Learners deserve the best: Teachers as agents of language proficiency

Summary

Teachers are the primary channel through which learners acquire academic knowledge. In classrooms, language is the key to communication and understanding. This can be problematic in multilingual countries where some teachers may not be proficient enough either in the language(s) of the learner(s) or in the language of instruction. Many South African primary school teachers currently face this scenario. In addition, teachers play a vital role in reorienting a formerly exclusive education system to provide education for all learners. Together with the multilingual and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of learners, this requires highly trained, innovative and motivated teachers. Based on the findings from two research projects on literacy development conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Limpopo, we make recommendations for the development of an inclusive and diversified literacy teaching model.

Introduction

The South African Language in Education Policy (LiEP) advocates for learners to be instructed in their mother tongue, although this is not made mandatory (Breton-Carbonneau Cleghorn, Evans & Pesco 2012; Manyike 2013). Section 29(2) of South Africa's Constitution states that everyone has the right to receive education in the language of their choice, within practical limitations. As a result, the common practice is to teach Grades 1 to 3 learners in their home language (HL) before switching to English or Afrikaans as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) from Grade 4 onwards (Manyike 2013; Howie, Venter & Van Staden 2008). This means that most white, Indian and coloured children are taught in either English or Afrikaans throughout Grades 1 to 12, whereas most black children are taught first in an African language before switching to English or Afrikaans in Grade 4 (Howie et al. 2008). Furthermore, South African teachers in vulnerable areas are faced with community poverty, poorly resourced schools, curriculum implementation and articulation problems, and low levels of subject-relevant teacher education (Benson 2004; Benson & Plüddemann 2009; Benson 2015).

Great skill is therefore required from the teachers who, under difficult circumstances, must impart both HL literacy and English literacy before the end of Grade 3. However, research indicates that it takes five to seven years for learners, who are taught in their HL for the first two to three years

of schooling, to acquire academic English fluency (Demie 2013). There is also research that indicates the need for supporting the physiological needs of the learner – both those of a cognitive/brain nature and those relating to the body, such as adequate nourishment – in the window period when the learner is acquiring both first and second languages (Nelson 2012; Herschensohn 2007). An ideal situation would be for teachers to have multiple language proficiencies, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (see Figure 1). The latter refers to how teachers are able able to integrate their subject content knowledge and general pedagogical approaches to formulate effective subject-relevant teaching strategies best suited to their learners who come from differing backgrounds; begin their learning lives with a range of different preconceptions; and find themselves in a variety of different social, emotional and conceptual development stages. This implies that appropriate teacher qualifications should equip teachers with the skills they require for the above teaching approach. Taken together, primary school teachers in South Africa face a huge challenge with regard to the literacy development of learners.

Figure 1: Diagram indicating content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge

PRINCIPALS OF SUCCESS

CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE
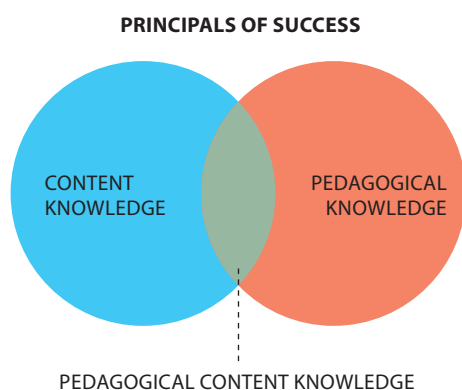
This policy brief focuses on literacy development in the first years of formal education, drawing from two research projects conducted by the HSRC. Firstly, the Limpopo Literacy Strategy (2006–2007) was aimed at providing direction to as well as guiding the improvement of literacy. Classroom-based observation of and interviews with learners in Grades 1 to 4 and their teachers were conducted. In the second study, a qualitative study was conducted with learners from Gauteng in Grades 1 to 3 language classes and in Limpopo primary schools between 2011 and 2013. The aim was to explore teacher–learner interaction in HL and second-language classrooms. Regular language classes (including isiZulu, Sepedi and English) as well as numeracy lessons and intervention lessons (the latter two only in Limpopo Province) were conducted and observed (Prinsloo *et al.* 2008). Results from these studies are used to discuss factors related to teachers and their training that constrain literacy development as well as those factors that facilitate the process.

Discussion of the empirical evidence

From the consolidated analysis of the two research projects, it was found that teachers were uncertain about how to approach the teaching of reading and writing as well as the available literacy teaching strategies at their disposal (Reeves *et al.* 2008; Department of Education 2008). Many teachers thought that learners learn to read by themselves and viewed their role as facilitating that process. In addition, many teachers had not received training related to how to teach reading. This resulted in inability to develop teaching materials and reading programmes, and in the use of rote teaching (Department of Education 2008).

