

"I speaks English deliciously" – Perceptions of oral proficiency within the context of televised instruction in a developing country

A B S T R A C T Interaction between educator and learners is widely considered a key variable of effective instruction. In face-to-face teaching, the educator is able to facilitate learning directly and gauge the level of the learners' English proficiency. Televised instruction makes this virtually impossible, as learners are invisible and thus immediate intervention in learning or estimations of proficiency are much more difficult to achieve. The *TeleTuks Schools* community project aimed to offer academic support to matriculants via interactive television. Several hundred Grade 12 learners watched daily broadcasts and while technology permitted bi-directional audio contact with the studio presenter, viewers seldom phoned in to ask questions or make comments about the academic content being presented on screen. These infrequent responses were unexpected and called for explanation. An initial proposition suggested that learners lacked sufficient proficiency in the medium of instruction – English – and thus refrained from participating. Further probing revealed that several non-linguistic factors rather than language proficiency silenced responsivity, yet it was deficient enough in several respects to merit additional investigation. This paper offers a language profile of Grade 12 learners who participated in the project and focuses specifically on the mismatch between their perceived and actual oral proficiency and how this may be influencing learning in general. Methods used for data gathering include analyses of oral and written responses obtained during learner interviews and open-ended survey questions. Recommendations are deemed applicable to any instructional context while avenues for further exploration relate to the increasing allure of English as the preferred instructional medium in the South African education system.

Keywords: developing country, interaction, interactive television, mismatch, oral proficiency, perceptions.

1. Introduction

Based on extended personal involvement in instructional television (ITV) broadcasts, the phenomenon of low reciprocity between teleteachers and viewers across projects had piqued my interest and I wondered why learners refrained from phoning in during instructional broadcasts even though technology allowed for synchronous, oral presenter-viewer interaction. In most cases, the studio crew feigned callers phoning in with pre-determined questions. Even the opportunity to interact asynchronously with the presenters via a toll-free phone-in line was under-utilised¹. My most recent experience as project manager of the *TeleTuks Schools* initiative – a community project launched by the University of Pretoria (UP), South Africa, once again gave me invaluable exposure to using television as a delivery mode for academic content. Previous surveys (De Vos, 1999 and Motsau, 2000) undertaken among adult viewers participating in UP's instructional broadcasts indicated that several cultural and even technical factors acted as hindrances to interaction. In addition, the nature of television as a communication channel and the complexities of presenting televised lessons were considered, while speculations that the legacy of a teaching culture which did not encourage questioning or challenging the "omniscient" teacher, were alluded to. However, anecdotal evidence from other presenters continued to endorse my experience of poor oral interaction and it was this unanticipated lack of verbal response that prompted me to investigate the possible reasons for low synchronous interaction during *TeleTuks* ITV broadcasts formally.

An early proposition had been that poor English proficiency was the primary reason for this lack of learner responsivity but this was later disconfirmed by empirical data. Although this variable could not be isolated as the single compounding factor, the English proficiency of the participants was deficient enough in several respects to merit further investigation. In this article, I offer a brief review of recent ITV research pertaining to interaction during telelessons, and then draw the English language profile of Grade 12 learners who participated in the *TeleTuks Schools* project. I conclude with an explanation of the mismatch between perceived and actual proficiency and express concern about how this may be influencing learning in general.

2. Literature review

Despite a profusion of publications on interactive television used in instructional contexts, the incidence of interaction is not well conceptualised in existing research, especially within developing country contexts. Extensive research exists on the implementation and evaluation of ITV as delivery mode (Kearsley, 1998; Love & Banks, 2001; Westbrook & Moon, 1997; Whittington, 1987) but studies are generally comparative or pragmatic. Almost all made practical suggestions for increasing interaction but focused on instructional design and technological issues rather than on communication obstacles. Furthermore, where reluctance to interact was reported, it was ascribed to embarrassment or technological gaucheness.

While many aspects of instructional television as documented in the literature correlate with my personal ITV experience, my conviction remained that a vital variable that needs exploration is the language of instruction used during telelessons. The disjuncture between the language of instruction and the learners' primary language was not addressed in any of the studies

¹ Private correspondence dated 4 October 1996.

reviewed; none even hinted at a possible tension between the primary language of the students and the code used for instruction. Thomson and Jelfs (1997) alluded to a linguistic hurdle encountered during a UK Open University project (Business School management course) using two-way interactive satellite to bring tutorials to adult learners in Cyprus. Four of the nine students were Cypriot nationals and at times, expressed concerns about their ability to understand the presenter (asynchronous sound being the actual problem) and read the amount of printed study material. Eisenberg (1998) reported on foreign language instruction via ITV but this study also emerged as a single institution report on the delivery of conversational Spanish, Chicano and Chinese to across-border students who otherwise could not have been served. His allusion to language as a barrier referred to giving instructions in English during a telelesson to the camera operator. This code switching, he felt, broke the mood and he thus insisted on having operators competent in Spanish². White *et al* (2000) report on a study conducted in New Zealand involving learners in a multimedia language course where video rather than ITV was the primary delivery mode. The subjects were tertiary learners of Spanish enrolled for a distance-learning programme. Engelbrecht (2005:220) made reference to 60% of the students in her study not being native speakers of English but stated that although this may have been perceived as a limiting factor "rather than language, fear of showing a lack of insight or knowledge inhibited students from asking questions".

