

# Misunderstanding during instructional communication as related to oral proficiency

Lizette de Jager (corresponding author) and Rinelle Evans

[lizette.dejager@up.ac.za](mailto:lizette.dejager@up.ac.za); [revans@postino.up.ac.za](mailto:revans@postino.up.ac.za)

*Department of Humanities Education, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa*

## Abstract

This article explores misunderstandings identified in an instructional context where oral communication is the primary form of communication and focuses on the teacher as sender of the message. Although the misinterpretation of the teacher's oral message may reside with the receiver, the speaker's inaccurate expression may also cause misunderstanding. Data were collected through video recorded observations of authentic lessons presented by 26 pre-service teachers using English second language as the medium of instruction in the classroom. Misunderstandings were identified and described in terms of their occurrence, nature and frequency. Participants' oral proficiency in English was rated using the International English Language Testing Score (IELTS). Focus group interviews helped gauge participants' awareness of the occurrence of and reasons for misunderstandings. Findings indicated that misunderstandings chiefly resulted from the student teachers' poor oral proficiency and inadequate speech act realization patterns, indicating a lack of pragmatic awareness. Research to improve practice within the teaching and learning context needs to be on-going since pre-service teachers should have a solid command of the language of instruction prior to embarking on their teaching careers. Teacher education programmes that focus on offering language support to prospective teachers may limit misunderstandings in multilingual instructional contexts.

## Key words:

English second language; instructional communication; misunderstanding; oral proficiency; pre-service teacher; Speech Act Theory

## Introduction

Misunderstandings generally occur due to a breakdown in communication as a result of an inaccurate expression on the part of the speaker, or the receiver's unintentional misinterpretation of an utterance, also referred to as pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). Pragmatic failure often occurs when the illocutionary force of an utterance, e.g. a request, has not been taken into consideration, resulting in speaker intent and hearer interpretation not matching (Thomas, 1983). Several factors may contribute to misunderstandings, including the context and circumstances within which the speech event takes place, stress factors or fatigue, or the level of interest that the topic generates. At times, misunderstandings occur as a result of under-developed communicative competence in a particular language, for example non-native speakers of the language being used who do not

understand a speech act fully (receptive level) or struggle at the level of expression.

Misunderstandings occur so frequently during societal interaction, even among native speakers, that they are accepted as "all-pervasive and ubiquitous in all kinds of encounters" (Hinnenkamp, 1999:9).

The occurrence of misunderstandings in a social setting is not necessarily problematic. In an instructional context, however, such a discrepancy between speaker and hearer in making meaning may negatively impact the learning experience. Various factors may account for misunderstandings in the classroom. We argue that a primary contributor is the inadequate oral proficiency of the teacher in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). In the South African educational context, the majority of teachers are mandated by policy to teach in English across the curriculum beyond the fourth grade. By implication, this is a complex and demanding task since few have native or near native proficiency in English. Similar challenges also face pre-service teachers who do not teach in their mother tongue, as internship placements are commonly made in linguistically and culturally diverse schools where English serves as the medium of instruction.

In this article, we question whether the misunderstandings identified as they occurred during the lesson presentations of pre-service teachers who used English as the medium of instruction can be attributed to their oral proficiency in English. The nature of the misunderstandings is described and analysed within the framework of Speech Act Theory. We examine the outcome of an assessment of the pre-service teachers' English proficiency using an internationally recognised protocol and we consider their awareness of misunderstandings as expressed in focus group interviews. Although we did not investigate the effects of misunderstandings in the instructional setting, we conclude with a sense of urgency that the Ministry and teacher education programmes need to focus on dramatically improving teachers' competence in the medium of instruction in the interest of limiting misunderstandings so that effective teaching and learning may take place.

### **Literature review and theoretical framework**

Misunderstandings often occur when a hearer perceives the purpose of an utterance as something other than what was intended by the speaker (Nelson, Carson, Batal & El Bakary, 2002), thus incorrectly interpreting the intent or function of a speech act (Weigand, 1999). In many descriptions, this is the central defining feature of misunderstanding. Weigand (1999:769) states that "it is a communicative phenomenon typically belonging to the receiver, who is not aware of the fact that s/he has misunderstood, it is involuntary and it occurs at the semantic-pragmatic level". This view concurs with what seems to be apparent in the instructional context: more obligation is conventionally placed on the learner at the receptive level to listen and pay attention. It is our view, however, that misunderstandings could equally well arise due to the teacher's utterances being

insufficiently clear. Our research attempted to add to the knowledge base concerning misunderstandings in instructional contexts and was informed by the literature related to misunderstandings as a socio-linguistic phenomenon. Hinnenkamp (1999:3) categorizes misunderstandings (MUs) as being overt, latent or covert, and describes seven types of misunderstanding as shown in table 1.

