement, big class sizes, lack of resources and teacher competency, are outlined in Fesi and Mncube's 2021 paper. The issue of teacher competency is what this paper the work of the PrimTEd project focuses on. Taylor in the Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP) study noted as: "low levels of English proficiency among both teachers and learners. This places a fundamental limit on academic progress, since English is the medium of teaching and learning in around 90% of schools" (Taylor 2014:6). School results clearly indicate a "lack of adequate reading pedagogies, resulting in large numbers of learners reaching Grade 5 essentially illiterate" (Taylor 2014:6).

The problem of poor results in English language education is caused by many factors, but the PrimTEd project focuses on addressing this where teachers are trained in initial teacher education (ITE). This paper seeks to detail the difficulties faced in schools and teacher education, and then examines how the PrimTEd project, with its accent on assessment, offers potentially pragmatic solutions to the issues of language education standards in ITE. This paper is a contribution to an ongoing discussion which aims to create positive change in teacher education by giving more attention to reading, as several studies such as the National Schools Effectiveness Study (Taylor, 2011) NEEDU (2012), the Early Grade Reading Studies (Taylor et al., 2016) and the early work of this very project, the Primary Teacher Education Project (PrimTEd, 2016) has done.

PrimTEd (2016) and Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour (2019) attested that more attention be given "to creating teacher education courses, both for initial and in- service teacher education and training, that focus on teaching reading specifically at primary level. This needs to be coupled with a principled basis for determining professional competence in additional language teaching..." (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019: 316). Taylor noted that "without very significantly improving teacher disciplinary knowledge and pedagogic proficiency, all other efforts aimed at improving the quality of South African schooling are likely to come up against low ceiling effects" (2019: 279). There have therefore been a number of voices in ITE research calling for the strengthening of the language courses' offerings, with the view that if English language standards on ITE are raised, then student teachers with stronger English language and literacies skills will be going into primary schools. It is a commonly held belief

that an education system cannot surpass the strength of its teachers and following this logic, strengthening teacher education is one way of improving educational standards on the ground. Considering the need for light to be shone on the teaching of reading and language in ITE, the research questions which this paper addresses are: What are the background conditions in language education which necessitate the PrimTEd project's work? And how can the PrimTEd project and its assessment strategy offer a hopeful solution to these conditions?

The paper sets out the context in broader South African society, policy and initial teacher education, and then looks at specific research findings which have a bearing on the above concerns in EFAL teaching – both as it starts in foundation phase and continues in Intermediate phase. After that, the calls for attention to be given to language teacher preparation will be discussed, and then, how the PrimTEd project, with its deliberate use of assessment, proposes raising standards in ITE language education in South Africa.

There are several reasons for the current state of language education which will be described from the outset in the context section below, which serves as a scene-setting backdrop.

Context

There are various historic and contextual factors which impact on South Africa's teaching and learning of languages. These will now be examined in turn, beginning with the country's apartheid background, and then proceeding to discussions of South Africa's post-apartheid language policy, issues of school management, initial teacher education's language standards and particularly the unevenness of these standards, and ending with a discussion of the response to policy.

Apartheid background

The complexity of the sheer number of languages spoken in South Africa, as well as an uneven and impoverished education system, with vastly different standards was the inheritance of the new democratic government of South Africa in 1994 (Heugh, 2013:217). Despite the optimism of change and the possibility of building a new free and inclusive nation, apartheid effects can still be felt and "race, class and gender remain strongly articulated and complicated by location, language, and generation" (Kerfoot & Bello-Nonjengele, 2016: 451).

Policy

South Africa's language policies are arguably borne of an extraordinarily complex linguistic situation with 11 official languages comprising nine indigenous African languages as well as

English and Afrikaans. There also are many other languages spoken by migrants, notably in the cities, and trans-linguaging is common (Makoe & McKinney 2014). The Department of Education strongly recommends that the Language of Instruction be the home language in Grades 1-3, but the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) usually changes to English¹ in Grade 4.

As English becomes a language of instruction (LoI) from Grade 4, the problem of lack of acquisition becomes even more of an educational burden; Heugh writes of this as a compounded educational problem:

What makes it worse for children who have received poor reading and writing instruction and inadequate provision of reading materials in their home language [is that they] are expected to switch over, and to read, write, and navigate their way, from the fourth grade on, through a curriculum in English that they barely understand (2013:228- 229).

