

EXAMINING READING AND WRITING APPROACHES USED IN THE TEACHING OF READING AND WRITING ABILITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *The education-specific policy on language in South Africa lays emphasis on teaching, use and promotion of all official languages, through what is described as additive multilingualism. Mother tongue is universally acknowledged as the most effective way to function both cognitively and socially. The focus of the paper is on the methods used to teach reading and writing in Grade One. The study was conducted at four different Primary Schools where Sepedi is the Language of Teaching and Learning (LOLT). Observations, interviews and document analysis were used for data collection. The findings was that teachers resort to two to three methods i.e. whole class reading, paired reading and reading aloud of which does not yield good results. There are also challenges which contribute to the abovementioned issue: lack of resources, lack of parental involvement and overcrowded classes to name a few. The aim of this study was to establish how reading and writing in Sepedi as the home language was taught in Grade One in Mpumalanga Province primary schools in rural areas. A qualitative approach utilising an interpretive design was used. The findings indicated that teachers resorted to few and same strategies for teaching reading. In addition, findings support the notion that there are challenges in teaching reading in Grade One.*

KEY WORDS: reading, writing, language of learning, teaching, Sepedi as home language.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to read and write is not a privilege; it is a right, that is stated in our Constitution Department of Education, (2002:17). People begin developing knowledge that they will use to read and write during their earliest interactions with families and communities because learning to read and write is a process. According to Gumede (2018) give the importance of one's language at an early stage "culture, in its evolving sense, should be embraced and languages must be allowed to thrive, for language is also critical, as it ensures and sustains people-to-people relations" (p.61). In their pre-school years, children learn to understand and use spoken language and learn about their world through meaningful interactions with others and also taught to embrace their culture. These interactions, which involve listening to and speaking a home language, form the foundation for learning to read and write upon entering Grade One. The International Reading Association (2016:2) states: "every child deserves excellent reading teachers, because teachers make a difference in children's reading achievement and motivation to read." Children learn about written language as more experienced readers provide meaningful demonstrations of reading and writing. When considering extrinsic factors, the National Reading Strategy Campaign document revealed the most challenging lack of effective reading support strategies (Department of Education (DoE) National reading strategy 2008:8). According to Section 29 (1) of South Africa's Constitution (1994:46), all citizens have the right to basic education, including adult basic education, and measures must make it progressively available and accessible. As a result it is stated in the South African Schools Act

(SASA)(1996:174) that schooling is compulsory from age seven (Grade One) to age 15 or the completion of Grade Nine. This implies that all children in South Africa will be provided with the opportunity to be taught to read and write, because they have to attend school. Reading forms the basis of writing, because the ability to write depends on the ability to read, and what is written can only be meaningful if it can be read (Stahl 2008: 57). Therefore, the skills of reading and writing support each other and they are, essential to success in any society. These skills are highly valued and important for both social and economic advancement. Strict ethical guidelines of the research have been adhered to throughout the process of this study. This includes informed consent or permission from the provincial Department of Education, the school governing bodies, the principals and educators of the various schools and all participants. The respondents were assured that no mental or physical harm would be caused as a result of their participation in the investigation. They were further assured of anonymity, privacy and confidentiality. They were also made aware that they would benefit in some way from the study. Participating schools and educators were offered some feedback on the results were required.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The research employed an ethnographic search, because the researcher used extensive time at a site in order to systematically observe learners reading and responding to questions about what they read and about their writing abilities; interviewed teachers regarding their teaching approaches in the teaching of reading and writing in Sepedi as a home language; and captured events as they occur in specific schools. De Vos (2011: 275) defines ethnography as “the study of an entire cultural or social group characterised by participant observation, description and interpretive data analysis”. Qualitative methodology rests on the assumption that valid understanding can be gained through accumulated knowledge acquired firsthand by a single researcher (Fouche & Delpont 2011: 74). It departs from a constructivist point of view, which, according to Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2010: 83), does not see knowledge as given, but as actively and continuously constructed by individuals, groups and society. This viewpoint is appropriate for the study, because the researcher observed learners actively involved in the learning process and in their natural school setting. In the study, the way in which teachers taught reading and writing in a home language and the way in which they addressed reading writing problems in the classroom situation.

