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## What Happens to Literacy in (Print) Poor Environments?

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# **THE STANDARDISATION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES**

## **LANGUAGE POLITICAL REALITIES**

CENTREPOL AND IFAS

PROCEEDINGS OF A CENTREPOL WORKSHOP HELD  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA ON MARCH 29,  
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SOUTHERN AFRICA

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chapter four

# What happens to literacy in (print) poor environments?

Reading in African languages  
and school language policies

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## INTRODUCTION

South Africa being a multilingual country with 11 official languages, it is natural that language issues, policy and planning are central concerns within the educational context. The debates concerning languages and the medium of instruction in schools are perennial items on conference, workshop, seminar and research agendas throughout South Africa and elsewhere on the continent. The results of the large scale nationwide systemic evaluation studies undertaken by the Department of Education since 2001, have stirred these debates with renewed vigour. Yet, what seems to be missing in many of these debates is an awareness of and active engagement with factors that promote literacy development that go beyond generalised associations between language and schooling.

In 2001, the Department of Education undertook its first large systemic evaluation of reading and writing in Grade 3 across all nine provinces. The results showed a mean of 38% in the home language in Grade 3 (Department of Education, 2003). The Grade 6 systemic evaluation in 2005 across the nine provinces showed a mean of 38% in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT): 63% of learners were found to be performing in the 'Not Achieved' band and only 28% of learners performed in the 'Achieved/Outstanding' bands (Department of Education, 2005). The poor performance of the learners on these literacy measures has drawn attention to the urgency of laying a good foundation for literacy and numeracy development in the primary school years. One of the ways of doing so is to provide initial instruction in the home language for as long as possible before changing over to English as the language of learning and teaching. Indeed, there is overwhelming evidence worldwide that doing one's schooling in one's home language is desirable and beneficial. Cummins, for instance, points out that there have been close to 150 empirical studies in the past 30 years that "*show beneficial effects ... on students' linguistic, cognitive or academic growth*" when they have the opportunity to acquire initial literacy in their home language (2000:37). This is the basis on which additive bilingual programmes are built, where the learners' home language is "*maintained and supported*" even though the LoLT may be in an additional language (Richards & Schmidt 2002:11). In subtractive bilingual programmes, the home language of the learner is replaced by the LoLT, and no attention is given to developing language or literacy in the home language.

In 1994 the newly elected democracy in South Africa laid the basis for a new outcomes-based approach to education, which forms the foundation of the transformed curriculum.

The new language policy explicitly promotes an additive approach to bilingualism. Thus, according to the revised curriculum, competence in the home language should be developed in order to provide “*a strong curriculum to support the language of learning and teaching*” (Department of Education, 2002:4). In this regard South Africa has one of the most progressive school language policies on the African continent in that explicit official attention is given to the development of home language literacy *in principle*. However, as is often the case, how well this policy translates into action in the classroom is debatable.

Although initial schooling in the home language is officially encouraged, school governing bodies have a choice and can opt for a ‘straight for English’ policy. In the previously disadvantaged African township and rural schools, literacy is often first developed in the home language in Grades 1-3, with English introduced in Grade 1 or 2 and becoming the LoLT in Grade 4 in most schools. After switching over to English, African children are expected to continue studying their home language as a school subject until Grade 12. Because English is regarded as the language of status, opportunity and education, the misperception often persists amongst parents that primary schools that offer ‘straight for English’ are schools that will provide a good education. The ‘straight for English’ option is also fed by the assumption that the sooner children start learning an additional language, the better their chances of becoming fluent in it.

Although African languages are not yet used as LoLTs after Grade 3 or 4, the call to adopt the use of home languages in primary schools can be seen in the drive to get schools to change their language policy accordingly and in the drive to provide textbooks in the African languages for the various learning areas up to at least Grade 6 level. These are welcome moves, and ones that are also long overdue. However, language policy is only as good as the education system that undergirds it.

That initial literacy in the home language is beneficial is not disputed here. Instead, this article focuses on the factors that underpin successful literacy development. Some data from research undertaken in three township primary schools are presented, where all three schools have a different language policy. These findings are used as a basis to identify school and classroom factors that need to be in place in order to provide learners with as propitious a learning environment as possible for literacy development. On the basis of these findings, it is argued that changes in language policy alone can create false expectations for such changes are unlikely to bring about fundamental improvements in literacy development *unless* other factors are also addressed simultaneously – and fervently.

## RESEARCH FOCUS

The research reported in this article examines the reading ability of Grade 6 and 7 learners in three different primary schools in a typical urban township environment. Two of the schools are typical state primary schools that serve disadvantaged communities, while the third is a private school in the same township that attracts children from less disadvantaged homes. The three schools have different language policies (these are explained in the Methodology section below). Comparisons are drawn between the learners' reading ability in the L1, (Northern Sotho), and English, the LoLT, in these three different learning environments. There are three questions that inform the study:

- 1) What are the reading profiles in Northern Sotho and English of Grade 6 and 7 learners from three different urban township schools with different language policies?
- 2) What is the relationship between reading in Northern Sotho and English in these schools?
- 3) How does reading performance in Northern Sotho and English in Grade 7 relate to academic performance?

These findings form the basis for considering what the implications are for language policy and literacy development in the African languages in primary schools.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Broader context*

The three primary schools from which the data are obtained are all situated in Atteridgeville, a predominantly Northern Sotho/Tswana speaking township to the west of Pretoria, in Gauteng province. There is one private and 26 state primary schools in the township. Of the state primary schools, 10 are predominantly Northern Sotho speaking, 9 Tswana, 3 Zulu, 2 Tsonga, 1 Venda and 1 South Sotho. Some of the Northern Sotho and Tswana schools offer also instruction in another African language, for instance a Northern Sotho school might also have a Zulu class at each grade level. In the great majority of these primary schools, initial schooling takes place in an African language, from Grade 1 to Grade 3. The switch to English as LoLT is made in Grade 4. Thereafter the specific African languages continue to be taught as a first language subject.