This is what Dampier (2012) describes as the “(f)utility of added bilingualism in South African education” – which has become a prevalent sentiment in the field. This is the Additive Bilingualism approach, championed by Neville Alexander in the 1990’s, who thought that access to English was a right (Dampier, 2012: 70), but that the learning thereof should not preclude children from also learning in their mother tongues. As Pretorius and Mampura note (2007:56): “Despite explicit and official attention given to the development of home language literacy in principle, national policy does not yet translate well into action in the classroom” and however noble Alexander’s intentions, English is also often more difficult for students to acquire due to the fact that “the indigenous languages of South Africa are sufficiently different from English as to render the effort of adding it to a pre-existent linguistic system futile” (Dampier, 2012: 70).

As Plüddemann puts it: “two decades into the new South Africa, the Language in Education Policy does not have a good story to tell” (2015:196). Or as Dampier 2012 writes, “additive bilingualism (is) a theoretical basis for instituting a language acquisition programme that is both unrealistic and self-defeating” (2012:69). Poor results in English do not remain in the language classroom but follow the pupils into other areas, as Spauld has noted, a child needs “to learn English but also needs English to learn (other subjects)” (2014). Therefore, the failings of language teaching and learning are exacerbated and pronounced by the necessity to know English in order to cope in every subject. There is a growing concern that English ‘for

academic purposes' is another neglected area of the curriculum, and that non- specialist teachers using English in the 'language across the curriculum' capacity are not being trained sufficiently in being able to use, and enable pupils to use, core academic language skills. Moreover, worryingly, the SACMEQ 2017 report notes that English reading is still lagging behind Mathematics (which is on an upward trend) (2017:27).

What should be noted is that there is a drive internationally to standardize education (Chung 2020:37), and although this is variously received internationally, in the light of the lack of commonly agreed standards in ITE in South African higher education the consideration and adoption of standards could be a very positive intervention, especially as they would produce greater alignment of academics' work and make them more accountable.

School Management

One of the issues further affecting school teaching of English is school management's frequent disregard for university subject specialisms, and their assumption "that all qualified educators are capable of teaching all subjects. Thus, at some stage of their careers, most primary school teachers will be required to teach maths and English. Across all phases, there are too many teachers teaching subjects in which they did not specialise." (DBE/DHET 2011: 34-36, 40-42, in Taylor, 2014:6); Deacon puts it, "moreover, their specific subject- and phase-related knowledge and skills would all too frequently be disregarded" (2016:19). This is doubtless a contributing factor to the large weaknesses found in schools. The next focus will be on factors relating to teacher training.

Initial Teacher Education issues

Michael Barber and Mona Mourshed in the 2007 McKinsey report, stated that "the quality of education system cannot exceed the quality of the teachers" and this is the premise for PrimTEd's work at improving primary teacher graduate quality. It would follow that a key area for strengthening English language skills would therefore be by focusing on improving language teacher training at universities. This is what led Taylor to write "The cause of poor performance, by and large, lies not with teachers but with the teacher education system that produced them" (Taylor, 2014:6).

Taylor, in the ITERP study, found that "Teacher educators' low expectations of the academic quality of students (including weak subject content knowledge, lack of proficiency in English, and generally poor reading and writing skills) are not always counterbalanced by any concerted or structured attempt to transform these poor quality entrants into good quality

'reflective practitioners'“(Taylor, 2014:10). This is, as mentioned earlier something which is concerning, and which is beyond the PrimTEd project’s power to address currently. It could be assumed that participating in the PrimTEd testing, and analysing the results and hearing how other academics nationally are using the results to address language learning needs and changing curricula, would be a positive step in creating a climate of making those structured attempts to improve ITE.

Teachers in South Africa are either trained on a Bachelor of Education programme or a post graduate education certificate course. Typically, education courses have lower entrance requirements than other courses, and worryingly this is acutely the case with regard to South Africa’s two areas of greatest educational failure, those being literacy and numeracy as ITERP found: “applicants to ITE programmes are admitted largely without reference to their levels of literacy and numeracy” (Deacon, 2016:11). When it comes to ITE programme design, the Initial Teacher Education Research project (ITERP)’s study of five university courses found that “the ITE programmes at most of these institutions evinced little structural or conceptual coherence”(Deacon, 2016:7). However, especially disturbing was the finding that “one out of every seven final year student-teachers was speaking, hearing or reading very little if any English (Deacon, 2015), yet will be required by most schools to teach using this language” (Deacon, 2016:8).