**Table 1: Hinnenkamp's (1999) seven types of misunderstandings**

Category	Description
MU1	Immediate recognition of a misunderstanding, followed by repair and a return to the <i>status quo ante</i> , usually with phrases such as "That is not what I meant", or "I think you misunderstood"
MU2	Immediate recognition of a misunderstanding, followed by repair, but no return to the <i>status quo ante</i>
MU3	Gradual recognition of misunderstanding, indicated by disturbances in the flow of communication (uncomfortable moments), with possible but unlikely return to the <i>status quo ante</i>
MU4	Gradual recognition of misunderstanding, indicated by disturbances in the communication, but is not treated as in MU1 and MU2; misunderstanding is not treated/rectified or repaired
MU5	Gradual recognition of misunderstanding, indicated by disturbances in the communication, until communication comes to a halt or breaks down, sometimes followed by change of topic
MU6	No obvious recognition of misunderstanding, although an outside observer will regard it as a misunderstanding
MU7	To an outside observer there is no indication that a misunderstanding has occurred, but one interlocutor may have the feeling that s/he was misunderstood – the misunderstanding, although noticed, remains unnegotiated

Crucial to our research was Hinnenkamp's (1999:8) further claim that in each of the seven types, the "event" and the "core" of the misunderstanding are significant. The *event* is the speech event, the reason for the conversation. The *core* refers to the actual misunderstanding, whether it be a mishearing, misinterpretation or poor expression. Focusing on these two concepts assisted us in extracting the mismatch between speaker intent and hearer interpretation in the misunderstandings examined in our research. Identifying and describing the type of misunderstanding and the possible reasons for such misunderstanding, could shed light on problematic instructional communication.

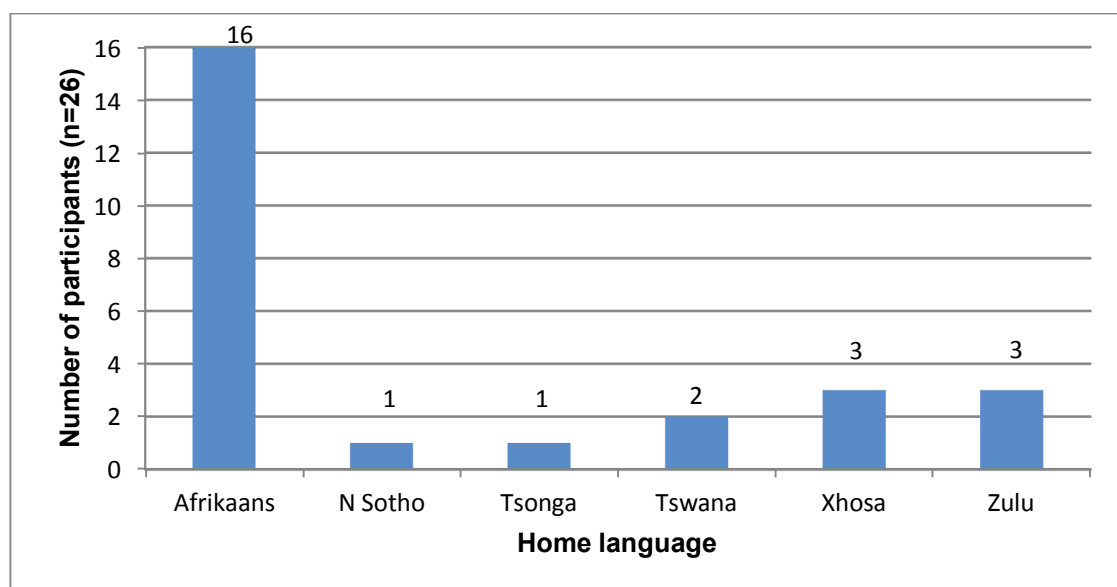
Our research was framed within Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, as well as elements from theories on communication, namely communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and instructional communication (McCroskey, Valencic & Richmond, 2004). Vygotsky's theory holds that language is the medium through which children learn, access knowledge, think and solve problems. His theory on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the Zone of Current Development (ZCD) is applied in this article. Communicative competence refers to the ability of an interlocutor to convey and interpret messages, and to negotiate meaning within a given context, and includes grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence, as well as discourse competence (Canale, 1983). The

notion of instructional communication is based on the General Model of Instructional Communication developed by McCroskey *et al.* (2004) and refers to teachers' communicative skills, which include oral proficiency, as they interact with their learners, verbally and non-verbally, in a face-to-face learning environment.

Speech Act Theory (SAT) (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) is an integral element of communicative competence because it describes the functions and uses of language. As such, we considered it an appropriate analytical tool to describe the misunderstandings identified. Austin (1962) asserts that when speakers communicate, their utterances (speech acts) potentially carry various types of meaning: they could produce propositional (literal or conventional) meaning also known as a locutionary act (LA). Some speech acts may not be as direct and meaning is inferred by the illocutionary force (ILF) of the words. This implies that the speaker's utterance aims to affect the listener's behaviour by for example to inform, persuade, apologise or sympathise. Lastly, the perlocutionary effect (PLE) of an utterance is intended to bring about a certain psychological reaction in the listener. Thus, when the force of an utterance is not taken into account in a speech event, the speech act is considered unachieved because a discrepancy between the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation exists (Marcu, 2000; Holtgraves, 2007). When the intent of the speaker (student teacher) does not match the hearer's interpretation (the learner), misunderstandings may result.

### **Research method**

This qualitative case study draws on observational, questionnaire and focus group interview data, as well as data from the application of the International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) rubric, gathered from a convenience sample comprising 26 final year student teachers during their teaching practice internship. Currently, at the institution where this research was undertaken, one of the prerequisites for the B. Ed. degree<sup>1</sup> is a six-month internship between April and October in the fourth year of study. The students are mentored by teachers at the placement school and assigned a university lecturer who provides guidance for the duration of the internship. Student interns who matched the selection criteria of being a non-native speaker of English and who would be teaching through the medium of English were invited to participate. Our research adhered to all ethical requirements for research involving human subjects. Twenty six student teachers, 9 males and 17 females, ranging between 21 and 23 years of age, accepted. Figure 1 indicates the home language of participants.