Two of these primary schools (Schools B and P below) are involved in a reading intervention programme, the aim of which is to make reading an integral part of daily school activities. The private primary school serves as a comparison school.

*School B (state school)*

School B has over 600 learners and a staff of 16 teachers. The school serves a socio-economically disadvantaged community. School fees were R120 (about \$20) per annum but at the end of 2006 the school was declared a Quintile 1 non-fee paying school. The Department of Education now provides the school with a fixed budget which is managed by the DoE. The school has a feeding scheme, where 400 children are fed once a day. For many of these children, this is the only meal they get a day.

There are two classes at each grade level. In the Foundation Phase (Grades 1-3), there are about 35 children per class. This increases to around 50 per class in Grade 7. With regard to language policy, the school has long opted for initial literacy in the home language. Northern Sotho is the language of learning and teaching from Grade R - Grade 3, with English introduced as an additional language in Grade 2. English becomes the LoLT in Grade 4 while Northern Sotho becomes a subject of instruction from Grades 4 - 7. Although many children come from homes in which a variety of African languages are spoken, about 70% of the learners at this school come from primarily Northern Sotho speaking homes. About half the teachers at the school have Northern Sotho as their home language. In theory, this school provides additive bilingualism, the most favourable of the various bilingual models, with initial literacy in the L1 for three years and with continued L1 support after the AL becomes the LoLT in the fourth year.

*School P (state school)*

Similar to School B, School P also has about 600 learners and a staff of 16 teachers. It also serves a low socio-economic community, but it is still a fee paying school (Quintile 3) that manages its own budget. The school fees are R100 per annum, but only about 50% of the parent body actually pay these fees. The school also has a school feeding scheme, and most of the learners at this school also come from primarily Northern Sotho speaking homes. Here too, about half of the teachers speak Northern Sotho as a home language. Class sizes at the school vary between about 45 – 55 learners.

With regard to language policy, unlike School B where initial literacy and numeracy is taught in Northern Sotho to the end of Grade 3, School P has a 'straight for English' policy from Grade 1<sup>2</sup>. Northern Sotho is taught as a subject from Grades 2 to 7. This school provides a weakened form of additive bilingualism for although there is no initial literacy in the home language, the L1 is at least taught as a subject from Grades 2-7.

*School M (private school)*

School M is a small private primary school that was opened in the township in 1991. Even though it serves the same community as the other primary schools in the township, many of children at this school come from higher socioeconomic homes, with many parents being white collar professionals who live in the township. However, there are also several children from poor homes who attend the school on scholarships.

The classrooms at this school are well resourced and the teachers well qualified, experienced and dedicated. Classes are small (about 25 learners per class). Reading and storybooks are an integral part of each classroom in the lower grades, and teachers have high reading expectations of learners. Teachers from Schools B and P attend the private school for classroom observations and occasional workshops, and closer ties are being forged between these schools.

With regard to language policy, the school has a 'straight for English' policy. Unlike Schools B and P, the learners at this school are not linguistically homogeneous but speak different African languages at home. No African languages are taught as subjects. Unlike many other private schools or ex-Model C schools, the learners at this school do not have peers for whom English is an L1. Many of the teachers are mother tongue speakers of English from different racial backgrounds (White, Indian and Coloured). There are also African teachers. All have high levels of English proficiency. The school provides monolingualism ('straight for English'), an approach which is criticised for not providing support for the home languages of the learners.

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<sup>2</sup> The school was originally a senior primary school (Grades 4-7 only) but a few years ago, following DoE directives, a Foundation Phase was incorporated into the school programme. The principal said that, due to the exodus of township learners into neighbouring Indian and ex-Model C primary schools, the only way they could attract parents to sending their children to the school was to go 'straight for English' in the Foundation Phase.

*Reading context prior to intervention*

For ease of reference, Schools B and P will be referred to collectively as the ‘township’ schools. Before the reading intervention programme was implemented at these schools, very little reading was happening in these two schools. Initial visits to the schools before project implementation revealed that at both schools none of the classrooms were print-rich environments, and very few books were visible. There were no bookshelves or storybooks in any of the classrooms. Neither of the schools had a school library, and although older learners were issued with textbooks, additional access to storybooks and other books and material of an educational or recreational nature was non-existent. Several teachers stated that reading was “a problem” and that many learners “couldn’t read” but the nature of their reading problems was not specified and no reading assessment was undertaken.

Literacy in the Foundation Phase was primarily taught from the chalkboard, homework was uncommon, and reading homework virtually nonexistent. There were no storybooks or readers available for learners to practise their newly acquired skills, and the teachers did very little storybook reading with them. In School B copies of the Northern Sotho Grade 1 reader were locked up in a cupboard because the teachers felt that “the children find it difficult to read”. Reading was given very little attention in the Intersen Phase (i.e. Grades 4-7) and teachers felt pressurised by the need to teach the different content subjects. Large classes were usual. There was a general feeling at these township schools that learners at all grade levels struggled with reading but, overwhelmed by their workloads, the teachers did not know how to really address this problem.

*The intervention project*

The intervention project has been in progress at School B since 2005, and at School P since 2006. It is hoped that by developing a culture of reading these schools will be able to improve the overall language and academic development of the learners. To this end a multi-level approach has been adopted that emphasises the building up of print based resources as well as capacity and involves the participation of the learners, teachers and parents.

The intervention project assists the schools in setting up a functional school library where learners can have easy access to age appropriate books in both Northern Sotho and English. Besides the library, the schools’ resources are also enhanced by way of increasing print based materials in the classrooms. Teachers at all grade levels are made aware of the need to create print rich classroom environments.

