

Where 'whole language' literacy and 'communicative' language TEACHING FAIL

Research data of learners in 'less' developed countries indicate that few students meet desired outcomes when the whole language and communicative approaches dominate. The data also shows that it is necessary to reconfigure how teaching happens in countries where English is not the most widely spoken language, *Kathleen Heugh* argued at an HSRC seminar.

Whole language is a method of teaching reading and writing that emphasises learning whole words and phrases by encountering them in meaningful contexts rather than by phonics exercises.

Phonics is a method of teaching reading by correlating sounds with symbols in an alphabetic writing system.



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Whole language versus phonics

For the last 20-30 years, the 'communicative' approach to language teaching and the 'whole language' approach to literacy have dominated the educational curricula of the UK, USA and Australia, abandoning the earlier phonics approach to the teaching of reading and writing because it was regarded as outdated and restricted critical thinking and creativity.

The industry of English as a second language (ESL) was driven by powerful universities in these countries, as well as the British Council, and so the theory and implementation of ESL in classroom practices emerged from countries where English is the most widely used language. ESL learners in these countries were in the minority, but living in an environment in which English is used for almost every socio-economic purpose.

Where established methodologies fail

What the ESL scholars and literacy specialists did not sufficiently understand was that theory and methodologies developed in English-dominant societies might not translate successfully to developing countries where English is not the home language of the majority of citizens.

Such approaches might also not meet the demands of the rapidly changing contexts of Europe and North America as armed conflict and political upheaval in the global south and Middle East resulted in the escalation of migration to the global north over the last 20 years.

More recent research in cognitive neuroscience suggests that poor children, whether in the global south or north, are unlikely to develop strong reading and writing

literacy or strong second language learning skills within constructivist, outcomes-based curricula. Constructivist theory is based on how the human mind constructs knowledge when it comes into contact with existing knowledge and experience. Since whole language literacy and communicative language teaching inform and underpin contemporary constructivist syllabuses, there is a need to scrutinise these approaches.

HSRC studies on the language and mathematics achievement of Grade 8 students in the Western Cape, an evaluation of literacy in the primary schools of Limpopo, and various studies in Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Zambia and Malawi, indicate that neither approach has success in the south.

More recently, the data from comparatively well-resourced Australia also indicate that

these approaches are not successful among working class urban school communities and even less so with remote Indigenous Australian communities, with 25% of all students failing to meet minimum reading levels in primary school.

The gap between the achievement of Indigenous Australian children obliged to learn to read and write in (standard Australian) English, and those from predominantly English-speaking communities, is enormous. Only 8.6% of grade 5 Indigenous students, compared with 94% of non-Indigenous students in very remote Australia, met minimum reading standards in the 2012 national literacy assessment, despite significant funding directed towards this objective.

How is this possible? The first reason, identified by several authors, is that educational change, whether curriculum or pedagogical or both, is seldom followed through with the kind of carefully time-framed and detailed implementation stages which an education system requires. Then, the kind of expertise required to support teachers, schools and district authorities to effect change is usually underestimated. Provincial, regional and district officials almost never have the kind of expertise to support meaningful school change.

The second reason is that while communicative language teaching is often identified in curriculum documentation, hardly anyone in the system understands what it entails, or how it ought to be used by teachers in the classroom. Instead, the approach is misunderstood to mean that the focus of language teaching is on spoken competence rather than on reading and writing. This misunderstanding releases teachers from the obligation to ensure daily extended and meaningful reading and writing tasks, and makes large-class teaching more manageable.

The third reason is that whole language literacy was conceived of in a setting where children come from well-resourced, English-speaking societies, where parents regularly read stories to their children and homes are well-stocked with books and other printed materials. It is assumed that children will attend early-childcare/pre-school classes, where early, pre-reading skills will be further developed in the home language of most students.

The approach was never developed in contexts where students come from poor homes with limited literacy practices and which are linguistically diverse, such as in most of the countries of the global south.

Whole language literacy makes no allowances for children from homes with limited literary practices.



Emily Visser⁶

If it has not been successful in Australia among Indigenous communities, despite the considerable resources directed towards it, the chances of its success in South Asia, South-East Asia and Africa are slim. Whole language literacy makes no allowances for children from homes with limited literary practices.

The chances are slimmer still where teachers do not understand what this approach means. In the HSRC's study in Limpopo researchers found that foundation phase teachers had become so disempowered by the name, 'whole language', that they believed that whatever they did in their teaching of reading and writing in the past was bad and they should discontinue those practices. Yet, they had no idea what to do to comply with the new approach and were effectively paralysed, passing their dilemma on to teachers in grade 4, at which point the language through which reading and writing would occur would be English. In other words, literacy development in the home language could not proceed simply because teachers had little guidance in how to teach literacy alongside curriculum change.

Among the challenges

The message of the diverse contexts of countries of the south is slowly seeping through to the north: large-scale evaluations conducted in African countries – more broadly in developing countries – and among remote pastoralist or nomadic communities, are informing the educational quandary in Europe and North America. In summary, the lessons learnt from the south and are now priorities, are:

- The oral tradition is a powerful educational resource and underutilised by systems too heavily influenced by the global north.
- Reading and writing opportunities in the students' repertoire of languages (both/all languages – including new urban varieties) can be maximised with simple classroom practices.
- Countries of the global north now borrow code-mixing and code-switching practices of the south and validate these as classroom practices which, when used systematically, can provide the scaffolding and bridges between what the students know and what they need to know.
- Reading and writing, facilitated through placing inexpensively produced books in the hands of each student (as is the case in Ethiopia and India) rather than locking up expensive books in cupboards (as in South Africa), and ensuring awareness of multiple genres of text, exponentially increases academic literacy.
- Localisation of education authority and greater participation of communities and teachers (i.e. giving back the dignity of teachers and valuing what they know and can do well) enhances quality education.

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