

Home Language versus First Additional Language Instruction: A Comparison of Grade 3 Rural Learners' Reading Comprehension in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This study seeks to investigate how the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) affects learners' reading comprehension. Two primary schools were chosen, one where the home language (IsiXhosa) was the medium of instruction from Grade one to three, with English as a taught subject or First Additional Language and another school where English (First Additional Language) was the medium of instruction from Grade one, with the home language (IsiXhosa) as a taught language were purposively selected for this study. An English language reading comprehension test and IsiXhosa reading comprehension test were administered to 95 Grade 3 learners from the two schools. A t-test was used in this study to determine whether the reading comprehension mean scores of the two groups for both tests differed statistically significantly. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in IsiXhosa reading comprehension between learners in the two schools in favour of the learners who were taught in the mother tongue/ home language as medium of instruction. With regard to the English reading comprehension test, the results indicated that there was a significant difference in the reading comprehension scores in favour of the learners in a school where English was used as medium of instruction from Grade 1. This study concluded that learners perform better in reading comprehension test in the language that is used as medium of instruction irrespective of whether the language is a home language/mother tongue or First Additional language/second language.

INTRODUCTION

Primary education is the most important level of education because the quality of secondary and tertiary levels of education is determined by its quality (Fakeye 2011). In South Africa, there has been a general outcry about the poor academic performance of learners at all levels which are associated with a literacy learning process in the Foundation Phase (Block 2000). According to Adeyemi (2004), most problems manifesting at the later stages of education have their roots in primary education practices. The literature has shown that among the contributing factors to quality education at the primary level is the language that is used as medium of instruction (Ball 2011; Heugh et al. 2007; Prinsloo 2007; Murray 2007; United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2007; Susan 2007; Benson 2005; Dutcher 2003; Butzkamm 2003; Block 2000). Murray (2007) states that at many levels the question of medium of instruction in education in African countries has become one of the crucial issues in research and discussion at many levels. According to Heugh et al. (2007), the medium of instruction in primary education is a key

factor which can both facilitate and optimise access to the content of the curriculum or block learning preventing both access and equity.

A growing body of empirical studies has shown that using the mother tongue of the learners as medium of instruction in particular; at the primary level demonstrate better academic performance for learners than those who start school in second language (Murray 2007; Heugh et al. 2007; Dutcher 2003; Block 2000). UNESCO (2007) emphasises the role of early childhood care and development in laying the foundation for learning and setting the stage for successful engagement in formal education. It is within this notion that the Department of Education in South Africa has placed the issue of language at the forefront of its interventions to improve teaching and learning. In order to improve access to education for all South Africans, the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) which was adopted in 1997 is underpinned by the principle of maintaining the use of home language of learners as the language of learning and teaching. However, the School Governing Bodies in consultation with all the stakeholders (parents, teachers, learners etc.) were allowed to choose any of the eleven official languages as a medium of instruction.

However, there is lack of consensus among studies as to the efficacy of the use of home languages as medium of instruction. Although some studies (Murray 2007; Heugh et al. 2007) maintain that the use of home languages as mediums of instruction produces positive results in terms of reading comprehension, others have shown that using the home language as medium of instruction does not improve the reading comprehension of the learners (Mgqwashu 2004; Prinsloo 2008, 2009). In addition, Pluddemann (2010) recommends the extension of the use of mother tongue instruction in South Africa up to Grade six in order to produce better academic results. Similarly, UNESCO (2007) argues that six to eight years of education in a home language are necessary to develop the level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for academic achievement in secondary schools.

As already mentioned above, the literature indicates that literacy in South Africa is already a problem, especially in the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3). According to Fayeke (2011), language and education are inseparable because the use of language as a medium of instruction in the teaching/learning situation goes a long way in determining the success achieved by the learner. It is against this background that the current study seeks to compare the reading comprehension of learners where the home language is used as a medium of instruction with learners where the First Additional Language (English) is used as a medium of instruction. Having this information may assist in making a contribution to the current debate about the use of home languages as medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase in South Africa and further make evidence-based recommendations for language education policy. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to address the following questions:

- ♦ Do learners where the home language is used as medium of instruction from Grade 1 to 3 have significantly higher IsiXhosa (L1) reading comprehension scores at Grade 3 than those in a school where English (L2) is used as medium of instruction from Grade 1?
- ♦ Do learners in the school where English (L2) is used as medium of instruction from Grade 1 have significantly higher English reading comprehension scores at Grade 3 than those in the school where the home language is used as medium of instruction?