**Figure 1: Home languages of participants**

The participants represented by figure 1 could seem to constitute two groups, assumedly from different educational and language backgrounds, who could perhaps display varying degrees of difficulty with English. The placement of student teachers is usually determined by their fields of specialization and the schools' willingness to accept students for a prolonged internship. These urban schools ranged from adequately to well-resourced, and were considered large, i.e. ranging from 800 to 1 300 learners. The learners were assumed to be predominantly non-native speakers of English. Table 2 indicates the distribution of the sites, participants, grades and subjects taught. The LoLT per site is also provided.

As can be seen from Table 2, just over half of the participants ( $n=14$ ) were placed at primary schools and 12 were placed at secondary schools. With one exception, the grade 4–7 learners were observed being taught English through the medium of English. This is of significance when reporting on the frequency of MUs identified in the various grades.

**Table 2: Distribution of sites, participants, grades and subjects taught**

Research site	Participants (n=26)	Grade taught <sup>3</sup>	Subject taught	Language of instruction as determined by the school's language policy
School A	1	gr 4	English First Additional Language	English
	1	gr 7	Mathematics	
School B	1	gr 4	English First Additional Language	Afrikaans
	1	gr 5		
	1	gr 7		
School C	1	gr 4	English First Additional Language	Afrikaans
	1	gr 7		
School D	1	gr 6	English First Additional Language	English
School E	2	gr 5	English First Additional Language	Afrikaans
	2	gr 6		
	2	gr 7		
School F	1	gr 8	Mathematics	English
	1	gr 10	Economics	
	2	gr 8	Life Orientation	
	1	gr 9	History	
School G	1	gr 10	Mathematics	English
	1	gr 12	Technical Drawing	
School H	1	gr 10	English First Additional Language	Afrikaans
	2	gr 11		
School I	1	gr 9	English First Additional Language	Afrikaans

One 45-minute lesson presented in English by each participant was video recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The recordings and transcripts were examined multiple times in order to identify and describe the misunderstandings that may have occurred between the student teachers and the learners during instruction. We concentrated on identifying discrepancies between the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation in the realization of speech acts. Student teacher utterances were scrutinized to establish whether they had been correctly interpreted by the learners, i.e. whether effective communication had taken place or whether there had been misunderstanding. Only the utterances resulting in misunderstanding were used as the selected data set. Although not analysed systematically, non-verbal behaviour of student teachers and learners was also noted in order to confirm the identification of misunderstandings. We further concentrated on ungrammatical sentences or atypical pronunciation. We adapted the error analysis classification of Nel and Swanepoel (2010:53) and that of Roberts, Moss, Wass, Sarangi and Jones (2005:465), to offer a

linguistic explanation of why misunderstandings arose. Three broad categories that relate to oral proficiency were used:

- Phonological errors, including pronunciation errors and problematic enunciation
- Grammatical errors, including concord, tense and sentence structure errors
- First language transfer errors, including word order, idiomatic expressions, vocabulary and accent influence

This error analysis provided a general impression of the oral proficiency of the participants.

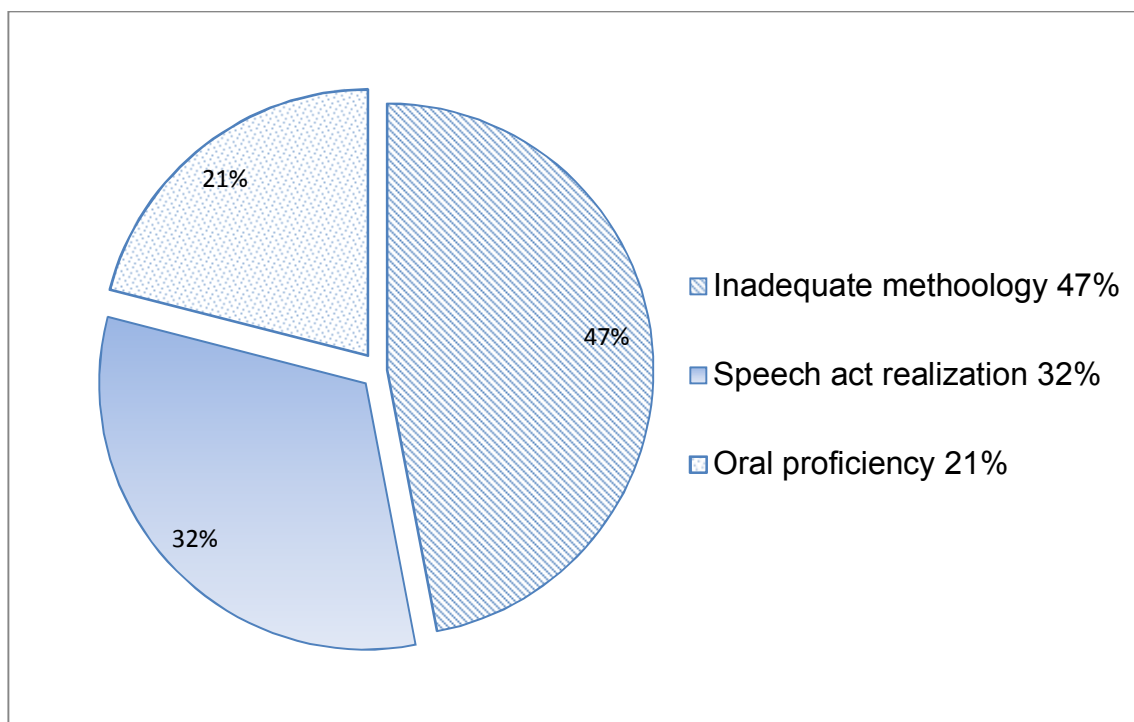
We rated the student teachers' oral proficiency using the IELTS rubric, a British-Australian venture developed to measure English language proficiency (oral and written) of students entering academic institutions of higher learning. IELTS is recognised by more than 7,000 institutions in over 135 countries (IELTS, s.a.). Examiners award a band score for each of four equally weighted criterion areas: *Fluency and coherence*, *Lexical resource*, *Grammatical range and accuracy*, and *Pronunciation*. The band descriptors provide categories for describing proficiency on a level of 1 to 9 across the four criterion areas, 1 representing a beginner in the language, and 9 representing an expert (Kaye, 2009). Level 6 indicates a competent user of English who, in familiar conditions, may understand complex utterances fairly well.

