

The role of language and literacy in preparing South African learners for educational success: Lessons learnt from a classroom study in Limpopo Province

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Introduction: Language-in-Education Policy

According to the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) and the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996), the underlying principle of current Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) is 'to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s)'. In practice, though, learners' home language development is being abandoned too early. At the same time, premature reliance on a new additional language sacrifices its effectiveness as a medium of learning and teaching. The overall result for learners whose home and instructional languages have been compromised simultaneously is poor educational achievement throughout school. Ample evidence from empirical studies and literature show the extent

of this policy failure in the South African schooling system. However, remedies are available. These include: policy awareness, implementation and derived strategies; teacher training; learning material provision; support to teachers and learners; and improved teaching practices.

Empirical evidence for failing language development

Alarming few learners in South African schools can read and write competently. The Department of Basic Education released its 2012 Annual National Assessment results in December 2012. These show that more than one in three Grade 1 and Grade 2 learners have not performed adequately (a mark of at least 50%) in language. This figure deteriorates to almost one in two in Grade 3, plummets to three in four in

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– Department of Basic Education, 2012

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Grade 4 and to five in six in Grade 5. The figure then recovers slightly to three in four in Grade 6 and decreases somewhat again to four in five in Grade 9 (Department of Basic Education 2012). International comparison shows that South African learners perform well below the international norm (Howie et al. 2012). Learners' achievement has also not improved significantly over the last five years.

In 2007, the HSRC undertook in-depth ethnographic classroom observation of literacy practices in a sample of 20 schools from all five districts of Limpopo Province. The study focused on Grade 1 to 4 classrooms. Findings point to a primary cause of the abysmal literacy achievement of learners and are corroborated by those from a number of other studies in other provinces. The most significant finding from the fieldwork and data collection for the Limpopo study was that by August/September 2007 only a minority of learners had been required to write in their exercise books on at least a weekly basis. Outcomes associated with such low levels of commitment and challenge include that not even one in four learners wrote short sentences at least every week in their home language (as subject). Three in every four learners did not write even a short paragraph, a figure that increased to nine out of ten for not writing short letters or essays. More than three of every four learners did not write more complex or longer sentences – a task important in Grade 4 in work across the curriculum – at least ten times between January and August, while one in every three never did (Reeves et al. 2008).

Such infrequent opportunities or expectations to write even simple sentences, let alone more complex sentences and paragraphs, are a matter of grave concern. The absence of extended writing opportunities and practice is a well-established causal factor in educational failure of learners.

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South African research and evidence from large-scale assessment conducted by the national and provincial departments of education show that after the first three school years, that is, from Grade 4 onwards, only a minority of learners sufficiently master content subjects across the curriculum. The result is that they will almost certainly not succeed in secondary-school education. This, in turn, compromises the options of young people of South Africa in relation to post-school learning, the workplace and general wellbeing in life. There is no doubt that there needs to be urgent and drastic realignments between the spirit and letter of the Constitution in regards to equity and that of the curriculum as it articulates with the LiEP in order to address this situation.

Conceptual argument for escaping language development failure

Numerous studies argue for the indispensable role of literacy and language acquisition as the building blocks of further learning, personal wellbeing and economic opportunity. The critical role of first-language (and literacy) acquisition during the pre-school and early-school years and the importance of these foundations for learning a second language or additional languages are well argued (Herschensohn 2007).

The next point in the argument is that language and literacy acquisition and development anchor subsequent cognitive development and academic proficiency (Cummins 1992).

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learn'. This involves reading in order to develop an understanding of concepts, and integrating the developmental awareness of concepts into increasingly sophisticated knowledge-processing capacities. Many studies on how language is learnt and processed by the brain confirm the connection between reading speed, fluency and comprehension. These elements crucially rely on vocabulary and word and language structure for automated reading to contribute to learners' conceptual development (Abadzi 2006).

It also means that the reader has to be so familiar with the larger structure of the kind of text being read that he or she can make predictions, which assist the process of comprehension. In order for this expertise to develop, learners require considerable exposure to and practice in reading different genres of text (for example, as found in scientific and mathematical writing and in historical, geographic and narrative texts).

Reading and writing are part of a continuum. Learning to read and write texts of different kinds and for different purposes should go hand in hand. The absence of writing opportunities to accompany reading results not only in poor writing, but also in poor reading development. The occasional one-word answer or part of a word written in an exercise book is completely inadequate and will not result in proficient writing. It will also not assist learners to advance their reading skills. Rather it will delay development at every level of the schooling system.

Should learners miss out on age-appropriate reading and writing development, their poor literacy and language proficiency will cost them their equitable and rightful access to personal opportunities and a promising future. Low levels of literacy proficiency, along with a number of other determining conditions, including nutrition, inhibit

optimal socio-economic development and this impedes innovation at a societal level (Cunha et al. 2005).