Literature Review

One of the most important skills learned by the Foundation Phase learners is the ability to understand written text, which is usually referred to as comprehension (Tannenbaum et al. 2006). According to Durkin (1993), reading comprehension is considered the essence of reading. Thus, reading comprehension is one of the pillars of the art of reading. In addition, Rice (2007) points out that comprehension are regarded as a process rather than a particular outcome or product through which a reader interacts with a text to construct meaning. This view of comprehension, according to Rice, emphasises the deliberate, strategic, problem-solving process of the reader as he engages with a text. The relationship between word knowledge and reading comprehension has been well documented (Tannenbaum et al. 2006; Scott 2010). Scott (2010) points out that vocabulary knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension. He further states that among the Foundation Phase learners, reading comprehension can be predicted to a large extent by vocabulary, letter recognition and phonemic awareness. According to Fielding and Pearson (1994), comprehension is viewed as a much more complex process involving knowledge. Experience, thinking and teaching. They further point out that comprehension depends heavily on knowledge, both about the world at large and the worlds of language and print.

The idea that primary education is best begun in a child's mother tongue has received strong support in many education and linguistic circles (Malone 2007; UNESCO 2007; Benson 2004; Butzkamm 2003). Malone (2007) points out that by the time children begin school they have begun gaining confidence in their ability to communicate meaningfully in their home language. This idea and its importance as a resource to be utilized by the Foundation Phase teachers are supported by many studies (Ball 2011; Fakeye 2011; Heugh et al. 2007; Murray 2007; Dutcher 2003). It is against this background that the South African Constitution guarantees learners the right to receive education in the language of their choice (South African Constitution 1996). Influenced by the constitution, the South African Language in Education Policy recognizes the benefits to be derived from mother-tongue education and commits itself to an additive ap-

proach to bilingualism within the education system (Prinsloo 2007). Prinsloo further points out that, this Language in Education Policy explicitly expresses the intention to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and effective acquisition of additional languages. Triggered by this language policy, the current study seeks to establish in practical terms if children who are taught in the medium of instruction of their mother tongue in the Foundation Phase can outperform children who are taught in the First Additional Language as medium of instruction.

A study similar to the current study was conducted by Mqquashu (2004) where he tested the learners' reading comprehension in tests conducted in English (First Additional Language) and Kiswahili (First Language). The objective of the study was to see in which medium of instruction learners would have better performance. The results indicated that learners' reading comprehension performances were not influenced by the medium of instruction as he observed that learners who scored very low in English were the same learners who scored low in reading comprehension tests conducted in Kiswahili. However, studies conducted around the issue of medium of instruction, especially the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction have produced varied results. Monsod (2009) argues that teaching in an official school language that is not the mother tongue is a major barrier in the child's learning. A study was conducted in the Philippines, where teachers used Kalinga (local language/mother tongue) to teach children to read and write from Grade 1 to 3. Kalinga was also used as the medium of instruction for teaching other subjects, including Filipino and English (First Additional Languages). The results showed that out of the ten districts in the Kalinga division, the Lubuageen district, where the local language was used as medium of instruction, topped the 2006 national achievement test Grade 3 reading test for both English and Filipino. In contrast, Prinsloo (2007) points out that South Africa's learners achieved the lowest score on the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which evaluated the performance of grade 4 learners from 40 countries. He states that learners whose home language was not English or Afrikaans, but were learning through these languages, did significantly better than many who were learning through their African home languages.