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents, guided by a process that provides rich and detailed data on the problem of study (Stage & Manning 2015:235). Sampling depended on the researcher’s judgment as to who provided reliable information. In this study, Grade One home language teachers were selected from four different primary schools in a rural area in the Mpumalanga Province. The researcher selected the participants and the purposive sampling was conducted based on the home language offered in the Grade One classes at the four schools, because is a National Policy that learners must be taught in their home language and the schools needs to implement it. The other reason being this will improve performance of learners when their Language of learning and teaching is their home language. This enables them to have a level of literacy and numeracy by the time they start formal schooling Read Educational Trust, (2005:12). Research has shown that learners who learn how to read and write at an early stage cope well and perform better academically, (Early Reading Strategy Panel (2003:22). Grade One is the foundation where the learners are taught the basics of

reading and writing and once this foundation is not well laid it will destruct and mess up the future of learners.

The four schools were selected purposively because they used Sepedi as their language of learning and teaching. The researcher also observed how the teachers taught reading and writing to Grade One learners. The focus of this study was Sepedi as the LoLT, which is key in Foundation Phase as prescribed by DBE policy.

Table 1 Demographic Information of the participants

| School | Teacher's name | Professional qualification | Gender | Teaching Experience | Age | Home language |
|--------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------------------|-----|-----------------------|
| A | T1 | Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD), Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE). | Female | 30 | 52 | Northern Sotho/Sepedi |
| A | T2 | Primary Teachers Certificate (PTC), Further Diploma in Education (FDE). | Female | 2 | 47 | Northern Sotho/Sepedi |
| B | T3 | Primary Teachers Certificate (PTC), Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD), Primary Teachers Certificate (PTC), Further Diploma in Education (FDE). | Female | 27 | 50 | Northern Sotho/Sepedi |
| B | T4 | Advanced Certificate in Education | Female | 29 | 51 | Northern Sotho/Sepedi |
| C | T5 | National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE), Advanced Certificate in Education (Inclusive Education) (ACE). | Female | 23 | 47 | Northern Sotho/Sepedi |
| C | T6 | Advanced Diploma in Education (IE) Bachelor of Arts. JPTD. | Female | 31 | 51 | Northern Sotho/Sepedi |
| D | T7 | Diploma in Development Studies (DDS), Bachelor of Arts General Degree (BA). | Female | 18 | 45 | Northern Sotho/Sepedi |
| D | T8 | Degree (BA). Primary Teachers Certificate (PTC), Further Diploma in Education (FDE). | Female | 20 | 47 | Northern Sotho/Sepedi |

Instrumentation

For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews are appropriate because the researcher was interested in understanding the experience of Grade One teachers with regard to problems related to the teaching of reading and writing to Grade One learners. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of Grade One teachers from four different primary schools.

Participatory observation was used, described by De Vos (2011:280) as a qualitative research procedure that studies the natural and everyday set-up in a particular community and situation. The researcher had spent two days a week, for four weeks, in each identified school, observing Grade One learners' reading and writing lessons. Of particular interest was reading and writing methodologies that teachers used in class, which assisted the researcher in gaining firsthand experience. Observation was conducted on the availability of reading materials in the classroom and the language spoken in the Grade One classrooms visited. The way in which the morning assembly was conducted and the use of Sepedi as a home language was observed. During observations, field notes were taken. Johnson and Christensen (2008: 212) affirm that qualitative observation involves observing all relevant phenomena and taking extensive field notes without specifying in advance exactly what is to be observed. Observation was mainly done by means of naturalistic methods of study, analysing conversations and interactions that researchers have with participants. Fouché (2011: 270) asserts that researchers using this strategy of interpretive inquiry mainly utilise participant observation and long interviews as their methods of data collection.