Pursuing a proactive direction at multiple levels: Implications

The findings of the Limpopo study portray particular implications for strengthening the participation of stakeholders at all layers of schooling, including:

- curriculum management and delivery;
- teacher training (appropriate to grade and each language subject);
- teacher subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (how to teach the language well);
- effective use of time to expose learners to enough substantive and extended reading and writing;
- access to and quality of resources (including textbooks, readers and libraries for every learner); and
- decisions by school governing bodies about school language policy (official languages of learning and teaching and language subjects at first and additional language levels).

In achieving the objectives outlined above, the schooling system has to abandon inefficient, unproductive and self-defeating practices. These need to be replaced by increasing capacity in the system, in particular in relation to teachers and learners. In this process, attention should be focused on the appropriate selection of language and literacy teachers and then on effective teacher development. This is to ensure that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child, as strongly argued by the now well-known McKinsey report (Barber & Mourshed 2007).

In the South African context, political will is required in balancing global demands, learners' futures and decisions by those in power about

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language use with the individual and cultural values of all home languages. In such a dispensation, successful second-language learning in formal educational settings will benefit from the following requirements. First, it is dependent upon the successful development of the language best known and used by the child upon entry to school (also known as the mother tongue, home language, language of the immediate community, or first language). Successful development in reading and writing can only be achieved within a time frame of six or more years using the language most familiar to the child. Second, where the intention is to develop reading and writing in a second language, which will later become used as the medium of instruction, then this language must also be taught for a minimum of six years before the learner is expected to use it as a medium of learning. In this scenario, the second language has to be taught well enough so that students learn a large body of vocabulary and come to understand how the syntax works in both spoken and written form. This also means very focused and systematic development of reading and writing opportunities and practices. Unless well-resourced second-language teaching and learning is provided as a subject, the second language cannot safely replace any first language as the language of teaching and learning (Thomas & Collier 1997).

Evidence-based principles derived from the Limpopo study and from international research elsewhere inform this policy brief. In formulating implications and recommendations from the Limpopo study for this policy brief, there is an attempt to resolve the discrepancy between current classroom practice and the official language education policy. Any attempt to address classroom challenges without meaningful consideration of language policy implementation will be a fruitless exercise.

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To have sufficient command of a second language so that it can serve as a vehicle for learning other subjects (across the curriculum) requires a sufficient body of vocabulary and a familiarity with the syntax of this language. It also requires knowledge of complex sentence structures and the different styles of writing used for science, history, geography and mathematics. Nowhere in the world can this level of proficiency in a second language be achieved by the majority of learners in a state school system in fewer than six to eight years. Where attempts have been made to switch from the home language in fewer than six years, learners rarely complete school and very few of them progress to higher education.

Recommendations

The various stakeholders and role players have to commit to and participate in a common strategy towards language and education. These parties of necessity should involve university-based linguists and specialists in cognition; teacher educators and educators at every level, from classroom teachers to provincial and national officials; school governing bodies; and other structures within civil society.

A strong balance has to be maintained between conceptual and theoretical assumptions and practical implementation. This includes, for instance, teachers' understanding of the approaches to literacy and language teaching referred to in the curriculum

documentation. Specifically, it is necessary to address what teachers understand by the term 'the communicative approach to language teaching', on the one hand, and how they make sense of the apparent contradiction between the 'phonics' and 'whole language' approaches to teaching literacy, on the other hand. Uncertainty about these terms has found its way into classroom practices in the form of misunderstandings of how to teach reading and writing and how to develop strong language skills. Such uncertainty and misunderstanding lead to dysfunctional classroom practices, which have to be addressed without delay.

A key implication is that a carefully sequenced and coherent national and provincial plan has to be put in place and implemented effectively. Additional components of a literacy strategy and any provincial literacy development model, as derived from the Limpopo study, are as indicated in Exhibits 1 and 2 later in this brief.

A number of solutions are offered for improving language achievement among South African learners. Such interventions mainly relate to teacher training and development, school management, district support, provincial literacy and language development strategies, and national policy. Recommendations have to be acted upon in an articulated way between sub- and supra-layers at three main levels:

1. The macro-level: This involves the national and provincial offices of the Department of Basic Education.
 - There needs to be a clear and complete formulation and explanation of what the LiEP actually means.
 - This has implications for the quality of and simultaneous and or sequential teaching of both home language and first additional language (FAL).
 - It has further implications for strategic and other management

decisions and actions pertaining to infrastructure (for example, libraries); learning materials (for example, textbooks and readers); human resources (for example, appropriate deployment of staff); curriculum and assessment policy and actions (for example, Annual National Assessment and CAPS); and related management and monitoring.