Uneven standards at universities

Due to the legacy of apartheid and longstanding differences in the state’s financial provision and status of universities, standards at universities vary widely (Reed 2014). Apart from the unevenness of admission criteria and internal standards, Deacon (2016:19) noted that “there is no common or core national ITE curriculum”. When it comes to curriculum design, what has been reported is that “most programmes seem to lack a strong underlying logic and coherence. At one institution, curricula change more in response to changing government policies than in response to research-informed opinions or professional judgements. At others, a similar degree of bureaucratic compliance is coupled with an overemphasis on practice (how) at the expense of theory (why), exacerbated by a lack of staff collaboration and module integration” (Taylor 2014:11).

When it comes to improving ITE, key learning areas need to be assessed. Currently assessment is mostly utilised “for reporting, promotion and certification”(Moloi, Kanjee

Roberts 2019:1). Beyond this there has been little ITE lecturer engagement with assessment results. Assessment could be profitably used to strengthen course curricula.

Language issues in ITE

Taylor in the ITERP study found that “Teacher educators' low expectations of the academic quality of students (including weak subject content knowledge, lack of proficiency in English, and generally poor reading and writing skills) are not always counterbalanced by any concerted or structured attempt to transform these poor-quality entrants into good quality 'reflective practitioners' (Taylor 2014:10).

Furthermore, the structure of ITE university courses does not help to improve the poor language skills that many student teachers graduate with. The 2015 Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MrTEQ) state that “all teachers... should be proficient in the use of at least one official South African language of learning and teaching” but what these standards of proficiency actually are has not yet been set out (DHET 2015:15). When student teachers graduate, their certificates are to “be endorsed to indicate the holder's level of competence in specific languages by using appropriate labels, for example: LoLT (English) and LoC (isiZulu) (DHET 2015:15). However, what these standards actually mean, in terms of whether someone is able to teach in LoLT or not, remains unquantified as there are no commonly held or agreed standards between universities or nationally.

While those ‘specialising’ in being primary school language teachers do receive more language education (but sometimes as little as 12 credits only out 480), those not specialising receive very little: “With respect to those Intermediate Phase teachers who have elected not to specialise in English, the question must again be asked whether their formal exposure to English Subject and Pedagogic Knowledge (between 5% and 7.5%) is adequate”(Taylor 2014:16).

The Language Wars

To compound the problems outlined above from improving ITE to school management to policy, is the disagreement about approaches, which have been described as “polemic debates” (Mthombeni & Ogunnub, 2020:186). Heugh more mildly, recognised: “the plethora of stakeholders whose interests are intimately associated with (language policy documents)” (Heugh, 2013:2310).

There are different approaches to teaching reading from constructivist, immersion, whole language, phonics. Approaches to policy differ too, with many sociolinguists pointing to its obvious shortcomings and calling for change. There are those who favour inter-languaging and codeswitching, those calling for bilingual and or multilingual classrooms, and those who argue for purity of language use. These are arguments which occur in research departments at universities.

But on the ground another kind of battle is waged as teachers struggle with large classes, with their own lack of training in how to teach reading, in under-resourced classrooms with little printed materials and scant access to them (Pretorius & Mampura, 2007), and with unclear guidelines from the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS curriculum) introduced in schools in 2012 (Govender & Hugo, 2018; Khoza, 2017) which favours not one approach, such as the synthetic phonetics which has been so successfully advocated by the Rose report (2006) (and subsequently successfully employed in English schools). This is compounded by the other variables described by (Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007:40) “such as poorly resourced schools, inappropriate instructional methods, printpoor environments, overcrowded classrooms, reduced time-on-task and poorly trained teachers (which) are consistently identified as impacting negatively on literacy accomplishment” (repeated in Fesi and Mncube’s study of 2021, showing little improvement in a 14-year time period).

