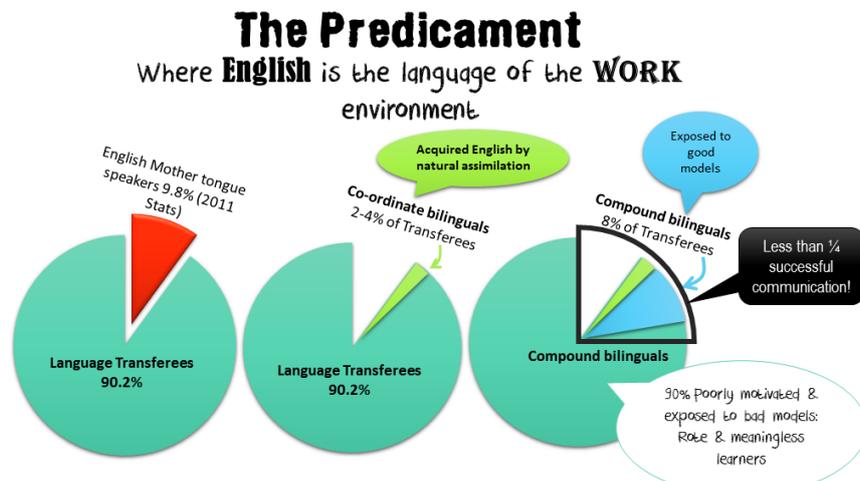


The dilemma of the Language Transferee in the workplace

by Zerelde Uys

The majority of South African workers are exposed to English as the language of commerce and industry. A poor command of the language and critical deficiencies in the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing makes it impossible for the transferee to take oral and written instructions.



It is imperative to understand that *Trainability* in an English language environment and English literacy skills level go hand in hand. Research by Hough & Horne since the nineties has shown:

1. Employers do not really understand how low the literacy levels of their workforce actually are, and
2. Literacy levels in the commercial sector have significantly dropped countrywide over the past two decades.

Who then is the Transferee in the workplace?

Theunis Horne defined the Transferee as a person who, in order to make a living, has to transfer daily from his/her natural language environment (and culture) to a different language environment (and culture) and is assumed/expected to cope like a mother-tongue user. In South Africa more than 90% of the workers transfer to an English language environment daily. Some find the transition easy, some manage somehow but the vast majority don't cope at all.

Co-ordinate bilinguals are about 2 – 4% of Transferees (of the 90% of the SA workforce). A Transferee who has acquired English by natural assimilation will as a result, find the transition to “**learning in and through**” English relatively easy. They cope because of COPE – Cognition and Proficiency in English.

On the other hand, the Compound Bilingual is a Transferee who learned the symbols of English as mother-tongue equivalents – they apply their **mother tongue as a mediator**.

When highly motivated and exposed to **good models** – they can attain high levels of competence in the learning environment (+- 8% of all ALT's). But, when **poorly motivated** and exposed to **bad models** – tend to be barely competent or even incompetent in learning environments. This person finds transition to and through English very difficult, which results in rote & meaningless learning – this is natural if you have very little to hang on to! (+- 90% all ALT's).

Unless Employers are prepared to face the realities of their workforce's true ability to cope in an English environment AND take responsible steps to improve such, we will continue to see valuable training budgets misspent, good facilitators become despondent with unresponsive candidates in learning programmes and poorly skilled employees unable to put knowledge to work.

- ELSA (English Literacy Skills Assessment) 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.