The 26 student teachers participated in audio-recorded focus group interviews post-observation. The focus groups were aimed at gauging the participants' awareness of the occurrence of misunderstanding or confusion during instruction, to ascertain their perceptions of the type and frequency of misunderstandings, to establish whether they could identify possible reasons for misunderstandings occurring and whether they would repair the misunderstanding. The data set was scrutinized for emerging categories.

## **Key findings**

### *Evidence of misunderstanding*

It is evident from the data analysis that misunderstandings did, in fact, occur; however, we had anticipated many more since the participants were all non-native speakers of English. Fewer misunderstandings (37%) were observed among student teachers teaching younger learners, while 63% were identified in secondary school classrooms. Student teachers' inadequate English oral proficiency (lack of surface structure ability and grammatical competence) and inadequate speech act realisation (the patterns used to display their pragmatic competence) contributed to the occurrence of 21% and 32% respectively of the identified misunderstandings. The remainder of the misunderstandings (47%) were related to underdeveloped methodological skills and inadequate content knowledge; findings not addressed in this article. Figure 2 indicates the distribution of the reasons for the misunderstandings that were identified.



**Figure 2: Reasons for misunderstandings**

When mapping all the misunderstandings, including those related to inadequate methodology and content, onto Hinnenkamp's classification (1999:3), we found that 32% of the misunderstandings lay in category MU6, while 16% lay in MU2. None of the identified misunderstandings lay in categories MU5 and MU7. We also found that 26% of misunderstandings did not fit any of the categories.

These misunderstandings were locutionary acts where incorrect information was provided to the learners, or information was incorrectly explained, and were examples of what Weigand (1999) calls non-understanding. Although it can be argued that non-understanding is not misunderstanding, in the instructional context the effect on the learners is the same as if it were a misunderstanding: the learners experience confusion and the teacher needs to initiate repair.

#### *Oral proficiency of student teachers*

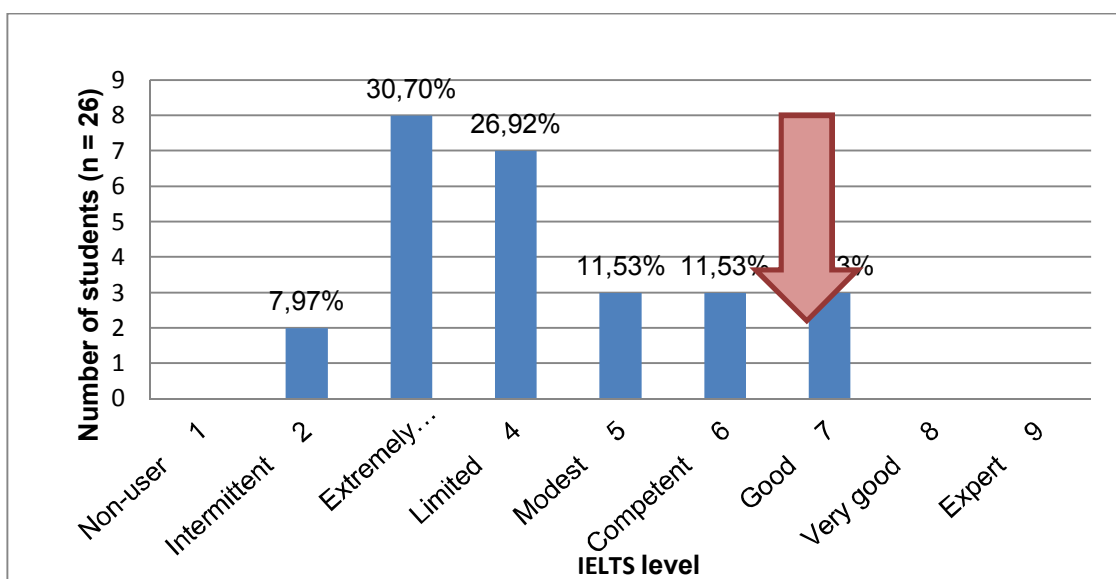
Student teachers' language use displayed blemishes relating to the surface structure of the utterances and the imperfection of words. Evidence of poor oral proficiency was found in, among others, inaccurate pronunciation, problematic use of concord and tenses, clumsy idiomatic expressions, direct translations from the mother tongue and incorrect word order. The blemishes provided an impression of the participants' level of oral proficiency, but did not necessarily always contribute to, or result in, the occurrence of misunderstandings. The most prominent features identified in the student teachers' idiosyncratic utterances include the following:

- Non-use of the third person present tense -s ("He climb onto the chair")
- Use of uncountable nouns as countable ("equipments"; "our involvements")



- Finite form of verb *to be* completely omitted ("She very ill"; "He in class today")
- Incorrect use of relative pronouns *who* and *which* (" the book who"; "the boy which")
- Omission of obligatory definite and indefinite article ("He sailed to Congo"; "We asked for pencil")
- Insertion of definite and indefinite article where they do not occur in native English ("I want you to write about the nature")
- Use of that-clauses instead of infinitive constructions ("I want that we discuss the poem")
- Use of question tag *is it?* or *isn't it* to form all question tags ("You should do homework regularly, isn't it?")
- Inserting redundant words such as prepositions ("You have to discuss about the simile")
- Using words to increase explicitness ("red colour" instead of "red"; "How long time?" instead of "How long")
- Incorrect placement of stress, often with pronouns or at the end of a sentence ("and HE has been in Durban for a week" "This is the correct WAY")
- Lack of/avoidance of reduced vowels where obligatory, in unstressed vowels, resulting in a full vowel rather than a schwa: [kɔ̃ntinju] instead of [kə̃ntinju]

We had assumed that some of the misunderstandings would occur due to the student teachers' English oral proficiency, but their poor rating was unanticipated. Figure 3 indicates the outcome of the IELTS rating, with Level 6 indicated by the arrow as the minimum level of English mastery to perform acceptably academically at English medium institutions of higher learning (Kaye, 2009; Elder, 2003).



**Figure 3: Participants' oral proficiency rated against the IELTS descriptors**

As indicated in figure 3, the language proficiency of 20 (76,92%) of the 26 student teachers lay below band 6. These student teachers showed inadequacy in all four of the IELTS criterion areas and were rated insufficiently proficient to facilitate the exposition of content for their learners via the medium of English. The language proficiency of only six students (23,07%) lay on IELTS bands 6 or above. Table 3 provides examples of their inadequacies across the four criterion areas.

**Table 3: Examples of inadequacies in the four criterion areas**

Fluency and coherence	Lexical resource	Grammatical range and accuracy	Pronunciation Phonetics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "xsqualstotwo" (X is equals to two)</li> <li>- "a to the por 19" (a to the power of 19)</li> <li>- "The father is drinking, the mother is drinking, the other is drinking the buzz."</li> <li>- "I'm gonna hand you out a paper."</li> <li>- "Let's look at quickly some of the others."</li> <li>- "Plug it in and put it around."</li> <li>- "When you have so big animal ..."</li> <li>- "You're thinking the same thinking I'm thinking?"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Sit on your phones" (switch on your phones)</li> <li>- "alteration" (instead of alliteration)</li> <li>- "Little Miss Muffin" (instead of "Little Miss Muffet")</li> <li>- "What colour are people when they were ill?"</li> </ul> <p>Learners couldn't answer, teacher answered "White" (instead of "pale")</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "There's more ones ..."</li> <li>- "What Zola mother say every day?"</li> <li>- "Why you doing nothing?"</li> <li>- "She have one there."</li> <li>- "There's two kinds of trees."</li> <li>- "... it always stay green ..."</li> <li>- "What is the two different kinds of trees?"</li> <li>- "Some of the cars has sensors."</li> <li>- "The first cell phones is ..."</li> <li>- "Our car have a TV."</li> <li>- "What is movies gonna be like in the future?"</li> <li>- "What does your phone had, that this phone didn't had?"</li> <li>- "You think cars look the way they do for the last 40 years?"</li> <li>- "All his brothers is not nice with him."</li> <li>- "How did you feel if you are blind?" (instead of "How would you feel ...?")</li> <li>- "This are all animals ..."</li> <li>- "There is easy ones ..."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "of" pronounced [ɔf]</li> <li>- "fractions" pronounced [fɹækʃəns]</li> <li>- "component" pronounced [kəmˌpɒnənt]</li> <li>- "board" pronounced [bɔr] or [bɔrd]</li> <li>- "web" pronounced [wɛ:b]</li> <li>- "rib" pronounced [ri:b]</li> <li>- "towards" pronounced [tuːwɔːdz]</li> <li>- "imagined" pronounced [i:mædʒɪnɛd]</li> <li>- "tennis bat" pronounced [tɛni:s bɔd]</li> <li>- "problem" pronounced [prɒbləm]</li> <li>- "domain" pronounced [dɒmɛɪn]</li> <li>- "long neck" pronounced long [næ:k]</li> <li>- "comparisons" pronounced [kəmˌpærɪsəns]</li> <li>- "disabled" pronounced [di:səbəlɪd]</li> </ul>

Participants apparently experienced most difficulties with the IELTS criterion areas *Grammatical range and accuracy* and *Pronunciation*, and to a lesser extent with *Lexical resource*. *Fluency and coherence* was also impacted, because of the difficulties in the other three areas. Participants were

not able to sustain extended discourse; their vocabulary and knowledge of sentence structures inhibiting prolonged exchanges. Few attempts were made to determine whether the learners had actually understood, other than asking "Do you understand?" Even in instances where student teachers recognised a problem, they ignored it and went on with the lesson, possibly because their grammatical range and lexicon were limited.