Considering South African school results, varying teacher education standards and ITERP’s findings (Taylor, 2016; Deacon 2016; Reed, 2014), there is a national need to know firstly what standards there are in ITE language education, and what language levels are being used or are regarded as acceptable at entrance and exit levels, in order to establish knowledge of ITE language education’s standards with a view to improving them. This paper attempts to address the need for more illumination about ITE language, both in its standards and what is being done to counterbalance the systemic weaknesses above, in order to help improve language teaching at school level. This paper continues with the ITERP premise that contrary to the ‘language wars’ “ITE cannot be improved by policy fiat, but only by teacher educators examining their own practice” (Deacon, 2016:25) and the best way to do this is by examination and through a number of professionals finding a common voice in discussion and the establishing of standards. “As a response [to the poor standards as well as NEEDU and ITERP findings], in 2016 the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), with funding from the European Union, launched a 5-year Teaching and Learning Development Capacity Improvement Programme. One of its five projects is the Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd)

Project which aims to strengthen Foundation and Intermediate Phase mathematics and literacy courses in initial teacher education programmes” (Reed, Dixon, Biesman-Simons & Pretorius: 2020). It is to be noted that the PrimTEd assessment of English language and literacies is one of many interventions.

Theoretical framing

Bearing in mind all the contextual difficulties in language education, the theoretical framing for this paper is built around building teacher capacity, and developing an ITE framework which included assessment in order to improve its capacity to train teachers effectively.

Pretorius and Currin ask the question at the outset of their research: “But what happens to biliteracy when the educational context is framed by disadvantage and the first language does not have an extensive written resource base?” (2010:68)ⁱ This pertinent question highlights the fact that while there have been many studies of how to achieve bilingualism or biliteracy, the South African situation, for a number of social and historical factors outlined above, has few precedents. Below are some accounts of what has been observed in schools, which further highlight the need for change.

EFAL at school

In the primary school, virtually nothing is done in English FAL until Grade 3. Gunning (2005:534) notes the importance of starting early with EFAL learning to develop proficiency. Lenyai’s study found that when the teachers did start, usually only in Grade 3, and not giving much time to EFAL, what was done did not provide opportunity for children to engage in English and thus did not promote communicative skills. Furthermore, it was found that nearly all of the teachers in Lenyai’s study, experienced difficulty teaching key aspects of language learning such as letters of the alphabet, teaching comprehension, teaching reading and writing (Lenyai, 2011). In fact, Lenyai’s findings were born out by Pretorius and Currin: “These consistently low literacy levels (as shown on international PIRLS and the national ANAS) suggest that learners are starting off poorly in reading and staying on a poor reading trajectory” (2010:67).

Academic Language Standards

What is of further concern is that those struggling with communicating in English in foundation phase will be taught in it as the LoLT from Grade 4, and their poor language skills will affect their achievements across the board in all their subjects. Pretorius & Currin’s (2010) findings

make a strong case for the importance of reading proficiently in English as a way of accessing and enabling academic knowledge in all parts of the curriculum, noting that

the outstanding students were all strong readers, but especially so in English. This is surely powerful evidence of the importance of reading in academic performance. If learners have difficulty reading, they will have difficulty accessing information in the textbooks and other print resources from which they need to ‘read to learn’. (2010: 71).

The value of PrimTEd

The Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) project was in part a response to the findings of the ITERP study. This study showed that there was substantial diversity in what was being taught and how it was being taught across the sample of universities, for mathematics and English for Bachelor of Education programmes for primary teachers.

Role players from universities, civil society and the department of higher education started conversations about what could be done. There was an obvious tension between the academic freedom of the university academics to choose what and how they taught to the student teachers in their particular context, and the national need for some minimum standards and common approaches to ensure that primary teachers entering the profession were at least to some degree comparable. Dr Nick Taylor explored the ways in which different international contexts had approached this tension.

The South African role players felt that a top-down approach would not be helpful. Dr Taylor motivated that it is incumbent on an academic community to set and improve on its own standards. He cited such examples in law, or engineering or accounting. Students graduate from different institutions but are required to set a professional examination (a board exam) before entering the profession. It was therefore felt that Primary teachers’ education ought to cohere as a professional community, and set its own standards and its own assessments. The threat was that not doing so may result in an assessment being developed outside of the academic community, either by government officials and or the South African Council of Educators. It was felt to be far better to form a community of practice within the initial teacher education community where a process of developing commonly agreed standards and related ways of assessing these standards could be possible. Such a process could be funded to develop capacity across the various institutions and allow for sharing, reflection and

ongoing improvement of the primary mathematics and languages and literacy communities (Roberts, 2021: private communication).

Thus, PrimTEd began in 2016 with the University of Johannesburg as a host.