Participant feedback was used in order to achieve interpretive validity. Participant feedback refers to discussion of the researcher's conclusions with the participants (Johnson & Christensen 2008: 277). When writing the research report, interpretive validity was achieved by using many low-inference descriptors. These are helpful because the reader can experience the participant's actual language, dialect and personal meanings. Direct quotations were used when writing the research report. This ensures interpretive validity.

Data collection is the vehicle through which researchers collect information to answer the research question and defend conclusions and recommendations based on the research findings (Mertens 2009:285). For the purpose of this research, two research methods were combined, namely a literature review and empirical study. The aim of the literature study contributed towards a clearer understanding of the nature and meaning of the teaching of reading and writing in a home language. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014:10), empirical research involves being guided by evidence obtained from systematic research, rather than by opinion or authorities. The following methods were employed to gain empirical data.

Qualitative data analysis is an inductive way of organising data into categories, and identifying patterns (i.e. relationships) among those categories (McMillan, & Schumacher 2014: 364). This analysis helped the researcher to design the questions which focused on the research problem. After completing data collection, a more detailed and refined analysis was done. The information was categorised into themes or concepts, to look for common methods used by teachers and categories of approaching researchers to solve similar problems in different ways.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

From the data collected, all participants were qualified as primary teachers and they were thus trained to teach reading and writing according to traditional methods. This indicates that what was taught at teacher training colleges or universities in the past ought to suffice to teach reading and writing to Grade One learners, although it was not the same at all institutions.

The factors discussed contributed to the environment of the schools in the current study, and give evidence of how the schools were managed. It also indicates whether policies were effectively implemented. The contextual factors under discussion deal with the management of the schools and other related matters, namely: curriculum management and functionality of the School Management Team; overcrowded classrooms and the management of these classrooms; training of classroom teachers in the teaching of reading and writing; support from the stakeholders.

Based on the observations, the classroom teachers at the four schools were doing their level best to accommodate all the learners, irrespective of their abilities. Many of the teachers did not have the benefit of being trained to teach learners who experience barriers to learning in their initial training. This is making it difficult for classroom teachers to support the learners with barriers to learning. According to the teachers, without regular additional training they would be lost, because they did not know whether they were doing the correct thing when they tried to support learners who had problems with reading and writing. They considered themselves critical elements in the implementation of departmental policies. They therefore needed to have the skills and knowledge for the proper implementation of the policies of the various departments of education.

From the interviews, it also became clear that some of the teachers still needed to be trained in order to know how to teach reading and specific reading strategies and writing skills as per the new curriculum for the Foundation Phase. Observation was confirmed by one participant, who said: *“we went for training only once. We need more training on language education policy so that we can implement it correctly, but for now what we are doing is just for formality purposes”*. The statement affirms that not all the classroom teachers in my study had appropriate skills and knowledge in teaching reading and writing in Grade One, as well as skills to accommodate learners with barriers. There is therefore a desperate need for more intensive training so that the classroom teachers can be confident in teaching and supporting learners with barriers. Classroom teachers at schools are required to identify and deal with the learners' problems such as reading and writing first. Then, if the learning problems persist, the learner should be referred to the Institution Level Support Team (ILST). During my interviews, I also noticed that the classroom teachers seemed to lack the knowledge and skills to identify learners with barriers to learning including reading and writing problems.

During key informant interviews and focus group interviews, the respondents were uncertain about approaches to use it in the beginning of teaching reading and writing. There were also no explanations for how the teachers could proceed if this approach did not work. They developed methods of their own, and used more than one method to teach reading and writing to beginners. For them to be active agents, as in line with Au (2015:48) and the DoE (2001:284), all learners need to be taught strategies to help them read and write with understanding, and to help them unlock the code of the read words. Teachers could thus

consider including different approaches when teaching beginning reading and beginning writing to beginners.

During my classroom observations, I noticed that some of the classrooms were really overcrowded. This is a problem when young Grade One learners have to be taught new language skills, such as reading and writing. During the interviews that I conducted with the teachers, I inquired about the many learners in their classrooms. My observations about the overcrowded classrooms in some schools were confirmed by what the teachers said during the personal interviews.

