

## The Importance of the Relevance of Language of the Library Collection for the Foundation Phase Learners in Vhembe District

N. P. Mahwasane

*University of Venda, South Africa*

**KEYWORDS** Learners. Language. Mother Tongue. Reading Material. School Library. Library Resources

**ABSTRACT** This paper sets out to examine the importance of the relevance of the language of the library collection for the foundation phase learners in Vhembe District. The focus is on the language of the library collection used by Grade 3 learners who are supposed to do their learning in mother tongue to read. The qualitative approach was chosen based on the nature of the paper. Four teacher librarians were purposively sampled to participate in the study. Interviews were used as a method for data collection from each teacher librarian. The study revealed that the learners in the foundation phase are supposed to learn in their mother tongue before they are introduced to English. As a result, the school library for foundation phase learners should be well equipped with more books in the mother tongue. The paper recommended that the Department of Education should provide more books that are interesting to foundation phase learners in the mother tongue so as to build their confidence. This will also enable them to develop the love for reading as well as various reading skills.

### INTRODUCTION

Motivating learners to learn in their mother tongue assists them to acquire self-reliance, self-assurance and their exceptional personality in a multi-cultural society (Senadeera 2010). As learners are compelled to attain an unfamiliar language in an unfamiliar traditional arrangement, learners are possibly going to be subjected to nervousness. Consequently, they might have a tendency to respond extremely in a different way to such passionate knowledge (Menyuk and Brisk 2005). Hallberg (2010) is of the opinion that, a language stumbling block is a type of psychological barrier whereby a language is a vehicle through which communication can take place. Moreover, Owen-Smith (2010) agrees, emphasising that learners who are unable to utilize the language which they are mainly used to (typically, the mother tongue) are doubtful not going to achieve satisfactorily in their reading ability.

### The Foundation Phase Learner

According to Piaget (in Fourie and Kruger 1995: 234-238), a grade 3 learner belongs to the stage of concrete operations. This is a stage between 7 and 11 years old. Operation is a type of action in which direct operations are carried out by manipulating objects, or are executed internally, as when symbols representing things and relations are central to concrete operations. According to the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987: 822), a learner is a person who is in the process of learning a specific subject, or learns how to do something.

### Language Used by Foundation Phase Learners

The language used in teaching learners in the foundation phase is of paramount importance because at this stage, the learners are acquainted with their mother tongue only. According to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (2003), foundation phase is the phase during which the teacher should be able to detect challenges encountered by learners when learning to read and write. It is, therefore, critical that learners should first master reading and writing skills in the home language. Thereafter, the first language, which is English, can be progressively introduced. Parents are responsi-

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\*Address for correspondence:

Mrs N. P. Mahwasane  
Library Department,  
University of Venda,  
Private Bag X5050,  
Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa  
E-mail: Nkhangweni.mahwasane@univen.ac.za

ble for deciding the language of learning and teaching for their children (RNCS 2003).

Language plays a critical role in human life because it is by means of language that we are able to have better thoughts about the universe. Language has an effect on the personality and understanding of mankind (RNCS 2002). Over and above, language assists in acquiring learners' reading and writing skills, which forms the basis for other essential reading abilities. It is also the vehicle through which most skills are learnt in all other areas (RNCS).

*"The Home Language Assessment Standards assume that learners come to school able to understand and speak the language. They support the development of this competence, especially with regard to various types of literacy (reading, writing, visual and critical literacies). They provide a strong curriculum to support the language of learning and teaching"* (RNCS 2002: 4).

*"The first Additional Language assumes that learners do not necessarily have any knowledge of the language when they arrive at school"* (RNCS 2002: 4).

*"It is recommended that the learner's home language should be used for learning and teaching wherever possible. This is particularly important in the foundation phase where children learn to read and write. Where learners have to make a transition from their home language to an additional language as the language of learning and teaching, this should be carefully planned"* (RNCS 2002: 4).

### School Library

The main purpose of the school library is to see to it that all members of the school community have equal access to books, reading information and information technology. According to the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and Culture (2003), a school library is utilized as an encompassing name that includes all the activities that are related to information provision. The Australian School Library Associations (ASLA) (2001: 6) describes the school library as functioning or based within five domains namely, "learners and learning; teachers and teaching; resourcing the curriculum; managing the physical environment; and the provision of access to information. Its work in each domain is

aimed at achieving the learning outcomes of the curriculum."

