

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENTS:

The current South African school system formally introduces children to a second language at the age of seven years. Nieman (1995:298) says that efforts were made in certain overseas schools in the late nineteen seventies to establish second or foreign language teaching in preschools, but it did not gain much acceptance. In most countries in the world, children are only introduced to a second language as a subject when they start attending primary school.

According to Lenneberg (1967:179), "we may speak of a critical period for language acquisition" which falls between the ages of two and the onset of adolescence. The end of this period is most probably related to a loss of and inability for reorganisation in the brain, also called cerebral lateralization (Lenneberg, 1967:179). It seems that preschool children can acquire a second language naturally and effortlessly during this critical period.

Although the research on the Critical Period Hypothesis is not conclusive, it seems necessary to commence the teaching of English as a second language before children start attending school, especially in a multilingual country as South Africa. Nieman (1995:300) is also of this opinion:

*Die geleentheid om tydens die kleuter se ontvanklike voorskoolse jare 'n basis te lê vir die verwerwing van 'n ander taal, kan nie onbenut verbygaan nie... Die noodsaaklikheid dat kleuters in 'n multikulturele land reeds vanaf voorskoolse vlak gewoon gemaak word aan en voorberei word op tweetaligheid, is verder 'n belangrike aspek wat in gedagte gehou moet word.*

Vilke (as quoted by Nieman, 1995:300) also mentions that children between the ages of four and six are in a very significant social developmental phase. They develop attitudes towards other people, other cultures and the world around them. This could strongly be influenced by their acquisition of another language. Vilke describes preschool children who learn a second language in the following manner:

*Their cultural outlook is wider than that of monolingual children who often believe that their own culture, their language and their customs are the only ones that matter in the world.*

At present, English is taught as a subject from either Grade 1 or Grade 2 to Grade 4 in African Schools in South Africa. After the first three or four years of school, it is then used as the medium of instruction from Grade 5 onwards. The Threshold Project researched the reasons why 50% of the African children in South Africa do not finish primary school in the minimum seven year period. It was found that "Language sits like a Gordian knot at the centre" of the problems (Macdonald and Burroughs, 1991:1). The children couldn't cope with English as the medium of instruction as the first four years of learning the language "does not provide a strong enough foundation for English" (Macdonald and Burroughs, 1991:5).

It can thus be seen that an earlier start by means of an ESL syllabus in the preschool phase could help to alleviate some of these problems and equip the children better to cope with English as medium of instruction from Grade five onwards.

If the problem of English as the medium of instruction is as big as the Threshold Project have found, why not use the children's mother tongue as the medium of instruction instead of English? It is a generally accepted fact that African parents prefer their children to be taught in English. In a recent survey, Mawasha (1996:39-40) found that predominantly African schools favoured English as the main language of instruction. One of the views that was substantially supported was that English should be the medium of instruction from preprimary to tertiary level. He came to the conclusion that:

*In the main, speakers of African languages regardless of level of education, political affiliation or socio-cultural sophistication still hold that their children are better off taught through the medium of English as L2 rather than through an African language as L1.*

The parents' preference for English as the medium of instruction cannot be separated from the history of the language policy in education in South Africa. During the Apartheid era, the Act of 1953 forced the Africans to be educated by Africans in their mother tongue for the first six years of schooling. This was interpreted as a move to repress the African people and they resented this (Edmunds, 1987:23). These historical events have influenced African parents to prefer English as a medium of instruction above any other language - even the child's mother tongue (Mawasha: 1996:39-40).

Parents often take their children to preschools where the medium of instruction is English. Preschool teachers are thus forced to use English as the medium of instruction even if it is their second or third language. Nieman (1995:301) calls this policy the substitution approach. This approach, however, is not ideal as the child can experience his mother tongue as inferior (Nieman, 1995:301). By introducing an ESL syllabus for preschoolers, the medium of instruction does not necessarily have to be English, but the preschooler will have the opportunity to acquire this second language.

At present there is no ESL syllabus for preschools. In fact, there isn't an official compulsory curriculum for the reception year at present. Each preschool in Ikageng constructs its own curriculum and syllabi for the different learning areas on an ad hoc basis. An ESL syllabus would be welcomed by many preschool teachers in Ikageng, as a preliminary survey for this study has shown.

Any course that is designed, is usually based on a theoretical model in order to clarify the complex process of curriculum and syllabus design. Nicholls and Nicholls (1978:14) propose a circular model for curriculum and syllabus development which states that "curriculum development implies that there is no one starting point and that it is a never-ending process".

Krüger (1980:33) also supports this view, as all the different steps in curriculum and syllabus development are interdependent, and if one aspect changes, it will automatically have an effect on the other aspects. This can be illustrated by a schematic representation of the model for a curriculum process as proposed by Nicholls and Nicholls (1978:21). (See Figure 2.1.)

Krüger (1980:33) explains the interdependence of the different steps by means of an example. If an aspect changes in the situation analysis, it will have an influence on the setting of the aims, and this in turn will influence the selection of content, the selection of methods, as well as the evaluation. For purposes of this dissertation, this model will be followed and the empirical research will focus on the first step, namely the situation analysis.