However, the literature indicates that the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the early stages of the learning process is important for various reasons. Researchers such as Krashen (2004), Thomas and Collier (2002) reveal that many skills acquired in the first language can be transferred to the second language. In other words, children who have developed good skills in their mother tongue are likely to apply those skills when reading in the second language. Research conducted by Macdonald and Burroughs (1991) to determine the language ability of learners who were in the process of switching from learning English as a subject to English as their language of learning and teaching (LoLT) seem to support these views. Their research findings indicated that the children were not ready to learn up to ten subjects in English when they entered Std 3 (Grade 5). The reasons for this, according to Macdonald and Burroughs (1991) were that the learners' reading skills were poorly developed in both the first and second languages and that the whole learning situation was too limited to prepare children for the range of skills which they would need.

Another study was conducted by Williams (1998) to determine the reading comprehension performance at year five in African primary schools (Malawi and Zambia). According to the study in Malawi, Chichewa was used as the medium of instruction from year 1 to 4, with English as a taught subject whereas in Zambia, English was the medium of instruction from year 1, with one of seven local languages as a taught subject. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in English language reading comprehension performance between learners in each country but large differences in favour of Chichewa in local language reading comprehension. Similarly the current study seeks to compare the reading comprehension of learners who have been taught in English as a medium of instruction from Grade 1 to 3 with those who have been taught in the mother tongue (IsiXhosa) as a medium of instruction from Grade 1 to 3.

Goal of the Study

The study aimed at establishing the impact of the language of teaching and learning (whether Home Language or First Additional Language)

on the reading comprehension of Grade 3 rural learners.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study followed a quantitative approach of data collection. Aliaga and Gunderson (2002) define quantitative methods as explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics). The quantitative research approach was suitable for this study as its design was quasi-experimental. The use of the t-test in this study made it possible for the researcher to compare the reading comprehension test scores of School A (English medium school) and School B (IsiXhosa medium school).

Participants

Learners from two schools in Idutywa district in the Eastern Cape of South Africa participated in this study. The schools were about one kilometre apart. The total number of Grade 3 learners in one school was 42 (IsiXhosa medium school) and in the other were 53 (English medium school). Learners from both schools shared a common mother tongue (IsiXhosa). They had a common background (that is,) learners came from rural areas and only went to urban area/town for schooling. Learners in both schools were day scholars from the surrounding rural areas and in both schools were taught by IsiXhosa speaking teachers who had similar background and experiences. Therefore, the participants in the two schools may be considered equivalent from a socio-economic viewpoint. The two schools were purposively selected on the basis of the two different languages that were used as medium of instruction from Grade 1 to 3, that is, English and IsiXhosa. A total number of 95 learners were tested in both languages. The mean age of learners in both schools was nine years for both girls and boys. Appropriate informed consent from parents and school and district authorities was obtained for all of the participants.

Instrumentation

The reading comprehension test that was used in this study was the one that was administered by the National Government for System-

ic Evaluation Foundation Phase Grade 3 in 2004 (South African Government- Department of Basic Education). This test appeared in all South African official languages and consisted of multiple choice questions, fill-in gaps and short passages. For the purpose of this study IsiXhosa and English versions were used.

Data Collection Procedure

Tests were administered to two intact classes. A total of 95 learners were tested in both languages (IsiXhosa and English). One day was spent administering the English version of the reading comprehension test in each school. The English version was followed by IsiXhosa version which was administered after three months to the same participants. The idea of three months waiting period was implemented since the IsiXhosa (L1) test was a direct translation of the English version comprehension test. The researcher felt that three months waiting period was long enough for the participants to remember what they wrote in the English reading comprehension test. Therefore, their performance in the IsiXhosa reading comprehension test was not influenced by their performance in the English reading comprehension test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of the first research question was on whether the learners who were taught in the mother tongue as medium of instruction from Grade 1 to 3 would achieve significantly higher scores in the reading comprehension test in IsiXhosa than those who were taught in the First Additional language (English) as medium of instruction from Grade 1 to 3.