I found the blank screen in ITV literature relating to the language of instruction as a research theme unusual since most instruction is still language-based. Could this perhaps be the maintenance of linguistic imperialism as described by Phillipson (1992)? It appears that the American and Australian studies did not question English as the medium of instruction while I assumed – since no explicit mention was made of the language used by the instructor – that those undertaken in Mexico and Switzerland used Spanish and French respectively. Although not directly linked to ITV research, Mkabela and Luthuli (1997:46) highlight the problematic and contentious issues pertaining to choosing a language of instruction by claiming that "The greatest challenge for education is the management of the country's [South Africa] language diversity as language will have to play a central role in bringing about equal education opportunities in South Africa". The ITV studies reviewed, like this case study, are based on the premise that interaction is an essential component of effective learning and when lacking, affects learning negatively. Oliver and McLoughlin (1997:360) purport that "the actual communications and interaction that occur with these technologies, demonstrate in many instances an under-utilisation of the opportunities" endorsing sentiments that at its worst, interactive television makes it harder for the teacher to interact and easier for the student to disengage. Such claims acknowledge the complexity of televised interactions but do not shed light on the reasons for this lack of oral interaction. My preliminary proposition remained that although several non-linguistic reasons may have accounted for poor participation in other studies, the level of the participants' English language proficiency was indeed cause for concern. This deficiency would have been highly compromised by any technologically mediated, faceless communication.

² This was also the experience of lecturers teaching in the Department of African Languages, University of Pretoria. Only on rare occasions was a Zulu, Tswana or Northern Sotho speaker on duty as a technician. Presenters taught in an African language but switched to English or Afrikaans when dealing with the technical crew.

3. Contextualising the inquiry

During the research period (2001-2004), broadcasts were beamed via digital satellite to 72 schools that had been appropriately equipped using sponsorship money. These schools are primarily located in under-developed rural areas of four of South Africa's inland provinces although some township schools³ also participated. Schools in the remaining five provinces were not equipped purely for logistical reasons.

This initiative was aimed at learners aged 17-19, who could watch 90-minute lessons in key subjects e.g. Mathematics, Physical Science and English, for four afternoons per week during the academic year. The intention was "not to replace educators at schools, but to assist learners with quality education in the more difficult aspects of the subjects" (Sedibe & Evans, 1999:2). The lessons were generic and aimed to review, rather than introduce new content. Logistics, however, prevented printed support material being offered. An average of 30 hours per academic subject was screened annually and the national core syllabus was the main guide to planning lesson content.

The primary mode of content delivery during each *TeleTuks* broadcast alternated between traditional "talking head" explanations and any visual material the presenter used to clarify concepts. A key feature, however, which distinguished these learning opportunities from similar educational projects, was that learners could ask questions telephonically at any time during a broadcast to which the presenter would then respond immediately. The learner's phone call was piped into the studio while the presenter's response was transmitted directly on-air using a microphone. No multi-site audio or video linkages existed. Direct interaction was sought through presenter-initiated questions as part of the instructional design; or during a planned Question-and-Answer slot. At times, learners were requested to solve problems or discuss options with a classmate. While completing such tasks, the presenter was blanked out by the University logo and background music played. An invitation to call in to the studio with comments or queries was also regularly crawled across the screen as a chiron. Phone calls or faxes received after the broadcast were dealt with during the subsequent session. This ability to interact was used as a marketing ploy of the project based on the widely accepted premise that interaction improves learning. However, presenters continued to be puzzled by the observation that in spite of the technological system that allowed for two-way audio communication and thus oral interaction, learner participation – as anticipated by the project team – remained exceptionally low. Data collected during the pilot study in 2001 indicated that 96,6% of the respondents had never interacted with the presenter and despite the apparent improvement (79,0%) during the follow-up survey; a high proportion of the learners still had never asked a question during a televised broadcast. An interaction rate of 0.27% per 60-minute broadcast was calculated using broadcast logs and analyses. This was in stark contrast to other studies that had viewer responses every two to four minutes. (Lyons, MacBrayne, & Johnson, 1994; McHenry & Bozik, 1995; Oliver & Grant, 1995). Such active participation elsewhere heightened the rarity of responses in my context.

³ Township schools – a legacy of the Apartheid education policy – serve Black peri-urban settlements. Historically the composition of the South African population has been based on race classification and although not comfortable with this appellation I use this categorisation (capitalised and not as an adjective) to clarify the particular ethnic group as prime target audience.

It needs to be stated that unlike many studies discussed in the literature (Edirisingha, 1999; Fulford & Zhang, 1993; Perraton, 2000; Shrestha, 1997), the *TeleTuks* presenters had no participants at the origination site and when talking to the camera, visualised a group of approximately 30 learners at the various remote sites. The size of such groups would be considered average in the South African context but large by comparison to the developed world. Even more so, if it is taken into account that potentially several hundred viewers watched the broadcasts simultaneously. The project team had envisaged several thousand Grade 12 watching daily broadcasts. It was also the potential size of the viewer audience that had created the expectation of greater learner participation. So what was hampering the communication process during televised lessons?

