

Most HRDs and employers in southern Africa seem to agree about two things:

One, starry-eyed jobseekers are invading the workplace with credentials that are NOT commensurate with their four R's, i.e. reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic and reasoning (thinking).

Two, there is hope because there is a cure: ELSA.

ELSA, short for *English Literacy Skills Assessment*, is a standardised measuring instrument extensively used in the corporate world, and in commerce and industry in southern Africa.

ELSA is unique in that it:

- **predicts** trainability outcomes, i.e. in formal training situations where English is the language of learning (medium of instruction)
- **equates** the functional skills level of a respondent to that of an English Mother Tongue (EMT) user
- **shows** up an individual's strengths and weaknesses in an English language training environment, and
- **prescribes** remedial treatment and how to effect proficiency.

The question arises: why the fuss? Why not use school levels instead? After all, everybody learns English at school, and every school leaver gets an accredited school leaving certificate.

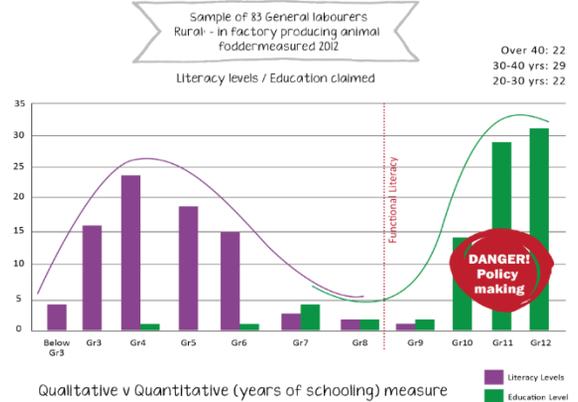
The answer is simple: research shows that scholastic levels and English literacy (functional) levels are like chalk and cheese. This is especially true for the vast majority of African language users whose preferred language of learning is English (SAAL-E).

Second language users are either co-ordinate or compound bilinguals:

A co-ordinate bilingual would be an employee who has acquired English by natural assimilation and, as a result, finds a transition to "learning in and through" English relatively easy. The co-ordinate bilingual copes because of **COPE**, i.e. **CO**gnition and **P**roficiency (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in English.

Compound bilinguals, on the other hand, learn the symbols of English as mother tongue equivalents. In other words, they apply their mother tongue as a mediator.

If a compound bilingual is **highly motivated** and exposed to good models, he/she can attain a high level of competence at school and in the workplace.



Yet, if the compound bilingual is poorly motivated and, in addition, exposed to bad models, he/she will be barely competent – even incompetent.

What is more, this particular employee – and he/she is the rule rather than the exception in Southern Africa – finds the transition to "learning in and through" English very difficult. The compound bilingual does not cope because he/she lacks COPE, i.e. COgnition and Proficiency in English. He/she "loses meaning", hence his/her tendency to revert to rote learning – which is meaningless learning.

Meaningful learning implies conceptualisation; i.e. integrating new knowledge with existing knowledge. Rote learning and memorisation do not allow for the integration of new knowledge with existing knowledge. In fact, they even make learning systems dysfunctional in their entirety.

ELSA is a group assessment and the duration is approx. 90 minutes. Its predictive validity is 84% and its reliability 0,67. **Major benefits are:**

ELSA picks out employees with poorly developed COPE-skills. Once they have been identified, their COPE-skills can be upgraded

ELSA ascertains and verifies COPE-skills of new recruits

ELSA helps the employer to determine the "literacy" comfort zone of his/her workforce which, in turn, enables the employer to make training manuals, in-house publications, standing orders, IR procedures, memos, etc., user-friendly.