Because literacy resources have no value if not used properly, teachers (and parents) need to be shown what to do with books. The intervention thus also focuses on developing the instructional capacity of the teachers and the supportive capacity of the parents. Workshops are held fortnightly with the teachers after school to make them aware of the importance of reading in the learning context, to increase their understanding of the reading process, familiarise them with reading strategies, draw attention to the OBE (Outcome Based Education) assessment standards for reading and different ways of assessing reading at the various grade levels, and integrating the library into their classroom practices. The importance of developing fluent reading skills in both Northern Sotho and English are continually emphasised. Arrangements are also made for teachers to take turns, by prior appointment, to spend a morning observing good reading practice in a grade equivalent classroom in a highly effective school where reading is a priority (e.g. School M below).

A family literacy component is also included in the project to involve parents more actively in the literacy development of their children. To this end a series of Family Literacy workshops are held for parents. The aim of these workshops is to draw parents' attention to the importance of reading, to encourage them to read to their children and/or to listen to their children reading, to emphasise the importance of literacy in Northern Sotho, to take an interest in children's school activities, make time and space available in the home for homework, encourage membership of the local community library, monitor what and how much TV children watch, and so on. The head librarian at the local community library is also invited to address the parents and closer links are forged between the community libraries and the schools.

To monitor project progress at both schools each year the early literacy development of the Grade 1 learners is assessed in Northern Sotho (a mixture of English and Northern Sotho at School P), and all the Grade 6 and 7 learners at both schools are tested for language and reading ability in Northern Sotho and English. Assessments take place at the beginning of each school year (February/March) and again towards the end of the year (October/November).

The language and reading abilities of the Grade 6 and 7 learners at School M are also tested once a year towards the end of the year, to provide a comparative perspective on the literacy development of learners in the township context. Since no African languages are taught as a subject at the private school, the Northern Sotho tests were not administered to the Grade 6 and 7s at this school; they only completed the English language and reading tests.

## LANGUAGE AND READING ASSESSMENT

In order to examine more closely how reading develops in different primary school contexts within the same township, the literacy performance of the 2006 cohorts of Grade 6 and 7 learners at the three schools will be examined here. Since language is the medium through/in which reading is conducted, the learners were also all given a language test in English and Northern Sotho to enable exploration of the language-reading relationship.

*Language proficiency:* In this study language proficiency is operationalised as performance on a dictation test in each language. According to Oller (1979:58), dictation correlates “*at surprisingly high levels with a vast array of other language tests*”. This correlation points to dictation tasks tapping into similar knowledge sources that standardised language tests tap into but it does so via the auditory rather than the written medium. Because most language tests are written tests they have to be read and thus they also tap into reading comprehension, resulting in covariance between language proficiency and reading comprehension. Because a dictation test taps into language knowledge via auditory comprehension, it avoids this covariance trap.

A dictation test can be regarded as an integrative, holistic language test – provided it is administered appropriately. A passage that is dictated word-for-word becomes a short term memory test and hence is not much use as a measure of language knowledge. Instead, the dictation passage is first read at normal conversational pace while the testees simply listen. The second time it is read at conversational pace, but chunked into natural sections of about 5-6 words which are not repeated. This kind of task meets the two naturalness criteria for natural language processing tasks, viz. it requires the processing of temporally constrained sequences of linguistic material and, in order to divide the stream of speech into identifiable chunks for writing down, it requires, to a large degree, an understanding of the meaning of what was heard (Oller 1979: p. 39).

The dictation passages were taken from current Grade 6 and 7 textbooks. After being read to the learners at normal conversational pace the first time while they simply listened, the learners wrote down what they heard when the passage was again read at conversational pace the second time but chunked into natural sections of about 5-6 words. A set of criteria was drawn up jointly by the English and Northern Sotho team members for the marking of the dictation passages. Spelling and punctuation were also taken into account. For the Northern Sotho dictation, words that were written conjunctively instead of disjunctively were accepted as correct, provided they were spelled correctly<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> For historical reasons, N Sotho spelling is highly disjunctive, whereas spelling in the Nguni languages is conjunctive

The dictation test was not intended as a comprehensive index of language proficiency. It was simply used as a reflection of a learner's understanding of the language via the auditory mode but it also includes aspects of literate language since spelling and punctuation were also taken into account.

*Reading comprehension:* Northern Sotho and English reading proficiency was operationally defined as proficiency obtained in a reading comprehension test where a combination of test items was used for both narrative and expository texts. The texts were taken from existing Grade 6 and 7 textbooks. The test items that were designed included multiple choice questions of an inferential nature, vocabulary questions, cloze items<sup>4</sup>, identifying referents of anaphoric items, and questions involving graphic information, e.g. maps, graphs.

The ability to answer inferential comprehension questions rather than literal questions is a reliable indicator of how well a reader understands a text (e.g. Oakhill & Cain 1998). There were no literal, interpretive or creative comprehension questions.

In the cloze task, approximately every 9th word was deleted, if it was appropriate and could be inferred from the text. Although the same passages were used in English and Northern Sotho for the cloze activities and the same number of deletions was designed, the same *linguistic items* were not deleted. Deletions were guided by the textual clues provided by the morphosyntactic and semantic features of each language text.

The ability to resolve anaphoric references in a text is an integral part of reading skill (e.g. Webber 1980). Specific anaphoric items were identified and the learners were required to underline the referents to which they referred. This section of the text was carefully explained to the learners beforehand in the test language, with an example on the chalkboard.

*Reading rate:* During the reading test an informal measure of the learners' reading rate was taken. After the test preliminaries, the learners were instructed to start reading. After a minute, they were stopped and asked to circle the word they had been reading. Readers then continued the passage and answered the questions that followed. The number of words read gave a *rough* indication of reading rate. Because it is difficult to accurately assess reading rate in large groups, the scores are treated with caution.

