

Improving classroom practice by using language development theory

Summary

Teaching literacy can be challenging within the multilingual context of South Africa where schools also exhibit much diversity in resource availability, school management structures, teacher quality, learner class size and learners' literacy foundations. To ensure successful literacy teaching and meet learners' needs, teachers need to be able to integrate various teaching approaches and resources. This policy brief highlights findings from four research projects conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) between 2006 and 2016 to provide a bridge between conceptual frameworks and practical delivery in literacy teaching. These findings explain stages of biliteracy development, introduce alternative teaching pedagogies and practices as opposed to those of traditional monolingualism, and emphasise the importance of teacher support.

Introduction

The issue of language in education is complicated in South Africa due to its historical use as a racial weapon during

the apartheid era and the multiplicity of languages in the country. During apartheid, the language of instruction benefited white learners, disadvantaged black learners, and excluded the latter along with Coloured and Indian learners from many further education and employment opportunities. The current language in education policy enables learners to be taught in their home language (HL) as the official language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in Grades 1 to 3 while simultaneously learning a first additional language (FAL). From Grade 4 onwards, it is common practice to switch from HL instruction to using English (predominantly) as the LoLT. Therefore, while the policy provides for learners to continue with their HL, it also – often because of practical limitations – allows its discontinuation from Grade 4 (or even earlier) on the basis of learner (parental) choice. It is thus concerning that the majority of Grade 4 learners are unable to read for meaning in either their HL or their new LoLT (Spaull *et al.* 2016; Heugh 2009). Without adequate language and literacy skills, learners do not have a solid foundation for academic progression. This handicap becomes progressively larger as the curriculum becomes more difficult in higher grades.

It is therefore crucial to ensure adequate development of language and literacy skills in all learners from an early age, regardless of language background.

For effective literacy development, alignment between literacy teaching theory and the practicalities of classroom interaction is important. In essence, child development and academic achievement are informed by a wide range of research areas, including learning theories, linguistics and neuroscience. Teachers who have this knowledge and are able to apply it in their teaching practices are more likely to effectively reach all the learners. This is particularly true in South Africa, where the socio-political context and language issues encountered require great teaching skill and proficiency among teachers.