In this study, school library is used to refer to a library which is attached to school, which provides resources in different formats in order to supplement textbook information and to make them equally accessible to all learners. The school library enables learners to have enough reference work to support their school curriculum.

### The Provision of School Library Services to Foundation Phase Learners

According to Mahwasane (2016), the foundation phase, which is also referred to as the elementary school, is critical in the development of early childhood education by providing learners with the relevant resources at their reading level. The library collection of books as well as other materials and the provision of fascinating and encouraging environment and the schools' approach to the library utilization are significant influences motivating pupils' proficiency to read for their school work as well as for relaxation. Library collection participates in expounding reading in learners. The reading materials in the library collection should be selected with care so as to sustain the syllabus and to enhance pupils' concentrations. They should be appropriate to the learners' level and abilities. According to LSE (2004), Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) suggests that a school library should consist of a minimum library material of ten books per pupil on roll. On the other hand, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) recommend a minimum of thirteen books per learner at sixteen years and above. For a small school, a minimum of 2 500 books will be sufficient to provide a broad range of differentiated stock to enable learners' academic performance (Library Services for Education 2004).

Language problems are frequently brought about by compelling learners to speak and study in a language which they do not frequently utilise at home and in which they are not proficient to learn effectively (South African Department of Education 2005).

South Africa encounters countless problems in encouraging reading. It is exceptional to find schools with functional libraries. Countless families have no books. Books in African languages are insufficient; as a result learners do not have the chance to practice reading in their mother

tongue. A number of classrooms have no books, and at the same time those classes which do have collections of readers, regularly have them at the inappropriate level. The learners' performance in all learning areas is influenced by the learners' language proficiency at all grades. Poor language proficiency regulates theoretical development of learners. If *reading* proficiency is poor, then learners' *writing* proficiency will be poor, and their *comprehension* (understanding) levels will equally be poor (South Africa 2008).

In as far as library provision to learners is concerned, library conditions in South African schools are very poor, especially in public schools in previously disadvantaged schools. There is inadequate library resources which are also not relevant to the school curriculum in use (Schreier 2000). UNESCO School Library Manifesto (2006) stresses that ideally, the school library is expected to supply each learner about ten (10) books. According to Equal Education (EE 2011), each learner should be provided with at least three (3) books so as to avoid the excessive lack of books in public schools.

As a result, Equal Education (EE) launched a campaign for school libraries in 2009. The slogan of this campaign is 1 school, 1 library, 1 librarian, and is aimed at addressing the lack of libraries in South African public schools. The Equal Education campaign for school libraries' demands are in line with the outcomes of local and international research, which indicate a clear link between the provision of school libraries and improved learners' performance (Equal Education 2011).

According to EE (2011), a national policy that stipulates that each school be provided with a library as well as library stocks was published on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 2010. Moreover, the minimum norms and standards for all schools are still to be finalised, while the plan to ensure that all South African schools, whether in rural or urban areas, should have a library with a librarian has to be implemented. Contrary to popular perceptions, according to EE, education is not equal in South Africa. Only eight percent of schools have functional libraries, which play a critical role in building literacy by developing a culture of reading and instilling the love for reading.

### Objectives

The ultimate objective of this paper is to determine the importance of the relevance of the language of the library collection for the foundation phase learners in Vhembe District, as well as to examine gaps in the relevance of the library collection for the learners in the foundation phase.

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## METHODOLOGY

### Study Design

A qualitative research approach was adopted. The phenomenological interview style seeks to find essential meaning or essence of a particular phenomenon for a group or an individual (Creswell 2008). However, interviews with individual teacher-librarians was used to solicit information.

### Population of the Study

Polit and Hungler (1999: 37) denote the population as a collective or entirety of all the substances, subjects or associates that coincide to a set of stipulations. The population of this study comprised of all teacher-librarians who provide library services to foundation phase learners in Vhembe District.