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<sup>4</sup> In cloze tests every nth word is left blank in a text and the reader has to fill an appropriate item in the blank. The cloze procedure indicates the extent to which readers are able to follow the sense of a text. In particular, it assesses a reader's use of text context as a strategy for understanding what is read

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES**

The English tests were administered first, towards the end of the academic year in mid-October. To reduce memory effects, the Northern Sotho tests were written about 3 weeks after the English tests. Both sets of tests were written during two periods allocated during school hours and administered by the project researchers. No specific time limits were set for completion of the tests. The data were captured and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, a software programme).

**RESULTS**

The effects that the intervention programme is having on the schools is not the focus of this paper. (For further details of how (and if) the project is impacting on the schools, classrooms, teachers and learners, see Pretorius & Mampuru 2007; Currin & Pretorius (forthcoming)). It suffices here to point out that at the start of the intervention in 2005, the mean English reading score of the Grade 7 learners was 29.5% at School B and 39% at School P, indicating extremely low reading levels<sup>5</sup>.

Before proceeding to the research question, the language distribution of the Grade 7 learners in the three schools is given in Table 1.

**TABLE 1.**  
**LANGUAGE DISTRIBUTION (PERCENTAGE) OF GRADE 7 LEARNERS ACROSS**  
**THE SCHOOLS**

	School B	School P	Private school
N Sotho	82 %	52 %	43 %
Tswana	4	23	10
S Sotho	5	2	27
Zulu	2	9	13
Ndebele	4	-	7
Venda	1	9	7
Tsonga	1	5	-

<sup>5</sup> In standardised reading tests in the USA learners who score below 90% for decoding accuracy (i.e. oral fluency on word recognition tests) and 60% or below for reading comprehension are regarded as reading at frustration level, below their grade level and in need of reading remediation

The first research question to be addressed is:

- 1) What are the reading profiles in Northern Sotho and English of Grade 6 and 7 learners from three urban township schools with (three) different language policies?

Descriptive statistics are given in Tables 2 and 3 below that reflect the results of the 2006 cohort of Grade 6 and 7 learners respectively with regard to mean performance in the dictation and reading comprehension tests in Northern Sotho and English.

**TABLE 2:**  
**GRADE 6 COMPARISON OF MEAN PERCENTAGES ACROSS THE SCHOOLS NOVEMBER 2006**

	Township School B	Township School P	Private School M
Number of learners tested	n=35	n=49	n=30
Mean age (age range in all schools 11-14)	12.6	12.1	12.1
Mean Northern Sotho dictation %	74.3	70.3	-
Standard Deviation	30.1	34.1	-
Minimum	0	0	-
Maximum	99	94	-
Mean Northern Sotho reading comprehension %	29.4	38.2	-
Standard Deviation	21.9	20.3	-
Minimum	6	4	-
Maximum	90	86	-
Mean English dictation %	55.3	54.8	85.4
Standard Deviation	25.4	26.3	12.8
Minimum	12.1	1	47.3
Maximum	93.2	95	100
Mean English reading comprehension %	45	48.07	88
Standard Deviation	20.3	25.3	8.5
Minimum	17	11	63.6
Maximum	93	95	100
Reading rate (words per minute)			
Northern Sotho	99	106	-
English	103	124	152



To recapitulate, at the start of the intervention in 2005, the mean English reading score of the Grade 7 learners was 29.5% at School B and 39% at School P, indicating extremely low reading levels. The results reflected in Table 3 show some improvements.

**TABLE 3:  
GRADE 7 COMPARISON OF MEAN PERCENTAGES ACROSS THE SCHOOLS NOVEMBER 2006**

	Township School B	Township School P	Private SchoolM
Numbers tested	n = 50	n = 54	n = 25
Average age (Range of years)	13.6 (11-16)	13.6 (11-16)	13.4 (12-14)
Mean Northern Sotho dictation %	67.7	64.5	-
Standard Deviation	25.65	27.04	-
Minimum	0	0	-
Maximum	98	97	-
Mean Northern Sotho reading comprehension %	38.1	36.06	-
Standard Deviation	19.62	21.57	-
Minimum	6	2	-
Maximum	82	91	-
Mean English dictation %	55.2	63.4	92.4
Standard Deviation	33.54	30.55	13.14
Minimum	2	0	45.2
Maximum	100	98	100
Mean English reading comprehension %	44.5	46.2	80.4
Standard Deviation	19.99	19.89	11.92
Minimum	9	11	52.3
Maximum	85	97	95.2
Mean Reading rate (words per minute)			
Northern Sotho	106	102	-
English	131	132	169

As can be seen from these two tables, there are four main patterns that emerge from the results. Firstly, the Grade 6 and 7 learners in the private school far outperformed the learners in the township schools in terms of English language and English reading comprehension.

They also read faster than the township learners. The weakest Grade 6 and 7 readers in the private school (63.6% and 52.3% respectively) would have been regarded as 'good readers' in the township context. Secondly, the reading performance of both Grade 6 and 7 learners in the township schools was better in English than in Northern Sotho. This has been a consistent pattern since reading assessment started at the two schools. Thirdly, the differences in language policy between the two township schools did not give them a noticeable advantage either way. In other words, the additive bilingual policy of School B did not give the learners an advantage in terms of Northern Sotho reading by the time they reached the senior primary school phase. In fact, the Grade 6 learners at School B had lower scores in Northern Sotho comprehension than their peers in School P. Similarly, the learners in School P with its weak additive bilingualism only had a slight advantage in terms of English reading comprehension compared to their School B peers. Fourthly, there was a large discrepancy in Northern Sotho in particular between performance on the dictation test and the reading comprehension test. Learners who performed well in Northern Sotho language did not necessarily read well in their language.

The second research question to be examined:

- 2) What is the relationship between language and reading ability in both languages?