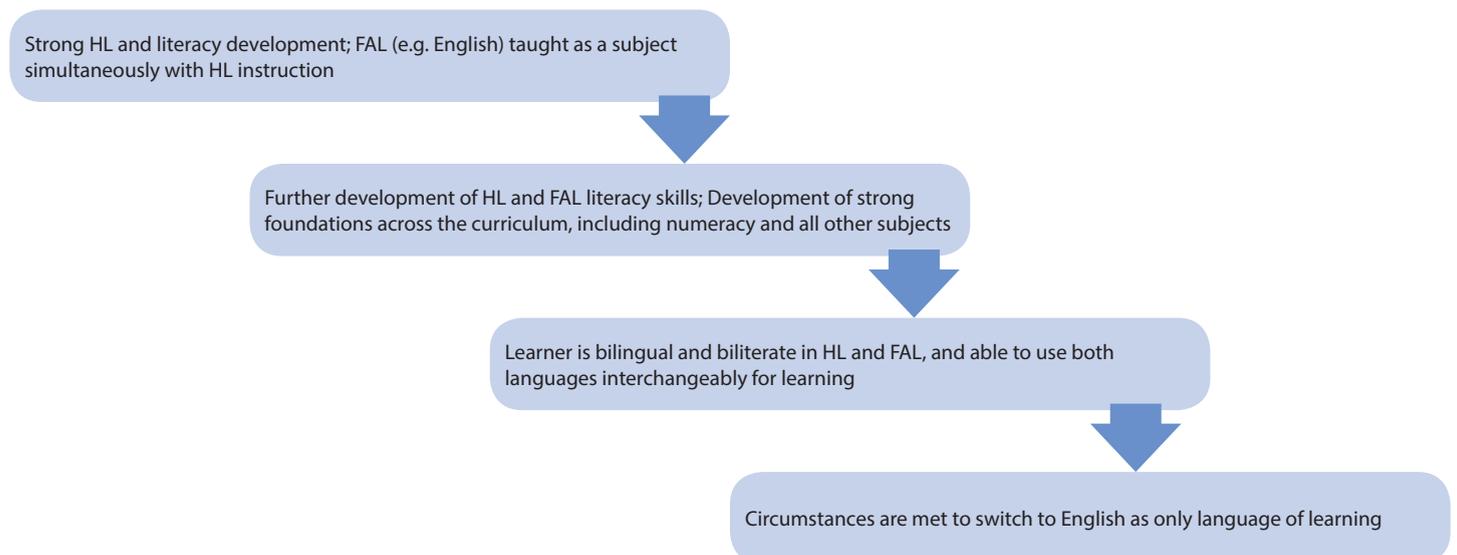
Findings

Selected findings were drawn from four research projects conducted by the HSRC:

1. **Limpopo Literacy Study (2006/2007)** (Reeves et al. 2008). This research project was aimed at providing direction to and guiding the improvement of literacy in Grades 1 to 4 in Limpopo schools.
2. **Inter-province study of language and literacy paradigms and practices (2011–2013)** (Prinsloo et al. 2015b). Grades 1 to 3 language lessons (including isiZulu, Sepedi and English) were qualitatively evaluated in Gauteng and Limpopo primary schools.
3. **Evaluation of siyaJabula siyaKhula’s learner regeneration language development intervention in Vhembe (2013–2015)** (Harvey et al. 2015; Prinsloo et al. 2015a). The intervention was aimed at repairing critical gaps in learners’ English literacy and language foundations as well as automating foundation proficiencies.
4. **Evaluation of the DBE’s Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) comprising a Setswana teacher intervention for Foundation Phase learners (2015/2016)** (Taylor et al. 2016; DBE 2017). The aim of this study was to conduct a randomised control-group impact assessment of the success of three different Setswana home-language interventions.

A chronological sequence of evidence-based principles (which establish a firm foundation of biliteracy, the ability to read and write proficiently in two languages) was derived from the first and then adhered to in the other studies above (see Figure 1). *This confirmed, as the first key finding, that one needs good first language (FL) proficiency to build up good FAL proficiency.* Following this sequence in the language and literacy development of learners whose first language is different from the instructional language will assist them to keep up with the curriculum and achieve an academic level equivalent to their peers. This sequence also takes into account the purported interaction between HL and FAL proficiencies (i.e. good HL proficiency assists in second-language acquisition while, in turn, second-language proficiency has a positive influence on HL development) (Pfenninger 2016). A successful end result is thus a bilingual and biliterate learner who is able to cope with the common trend of shifting to an English LoLT in Grade 4. (Bilingualism can be interpreted as multilingualism in the complex language situation of many learners.)

Figure 1: Evidence-based principles for efficient language and literacy development (Reeves et al. 2008)



Disruption of the above sequence (e.g. when English FAL is introduced too late or termination of HL as a subject happens too early) can result in long-lasting conceptual gaps and inadequate literacy skills. Because conceptual gaps and literacy deficiencies progressively build up as the learner reaches higher grades, they require more intensive remediation all along.

A second key finding is that learners require automatic and fluent decoding skills to read with comprehension. Results from Grades 1, 4 and 7 Setswana first-language learners who took part in the *siyaJabula siyaKhula* study indicated overall improvement in the following English literacy components: phonetic knowledge, word attack and word recognition skills, comprehension and writing skills, and reading ability. Word attack refers to the aggregation of skills (e.g. phonics) that an individual has to recognise and master a new word; the reader uses any of these skills in any combination. However, the achievement gains were smaller for the two higher grades and these learners remained below the required reading level according to their age after one and even two years of intervention. In addition, the results from the *siyaJabula siyaKhula* study showed that foundation skills benefitted substantially from the intervention as soon as within one year from the start of the relevant intervention. Derived competencies, such as comprehension, only improved after a time lag of at least two years of intervention. These results support a sequential development of literacy, where more challenging cognitive skills are built upon a foundation of basic literacy skills.