Teaching and learning cannot take place as planned if there are too many learners in a classroom, as identified by teacher B3: *“teachers don't have time to help learners with learning barriers; we have got so many learners in classes”*.

Overcrowded classrooms resulted in teachers neglecting the learners who really need help, and they could only move forward with those learners who are able to perform as expected and grasp concepts more easily. Teacher C4 noted: *“it is not easy to say how it can be done as I said there are many excuses, number of learners, overcrowding in the classes we could not attend to one learner, instead of teaching fifty to fifty five learners”*. This indicates that some of the teachers encountered complex difficulties to teach their young custodians properly. It also requires the teachers to adapt their teaching methodologies, in order to accommodate those learners who have learning barriers, such as the acquisition of reading and writing.

In some classrooms, even the teachers had no access to readers. There was no evidence of graded level books to use during guided reading. I noticed that in some schools there are no picture charts. The literature states that a lack of readers can discourage teachers from teaching (Fawson & Reutzell, 2009:112). This was not the case in the schools included here, for example, School A did not have readers for the learners, yet the teacher continued teaching. This was confirmed by teacher A1, who said: *“we don't have readers for utilisation when we conduct reading in Grade 1 for Home Languages, especially for Sepedi that is not well developed”*. What I observed is that most teachers use picture books for reading. This will impact negatively on teaching reading and writing to learners.

It was also noted from the findings that it was unclear when reading was to be taught in the classroom. This is an issue that needs to be discussed at macro-level, where policies are being formulated. When addressing such matters, the provincial departments should be given an opportunity to come up with ways to structure their school's timetable in order to make sure that all components of reading and learners' reading needs are being addressed and met. Teachers as experts in their own field need to alternate various methods for teaching reading depending on the learner needs. This study duly contributes to the enhancement of the teaching of reading and writing in Sepedi to Grade One learners, and for that matter, in any home language spoken in South Africa.

In conclusion research indicates that no method can be singled out as the best method for teaching reading and writing. Grade One teachers should be aware of the fact that there are various factors occurring in all the systems that constitute a young learner's environment that could influence this young person's acquisition of reading and writing skills in Grade One. It is very important for reading and writing to be taught well in the home language of young learners entering school for the first time. This forms the base of proper language acquisition and will also have good and positive influence on the acquisition of first additional language,

which becomes the language of learning and teaching for learners whose home language is Sepedi or other South African languages in the Intermediate Phase.

Possible implications

Overcrowding in South African classrooms is very high, in some of the classes there are 40 to 65 learners in one classroom. Teachers are therefore unable to identify most learners who are under-developed, especially those with barriers to reading and writing. The findings from the study confirm that classroom teachers who were involved in the research were finding it difficult to cope with the situation in the classes; as such they tended to develop negative attitudes to learners experiencing barriers to reading and writing. They regarded these learners as a burden, who made it even more difficult to perform their daily routine. Lack of support from all stakeholders such as officials from the district DBST, SBST and other specialist contribute to barriers to teaching and learning. Lack of parental involvement: Family literacy level, grandparents as caregivers and poverty underpins the success or failure of the learning experience because children who are read to and share the reading experience with their primary adult caregivers succeed in their schooling and this generally leads to success in adult life.

This study revealed that the language or languages spoken in community could have a negative impact on the language development of the child, especially if it is not his or her home language that is spoken in the community. It was evident from the study that it could also affect the LoLT in the school situation. The methods used in the classroom by educators confirmed that not all learners are accommodated, especially those with reading and writing barriers. Reading and writing may be two separate activities, but it is advisable to treat them as two sides of the same coin (Hugo AJ & Lenyai E 2016:15). Not all learners can, for instance, master reading when teachers only use the phonics method. Teachers should thus be versatile to use more than one method to teach reading and writing.