This was done by means of a Pearson Product Moment correlation<sup>6</sup> between language proficiency and reading ability in both Northern Sotho and English in Grade 7. These correlations are shown in Table 4.

What is important to note here is the unexpected low correlation between scores in Northern Sotho language and Northern Sotho reading in Grade 6 ( $r = .356$ ). Scoring well on the Northern Sotho dictation test did not mean that learners also scored well when it came to reading in Northern Sotho. This relationship became stronger in Grade 7 ( $r = .645$ ). In contrast, as expected, all the schools showed significant robust correlations between scores in English language and English reading ( $r = .747$  in Grade 6;  $r = .724$  in Grade 7): learners who scored well in English language tended to score comparably in English reading, and vice versa. Significant and robust too was the correlation between reading in Northern Sotho and English in both grades, but particularly in Grade 7 ( $r = .773$ ). In other words, relatively good readers in Northern Sotho were also relatively good readers in English and vice versa; weak readers in English were also weak readers in Northern Sotho.

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<sup>6</sup> A correlation measures the degree of relationship between two variables. Correlation coefficients range between 0-1. The higher the correlation the stronger the association between the variables

**TABLE 4:**  
**CORRELATION MATRIX SHOWING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND**  
**READING COMPREHENSION IN BOTH LANGUAGES**

	1	2	3	4
<i>Grade 6</i>				
1 N Sotho language: Township schools	-	.356**		
2 N Sotho reading: Township schools		-		.723**
3 English language: Township schools			-	.747**
Private School			-	.692**
4 English reading				-
<i>Grade 7</i>				
1 N Sotho language: Township schools	-	.645**		
2 N Sotho reading: Township schools		-		.773**
3 English language: Township schools			-	.724**
Private School			-	.691**
4 English reading				-

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level two-tailed

Since causal relations cannot be inferred from correlations, regression analyses were performed to further explore the language and reading relationships in the township schools. The question being explored was: what best predicted reading in one language? Was it language proficiency in the language or reading ability in the other language? In the first application, the dependent variable was L2 reading, and the predictor variables were L1 reading and L2 language. Because the study was exploratory, the enter (simultaneous) method was used. Significant models emerged for both the Grade 6 and 7 cohorts, with L1 reading being a stronger predictor of L2 reading than L2 language in both grades, as shown by the standardised beta coefficients<sup>7</sup> in Table 5.

Given that L1 reading lagged behind L2 reading in both grades, in the second application the data were also examined in the other direction, viz. which variables best predicted L1 reading, L1 language or L2 reading? Using the enter method, significant models emerged for

<sup>7</sup> The standardised beta coefficient indicates the measure of contribution of a particular variable to the prediction model. The larger the value, the greater effect the predictor variable is having on the dependent variable

both grade cohorts. In Grade 6, L2 reading was the only significant predictor of L1 reading, while in Grade 7 L2 reading was a stronger predictor of L1 reading (beta coefficient = .605) than L1 language (beta coefficient = .347).

In other words, these findings indicated that reading ability in one language was a strong predictor of reading ability in the other language. In particular, L2 reading strongly predicted L1 reading ability. While L2 language contributed some variance to L2 reading, L1 language was not a predictor of L1 reading ability in Grade 6, although it did contribute some variance to L1 reading in Grade 7.

**TABLE 5:**  
**SIMULTANEOUS MULTIPLE REGRESSION PREDICTING L2 AND L1 READING**  
**RESPECTIVELY**

**Grade 6: L2 reading**

$F_{2,74} = 48.856, p < 0.0005$   
Adj. R square = .557

<i>Predictor variables</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
L1 reading	.546	0.000
L2 language	.289	0.003

**Grade 7: L2 reading**

$F_{2,92} = 85.716, p < 0.0005$   
Adj. R square = .643

<i>Predictor variables</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
L1 reading	.545	0.000
L2 language	.324	0.000

**Grade 7: L1 reading**

$F_{2,74} = 44.564, p < 0.0005$   
Adj. R square = .531

<i>Predictor variables</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
L1 language	.146	0.074
L2 reading	.689	0.003

**Grade 7: L1 reading**

$F_{2,92} = 102.358, p < 0.0005$   
Adj. R square = .683

<i>Predictor variables</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
L1 language	.347	0.000
L2 reading	.605	0.000

The third research question examined the relationship between reading ability and academic performance in the final year of primary school.

- 3) How does reading performance in Northern Sotho and English in Grade 7 relate to academic performance?

In order to address this question, the learners' scores in the final Grade 7 examinations were obtained in all eight subjects (English, Northern Sotho, Afrikaans, Maths, Natural Science, Social Science, Life Orientation and Technology) and a mean score computed from these marks. The learners were then placed into four achievement categories used by the Department of Education, viz. Not Achieved (0-39%), Partially Achieved (40-49%), Achieved (50-69%) and Outstanding (70-100%). The means for L1 and L2 language and reading of the learners in each of these four levels were then tabulated. The results are shown in Table 6.

It is clear from the table, firstly, that across the schools there was a trend of increased language and reading ability associated with academic category. In other words, learners who read relatively well were learners who performed in the Achieved or Outstanding groups. Learners in the Not Achieved category had much lower reading scores than learners in the Partially Achieved category, who in turn had lower reading scores than those in the Achieved group; learners in the Outstanding group were all competent readers. In the township schools, the Outstanding learners read better than their peers in both English and Northern Sotho, but their comprehension scores were superior in English than in Northern Sotho.

Secondly, the notion of being a 'good' or 'weak' reader varied considerably, and was relative to the school context. It is instructive to compare the mean reading score of the learners who failed in the private school with those who failed in the township schools. The failed learners in the township schools could hardly read in either their L1 or the L2 after seven years of primary schooling, while the failed learners in the private school were, by comparison, 'literate' failures with a mean reading score of 63.8%.