2. The meso-level: This is the level between provincial offices and teachers at schools.
 - This requires the local provision of infrastructure, facilities, a sufficient information and communications technology base, and especially the various support and monitoring activities related to subject advisors.
 - Most importantly, it requires a translation of what the language education policy means in relation to each province, district and school.
 - It requires a translation of what is required to resource adequate literacy and language development in schools.
3. The micro-level: This is among teachers, learners and their parents or caregivers at home.
 - This requires ensuring sufficient extended opportunities to read and to write.
 - It requires making resources such as textbooks, readers and other books available to every student in the system.
 - It requires ongoing class-work and homework practices which foreground regular and challenging reading and writing opportunities, and the availability and use of community resource centres and libraries.
 - It requires participation of parents and local community structures to support literacy in school, the home and the local community.

Concluding remarks

Evidence collected through the Limpopo study and statistical data derived from provincial, national and international assessment instruments show that the problem of low literacy and poor language proficiency is enormous. At one level, solving the problem is going to be difficult and complex. At another level, in order to turn around dysfunctional literacy development in primary schools, there are a number of simple and easy-to-implement strategies that could be put in place immediately. There is, however, a rather limited and critical window of opportunity for these to occur before teachers lose all recollection of earlier expertise. Many parties and individuals share these concerns. At each level of interface with teaching and learning, there are people with valuable expertise who can contribute towards the solution.

Turning around the disastrously poor literacy achievement of school students across the country now requires a carefully orchestrated national plan. There needs to be a national strategy and literacy campaign for South African schools. This campaign needs to involve both government and civil society in order to bring about the kind of change that guarantees students the necessary building blocks for their education and future prospects. And it is this that would improve national opportunities for innovation and socio-economic advancement.

Exhibit 1: Items that need to be addressed in a literacy strategy

1. Optimise pre-school/Grade R literacy benefits.
2. Create literacy-enriched (text-rich) school and classroom environments.
3. Give every learner access to his or her personal textbooks and readers. Manage and control this and other learning and teaching support material well.

4. Clarify/explain rationales and research evidence to key stakeholders and monitor their application in school language and literacy policies, schools and classrooms.
5. Optimally engage learners with grade-appropriate, cognitively demanding reading and writing volume and quality.
6. Improve the quality of literacy instruction, planning and assessment (in-service training and support).
7. Overhaul primary-teacher education and increase the supply of Grade 1 and Foundation Phase teachers.
8. Expand home, family-based or out-of-school literacy opportunities and environments.
9. Tie provincial and national literacy strategies and campaigns tightly together.

Exhibit 2: Key generic features that need to be incorporated into any provincial literacy development model

1. Explicit teaching of home language literacy from Grade R to at least Grade 6, with an emphasis on extended reading and writing from the second half of Grade 1, also across the curriculum.
2. Introduction of first additional language – usually English – in oral form at the beginning of Grade 1, followed by proper FAL literacy (reading and writing) by as early as the middle of Grade 1 by suitably competent teachers able to model its proficient use and to implement explicit literacy and language teaching strategies.
3. Extending literacy teaching and development across the curriculum, including the use of explicit reading and writing of the kinds of expository texts that are used in the subject/discipline of study, and following an incremental trajectory of extended reading and writing in each subject.

4. Training and supporting Foundation Phase teachers to teach reading and writing in the home language and the FAL, and teachers for other disciplines to develop reading and writing in other subjects, in the home language, preferably to the end of the Intermediate Phase (including the use of bilingual/multilingual teaching methodologies across the curriculum).
5. Emphasis on 'time on task', namely, efficient use of teaching and learning time frames.
6. Emphasis on placing books in learners' hands every day in class and for taking home to read.
7. Daily homework for reading, writing and numeracy from early in Grade 1 up to Grade 7.
8. Increasing public awareness of the value in family literacy practices and development.
9. The dovetailing of schools' literacy strategies or models with the national adult literacy campaign.
10. Setting explicit and realistic targets for improved reading and writing levels in primary schools.
11. Establishing assessment measures for evaluating improvement of expected levels of performance.
12. Establishing strong accountability: through leadership in schools, districts and the provincial departments of education; and through a system of incentives and rewards (e.g. development grants) for reaching the targets.

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This policy brief draws on findings from a study by Reeves et al. published in 2008 on literacy teaching in Grade 1 to Grade 4 classrooms in Limpopo schools. It argues that language and literacy development should, but do not, underpin learners' education, as well as work prospects and general wellbeing. Reading has to help learners reach their potential; and writing to help them realise their future.