### Sampling and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was employed to select four (4) schools to participate in the study. The schools were selected on the basis of having a school library. Only schools that had school libraries were selected. Four teacher-librarians, one from each of the four schools participated.

### Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected by means of interviews from some of the teacher-librarians through a focus group. Focus group interviewing is usually used in qualitative research studies (De Vos 1998: 48), and is specifically successful for acquiring information about why people think or feel the way they do. It is also expected that through focus group interview, the participants would provide sufficient information which is appropriate to the study. The focus group interviews were guided by the discussions in which the researcher had a list of questions so as to guarantee inclusion of significant issues associated with the topic. A set of interview schedule was used in this study, for teacher-librarians.

Data were collected from four teacher-librarians from the selected schools with libraries since they provide teachers and learners with library services. The researcher also used classroom observation to collect information. Cohen et al. (2000: 267) elucidate "... the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable."

### Data Analysis

Data analysis started immediately after collection from each teacher-librarian. The actual words from the teacher-librarians who participated in the study were transcribed, analysed and interpreted. The researcher went on contracting and categorizing the ideas up to the point where fullness was accomplished in as far as the themes and categories are concerned. At the end, the researcher was able to come out with three (3) comprehensive core themes.

### Ethical Considerations

The researcher consulted the school principals of the selected schools and asked permission from them to gather data from the schools under their supervision. The principals were contacted beforehand that the researcher would conduct interviews with their teachers, which would take a few minutes and that they would be needed to respond to the interviews. Both the principals and the teacher-librarians were informed that the findings of this study would be made available to them on request.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed at discovering teacher-librarians' experiences in managing library collection for foundation phase learners in Thohoyandou area. Their experiences and opinions are delineated in the sections below.

### Theme 1: Teacher-Librarians' Different Sentiments, Viewpoints and Awareness of the State and Conditions of the Language of Library Resources

*Category 1.1:* "Most of the books are in English, some few books are written in Tshivenda, and I think it contradicts the policy because in

the foundation phase we are encouraged to teach in home language, then latter on they will start to learn English as First Additional Language."

Theme 1 consists of different sentiments and viewpoints from teacher-librarians regarding the language of collection in their school libraries. Teacher-librarian A from school 1 indicated that:

*"Most of the books are written in English, some are written in Tshivenda, and I think it contradict the policy because in the foundation phase we are encouraged to teach in home language, then latter on they will start to learn English as first additional language. But in my library most of the books collected are written in English. I supposed we are lacking home languages (Tshivenda) book writers."*

One of the participating teachers in this study revealed that the library collections in their school libraries are mainly in English. It is made up of sources in English. In the context of this study, children who were instructed successfully to use their mother tongue achieve better results in school. As a result, they turn out to be literate in that language. On the other hand, children who were not taught to make use of their mother tongue jeopardised their individual and conceptual basis for learning (Ocbian et al. 2015). This implies that children should be taught in their mother tongue. As a result, books in mother tongue should be made available in the school library. Therefore, the library collection in primary schools should be made up of books in the mother tongue.

*Category 1.2:* "The library resources and facilities in our school library is not relevant to the foundation phase learners because learners need to learn through mother tongue."

Employing the dialect or the child's initial language makes it easier for him to learn how to read, write as well as to learn concepts in academic subjects, including the learning of the second or other languages. This enables them to acquire early reading skills faster than when using a foreign language (Ocbian et al. 2015). Therefore, the reading materials should be made available in the mother tongue so as to assist learners to develop the ability to read fluently in both languages.

*Category 1.3:* "The reading material in mother tongue is no longer enough because the main collection is in English."

It is true that inspiring learners to study through their mother tongue helps them to ac-

quire self-assurance, self-reverence and their exceptional distinctiveness within a multi-cultural society (Senadeera 2010). Therefore, the learners should be provided with books written in the mother tongue for reading and teaching. The following quote from the participating teacher-librarian serves as testimony of what most of the respondents showed as a prerequisite for developing reading skills in learners.

### **Theme 2: The Role of Teacher-Librarians in Managing the Use of School Libraries**

*Category 2.1:* “I always go to the library to pick the books that are simple for my learners.”