The PrimTEd project focuses on reading for comprehension and language, and its assessment answers some of the research precedents below:

1. Lenyai's recommendation was that "teacher development for teaching a first additional language must be made a priority so they can implement the CAPS successfully" (2011:78).
2. The SACMEQ 2017 report calls for them "strengthening of in-service and pre- service training of teachers with respect to pedagogical and subject content knowledge on the teaching of higher cognitive demand questions" this was particularly in regard to Language and Mathematics. (SACMEQ 2017:3)
3. Call for disaggregated knowledge about reading results, which is one of the aspects of PrimTEd testing and mapping which is most necessary: "Space does not permit a detailed examination of performance on all the different components of the reading tests" wrote Pretorius and Currin (2010: 71).
4. The necessity of developing an explicit discourse about reading and second language instruction, both in schools (Pretorius & Currin, 2010: 73) and initial teacher education.

The PrimTEd Approach and the importance of assessment

The PrimTEd project realised the importance of using assessment differently to how it had been used before on university courses. It aimed to change the dominant culture from one in which assessment data is only utilised for reporting, promotion and certification to one in which assessment data is regarded as a rich source of information for use in improving teaching and learning. Instead of there being, as there had been, no shared or reported testing standards, meaningful reporting and utility of assessment data is a central requirement for programme coordinators of Bachelor of Education programmes who are collaborating in the assessment workstream of the Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) project. The aim of the PrimTEd project's assessment workstream is to:

Advocate for Higher Education Institutions' participation in common assessment approaches.

Encourage collaboration on teacher assessment approaches towards developing teacher competence in relation to improving the teaching and learning of mathematics.

Develop a teacher competency assessment framework (related to mathematics), for Foundation and Intermediate Phase, for student teachers graduating from Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. (Moloi, Kanjee & Roberts, 2019:1)

The value of these assessments is that they can be “used to establish and report the levels at which students are functioning in order to: (1) identify specific learning needs of students for developing appropriate interventions to address these needs and (2) determine the knowledge and skills with which students graduate upon completion of their ITE programmes”.

The PrimTEd project is concerned with developing an assessment strategy which would see “how a standards-based framework can be used to establish and report the levels at which students are functioning in order to: (1) identify specific learning needs of students for developing appropriate interventions to address these needs and (2) determine the knowledge and skills with which students graduate upon completion of their ITE programmes.” (Moloi, Kanjee & Roberts, 2019:1).

Data is gathered from two tests – one done early on in first year which provides a picture of the skills with which the student teachers arrive on campus, and the second one in fourth year which measures what the student teachers leave with, as well as what they have learned by on the course, through dint of their improvements.

The analysis of the tests is presented in the form of some basic statistics (and lecturers engaging in the PrimTEd project will also receive training in analysing, reporting on and using these results). After the test has been written, the mean and standard deviation for each year group are calculated and the phase specialisations (IP and FP) at first year and fourth year level are compared. This is done to establish whether the observed difference in means is significant or not, conducting a t-test for unpaired data. Where significance is found this difference is quantified by calculating the effect size using Cohen’s D. Reports are generated using five-point summaries, to offer another indicator of the distribution of the results for each group and reflect on their similarities and differences. This analysis contributes to a fuller picture of the results.

To obtain more detailed information at item level, the facility scores for each item pertaining to each group are also reported, and areas of strength and weakness within the test are noted. Having understood the key features of the assessment data, attention turns to the

current course design. Firstly, courses in the B.Ed programmes which focus on English and may therefore be expected to develop the skills assessed in the Authentic texts assessment have been noted. These courses have been examined by their credit weighting, to show the proportion of credits dedicated to English. The next step will be to look at each course-offering drawing on two sets of documents: (1) the submission made to DHET to register the programme, extracting the English course descriptions and (2) the English course outlines which detail learning outcomes to students. The analysis of these documents focuses on extracting learning outcomes which clearly map to the constructs assessed in the Authentic texts assessment.

Finally, the mapping process of the English course learning outcomes of the constructs in the Authentic texts assessment is undertaken, to revisit and further enhance the analysis of the assessment data. This is done with a view to recommending ways in which the English courses may be improved in the future.

By examining the test results over time, a process of improvement can be established, including examining how specific standards of engagement with Authentic texts in English can be assessed, and shows how such rigorous work can potentially improve standards in English language education. It is also hoped that this provides standard setting processes such as the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) as promulgated by the Department of Higher Education, as well as universities processes of defining and designing their English language courses the impetus to attend to language issues in more depth in initial teacher education.