Similarly, Achieved learners in the township schools had mean reading scores that were about 13-15% lower than the mean reading level of the failed learners in the private school. On the other hand, although lower than their private school peers, the reading scores of the Outstanding learners in the township schools were remarkable, given the print-poor circumstances in which they had acquired their reading skills.

**TABLE 6:**  
**GRADE 7: COMPARISON OF L1 AND L2 LANGUAGE AND READING PROFICIENCY**  
**ACROSS THE FOUR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT CATEGORIES (PERCENTAGE)**

Academic category	Language and reading assessment	Township School B Mean	Township School P Mean	Private school Mean
<i>Not achieved</i>	L1 Language	24.1	37.6	-
	L1 reading	13.1	12.2	-
	L2 Language	11.9	17.6	79.7
	L2 reading	19.0	20.2	63.6
<i>Partly achieved</i>	L1 Language	48.4	58.6	-
	L1 reading	26.3	30.3	-
	L2 Language	27.1	50.6	84.8
	L2 reading	32.9	38.6	70.8
<i>Achieved</i>	L1 Language	77.4	69.1	-
	L1 reading	42.3	39.2	-
	L2 Language	67.8	74.0	96.9
	L2 reading	48.3	50.4	86.0
<i>Outstanding</i>	L1 Language	94.6	84.3	-
	L1 reading	65.0	60.0	-
	L2 Language	96.7	87.6	99.4
	L2 reading	78.5	72.3	91.6

## DISCUSSION

The main aim of this paper was to examine the reading performance of Grade 6 and 7 learners in three different urban township schools in relation to the language policies at the schools, to see how language and reading abilities were related to one another and to academic performance, and to consider the implications of the findings for language policy and literacy development in the African languages in primary schools.

One of the main findings in this study was that township learners who attended the private school in the township performed very well on the (English) reading and language tests, while the township learners who attended the township schools did poorly on the reading tests, in both Northern Sotho and English. It is important to note that Schools B

and P are typical township schools and these reading outcomes are not unusual. In fact, the Grade 6 systemic evaluation undertaken in 2005 across all nine provinces showed that Grade 6 learners achieved a national average of 38% in literacy (Department of Education, 2005). With Grade 6 reading means of 45% and 47% respectively, Schools B and P are even ahead of the national literacy norms.

There were several expectations based on received academic wisdom that were violated from the findings in this study. Firstly, contrary to expectation, the 'desirability' of language policy was in inverse relation to literacy outcomes of the schools. In other words, the school that had the least desirable language policy (English monolingualism in the private school) was the school that consistently produced the most outstanding results in terms of language and reading accomplishments, while the school that in theory had the most desirable policy (additive bilingualism in School B) performed poorly. Secondly, contrary to expectation, the learners in the two township schools did not read better in their home language than in English. Thirdly, contrary to expectation, there were large gaps between performance on the dictation tests and the reading tests in both grades in the township schools, but especially in Northern Sotho. In other words, even doing quite well in the home language did not mean that a learner would also read well in that language. Instead, there seemed to be a general construct of reading ability that manifested mutually in the L1 and the L2, although reading ability manifested more dominantly in the L2 than the L1. This finding lends some support to the Interdependence hypothesis (c f. Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Cummins, 2000; Van Gelderen et al. 2007) in that reading ability clearly seemed to transfer across the languages. However, whereas this hypothesis generally assumes that transfer occurs from L1 to L2, in this study transfer seemed to occur bidirectionally, but especially from the more dominant L2 to the weaker L1.

What are we to make of these seeming contradictions? It could be argued that the findings in this study that the learners at the private school far outperformed the learners in the township schools simply confirms what we already know, viz. that poverty determines school accomplishment. The township schools served poor communities, while the private school served an emerging middle class community within the township. There is well documented empirical evidence from around the world that poverty and low levels of literacy go hand in hand, and that it is difficult to educate children from poor homes (Allington 2000; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). However, given that 80% of South African schools are disadvantaged (Gustafsson, 2005) this view could lead to educational fatalism. The poverty argument also raises questions about the role of language policy as an explanatory variable in less than ideal school circumstances. In developing countries where much of education is framed by poverty it is more instructive and helpful to consider instead which factors might mediate the

effects of poverty in literacy development. In this study language policy per se did not seem to have a mediating effect. Instead, if one considers the research-based knowledge derived from decades of research into reading development, then it is easier to identify factors that might mediate the effects of poverty on literacy development.

### FACTORS THAT PROMOTE READING DEVELOPMENT

Reading development is premised on a simple principle: reading develops reading. This is not a particularly novel tenet but it is nevertheless fundamental. It is so fundamental that it is usually overlooked, mainly because language is the medium through which reading occurs. The medium is then taken to be the main principle in reading, hence the assumption that if one speaks a language or is good at a language one can read in the language. There is of course a certain truth in this, but consider an analogy; knowing something about music does not make one a violinist. To become a good violinist one has to practice the violin (spending many hundreds of hours actually playing the instrument) with music being the medium that gives voice to the violin. Practising the piano does not make one a violinist, although it may make one more proficient in music.

Reading ability underpins academic accomplishment. Schools that produce good readers are schools that make reading a priority. They do this by providing learners with plenty of opportunities to practice reading, by providing access to books or print material to read, and by constantly motivating, cajoling or goading learners to read so that reading is not an option but a core activity.