The knowledge gap demonstrated by teachers is compounded by the multilingual nature of the South African

context. Teachers appear not to be well informed about the relationship between first and second language and general learning (Reeves *et al.* 2008). Understanding language interaction and the impact of bilingualism or multilingualism on English language acquisition is a crucial requirement for effective classroom instruction in South Africa (Vaish 2012). Classrooms have become multilingual and a single universal teaching programme, sometimes requiring immersion, is inappropriate for the South African context. This requires teacher innovation in classroom practices, which is made more difficult – if not impossible – without a full understanding of language and literacy learning, teaching methods and interactions.

With regard to university teacher training programmes, it may be necessary to formally accept and provide teaching in the optimal use of practices such as code switching and translanguaging. Code switching is where the HL is used for key explanations in place of the LoLT, while translanguaging refers to the integrated use of all available language resources (Heugh 2015). These two techniques provide a deeper understanding of content for learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds as the combination of their HL and the chosen LoLT work together to enhance learning. In addition, the wider use of these techniques and the context of a multilingual country may require teaching to become a multilingual profession. Doing so would not only assist learners currently, but would also pave the way for teacher training in the pedagogy of reading in the mother tongue language of African learners. African languages are different in structure from both English and Afrikaans (Department of Education 2008), meaning that training on how to teach reading in English or Afrikaans may not necessarily translate to teaching

reading in African languages. However, it is noted that the latter languages are considered transparent, where graphemes (written letters and words) are easily related to phonemes (spoken sounds), making them easier languages to acquire.

For teachers who have completed their training and are now working in various schools across the country, additional training may not be available: The Limpopo tertiary teacher training system does not have the capacity to provide formal primary teaching education, development, and expertise. There was no evidence of higher education institutions (HEIs) offering in-service teacher education designed to prepare teachers for teaching reading and writing in the province's primary schools (Reeves *et al.* 2008). However, the National Reading Strategy of the Department of Basic Education included plans for accredited training courses on strategies for teaching reading which would be offered at HEIs (Department of Education 2008). These plans, therefore, require follow-up with the relevant bodies.

Further training is not only important for learner achievement but for teacher development as well. Prinsloo *et al.* (2008) illustrate the importance of introducing innovative practices among teachers as the outcomes include greater learner agency (increased learner confidence, meaningful shaping of their own voices, and concept development and understanding), the bridging of oracy (speaking and hearing language) and literacy, and changed teacher perceptions about and responses to alternative practices. Being open to and exploring alternative practices can enable teachers to overcome difficulties in the classroom related to multilingualism and contextual aspects such as poverty. Teachers may also feel more able to explore their own teaching style. As

Msila (2002) notes, it is important that teachers realise that their own narratives are influential in both their identity as a teacher and how they approach teaching. These narratives are influenced by the time and politics of education during their training (Msila 2002). Being able to explore these facets may provide new answers or teaching practices.

Another constraining factor indicated was a lack of teacher specialisation in early childhood development. Only 15% of school management team members and 12% of the sample of Limpopo primary school teachers who were surveyed had postgraduate degrees which have been shown to assist in teacher performance. These factors indicate that teachers require further teacher education as well as support and incentives to increase their motivation to undertake studies for postgraduate degrees (Reeves *et al.* 2008).

The complexity of the South African context makes it clear that a one-size-fits-all literacy teaching model is neither appropriate nor what is now urgently required for bringing children to levels of reading literacy that are appropriate for both their own development and the needs of the broader society. Although learners are now taught in their HLs, or at least some learners for some grades, we need to look more deeply into the issues surrounding the LoLT. This includes the socioeconomic status of the home, the perceived value of language and the language in which the learner is proficient, the extent of immersion accomplished, how literacy is developed and multilingual teaching strategies. Changing to an inclusive education system has and will require much time and an in-depth critique of multiple issues related to super-diverse classrooms.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that the following components are covered well in

all pre-service (initial) teacher training presented by teacher training institutions, including HEIs: supervised classroom practical sessions, language-focused content, teacher self-awareness, and the use and adaptation of resource materials.
2. Implement a structured programme to assess the pedagogical content knowledge of students and recent graduates in order to ensure transition from training to classroom teaching.
3. Provide the above to in-service teachers, together with the establishment of communities of practice of teachers and schools in close proximity.
4. The Department of Basic Education should, through subject advisors as well as curriculum managers and experts, support all the aforementioned role-players who are aware of and embrace teaching methods suited to linguistically diverse classrooms.

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