Although data gathered from the focus group interviews revealed blemishes in the participants' language proficiency, participants' confidence in their own language proficiency differed markedly:

"I think my English is quite good, I take academic English."

"I speak well, I don't have problems."

"My English is good."

"I usually do well in English."

The participants ascribed misunderstandings to the learners' inadequate proficiency and not their own:

"The learners don't have the vocabulary."

"They struggle to understand my English."

"They don't understand, I have to switch to the vernacular."

"They don't have enough opportunity to speak English at home."

Tension, therefore, existed between our aural assessment and the IELTS results on the one hand, and the student teachers' own perceptions regarding their English proficiency on the other.

#### *Paralinguistic features identified in student teacher speech*

Paralinguistic aspects were identified which probably influenced learners' behaviour and contributed to misunderstandings. For example, two participants often repeated themselves, not because of any misunderstanding that had to be repaired, but as part of their communication style. They also tended to answer their own questions, not giving enough opportunity for the learners to formulate and provide answers. Two participants used clumsy expressions, spoke carelessly or too fast, or too much. Four participants dominated the interaction with teacher talk, thus restricting learners' participation. Two participants spoke in such a shrill voice that it caused aural discomfort, as evidenced by some learners' pained facial expressions/grimaces. Two participants articulated poorly and two others spoke inaudibly. In three of the lessons we observed factors such as impatience and frustration on the student teachers' part, indicating their ignorance of communication strategies to compensate for imperfect knowledge of rules or for factors such as fatigue and distraction. Although we did not analyse any learners' non-verbal responses to these paralinguistic features used by the student teachers, we observed their uneasiness, especially where student teachers' pronunciation was non-standard. Based on the verbal responses of some of the learners, it was evident that their command of the second language was at times better than that of the student teachers.

We also observed disquiet in the learners' body language when the student teachers became frustrated with learners who failed to provide the anticipated answer. This frustration was evident in participants' tone of voice and exasperated gestures. The learners were sensitive to this and tended to be unresponsive, which exacerbated the situation. Furthermore, we observed learners using non-verbal gestures which suggested insufficient understanding and confusion. However, in most cases participants did not respond to these cues and the misunderstandings were left unrepaired. Possible reasons why the participants did not follow up on the non-verbal cues, or failed to address the misunderstanding, seemed to include that they did not notice them, did not recognise them as distress signals, or did not have the knowledge or skills required to intervene.

### *Speech act realization*

Evidence of inadequate speech act realization was found in the idiolectic nature of utterances made by student teachers. Of the 32% of misunderstandings related to speech act realization, 85% were caused by ill-formed locutionary acts (LAs), as shown in the following examples:

"Why Zola **not look** before **cross** the road?" (Incorrect grammatical structure)

"What is '**of**'?" (Wrong word choice - couldn't interpret)

"What **questions** we **have**?" (Incorrect grammatical structure and wrong word choice – couldn't interpret)

Such ill-formed LAs created confusion, which was evident in the learners' body language and facial expressions. The learners were unable to interpret the utterances and did not provide any answers, forcing the student teacher to either repeat the question or rephrase it.

Of the 32% of misunderstandings related to speech act realization, 15 % were caused by ill-formed illocutionary acts (ILAs), where the hearers were unable to interpret speaker intent accurately. Students did not know how and where to use utterances appropriately or how to negotiate meaning within a given context, social or cultural, as indicated by the following examples:

- "Yes, I will come for you." (meaning: The teacher will help her soon, but interpreted as a threat)
- "You've read the book, people!" (meaning: Exasperation at their not understanding, but interpreted by the learners as an ordinary interrogative; almost all the learners chorused : "Yes" as if a question had been asked)
- "And sad?" (meaning: Can sad be classified as an "inside" or "outside" character? [classification of literary character] learners couldn't interpret)
- "I think you should write this down." (meaning: This is important information, they should write it in their books, but not interpreted, ignored by learners)

Valuable teaching and learning time was spent on repeating instructions and rephrasing statements in an effort to repair the misunderstandings. It would appear as if the resulting frustration and impatience on both the teachers' and the learners' part contributed to distorted communication.

In the few instances where student teachers addressed the misunderstandings, they did so by code-switching and rephrasing as repair strategies, claiming to promote the learners' grammatical competence. However, we observed that the code-switching the student teachers used was merely to make up for their own lack of vocabulary or ignorance of the correct language structure to be used. In only one instance did the code-switching assist in enhancing learners' knowledge of English:

"Ja, in Afrikaans sê ons kom kyk **na** my prentjie, *but in English it's look at...*".

## Discussion

In this study, the misunderstandings that were identified during the instructional event fell into two broad categories, namely those related to an inability to realize speech acts and those related to inadequate oral proficiency. Although we had anticipated finding more misunderstandings, it is possible that the participants' inadequate oral proficiency while teaching created a language-lean environment where a minimum of explanatory language was used to deliver content.