#### *Reading as time on task and practice*

Every time young learners in primary school read a storybook or a text they are in effect practising their reading skills. In research on effective schools and classrooms that produce good readers, the amount of time spent on reading and the kinds of tasks involving reading emerge as important factors. In the Grade 6 systemic evaluation (Department of Education, 2005), time on task in general, across all subjects, was identified as an important factor associated with effective schools. Teachers in poor performing schools were found to spend much less time in classrooms actually engaged in meaningful learning activities with their learners. This loss of valuable learning time is cumulatively harmful for reading development. For example, in their study of effective literacy instruction across 14 low-income primary schools in the USA, Taylor, Pearson, Clark and Walpole (2000) found that time spent on reading activities was significant. Effective schools averaged 134 minutes a



day on reading activities in the early grades, excluding time spent reading storybooks to the children. Time was also provided for independent classroom reading, and learners engaged in authentic reading tasks and also in writing tasks in response to reading activities. In all the effective schools, reading was a priority at both school and classroom level.

Reading homework is also crucial in the early grades, with parents being involved in their children's literacy development by listening to them read and by reading storybooks to them. In a study in the USA referred to in Anderson, Wilson and Fielding (1988), it was found that good Grade 1 learners were reading at least 1,200 words a week as part of reading homework, whereas weak Grade 1 learners only read on average 16 words a week.

Regular exposure to books and opportunities to read result in hours and hours of reading practice done in meaningful contexts. In the later grades it is largely through regular exposure to a variety of books and print material over many years that learners become rapid and fluent readers who use cues in the texts they read to construct meaning. Regular reading establishes automaticity in word identification processing, which frees up working memory and facilitates comprehension processing (Perfetti, 1988; Walczyk, Marsiglia, Johns & Bryan, 2004). Only regular extensive reading leads to increased reading speed. Through regular reading learners also build up their linguistic knowledge, acquire more complex grammatical structures not often encountered in spoken language, extend their vocabulary, build up background knowledge and become familiar with text structures and conventions that characterise written language and its different genres.

In the private school in this study reading is a core activity, and the basics of reading are attended to right from the Foundation Phase, with plenty of opportunities and tasks for reading practice. In contrast, in the two township schools, many learners don't read well simply because they have never really read enough during their primary school years, in either Northern Sotho or in English. Before the intervention the schools did not make reading a real priority, very little time was spent on reading activities, and very often the little time spent on reading in the early grades consisted of reading lists of syllables, words and short sentences in chorus from the chalkboard. There was very little engagement in extended, meaningful texts.

Another factor that might account for the low reading scores in Northern Sotho and the large discrepancy between performance in the L1 language and L1 reading tests is the difference between the spoken Northern Sotho used in daily interactions, especially the urban version spoken in Gauteng (*Sesotho sa Pretoria*), and the standard language of written Northern Sotho (*Sesotho sa Leboa*). This is similar to diglossic situations, where a non-

standard variety of a language is used for every day interactions and a more formal or ‘high’ variety used for more formal situations and in written language. Some of the intervention project team members<sup>8</sup> who have done classroom observations have commented on the fact that ‘proper’ Northern Sotho is not being used in the classrooms (See the contribution by Ramagoshi & Bulane outlined at the workshop for a more detailed description of this situation in schools in Tshwane.) For many learners, the language of written Northern Sotho may be an unfamiliar dialect. If they are not regularly exposed to the language of written Northern Sotho via storybooks and other print material, they may never learn to read such texts comprehendingly.

The fact that the township learners were reading relatively slowly in both Northern Sotho and English is also indicative of learners who do very little reading of extended texts. The fact that learners were reading better in English than in Northern Sotho may in part be due to the fact that what little reading they tended to do was done in English, by virtue of it being the LoLT. Before the intervention there was no reading assessment in the township schools so learners with reading difficulties were not identified and helped. By the time learners reached Grade 7 there was a large backlog of very weak readers who still had not mastered the basics of fluent and meaningful reading in either the L1 or the L2. Playing catch up at this late stage is extremely challenging.

Reading has now been explicitly put on the two schools’ agendas. A literacy period has been built into the daily timetable and in many classrooms reading activities are occupying more classroom time. This is especially evident in the Foundation Phase and in the Northern Sotho and English language classes.

#### *Access to books and print material*

Learners can’t practise reading unless they have easy access to books and spend their hours at school in classrooms that are print rich environments that stimulate reading. In the International Studies in Educational Achievement in 32 countries, differences in reading ability were consistently associated with availability of books: “*the general message is that books are essential, no matter how rich or poor a nation is*” (Ross & Postlethwaite 1994: 147).

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<sup>8</sup> Two members of the project team are mother tongue speakers of N Sotho who are lecturers in the Department of African Languages at Unisa

The availability of books is a basic requirement for reading development, yet one that is notably absent in high poverty schools. The two township schools were no exception in this regard. Before the intervention, books and print resources with which to inculcate good reading practices were virtually absent, and classroom walls were bare of print material. The only books that were available were textbooks, and many of these tend to be locked away in a classroom cupboard after the lesson period. Many learners also have to share textbooks and do not get the opportunity to take textbooks home with them and study from them. From a reading development perspective it is not surprising that the learners were reading more poorly in Northern Sotho than in English – they were seldom exposed to Northern Sotho books.

As a result of the intervention, the schools are building up their print resources. School P, in its second year of the project, has a collection of about 1,500 books. In School B the school library has been built up over 3 years from a modest 200 books to a fully functioning library containing 4,000 books. However, in both schools, building up stocks of Northern Sotho books is difficult. In School B there are only 169 Northern Sotho titles in the 4,000 book collection, in spite of the project's explicit policy to buy books in the learners' home language. The great majority of these Northern Sotho books are storybooks for children under the age of 10; there are very few novels for teenagers in Northern Sotho, and practically no non-fiction books. This has important implications for the development of more advanced reading skills in Northern Sotho. Even if a firm reading foundation in Northern Sotho is laid in the Foundation Phase, reading skills need to be sustained to cope with the increasingly more complex texts and the language and conceptual demands that characterise the middle and senior school years. A lack of exposure to more complex, non-narrative types of written texts after Grade 3 will result in a decline in reading skills from Grade 4 onwards. Based on almost two decades of research into the development of reading skills, Chall et al. (1990) argue that if adequate reading abilities are not acquired during the senior primary school years then there are severe consequences: reading skills developed during this stage "*are crucial to later academic success ... reading science and social studies texts becomes an almost impossible task for students who cannot read [in the middle grades]*" (Chall et al. 1990: p.14).