4. Methods and materials

This study investigated the *TeleTuks Schools* community project as a clearly defined unit of analysis. An extensive study of current literature related to instructional television presented the conceptual parameters within which the study was located, and identified lacunae in the knowledge base. The formulation of the research question favoured a case study method that allowed for an investigation and a holistic description of participants' real-life experience of interactive television in context. The primary informants were nine subject experts who presented telelessons, close on 300 Grade 12 viewers and five site educators. I was a participant observer in this inquiry. A case study also typically permits the combination of data collection methods and such varied data sources provide both quantitative and qualitative evidence. In this study, field notes and personal reflection accounted for informal data collection while I used seven formal instruments to gather data, each informing the research question in a particular way. I undertook fieldwork at several sites; chiefly those related to the participants' immediate context, i.e. learners were interviewed in groups at school and presenters at the studio facilities. Telephonic interviews were conducted with educators. Since the data gleaned during the pilot study had not suggested a key explanatory variable, I selected a multiplicity of data sources and collection methods in order to establish more accurately factors that may be inhibiting oral interaction during a televised lesson. I used a small-scale quantitative approach based on a questionnaire survey and phone call log (percentages) in order to establish *how* prevalent poor participation was, while a more personalised experience obtained by means of interviews and an analysis of recorded broadcasts generated qualitative data which suggested reasons *why* learners refrained from interacting.

A once-off survey using questionnaires voluntarily completed by Grade 12 learners under controlled circumstances offered the biggest portion of learner-related data. Apart from eight questions formulated to gather bio- and demographic detail, six others sought to garner information about the actual broadcasts. The pivotal Question 10 asked the respondents to answer Yes/No to sub-statements starting with the lead-in statement: *I know I can ask a question but I don't because...* This question offered definitive data coupled to five topics of inquiry that related to language proficiency; the presenter; technology; as well as cultural and personality variables. I arranged the possible reasons why learners did not ask questions in alphabetical order to achieve a random scattering. This ensured less chance of learners being influenced by patterned or categorical statements and I thus avoided a "yes-set" for this section. Three subquestions allowed for open-ended responses. A good return rate was possible, as the survey

had been completed under controlled circumstances during the winter schools and 277 questionnaires were usable for analysis. The questionnaire survey was deemed an exploratory mechanism with which to guide the learner interviews and served as the introductory phase of my qualitative research project.

Semi-structured group interviews conducted with Grade 12 learners were guided by a schedule I developed after analysing the survey data. During these discussions, I tape-recorded sufficient usable and representative samples of their spoken English from which to describe and assess the actual English proficiency of the viewers. It also afforded me the opportunity of being on site where the daily broadcasts took place, giving me a sense of the *TeleTuks* target audience's immediate context. Bio- and demographical data obtained from the questionnaires, augmented by the authentic speech data recorded during the interviews, allowed for in-depth descriptions and rich primary data to triangulate with the questionnaire data as well as the adult interviews. I gauged these oral data using the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) Grade 12 oral assessment rubric as well as the Assessment Guide for the Speaking Module (part of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) developed in the United Kingdom). Both the local and the international rubrics are widely used to assess and moderate the oral proficiency of young adult second language speakers of English. I used both as a counter-check on each other and also to facilitate a crosscheck of my evaluation by any independent rater. I prepared all transcripts and narrative responses for electronic scrutiny and a rigorous data analysis process was facilitated by using *Atlas.ti*TM. The search for relationships or patterns, silences or unexpected trends all formed part of the continuous analysis and interpretation of data. I visually illustrated emerging patterns for ease of interpretation using tables and network maps.

5. Findings related to viewers' English proficiency

Encouraging explanations for *not* interacting telephonically revealed that several learners had no reason to ask questions or comment, as they understood everything. Others were confident about their academic performance or felt that the presenter explained well. A probing of face-to-face interaction was also done but is not the focus of this discussion. In this section I present a learner and language profile. I also discuss the perceptions that the Grade 12s as well as the presenters and educators had of the learners' oral proficiency. I conclude with a detailed analysis of their proficiency.

5.1 Learner profile

I used personal detail obtained from the survey questionnaire to draw a rough biographical sketch and also note attendance patterns during broadcasts. The Grade 12 viewers who participated in this inquiry were, on average, 18 years old. The male-female distribution during the research period was constant with 61% of respondents being female in all three instances⁴. Representation of urban and rural learners was well balanced. Seventy three per cent of the learners travelled

⁴ Learners start formal schooling in the year that they turn 7 and attendance is compulsory until they are 15 years old or have completed nine years of formal schooling (Grade 9). This band is known as General Education and Training with the following demarcations: Reception phase or Grade 0 (5/6 years, not compulsory but a formal pre-primary preparation for schooling) Foundation phase (7-9 years), Intermediate phase (10-12 years), Senior Phase (13-15 years). Adult learners are able to complete a similar band labelled ABET level 1-4. Generally all learners are encouraged to complete another three years of senior secondary schooling (Further Education and Training band) in order to gain a matric certificate that with the necessary exemption, allows access to the remaining band of Higher Education and Training.

less than five kilometres to attend broadcasts and thus they ought not to have been disadvantaged with regard to time factors and possibly transport costs. Far fewer learners than expected actually attended daily broadcasts during the school term and this partially accounts for the low learner participation rate during the majority of televised instructional episodes. Despite this, more than two thirds of the viewers (66,5%) participating in the questionnaire survey indicated that they did have questions to ask during a broadcast. Data gleaned from the interviews substantiated the desire to ask questions although some uncertainty existed about procedure.