Most reading and writing lesson activities used during my classroom observation were suitable for learners without reading and writing barriers, and not suitable for learners with barriers. Lack of resources: The findings from the interviews with the teachers revealed that not all learners in some of the schools had resources to use for reading. Teachers had to photocopy the passage to be read in order to cover all learners. During the classroom observations, the finding was confirmed, as some learners used photocopied material when asked to read. This posed a serious challenge for teachers, who were to give extra work for reading at home. This was also confirmed by teachers regarding CAPS documents, where each school is given only one copy and they were unable to access the documents individually at their own time. I also realised that most learners did not receive early or emergent reading and writing development, which is normally done during the Grade R phase. Some of the reading activities for teacher and learner interactions were not user friendly, because most of the activities were in English and needed to be translated to Sepedi as the language of learning and teaching. Sometimes when books were used, teachers did direct translation, and this did not develop the correct use of the home language.

Findings revealed that not all teachers received training on how to teach reading and writing. Those who qualified as primary teachers were the ones who had been trained, and this posed a challenge for home language teachers, because they lacked the equivalent knowledge required for the Phase (see Table 1 teacher's profiles). In order to address this challenge

teachers will need training so as to improve themselves. The findings affirmed the Education White Paper 6 (2001:18), which calls for teachers to improve their skills and knowledge in order to develop skills that can be used to address the requirements of the new curricula and curriculum differentiation in South Africa.

Recommendation and further research.

District officials should be well-trained so that they can assist Grade One teachers to be versatile in the use of different reading and writing methods. They should train the SBST and Foundation Phase teachers to provide support to learners who have barriers to reading and writing and also offer train them on creating resources (teaching aids) and to teach reading and writing effectively. Teaching assistants could be hired to help classroom teachers with learners experiencing barriers to reading and writing development. The teaching assistants should be trained to give learners individual support and attention under the supervision of the classroom teacher.

The national policy on teacher-learner ratio be implemented effectively and post establishment be a priority, especially in the Foundation Phase. Teachers to conduct community awareness regarding child school readiness and working with the community leaders with regard to this issue. Encourage parents to enroll their children in ECD Centres to prepare them for school readiness. Motivate parents to enroll themselves in ABET Centres so that they can improve their level of literacy in order to help their young once with homework.

In community gatherings, all languages must be used equally, because there is no language that is better than the other. Parents should be encouraged to also use their home language when they socialise with people in their communities when their young children are present. Thus, the children will hear the correct use of their home language outside the home and the school. It is recommended that teachers develop reading lesson activities and use different methods that will accommodate the diversity of learners.

During reading and writing, teachers must always give extra time for the learners who struggle in reading and writing. They must start from simple to complex tasks, so that the learners are able to feel a sense of belonging and their prior knowledge be taken into consideration. Early literacy and writing development is recommended. Special attention should be given to Grade One learners who did not attend a Grade R class.

Curriculum differentiation must be key, and be taken into consideration at all times. Thus, the specific reading and writing needs of some of the learners will be attended to.

Teachers should be encouraged to be creative and have print-rich walls to promote an environment that is conducive for teaching and learning. Different kind of reading methods should be used in order to accommodate diversity of learners. The strategies that can be used include shared reading, group guided reading, and whole class reading. These are the most effective methods to accommodate learners with reading barriers. Individual attention could be given to learners with barriers to reading.

It is recommended that the DBE supply schools with enough resources or Learning and Teaching Support Materials, especially with regard to the teaching of reading and writing in the home languages used in South Africa. Teachers should encourage learners to bring old reading materials (such as books, magazines and newspapers) to school in order to use

them to read for enjoyment during their free periods, thus increasing their vocabulary and the ability to recognise words.

The DBE should be approached to organise in-service training for Sepedi Foundation Phase teachers where all strategies on how to teach reading and writing in Sepedi as the home language of the learners will be outlined. Neighbouring schools to form clusters in which teachers share their good practices and assist each other in addressing their challenges in terms of how reading and writing are taught.

Teachers should encourage reading together and reading aloud in order to improve the learners' ability to read.

For further research:

- An investigation into how tertiary institutions could enhance the teaching of reading and writing in training student teachers in (HL).
- An investigation into how district officials could effectively support Grade One-Three teachers with curriculum differentiation and training programmes for teachers to develop intervention strategies to support and embrace learners who experience reading and writing barriers.
- Research about teachers' professional knowledge of the language taught and in which they teach;

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