

# LESSONS IN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY: A CLASSROOM STUDY IN LIMPOPO

The objective of the Language-in-Education Policy (LIEP) is to maintain a learner's 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, as shown by the abysmal literacy achievement of learners in a study in Limpopo. *Cas Prinsloo* explains.



In 2007, the HSRC studied literacy practices in depth in a sample of 20 schools from all five districts of Limpopo. The study focused on classrooms in Grades 1 to 4, and uncovered an abysmal literacy achievement among learners. Findings pointed to the primary cause of poor performance, as corroborated by a number of other studies in other provinces.

The most significant finding from 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 included that not even one in four learners wrote short sentences at least every week in their home language. Three in every four learners did not write even a short paragraph, a figure that increased to nine out of 10 for not writing short letters or essays.

More than three out 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 10 times between January and August, while one in every three never did.

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.



**The absence of extended writing opportunities and practice is a causal factor in educational failure.**

## **A country-wide symptom**

South African research and evidence from large-scale assessments conducted by the national and provincial departments of education show that after the first three school years, 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. This in turn compromises young people's options once they've left school.

To address this, urgent and drastic realignments are needed between the spirit and letter of the constitution with regards to equity and that of the curriculum as it articulates with the LiEP.



## 'Learning to read' has to be converted into 'reading to learn'.

### How to escape 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 preschool and early school years, and the importance of these foundations for learning a second language or additional languages, are well established. Language and literacy acquisition and development anchor subsequent cognitive development and academic proficiency.

'Learning to read' has to be converted into 'reading to learn'. In doing so, and by aligning language use with the individual and cultural values of all home languages, successful second-language learning in formal educational settings can take place. The requirements necessary for such alignment would benefit second-language learning in a number of ways.

First, it is dependent upon the successful development of the language best known and used by the child upon entry to school (known as the mother tongue, home language 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 that will later become the medium of instruction, 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 to enable students to learn a large body of vocabulary and 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.

### Policy implications

In formulating implications and recommendations from the Limpopo study, the researchers attempted 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 would be a fruitless exercise.

## The key objective of language policy should be to maintain home language teaching and learning for as long as possible.



The key objective of language policy should be to maintain home language teaching and learning for as long as possible so that learners achieve sufficiently strong reading and writing skills in this language while simultaneously learning a second language. For most students, this second language would be English.

To have sufficient command of a second language 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

There should be a common strategy towards language and education. In compiling this strategy, 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 should be involved.

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 has resulted in dysfunctional classroom practices, which have to be addressed urgently. ■

*Author: Dr Cas Prinsloo, research specialist, Education and Skills Development programme, HSRC.*

*The policy proposal is explained in depth in an HSRC Policy Brief, available on <http://bit.ly/Pm4L5f>.*