5.2 Language profile

Responses pertaining to language issues have been clustered and foregrounded as this was the primary lens through which I looked at the data sets. Initially I planned to translate the questionnaires into a regional majority language allowing the respondent a choice between English and a more familiar language, but the pilot study clearly indicated that 85,4% of respondents preferred English as the medium of communication (Evans, 2004).

With reference to the language spoken most often at home to parents or caregivers, Northern Sotho (50,9%) had the largest representation followed by Tswana (19,4%). Tsonga, an official but minority language had 15,1% while Zulu (6,8%) was the only other official language with a noteworthy population. These language proportions are in keeping with the regional representation of the respondents. Five respondents (1,8%) indicated English or Afrikaans respectively as the *only* language spoken at home while one spoke Chinese and one Portuguese – both these languages having a fairly large population in South Africa but no official status. A fifth of the respondents (19,4%) claimed they spoke both English *as well as* a vernacular to their parents or caregivers. A substantial change is evident in the languages spoken to their peers, in that 58,4% claim to speak English resulting in a sharp usage decline of the vernaculars. Table 1 indicates the percentage usage of languages spoken by Grade 12 learners within their communities.

Table 1: Languages used by Grade 12 learners within their communities

Although three-quarters of the target population (73,6%) exclusively used a vernacular for

Languages	% used with parents/caregivers	% used with peers
English	19,4% (in conjunction with a vernacular)	58,4%
Northern Sotho	50,9%	33,9%
Tswana	19,4%	19,4%
Tsonga	15,1%	9,6%
Zulu	6,8%	6,4%

communication within their own communities, the majority of respondents would still have preferred to answer in English even if they had had a choice of language in which to complete the questionnaire. The 2003 survey results alone indicated that 91,5% of the respondents wanted

an English questionnaire. Historical and geographical reasons dictate that schools involved in this study still have exclusively black learners enrolled. They would have very infrequent dealings with mother-tongue speakers of English and at best a limited exposure to televised (American) English-speaking culture.

5.3 Learner perceptions

The following communicative episode describes not only learners' notions of how they learnt English but also indicates their relatively poor discourse proficiency, despite simplified researcher questions. It may be assumed that those who spoke believed their English to be acceptable enough to be recorded in this edited passage from Primary Document 1, lines 1374-1401:

Interviewer: *OK, Where did you learn your English?*

Learner A: *What?*

Interviewer: *Your English? ... to speak your English. Where did you learn that?*

Learner A: (inaudible response)

Interviewer: *Do you speak English to your friends?*

Learner B: *I learn English, English at school and I read magazines and newspapers.*

Interviewer: *OK the newspapers. And you, you where did you learn English?*

Learner C: *At school and even though when I'm home when I'm talking to my parents, or my friends, even in the class when I'm talking to my learners.*

Local teacher: *Is it important for what* (inaudible)?

Learner D: *Yes, It's important because they show us everything that we don't know and we gave something in our mind.*

Interviewer: *And your English?*

Learner E: *I learn English by watching TV at my home and by talking to my friends at the school. That's why I understand. My teachers who teach us English there where I understand that English, that's how I learnt English.*

Interviewer: *Do you speak English in Maths or do you use Northern Sotho when the teacher teaches you Maths?*

Learner E: *I think sometimes we use Sotho but most time we use English.*

Interviewer: *OK and are you supposed to use English or is it OK if you use Northern Sotho?*

Learner E: *No, we must use English.*

Several learners preferred their mother tongue but conceded the importance of English for post-matric purposes, especially with regard to employment opportunities as evident in the following suggestion:

Let the TeleTuks not [sic] presented in Northern Sotho because next year we are going

to tertiary institution and there's no somebody who can said to us in our mother language [sic] (P1:143 656-658).

Another learner added:

We do not want to ... to know only our languages because next time we will meet some people with other different languages. We must use English as a communication language (P1:146 664-666).

It is, however, discrepant that while the majority of respondents (85,4%) indicated a preference for completing the questionnaire in English, almost half the respondents (47,7%) felt they would be more confident using the spoken form of their first language publicly during a televised lesson. By the same token in spite of their claiming to speak English to friends whose proficiency was perceived as superior, it does not appear to have ameliorated theirs as reflected in the following declaration:

Ja, like my friends are like from model schools⁵ and they used [sic] to speak English like when I'm around them I like have to like talk like speak the way they do so that I can speak English (P1:247 1717-1719).

I formulated Question 10 of the survey using a lead-in statement with subsidiary sentences to which respondents could answer affirmatively or negatively. My intention with this question was to glean definitive data related to the variable of English language proficiency. Taking 20% as an arbitrary cut-off, almost a fifth of the target population doubted their English language ability with regard to vocabulary range and accent while Respondent 04/03 claimed that *I think I am not fast in English talking to someone on the transmission [sic]*. This endorses the 44,1% of respondents who felt that their English fluency was lacking and that they could not speak English fast enough to ask a question during a broadcast. A third of the Grade 12 learners (31%) who participated in the survey refrained from asking a question because they were concerned about making grammatical errors. Some 19,2% would have preferred to write down their question so that someone else could ask it and a considerable number (53,8%) indicated a preference for asking questions after the broadcast had ended as Respondent 22/02 felt *it is better to let the presenter to let the presenter [sic] talk then write down your question and ask later*. More than a fifth of respondents (27,2%) preferred writing down a question and then using electronic means to transmit it to the presenter. Table 2 reflects the responses of learners to subsets of the question related to their oral proficiency in English.