Misunderstandings seemed to occur most when student teachers asked questions. Usually, once a question has been posed, an answer is expected. When an incorrect response is offered, or lengthy silences ensue, or learners ask for clarification, a misunderstanding may have occurred. Most of the misunderstandings observed were notably caused by lexical problems, thus confusing the learners by using an incorrect word. This may point to student teachers' lean vocabulary, and could hamper their content delivery. In some instances the misunderstandings were also caused by non-standard pronunciation or incorrect grammar usage. In most cases, the core of the misunderstanding was identified in Hinnenkamp's (1999) terms as poor expression resulting in misinterpretation. Several of the misunderstandings were not repaired, possibly because the participants were unaware that a misunderstanding had occurred. We surmise that since 32% of the misunderstandings were identified as category MU6 (*No obvious recognition of misunderstanding, although an outside observer will regard it as a misunderstanding*), misunderstandings were generally unnoticed by the student teacher. In a few instances where the student teachers did recognize the misunderstanding, repair took place within the next speech turn.

The occurrence of fewer misunderstandings among student teachers teaching younger learners (grade 4–7) was unexpected. Currently *The Language in Education Policy* (Department of Education, 1997) calls for mother tongue education in the Foundation Phase, consequently, from

grade 4 there is generally a radical switch to English. Young learners would thus have had limited exposure to L2 instruction and would be in a developmental phase of language learning. What perhaps accounted for fewer misunderstandings identified was that student teachers may not have needed such sophisticated levels of expression and that their basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) sufficed for this age group.

Despite the student teachers' oral proficiency being below par, the inadequacies in grammatical competence and non-standard pronunciation did not necessarily contribute to misunderstandings. Primarily, the student teachers' lack of fluency and coherence led to learner confusion and misinterpretation. Usually, a certain amount of latitude is allowed in the language user's performance, particularly one for whom it is a second language, and idiosyncrasies are tolerated. Nevertheless, when teachers are not sufficiently in command of the LoLT, they struggle to extend their learners' BICS, let alone develop the learners' cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Evans and Cleghorn 2010). Gauging from the observations and focus group interviews, as well as informal discussions with the student teachers, it was clear that their English was generally adequately developed to interact socially at an elementary conversational level. What proved to be problematic was the student teachers' ability to express themselves logically and clearly in a formal instructional context. Most of them required a more advanced language proficiency and the ability to realize speech acts appropriately in order to explain abstractions or expound content. As Cummins first theorised in 1979 (Cummins, 2003), a teacher's surface fluency in the instructional language is not enough to take learners beyond BICS to the CALP needed to verbally express what they have understood. We thus infer that where the teacher's level of oral proficiency is inadequate, the teacher would struggle with successful exposition of content.

Although the IELTS rubric was not designed specifically to evaluate instructional language, or what Uys (2006:69) calls "Classroom English"<sup>2</sup>, it is possible to infer that if one has achieved a level 6 on IELTS, one's proficiency to teach via English should also be adequate. However, 77% of the student teachers were rated below level 6, which accounts in part for the instructional difficulties they experienced and the misunderstandings that ensued. The poor oral proficiency observed was spread equally among the different language groups mentioned in figure 1 and they all struggled equally in their language use. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) theory, teachers, as the competent adult agent, are supposed to assist learners in achieving a level of oral performance which the learners would be incapable of developing autonomously. Without the required level of oral proficiency, the teacher perpetuates the cycle of poor English. This notion is supported by Nel and Müller (2010:648) who claim that teachers' limited English proficiency negatively affects their learners' development of English as a language of learning. Further research would highlight the extent to which the complexities of learning would be compounded.

The fact that no perlocutionary acts were found to contribute to misunderstandings is notable. This could be because the specific instructional context did not provide sufficient opportunity for teachers to bring about a certain reaction, for example, convincing or persuading. More locutionary acts contributed to misunderstandings than did illocutionary acts. This was not owing to the participants' finesse in dealing with indirect speech acts, but rather their avoidance of complicated speech acts, confirming the suggested relationship between a speaker's CALP and speech act realization ability. Misunderstandings which occur due to the student teachers' inability to realize speech acts implies that they have not mastered pragmatic competence, which El Samaty (2005:341) describes as "the ability to use language effectively in order to understand language in context". Since most language teachers do not stress pragmatic knowledge in their classrooms but rather focus on linguistic knowledge (Al Falasi, 2007), it is possible that learners do not have sufficient opportunities to communicate in the target language.

One of the tenets of the Communicative Approach to language teaching is that the language used in the classroom should be as authentic as possible. A useful way to address this would be to contextualise the theme or topic that the teacher wishes to use for teaching content in such a way that learners can relate it to their lives. The student teachers in this study failed to contextualise their lessons, often starting with the marking of homework and continuing with de-contextualised, random exercises unrelated to authentic examples. These inadequacies, although a methodological aspect, are closely linked to the student teachers' own communicative competence. The more the lexicon or grammatical fluency was absent in the student teachers' communication, the more they struggled to deliver content.

In addition, although the paralinguistic features of some of the participants did not directly contribute to misunderstandings, they were marked enough to distort communication. Some student teachers' frustration and exasperation at not eliciting the desired response from learners led to learner discomfort and unresponsiveness. However, in many cases the student teachers did not address this problem, but continued with the lesson. Possibly, immaturity and inexperience were to blame.