Table 1 reveals that the IsiXhosa (L1) reading comprehension results were in favour of learners in a school where IsiXhosa was used as medium of instruction at a significant level with a mean of 42.61 whereas in the school where English was used the mean was 29.73. These results support William's (1998) findings that the Malawian learners showed a vastly superior performance in their local language (Chichewa) than their counterparts in Zambia where English was used as medium of instruction from Grade 1. However, Table 1 further reveals that although the learners from IsiXhosa medium of instruction school performed better than their counterparts, there is a concern about the number of learners from the same group who did not per-

Table 1: Difference between schools: IsiXhosa scores

<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Statistical significance</i>	<i>Practical significance</i>
A	53	29.73	15.95	3.44	74.13	P< 0.05	0.80
B	42	42.61	16.07	12.06	74.13		

School: A = English Medium school

School: B= IsiXhosa Medium school

form well. In other words, not all the learners in isiXhosa medium school performed well in the reading comprehension test in their mother tongue. This finding is supported by Mqgqashu's (2004) findings where three reading comprehension tests were administered in different languages to the same group of learners in order to detect the learners' reading comprehension scores that could be used to describe the impact of teaching medium on learners' reading comprehension performance. The results indicated that teaching in the mother tongue (Kiswahili) could not pick up weak students' reading comprehension scores. In other words, learners who performed badly in the reading comprehension test in the mother tongue also performed badly in the reading comprehension test in the second language. According to Mqgqashu (2004), the development of indigenous languages so that they can carry all aspects of a modern technology society and become a medium of instruction in our schools is unlikely to be achieved. Foley (2006) concurs with Mqgqashu (2004) by stating that as the indigenous languages currently exist in South Africa, they have not been developed to the point where they are able to carry academic discourse effectively and therefore function as full-fledged languages of learning and teaching. However, the results of the current study showed that if one considers the reading comprehension achievement gap in the two languages that were used as medium of instruction, the IsiXhosa learners achieved better (mean-42.61). On the other hand the learners who were taught in the First Additional Language as medium of instruction achieved a mean

of 38.78 in the English reading comprehension test.

Table 2 shows that the learners in the school where English was used as medium of instruction were significantly superior in the English reading comprehension test to the learners in the other school with a mean of 38.78 and their IsiXhosa counterparts achieved a mean of 25.66. This performance could be attributed to the fact that teaching in a language with a tradition of scientific and technical literature like English might yield positive results in some contexts. Mutasa (2007) questions the possibility of using the indigenous languages as medium of instruction in South Africa, which is at the infant stage of development with regard to technical terminology, to survive at par with English which has long been developed. Again, the results of the current study contradict William's (1996) findings that the Zambian learners who had the first four years of education through the medium of English were not superior in their reading comprehension scores to Malawi learners who had Chichewa as a medium of instruction for those years. The results of the current study have proved that learners in the reading comprehension test based on the language used as medium of instruction achieved significantly higher scores. This finding is true for both IsiXhosa and the First Additional Language. However, comparing the mean scores by which both groups significantly achieved in their respective medium of instruction, the IsiXhosa group performed better (42.61 IsiXhosa learners versus 38.78 English learners).

Table 2: Differences between schools: English scores

<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Statistical significance</i>	<i>Practical significance</i>
A	53	38.78	14.82	11.11	74.07	P< 0.05	0.89
B	42	25.66	8.46	9.25	44.44		

School: A = English Medium school

School: B = IsiXhosa Medium school

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to compare the reading comprehension of learners who were taught in English as a medium of instruction with those who were taught in their mother tongue as a medium of instruction. The idea of testing learners in both languages was to establish if the language of learning and teaching had any bearing on the reading comprehension of learners. The literature highlights that using the mother tongue of the learners as medium of instruction, in particular, in primary education demonstrate better academic performance. The results of the current study indicated that learners achieve significantly higher scores in whatever language used as medium of instruction. However, the study further revealed that learners who are taught in the medium of instruction of their mother tongue achieve higher scores in the reading comprehension test in their mother tongue. On the other hand, although the learners who were taught in the First Additional language as medium of instruction performed significantly higher English reading comprehension scores, their mean score in English was less as compared to the IsiXhosa group in the IsiXhosa reading comprehension test. Therefore, learners who are taught in the medium of instruction of their mother tongue have an advantage of performing well in the reading comprehension in their mother tongue.

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