The admission here was that they lacked fluency or "acceptable" accents, expressed themselves better in another language and preferred asynchronous interaction. It is not clear whether asynchronous, anonymous interaction was a preferred mode or whether it related to self-esteem, or even perceived language proficiency. On several occasions during the interviews, learners switched over to their mother tongue in order to express their thoughts. A site educator on one occasion admonished the Grade 12s for using their mother tongue rather than English:

⁵ As part of the transitional process to democratise the RSA education system, schools were categorised based on the percentage government funding received. Model C was the label given to former white state schools that received full governmental funding but were to be racially integrated henceforth. Despite steep school fees, many black parents chose to send their children to these schools owing to superior resources and well-trained teaching staff rather than to township schools. Learners attending such schools are generally envied by their peers. Such classification of schools no longer exists.

Table 2: Learners' perceptions of their English proficiency

Statement: I know I can ask a question but I don't because...	Yes	No
I am not sure what the right English words are	19,2%	80,8%
I cannot speak English fast enough	44,1%	55,9%
I do not think my English is good enough to ask questions	22,9%	77,1%
I do not understand what the presenter is saying	13,0%	87,0%
I express myself better in another language	47,7%	52,3%
I would rather ask questions after class	53,8%	46,2%
I would rather write down my question and ask someone else to ask it	19,2%	80,8%
I would rather write down my question and fax or email it	27,2%	72,8%
Maybe the presenter will not understand my English accent	18,4%	81,6%

And even when they're in class themselves in an English class they use too much of L1. Even when they go home with their friends I tell them when you meet your friends when you want to tell your friends use the L2 (P1:187, 935-938).

Yet learners generally perceived themselves to be fluent speakers of English by comparison to their parents/caretakers but in actual fact, spoke a 'township lingo', an atypical variety of English. During another interview with rural learners, a site educator's exasperation about his matriculants' attitude towards improving their English was met with light-hearted protests from his charges but hints at the discrepancy between the learners' own perceived proficiency and actual performance:

And just to add more meat on what they were saying, the problem is not with the language. My dear students, I'm telling them each and every day. They have to improve their language. They're lazy, they're not reading newspapers, they don't want to improve... they don't listen to English radio stations... I tell them day in and day out... (P1:186 929-931).

5.4 Presenter and educator perceptions

Presenters outlined opposing experiences when asked to comment on the use of callers' English. They had all interacted with proficient callers but had also had, on occasion, discouraging encounters as illustrated here:

...the first person, the one person that called was an English-speaking person from an English school but the second learner was battling a bit... she battled to express herself. After I asked about three times! She had to repeat herself and then I realised what the problem was.

...there's been one or two that have been able to express themselves very clearly and they're obviously on a level of Grade 12,... very much a Grade 12 level. Considering that there are pupils, the way they ask the questions, I would say above average, above standards. The others have been, you ask them to repeat themselves three or four times and you're still not sure exactly what they want...

...obviously the standard problem is many of our learners as you are aware, are not mother tongue English speakers, and that always creates a problem. But I can honestly state that I have asked the learners to repeat what they've said on one or two occasions, but that's not a problem, I could really understand what they are trying to ask, what they're trying to say, maybe I could not always discern what exactly the mathematical problem was, but not the language aspect itself, that's not a problem, you get accustomed to the pronunciation and that is not a major problem to me.

[The language] was English and what's more the language used was absolutely fine, I could hear they are a little bit nervous... .

Turning now to those who actually engaged daily with these learners in the English class, the proficiency range of learners participating in this study is best described by such a site educator:

I would say we've got extremes, it's [the school] got those which who are highly learned and much knowledgeable in terms of the vocabulary but then on the other hand we've got those who really need extra help and that hmm, perhaps need extra help and some whose expression is rather clumsy, you know, it's just a school of extremes, I would say.

Only one of the educators with whom I conducted telephonic interviews, succinctly described his learners' English as *Average ma'am, it's their second language* while the rest elaborated on their group's proficiency lying at the extreme ends of the proficiency line:

The English senior learners use. I think we have sort of set a standard, and it's a higher standard, we've set a higher standard. They have managed to sort of live up to that standard and how we communicate with them, they've sort of learnt to reciprocate how we communicate with them. So the higher standard that we use, you know, they've learnt to sort of give back, to respond in that high standard. So I would say, I think they are in [sic] par with that and what's really expected, so they actually use that good English, acceptable English and they know how to differentiate between formal English and slang, so when they speak to us they use formal language, they use formal English... .

...the majority we have here at the moment is [sic] foreign students, not majority actually but the big group. So they still battling [sic] to catch up with the language, English. So they will ask any question pertaining to the subject as they don't understand English. ...We've got two sets, first the other ones they speak good English because they've been here doing English as their first language. Some they're speaking you know Portuguese English, the mixed English, so you need to know them in order to understand them, what they actually mean.