A crucial basic literacy skill is that of decoding. This working tool must be well developed to the point that the learners achieve automaticity in applying it during reading tasks. If

unable to do so, the learners need to sound-out or methodically decode each word individually. This makes reading even a short sentence a long and taxing process. Furthermore, readers are able to understand a sentence by “holding words” in their working memory (i.e. not forgetting the first words by the time they have read the last words). The time taken to read each word by slowly decoding it makes it, if not impossible, very unlikely to read meaningfully. The inability to automatically decode words therefore limits comprehension, or the conceptual processing of the meaning, of what has been read. The reasoning behind this lies in the limited capacity of working memory (10–12 seconds for 5–7 items). Slow decoding uses up too much or all of this capacity before higher-order processes can attend to the meaning of what is being read and storing it away as new knowledge along with what a learner has mastered previously.

The third key finding concerns the necessary teacher proficiency in literacy teaching that teachers can only master through appropriate initial teacher training and all subsequent professional development and support. It is important that teachers understand the process of literacy development as well as which teaching methods should be emphasised in the South African context. Importantly, traditional methods characterised by meaningless repetition, rote learning and chorusing do not provide a way for learners to connect their developing literacy skills with their own knowledge. Other available methods, such as code switching and translanguaging, are aimed at bridging the gap between learners’ existing knowledge frameworks and new knowledge. These other methods challenge learners in more cognitively-demanding tasks, show flexibility with regard to curriculum pace in order to place less pressure on themselves and to nurture all learners,

and use all these various knowledge modalities during teaching and learning interactions. Code switching denotes using the HL for key explanations rather than the instructional language, while translanguaging is the process of using all the available language resources in an integrated manner (Heugh 2015). In doing so, teachers will be able to use underlying literacy theory and appropriate multilingual teaching practices to successfully develop literacy in all the learners.

There are other related habits which should be avoided. The inter-province study on language and literacy paradigms and practices used the following IRF structure (see the boldface capital letters below) to explore literacy interaction between learners and teachers: Initiation of interactions by teachers, learners’ Responses and the subsequent requisite teacher Feedback on learners’ progress. An important finding was what has been termed “safetalk” – instead of engaging in honest interaction, including feedback. Here, learners and teachers form a silent pact to not unmask insufficient language proficiency by either party and instead merely use ritualised chanting and the like (Prinsloo *et al.* 2015; Hornberger & Chick 2001). As noted previously, these are ineffective teaching strategies and thus the safetalk phenomenon is detrimental to learner progress. The authors highlight this as an example of approaches that could be replaced by effective strategies based on empirical support.

Developing literacy competently in all learners is evidently a large task given to teachers and it is important that they receive support in this endeavour. The EGRS design included three different interventions. Two were pedagogy-based teacher interventions comprising teacher support at different intensities. The first involved a two-day Setswana

literacy teaching course at the start of each semester, accompanied by the provision and use of structured lesson plans and graded readers. The second comprised all of the foregoing, but solidified it further through monthly (or more frequent) content-based and pedagogy-based coaching or mentoring support engagements. The results indicated that these two interventions had the highest impact, compared to the third non-effective parent-support intervention. The second mode of teacher support had a statistically significant impact through classroom language teaching on improved learner achievement.

In conclusion, theory provides a foundation for understanding the teaching of literacy which highlights areas of focus during teacher training as well as classroom teaching strategies. In addition, the theory underlying how learners develop literacy (particularly in multilingual contexts) can inform the formulation of practical interventions that produce results.

Recommendations

1. Implement a structured programme to assess the pedagogical content knowledge of trainee teachers or recent graduates to ensure transition from training knowledge to proficient classroom teaching.
2. Cover recent literacy teaching and learning concepts and theoretical frameworks in teacher training aimed at enabling teachers to guide learners towards automatic and fluent decoding proficiency in order to read meaningfully.
3. Formally incorporate appropriate multilingual literacy teaching methods in pre-service programmes, including techniques related to code switching and translanguaging, and everything else that will ensure that the learners achieve automaticity and fluency in decoding and reading comprehension.

4. Undertake interventions to support or train teachers in their own proficiency in English or another additional LoLT.

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