The PrimTEd language test: intentions and design

The PrimTEd language test draws on two important sources. One of these is a comprehension test known as the Tea Test⁴ developed by academics from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), and the other is Core Academic Language Skills test. The former tests reading and comprehension. The latter is based on the work promulgated by Catherine Snow and her team at the Harvard Education school and is described thus: "CALs-I is a group-administered instrument designed to assess core academic language skills (CALs) in grades 4 to 8. Each CALs-I form consists of a 50-minute paper-and-pencil test that includes eight tasks: Connecting Ideas, Tracking Themes, Organizing Texts, Breaking Words, Comprehending Sentences, Identifying Definitions, Interpreting Epistemic Stance Markers, and Understanding Metalinguistic Vocabulary" (Uccelli et al. 2016:

1). This is known as the persuasive language' part of the test and tests the students' muscular use of language.

The PrimTEd team also established Teacher Standards. These are standards which language teachers ought to meet, in order to teach effectively. The tests hope to measure the PrimTEd Language Teacher standards. There are a number of very valuable features on these tests, which will now be described in turn. Firstly, the test has dual components; measuring both comprehension and the persuasive use of language. Another key feature is that because of the test using the CALS II framework, it is testing language which would impact learning in other subjects, or language being used across the curriculum, or core academic language skills. Using CALS II as a framework, the PrimTEd language test also takes lessons and learning from an internationally well-regarded language research centre (Snow & Uccelli at Harvard) and adapts this to a South African context. Furthermore, each test item has specific levels and descriptors which make it useful to identify the language usage levels of those being tested. While test analysis is not the scope of this paper, test results (available since 2017) have been used to assess students' skills in English language and offer university lecturers an idea of where they need to concentrate their efforts to improve the language levels of student teachers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Fundamental Reading challenge findings described by Pretorius and Currin in 2010 show that reading across the board needs attention. This was also found by SACMEQ (2017) and ITERP (2014-15) and led to the start of the PrimTEd project.

The Fundamental Reading Challenge's results indicated "that learners who were poor readers in one language were also poor readers in the other language; similarly, good readers tended to be good readers in both languages" (Pretorius and Currin 2010: 71). This shows that reading in all languages need attention, and comprehension-based tests such as the Tea Test offer a way of assessing this in ITE as well as establishing benchmarks. Furthermore, if reading is necessary, and reading in English is necessary for across the curriculum academic gains, then comprehension is the most pragmatic way of assessing this.

By having two tests at university, one in the first and the other in the last year of university, PrimTEd enables a way of measuring growth in that time. The first test also offers an opportunity to design quick, efficient, and appropriate remediation programmes which ensure importantly that the gap between those who can and those who struggle does not increase so far as to make bridging it more difficult (Rose Report, 2006).

Another important aspect of PrimTEd's assessment is the long-term nature of the project and the annual occurrence of testing which implies that targets for improvement can be modest and pragmatic, for as Pretorius & Cummins advise, "reading skills improve slowly and reading gaps between weak and more able readers can persist in such contexts. Long-term interventions of at least four to five years are needed to bring about effective changes. Stakeholders involved in ... interventions need to be aware of this and avoid the allure of short-term or 'quick fix' interventions" (Pretorius & Currin, 2010: 75). Therefore, the scale of the project and work is realistic.

It is recommended that universities make use of the PrimTEd project for its value in assessing language and literacies skills as well as for the reasons mentioned above – opportunities for swift remediation and the possibility of making efficient changes to course design. Yet another benefit: inter-university collegial dialogue, support and professional growth opportunities as academics learn how to use measurement tools and report on them to strengthen their own practice and programmes.

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ⁱ This lack of resources and printed text in African (first/home) languages is being addressed by a greater effort to publish, with greater investment. Universities training teachers are also pushing the first/home language standards by both employing more ITE specialists with these language skills and seeing more PhD students graduate with dissertations pertaining to African languages in education. The first non-education PhD dissertation in isiXhosa was published at Rhodes University (Makhanda, South Africa) in 2017 (Skade, 2017). The PrimTEd project is currently fund-raising for African languages development, after learning in 2021 that African languages' academics were using the PrimTEd standards in their work at universities.