Look – since we're taking English Second Language, Higher Grade, I would say 80%

of my learners are at quite a good level, I would say the average pass rate that I would receive would be somewhere around a B, with a few C's and maybe in (unclear) but out of the class I think I'm going to take seven to Standard Grade, I'm talking about my Grade 12s now.

Although this analysis has focused exclusively on the learners' English usage, the level of educator proficiency is also glaringly evident. In the next section, I offer my perceptions as researcher of the learners' ability to express themselves in spoken English.

5.5 Linguistic proficiency

Apart from providing more extensive data to substantiate the questionnaire survey, face-to-face interviews with the learners clarified some tensions evident in the questionnaire results and also afforded me a first-hand opportunity of assessing the oral proficiency of participants *in situ*. The actual interviews took place in an authentic setting i.e. the classroom in which the learners would daily have been taught, amongst others, English. Apart from their peers, the listeners in this context were two adults; the *TeleTuks* project manager and myself as researcher. The introduction of unknown role players added to the authenticity of the learners using English as a common vehicle of communication. In two cases, the site educator was also present. The environment was thus familiar but public. The semi-structured yet relaxed context was conducive to assessing their informal communicative ability.

As a researcher, I was encouraged by the rapport I managed to establish in the fifteen minutes (on average) I spent with each group. The reactions of these senior learners to my quips and antics mirrored those of the learners I had taught in my more familiar (white) teaching contexts. There was plenty of hearty laughter, many smiles, and general acceptance of me by the learners as a participant in the interview process. I report this as noteworthy since a relaxed atmosphere and affinity are particularly conducive to lowering what the linguistic theorist, Krashen (1982), defines as the affective filter *i.e.* the emotive or attitudinal state of the learner. Negative feelings related to lack of motivation, poor self-esteem or anxiety act as a filter and prevent the language learner from using the input thus, hindering successful learning. This affective filter needs to be as low as possible in all educational contexts to enable learners to have the pluck to engage in oral transactions with others. Although there was some reluctance to speak, I did not sense resistance. Most learners responded spontaneously but generally offered short exchanges. A short turn consists of only one or two utterances and does not demand much of the speaker in producing structure (Brown & Yule, 1983). Although most black South Africans have a broad linguistic repertoire, none of the learners I interviewed were speaking their first language, possibly not even their second. They were also being taught in English by educators for whom the latter language was not their native tongue either. Both learners and educators in rural areas would have limited opportunity beyond the classroom for conversing in English. Those persons living in the township areas are more exposed to English albeit a hybridised version of American slang mixed with several local vernacular structures and lexical items.

Upon my return from the field visits, I reviewed the cassette recordings several times while transcribing this particular data set myself. It is from these repeated aural renderings that the analysis was done. Sample recordings contain what Brown and Yule (1983) term "smudged" (p. xi) or "blurred acoustic signal" (p. 24). This variation in sound quality is related to the size

of the group as well as their willingness to speak up. In places, white noise became intrusive. I transcribed their speech verbatim and some paralinguistic features e.g. tone of voice, pauses and laughter, as I understood them. Different interpretations are possible and thus an attentive listener with a different agenda may produce a variation of my version. I acknowledge that the recording has primary status and the transcriptions are but a "reasonable interpretation of [oral] text rather than a correct interpretation" (Brown & Yule, 1983:24). They are also but a slice of the viewers' experience and do not claim to be fully representational of their ITV experience.

I was intrigued that during the actual interviews I had understood what the learners were communicating without difficulty, yet upon reading the transcripts later their articulation into text of certain lengthier exchanges was poor and although they sounded fluent, the exchange was garbled. For instance, in answer to my question about learners' opinion of watching televised lessons, the following response here needs deciphering: *Hmm, I think that... that contact lessons on eh, especially not ask questions we must go so I think that we must ask questions personally* (P1:41 19-21). Another learner at the same site also braved more than a single word response, and added:

No, when they say we must phone and there's no contact ... phone eh, like when you phone, there'll be like some days when you phone they'll find time and present the lesson solution and some days there'll be no time like maybe we'll be out (unclear)...like I don't know how to explain them, you know (Collective laughter).

This lack of comprehension of the textual communication, may point to the importance of paralinguistics and immediacy behaviours that helped clarify the meaning in a face-to-face situation despite the learners' lean proficiency. This may tie in with the comments made by presenters who remarked on the frustration of not being able to see the persons they were communicating with and the resultant loss of information due to non-existent nonverbal responses (Rao & Dietrich, 1998).

Spelling as judged from the written responses as well as pronunciation was comprehensible and comparable with the average South African Grade 12 English Second Language (ESL) speaker. Although learners generally showed coherence in their expression, they were seldom able to sustain conversation and regularly offered single-sentence responses, at times even a single word answer e.g. No. Transcripts clearly show the imbalance of linguistic input by the participants and myself. Others used stilted, clumsy expressions e.g. *According to my opinion*, false starts, or non-lexical items like *uhhhm*. Exchanges were peppered by discourse markers e.g. *so/likely/know?* The marker, "*you know*" was heard more often among township learners. There was barely any overlapping speech although on several occasions other signs of listener participation were evident. Joint spontaneous agreement or disagreement, often non-verbal, was regularly apparent suggesting that the learners were actively listening albeit not responding vocally. These learners displayed a limited ability to discuss a topic. It is possible that they were unsure of what constitutes an acceptable answer to open-ended questions or that they were accustomed to giving lean responses to teacher-initiated questions in the classroom. Closer analysis did, however, reveal that some of my unstructured questions limited lengthier exchanges. There were several silences of longer than eight seconds where much prompting on my part was evident and in some cases a response was only forthcoming after I encouraged the learners

to use the local vernacular. The current project manager, who served as a cultural bridge, especially in the rural communities, translated this for me.