The discrepancy between the student teachers' actual oral proficiency and their perceived proficiency could point to the existence of different notions of the "successful English second language speaker" (Coetzee-Van Rooy & Verhoef, 2000). They were unaware of their own low level of oral proficiency, possibly overrating it since, compared to other persons in their community, their grammatical knowledge and fluency in English may be considered superior. We also suggest that certain non-standard phrases or pronunciation forms have become so "standard" that miscommunication does not happen despite the irregular usage.

Avenues for future research may lie in building on McNeill's (2000) exploration of gesture, thought and interaction between teacher and learners. Furthermore, the effect of misunderstandings on the learning experience was not investigated, neither was the expressive or receptive oral proficiency of the learners. Testing learners' oral proficiency may yield surprising results if compared to that of the teachers. The same applies to their perceptions of misunderstandings. It is also possible that learners experienced misunderstandings that were not observed. The discussion of the findings in this research relates to student teachers from only one institution and cannot be generalized, although they may be transferable to similar education contexts.

### **Implications for practice**

Teachers need to feel secure in their command of the instructional language. Strategies need to be put in place to ensure that their mastery of the language of instruction is sufficiently fluent and comprehensible that it may be used spontaneously during instructional communication (Evans & Cleghorn, 2012). Situations in which speakers may fail pragmatically can be illuminated, which in turn, may help to develop curricula to address these problem areas. While all misunderstandings may not be eliminated completely, they may be reduced by well-planned, critical language awareness and consciousness-raising education that focuses its attention on the pragmatic meanings behind speech act behaviour.

The significance and urgency of dramatically improving teachers' competence in English require governmental intervention. Institutions responsible for teacher education ought to be supported in establishing language support centres where, under specialist guidance, prospective teachers can work at developing acceptable levels of Classroom English. Non-native speakers who choose to become teachers of English or who will teach through English as the LoLT, should be sensitised to specific speech acts and the accompanying linguistic features that are necessary to produce appropriate and well-received speech acts. Student teachers need to be able to cope with the discourse dimension of speech acts, but should also develop awareness of the differences between various realizations of the same speech act, e.g. between explicit performatives and more indirect ways of communicating the same meaning. Practical opportunities where these competences can be sharpened need to be created and made available, either in simulated teaching contexts e.g. micro lessons, or through assistive electronic sources. The Education Ministry has re-introduced language endorsements as part of the exit examination before awarding teacher qualifications (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Although flawed in terms of the time scale, if such measures are implemented successfully, beginner teachers could become fully proficient in the LoLT as well as conversationally fluent in at least one additional official language.



Currently, no standardised South African oral proficiency test to gauge oral proficiency exists. A purposeful assessment of the "Classroom English" language development course crafted by Uys (2006:69) for second language speakers of English who intend to become teachers, is a starting point. Native speakers of English should not be precluded as they often do not know that their sentences are complex or that their rate of delivery is fast (Evans & Cleghorn, 2012; Klaassen, 2002). Such courses need to be intensive and should span the full four years required for obtaining a professional teaching qualification.

Introducing specific exposure in this regard could develop the required competence for L2 acquisition and for the mastery of acceptable Classroom English (Uys, Van der Walt, Botha & Van der Berg, 2006) for teaching through the LoLT. Uys *et al.* (2006:80) propose that "administrators and programme organisers should realize that at least for the immediate future, extensive training in English as main L2MI<sup>4</sup> in South Africa should prevail".

Teacher education programmes that focus on offering language support to pre-service teachers, as well as helping to develop instructional skills and knowledge of basic pedagogical principles, will go a long way in ensuring effective teaching and learning. Moreover, a stronger focus on pre-service teachers' pragmatic proficiency in the LoLT is imperative, especially in South Africa where educators have to address the needs of classrooms comprised of learners from varying linguistic backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

Our initial proposition, that misunderstandings in instructional settings may be caused by the student teachers' poor oral proficiency, was affirmed by this study. However, we had not known just how poor their oral proficiency was in the language they would use to teach upon graduation. Misunderstandings were also caused by unanticipated variables namely, the student teachers' lack of sound methodological and pedagogical principles as well as their insufficient content knowledge – the full explication of which lies beyond the scope of this article.

When the teacher is not sufficiently in command of the LoLT, communication between teacher and learner is seriously hampered. More importantly, when the teacher is not adequately trained in the basic pedagogical principles of good teaching practice, communication is even more problematic. This in turn leads to instructional dissonance of the sort claimed by Evans (2005) and Evans & Cleghorn (2010:147) where teachers cannot develop their learners' basic communicative skills or their cognitive ability because they themselves do not have the required oral proficiency.

Research to improve practice within the teaching and learning context needs to be on-going, especially where a diverse group of multilingual speakers (such as is found in most urban South

African classrooms) come together to create meaning from instructional communication. In daily conversations with others, communication often fails for various reasons and results in misunderstandings, usually without dire consequences. However, the formal context of the classroom does not tolerate such instructional dissonance easily. It remains imperative then that pre-service teachers have a sound command of the language of instruction in order to embark on their careers as teachers.

### Notes

1. A four year undergraduate degree in Education, with specialization in teaching at pre-school, primary school or secondary school.
2. The specific English proficiency required by teachers who use English as the medium of instruction, integrating the development of language skills with methodology principles and presentational skills.
3. In South Africa, grades 1–7 are taught in primary schools and grades 8–12 in secondary schools.
4. Second language medium of instruction.

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