There is a link between theme 1 and theme 2 because when teachers are aware of their library collection which is made up of mainly English books, they will be able to assist learners by selecting and providing them with books that they will be able to read.

This category reveals lots of things that teacher-librarians do to encourage learners to be interested in reading. The participating teacher-librarians seemed to have various ideas on how to encourage learners to read. They explain how they collaborate with other staff members to encourage learners to use the library to read:

*“In our school I am a school librarian. I collaborate with teachers by facilitating the use of the school library.”*

Another participant commented that: *“By facilitating collaboration in our school. We teacher-librarians, subject teachers, admin clerk and the support staff help in encouraging learners to use the library and in searching the books and on how to use information they found in the book.”*

*Category 2.2:* “I allocate them in groups, so one day I take one group, mostly ten learners a day per group so that I will be able to manage them in the library.”

The teacher-librarians who participated in the study indicated the different roles that they play in their various schools.

The participant commented that: *“The role that I regard myself as somebody who can assist in reading in the library. I play a role of being a librarian even though I am an educator in a government school we do not have full time employed librarians. So educators who are responsible for learners in the library are also responsible for making sure that they*

*change their roles into being librarians and from there they will go back to the class and become an educator.”*

Another participant said: *“The curriculum encourages learners to do seventy-five percent of the work by themselves. I encourage them to read on their own. I took this offer because I found that there are some difficulties regarding reading by our learners in our school.”*

According to Senadeera (2010), encouraging learners to learn through their mother tongue helps them to develop confidence, self-esteem and their unique identity within a multicultural society. When children are required to acquire an unknown language in an unknown cultural pattern, they are likely to experience anxiety; thus, they may tend to react very differently to such intense experiences (Menyuk and Brisk 2005).

*Category 2.3:* “I give them different topics a day and give them the books that are related to their topics and do extensive reading with them.”

*“I assist learners to read our library books by employing the extensive reading activity because I know where they have problems.”*

This response seems to indicate that the teacher-librarian understands what the extensive reading activity is and the advantages of using it. The respondent expressed that an extensive reading activity assists the teachers to put emphasis on where learners encounter difficulties. On the other hand, reading recovery is a research based, intensive one on one intervention programme used effectively around the world to support and teach struggling six-year old children, by helping them to catch-up with their classmates in reading and writing (Schroeder 2010).

### **Theme 3: The Challenges of Using English Books in the Foundation Phase**

*Category 3.1:* “Our library collection is mainly in English even though the policy indicates that learners in the foundation phase should be taught in mother tongue, but we do not have enough books in mother tongue.”

In this category, the participants indicated the challenges that they are facing as a result of the language of the library collections in their school libraries. One participant made the following statement:

*“According to the policy, mother tongue and not English should be used to teach learners in the foundation phase.”*

The above comment advocates that learners should be taught in the mother tongue. As a result, books in the mother tongue must be purchased and be made available to all learners. The language in Education Policy Department of Education 2002/5 makes provision for learners' home languages to be used for teaching and learning (DOE 2002). Motshekga (2010) made the following declaration:

*"The language chosen by the learner as a language of learning and teaching shall be taught as a subject or as a first additional language from grade 1 and not from grade 2. The teaching of English would therefore occur alongside mother tongue instruction for those learners who choose English as LOLT. English will subsequently not replace the home language in the early grade."*

As a result, it is obvious that the mother tongue should be implemented as a medium of instruction and learning from grade 1 to 3, when instructing English as a subject. It is the researcher's understanding that South Africa is a multilingual country whose language policy encourages the advancement and utilisation of language within society by formally acknowledging all languages: English, Afrikaans, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa and IsiZulu (Khosa 2012). This enables parents, including those that are not educated, to be able to escort their kids in the course of tasks that are requested to be accomplished as homework so that they (parents) can also retrieve material on the justification of their kids' advancement at school. To support this view, another participant made the following remark:

*"Our school library collection is mainly in English even though the policy indicates that learners in the foundation phase should be taught in the mother tongue, but we do not have enough books in mother tongue in the library."*

From the above response, it is evident that learners in the foundation phase should be taught in the mother tongue. But the challenge that the learners are facing is lack of adequate books in the mother tongue in the school library. This idea is linked to fact that the standpoint is further intensified by the nonexistence of library materials designed to make possible multilingual programmes in the foundation phase. On the other hand, people may indicate their unwillingness with respect to encouraging mother tongue

education. But if the government involves operational involvement, the progression may be slow, but expectantly it will finally bear suitable consequences. The mother tongue bears an exceptionally important responsibility to play concerning influencing our opinions and feelings. It offers the foundation for the learners' capability to learn (Khosa 2012).