At all sites learners misunderstood one or two of my questions and answered in an unrelated fashion causing me to rephrase at length before the appropriate response was elicited. Learners generally lacked socio-linguistic proficiency and at times, used contextually inappropriate language e.g. *What?* instead of *I beg your pardon*.⁶ Furthermore the learners did not interpret my concluding an interview as a final termination but rather as a change in topic. For instance, my closing question *Anything you want to ask or last comments you would like to make?* led to several of them asking questions unrelated to the television broadcasts but important to their frame of reference e.g. requests for application forms (*I think you must provide us with entry forms from the University of Pretoria so that next year we can go there* (P1:183 897-898)), career guidance (*I will ask if they can give us a lecture of the guide careers* (P1:303 1528-1529)) and at one site a lengthy question and answer session ensued about the nature and demands of campus and city life.

Surprisingly, no clear distinction was evident between the proficiency of learners from township schools and those from rural areas in spite of my assumption that city learners would have greater exposure to English and television – a rich source of, especially US accented English. Those from a private school seemed more confident to speak and had longer exchanges but then that group only comprised three persons allowing for greater participation although one learner did dominate. When asked whether speaking or understanding English was a problem, learners collectively and emphatically denied this: *English is not a problem you speak, you speak*. An individual possibly venturing to respond on behalf of others contradicted this view:

Interviewer: *Do you understand the presenters?* (Hmmm) *Sometimes?*

Learner: *Yes, sometimes we do. The problem is English you know, people don't understand it. That's why.*

Interviewer: *And what language do you think you should be taught in?*

Learner: *Maybe Sotho, I mean some of us don't understand English and that's why most of us don't even ask questions in between because of the language...*

Extended rapport with these learners may have bridged some of their reluctance to interact freely and possibly several more would have interacted and for longer periods. My personal assessment of their output provided more conclusive evidence of limited English than offered by the survey, yet it remains a tentative finding. I conducted an elementary analysis of their spoken English, using two official oral proficiency evaluation grids and emphasise that the ensuing analysis was exploratory and caution should be used in generalising to second-language learners per se.

IELTS is administered in over a hundred countries by more than 950 certified examiners and as the training manual (The British Council, 1996: 1) states: "The aim of this Assessment Guide, therefore, is to standardise as far as possible both the administration and the marking of the

⁶ Excuse me or Sorry are acceptable South African alternatives.

IELTS Speaking Module, in order to ensure the stability amid consistency of all assessments" (p.1). A Band 6 rating is highly sought after by non-native speakers of English as this assists them in gaining access to most English-speaking universities. Persons wishing to emigrate to English-speaking countries require a minimum band score of 5 for each of the four components as acceptable evidence of their English language ability (Network Migration Services, 1999). The IELTS examination assesses a candidate's proficiency in the four basic communicative skills i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. A proficiency rating is provided for each of the four modules and this is reported on a band scale ranging from Band 0-9. A candidate's overall Band Score for IELTS is the arithmetical average of the scores obtained for each of the four modules.

The core concepts that the GDE rubric judges, relate to learners being able "...to express their needs, desires, aspirations, opinions and feelings about everyday situations in an appropriate manner" as well as being able "to react appropriately to requests, questions, or texts that they are confronted with" (Gauteng Department of Education, 2003: 11). Assessors must also note the clarity and fluency of speech as well as the learners' ability to interact in a variety of oral genres e.g. conversation, discussion, debate and interviews. Having done innumerable oral assessments of ESL learners during my 25-year teaching career, I believe I was able to make fair and sound judgements from both the rubrics. I played the taped interviews and wrote comments about the learners' interaction within each context visited. Since the individual exchanges were generally limited in length and also since no learner could be singled out as highly proficient, I have presented a generic assessment of the learners' English proficiency. In order to draft this linguistic profile, I also evaluated the written, single-sentence responses taken from the open-ended questions answered as part of the survey. In terms of oral proficiency, I focussed on the following key aspects of spontaneous speech:

- Fluency – speed and rhythm, naturalness and clarity, linking of phrases
- Grammatical accuracy – Control of structures including tenses, prepositions
- Vocabulary resource – variety and correctness
- Comprehensibility – pronunciation, stress timing
- Appropriacy – register, response.

Applying the assessment criteria to the data available, I would place the majority of learners who interacted during the visits within IELTS Band 3 or 4, with very few learners in Band 5. The provincial grid (GDE) seems to distinguish more finely between categories and also awards a percentage i.e. more norm-based than criterion-referenced. The descriptors do not readily match the respondents' interactions but I would assess their general spoken ability within the range of 45 - 55%. This grid has only been used in schools since 2002 and may need revision. My assessment may thus warrant further investigation.

6. Discussion

Learner inhibition, cultural reticence and technological flaws accounted in varying degrees, for the lack of interaction during televised instruction but for the purpose of this article I only discuss matters pertaining to the Grade 12 learners' English proficiency which was a contributing barrier to (synchronous) interaction.