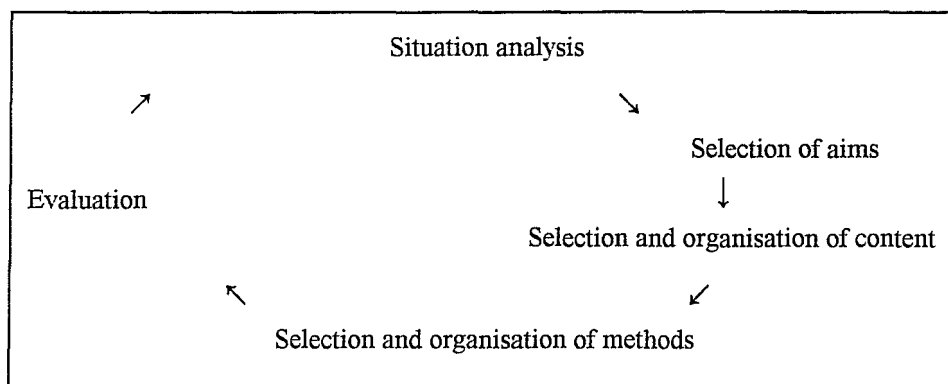


Figure 1.1: The circular curriculum or syllabus design model as proposed by Nicholls and Nicholls (1978:21)

The first step in this whole process of curriculum or syllabus development is thus the situation analysis. Witkin and Altschuld (1995:4) defines the situation analysis in the following manner:

*a systematic set of procedures undertaken for the purpose of setting priorities and making decisions about program or organizational improvement and allocation of resources. The priorities are based on identified needs.*

Stern (1992:35-36) discusses the factors that should be taken into consideration when the situation is analysed. They are social factors, learner factors, educational framework and teacher factors, as well as the context within which the course is designed.

Social factors can be described in terms of the sociocultural, historico-political, linguistic, geographic and economic-technological characteristics of the environment. Learner factors include the learner group, their motivations and their expectations. It also takes the learners' social and educational backgrounds, previous language experience and ethnolinguistic attitudes into consideration. The third factor, educational framework and teacher factors, looks at the organisation and structure of the educational system and its institutions as well as the teachers themselves. This will include the teachers' educational and professional background, their access to advice, supervision and in-service training. The final factor, the curriculum context relates a particular class to the entire language programme and the overall curriculum. The length of the language programme as well as the ways in which learner groups have been arranged are included here.

From the above it is clear that the following problems should be addressed:

- What factors should be taken into account in the design of an ESL syllabus for African preschool children?
- What should an ESL Programme for African preprimary children contain?

## **1.2 AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aims of the dissertation are to:

1. describe and discuss the situational factors that might influence the design of an ESL syllabus for African preschool children by looking at five different case studies.
2. design an ESL syllabus for preprimary children in Ikageng in the form of a programme that can be implemented by teachers.

## **1.3 RESEARCH METHOD**

A survey of the literature will be done on topics such as course design, curriculum design, syllabus design, situation analysis, the preprimary learner and the preprimary syllabus. The following data bases have been consulted: RSAT (Repertorium van Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrifte), ERIC (Educational Database), Library Catalogue, as well as Nexus (the HSRC Database).

Five case studies of preschool children of the ages of 4 - 6 years old will be conducted in order to do the situation analysis, and thus determine the factors that might influence the design of an ESL course for preprimary African children. The design is therefore primarily qualitative.

The subjects of the case studies can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of five preschoolers from different schools between the ages of four and six years old. The second group consists of the preschool teachers of these children while the third group consists of one parent or caretaker of each of the children.

The teachers, together with the preschoolers will be observed for a week at a time at each preschool in order to determine the children's English proficiency, as well as the place of English

in the currently used syllabus. Furthermore an unstructured interview will be conducted with the parents to determine, e.g. the amount of English the children are exposed to at home, as well as their exposure to television, radio, books and magazines. It will also determine whether the parents would want an ESL course for their preschoolers and if so, what it should aim at.

The data for each case study will be collected, systematically analysed and then categorized. The data acquired and analysed from the case studies will then be compared in order to find similarities in the situation of each study. These similarities will be incorporated in the first step of syllabus design, namely the situation analysis and will therefore be used as a starting point for the design of an ESL Syllabus.

#### **1.4 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS**

Chapter 2 is a general introduction to course design. In this chapter the different levels and elements of course design are discussed. Furthermore, the prescribed curriculum for South Africa, Curriculum 2005 is placed within the theory of curriculum development. Chapter 3 discusses the concept of a situation analysis which includes the reasons for doing such an analysis, the importance and relevance of needs as well as the different phases of a situation analysis. Chapter 4 deals with the preprimary child - what he is like psychologically, cognitively, physiologically and socially. The second part is a description of how the preprimary child learns, while the final section discusses different approaches to preschool syllabus design. Chapter 5 continues with the topic of syllabus design and specific syllabus types based on the Communicative Approach to language teaching are discussed with emphasis on the procedural task-based syllabus. Chapter 6 describes the method of research and Chapter 7 discusses the results of the situation analysis. Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the proposed syllabus. Chapter 8 is a synthesis chapter and explains the reasons behind the choice and format of the syllabus and chapter 9 is the proposed syllabus itself. In Chapter 10 conclusions and recommendations for further research are discussed while Chapter 11 contains all the references used in the dissertation.