*Category 3.2:* "Most of the books in our school library are in English, there are few books in mother tongue, and most of the books are not at the level of our learners."

Moreover, the scarcity of teacher training in the mother tongue and first additional languages, as well as the insufficient provision of resources in foundation phase classes also contribute to the problematic implementation of home language instruction (Pandor 2005: 15; Manyike 2007: 22). This impression can be associated with what the following participant emphasised in the following statement:

*"Books in our library are in English. There are no longer library materials in mother tongue and it becomes a challenge when one want to use the library collection."*

Another participant said: *"There are very few Tshivenda library books in our library. The main collection is in English it becomes difficult when the learners want to read on their own."*

From the above responses, it appears that very few books in mother tongue (Tshivenda) are available in library collections. As a result, they are left with no option but to use the English materials that are at least readily available in school libraries. Consequently, it is exceptional to find schools with satisfactory utilised conventional libraries. In numerous families there are no books. Specifically, books in African languages are scarce. As a result, learners do not have the chance to read in their mother tongue. In a number of classrooms, there are no books for learners to read, and still those classes which do have collections of readers, regularly have them in incorrect level (DOE 2008).

*Category 3.3:* "It is a challenge because the learners do not have any background of English language."

Language mismatches makes the problem worse. The home and school languages do not match in many cases. The language of the resources at school such as books and posters generally do not match the home language of

the learner. What makes matters worse is that African languages are structured differently from English and Afrikaans (South African Department of Education 2008).

This is supported by the participant who said: *"It is difficult to have enough materials especially because in Grade 3 we are supposed to teach in mother tongue. Books for mother tongue are very few though we have books like 'Ri 'shela mulenzhe' wherein you might find that it only suits [suffice] few learners."*

From the response above, most teacher-librarians indicated that their library collections were mainly English. Only one teacher-librarian made mention of the Tshivenda book called *Kha ri shele mulenzhe*. During the classroom observation, none of the subject teachers and teacher-librarians used the book *Kha ri shele mulenzhe* for reading. During classroom observation, with the exception of two subject teachers who taught learners reading using the work study book, teachers made use of different reading materials that they had improvised. These include photocopies of reading content from reading books, lists of sounds and words pasted on the wall and chalk boards. During the reading lessons, all teachers spent nearly half the lesson asking learners about pictures in the story.

### CONCLUSION

It is true that an instructional material of any configuration is an essential instrument in the development of learning. An instructional material does not only improve comprehension, reasoning and problem solving skills of pupils, but also permits them to attain the learning intentions successfully and fascinatingly. Therefore, teachers should use books in the mother tongue in order to teach learners to read. The general viewpoint concerning the conditions of the library resource languages is that teacher-librarians are of the opinion that the library collection is mainly made up of English books and other resources. As a result, libraries in the foundation phase are not fulfilling their roles. The other challenge is maintaining the library full of books that the learners are unable to use.

### LIMITATIONS

The study involved five schools in Vhembe District and four teacher-librarians were used

for the purpose of this study. It is also possible that different results might have been yielded.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Department of Education should provide more books in the mother tongue that are interesting to read to foundation phase learners. Learners in the foundation phase should be provided with books for reading in their mother tongue so as to build learners' confidence. This will enable learners to develop the love for reading as well as the various reading skills. It is also recommended that teacher-librarians who are responsible for providing library services to foundation phase learners should form part of those staff members who select the library collections where most of the books selected are in the mother tongue. The researcher also recommend that when selecting library resources for foundation phase learners, there is a need for cooperation between teacher-librarians and other teachers so as to enable the choice of books that are at the right level of learners, and that are written in the correct language which is stipulated by the policy.

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