It is common linguistic knowledge that second language learners' receptive skills (listening and reading) are more developed than their expressive skills (speaking and writing) until they

achieve near-native proficiency in the target language. By implication, viewers would understand the English used during instructional sessions better than they would be able to express themselves in the same language. Being able to communicate in English is generally considered a status symbol and thus respondents may have claimed to comprehend all the presenter was saying rather than admit to limitations regarding their own comprehension or fluency of expression. Although eleven languages are officially recognised in South Africa and all have equity of status but not necessarily of use, English enjoys an unparalleled standing despite its colonial legacy. Mkabela and Luthuli (1997) term this, "linguistic dependency" (p. 50) and point out that "Competence in multiple African languages has not been permitted to outweigh the handicap of not speaking the imperial languages ... and it is internalised that [English] is as superior as its native speaker" (p.51) thus substantiating why being able to communicate well in English is generally considered a status symbol in South Africa. Respondents may therefore have claimed to comprehend all the presenter said and believed that they had no problem rather than admit to limitations regarding their own fluency of expression.

While the vast majority of South Africans are at least bilingual, only 8,2% of the total population of 44,8 million people, claims English as their mother tongue. This figure primarily comprises 39,3% of the white community and 93,8% of the Indian (Asian) community (Statistics South Africa, 2001). Many respondents claimed to be bilingual and even multilingual and showed a strong preference for using English at home (19,4%) and especially among friends (58,4%) yet one of the reasons why some learners did not ask questions relates to their limited re-coding ability, which in turn is linked to expressive language deficiency. In the case of TeleTuks viewers, upon receipt of a message coded in English they can only internalise this message after a complex cognitive decoding process that furthermore entails translation into their primary language. This dual process of interpretation is followed by attaching meaning to the message from their personal context (Freysen & Briel, 1991). By the time this process is complete, linguistic input by the presenter (sender) has been so great that the viewers have no time to formulate feedback, let alone in an unfamiliar code. I adapt Freysen *et al's* (1991) definition of re-code to mean the act of formulating a reply to a particular message.

Demands made on interpersonal communication skills are even greater when participants are not physically in each others' presence as is the case during ITV instructional broadcasts or telephone tutoring (Pugliese, 2000). In order to improve interaction at a distance, learners may need to be taught how to take responsibility for their own progress becoming active participants in the learning process rather than passive receivers of information. They may, for instance, need to develop questioning skills and conversational strategies as well as learn the language structures for e.g. interrupting with a question ("May I please ask you something?" or "I have a question, please?"). This would include appropriate points at which to break into the discussion as well as means of turn taking. Viewers need to realise that their academic success rests primarily within themselves. Here too, lies unexploited research potential.

Although the English proficiency of the participants in this study is seemingly deficient in several respects, this variable could not be isolated as the only compounding factor influencing interaction. Actual oral exchanges indicated a willingness to speak although with lean expression. Those viewers who had enough confidence, ventured interaction regardless of their proficiency. Learners sounded fluent but their actual performance was below par and at times incomprehensible yet they perceived themselves as good speakers of English.

Learner proficiency in the language of instruction is apparently not addressed elsewhere within an ITV context and I suggest that it plays a more significant role in academic progress, particularly in technologically mediated instruction than currently acknowledged. In face-to-face teaching, the educator is able to mediate the learning opportunities and easily determine the level of the learners' language proficiency. The medium of television makes this virtually impossible. Firstly, the remote learners are invisible to the presenter and thus the teleteacher has no paralinguistic features by which to gauge comprehension. Secondly, the unseen audience was so diverse with regard to their levels of English proficiency due to the geographical environments in which they were located. The influence of English as the primary medium of instruction in South Africa on the teaching-learning dyad needs to be established regardless of the instructional context.

7. Conclusion

In answer to my research question, I established, in descending order of influence, that

- presenter-related factors, rather than limited language proficiency, combined to ensure low reciprocity in the viewer audience;
- technological limitations and inadequate technician support, may have further contributed to low levels of interaction;
- learner inhibition had an influence, albeit limited, on participation rates.

This unpredicted disparity between my initial propositions about why learners were not participating and the eventual findings disproved my anticipation that poor English proficiency would be the primary reason for low learner responsiveness during interactive television instruction. However, the data clearly indicated several facets that ought to have dovetailed neatly but which were at variance with each other. These discrepancies resulted in mismatches of expectations, needs and application. My surmise is that in many instances, face-to-face instruction suffers from the same malady.

Despite these unexpected discoveries, the study underscores the pivotal position that adequate language mastery commands in any instructional situation. In addition, it draws attention to the increasing allure of English as a preferred instructional lingua franca in the South African education system. Many schools and indeed parent communities now insist on English as a medium of instruction, for reasons that include perceptions of increased economic opportunity in this language (Mkabela & Luthuli, 1997). This, despite the South African Constitution recognising eleven official languages as well as school-governing bodies having the jurisdiction to decide on the preferred language of instruction. Furthermore, the overwhelming support for English even though many educators as well as learners lack full proficiency creates a mismatch between the medium of instruction and the learners' dominant language. This semantic noise merits an in-depth inquiry with regard to its ensuing consequences for learning and teaching and probably demands a rigorous endeavour at redress in order to ensure effective teaching and learning. An improved interaction rate may be a natural corollary.

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