If learners are reading better in English than in Northern Sotho, this may be due not only to the fact that they read more in English because it is the LoLT but also because they have a far greater variety of books in English to read than in Northern Sotho. If learners are not exposed to a variety of texts and books in their home language and given opportunities to practice reading they won't become skilled readers in their language.

*Motivations that propel reading*

Although the affective aspects of reading have tended to be overlooked in traditional reading research, research in the past decade or so has focussed attention on the importance of attitudes and affect in reading and the role that sociocultural factors play in motivations to read and the values assigned to reading (e.g. McKenna, 1994; Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). In fact, it is argued that

*... enthusiasm for reading is a prerequisite for learning how to read; nurturing enthusiasm for literacy is an indispensable component of adequate early prevention and intervention programs, a crucial aspect of good reading instruction in the elementary school years, and a serious challenge in adult literacy programs (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001:2)*

In the private school storybook reading is a favoured activity in the early grades and this helps nurture a love and enthusiasm for reading. Reading for pleasure is treated as the norm and older learners regularly encouraged to read books and write book reports.

In the township schools storybook reading before the intervention was not a feature of any classroom activity. None of the teachers at these schools was a member of a community library and 68% of the teachers in these schools indicated that they had 10 or fewer books in the home. These factors suggest that the teachers themselves were not readers. Teachers initially commented that they perceived storybook reading to be a frivolous activity, to be engaged in only after the 'proper work' was done. As a result of the intervention, many teachers have been persuaded that the reading of storybooks is an effective and legitimate classroom activity and they perceive that a lot of language learning occurs through book reading. In addition, enjoyment and fun is now being associated with books in several classrooms. There is now also an explicit public discourse about reading at the school, learners are regularly being reminded of the importance of reading and being motivated to read books and to join the community library, and parents are being encouraged to support their children's literacy activities at home.

In order to develop good readers in the African languages, more reading needs to be done in these languages, more books and a greater variety of books need to be written in the African languages and put in classrooms, and enthusiasm for reading in the African languages needs to be nurtured. As a result of the intervention project, the two township schools are gradually adopting many of the characteristics of reading schools and reading levels in both languages are slowly improving.

**LANGUAGE POLICIES, READING DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS**

The findings in this study revealed differential literacy performance that is clearly linked to academic performance, occurring in complex multilingual educational contexts characterised by varying degrees of disadvantage. How does language policy fit into this picture? The finding that the learners at the private school far outperformed the learners in the township schools does not by any means imply that monolingualism ‘works’ and additive bilingualism ‘doesn’t work’. It is fallacious to make such an association. But, by the same token, is it not equally fallacious – or misleading at the least – to claim that a language policy of additive bilingualism will make for more effective schooling? The school with an additive bilingual policy was not effective, nor was the school with a weak additive language policy. These two schools are not simply examples of poor implementation of language policy. Instead, they are examples of the virtual absence of basic principles on which effective literacy development depends, irrespective of the language in which it is done. This is not simply hair splitting; it is an important conceptual distinction.

There are, undeniably, beneficial effects on learners’ linguistic, cognitive or academic growth when they have the opportunity to acquire literacy in their home language. Because language is intimately tied up with self identity, there are also affective and psychological benefits in learning in one’s own language and having one’s language and culture affirmed in the learning context. However, these beneficial effects won’t materialise if teachers do not spend time developing reading in the classrooms, if learners have little or no access to books, and if there is little motivation to impel reading. Self identity is also tied up with feelings of self worth. Children who do not develop good literacy skills may suffer from poor self esteem and will have trouble competing in a competitive job market in the high tech twenty-first century.

On the whole the learners in the private school were well behaved, polite, confident and competent young students who showed high levels of linguistic, literacy and academic accomplishments even though they did not acquire these in their home language. What effect English monolingualism has on their self identity and their connectedness to their own language and culture are issues beyond the scope of this study, but ones that merit further study. The challenges here lie in persuading schools like this who provide quality education to change their language policy to an additive language policy so that their learners can accrue even more benefits from their schooling.

On the whole, the learners in the township schools were well behaved and polite young students who showed generally low levels of linguistic, literacy and academic accomplishments even though their home language was being used in some form or other in the schools. Their intellectual potential was not being fully developed and what effect this has had on their self esteem and their feelings of self worth are issues beyond the scope of this study, but ones that merit further study. The challenges facing these schools are far greater, for very real changes need to occur in the learning and teaching context that fosters literacy development so that their learners can start accruing linguistic, literacy and academic benefits from their schooling.

## CONCLUSION

The title of this article poses the question of what happens to literacy in (print) poor environments. The answer, blandly put, is that literacy doesn't happen in such environments. The findings in this study, though seemingly counter-intuitive, are not surprising. If one considers these findings from the point of view of what makes for effective literacy development, the apparent contradictions in the findings make perfect sense. A sound language policy is only as good as the education system which undergirds it.

We can be proud of South Africa's progressive school language policy, and we can applaud the moves to ensure that children initially acquire literacy in their home languages and that their home languages continue to be taught and supported after they have changed to English as a LoLT. However, in multilingual developing countries where poverty is wide spread, where schooling conditions are less than ideal, where print resources are scarce, where literacy levels in the surrounding communities are low, and where there are few educational or recreational opportunities for extensive reading in a home language, a far more complex model of effective schooling is needed to overcome the challenges facing schools.

In this paper I have argued that reading accomplishment is a complex and dynamic process that develops within a complex and interrelated web of school, classroom, teacher and home based factors that create and facilitate necessary and enabling conditions for literacy development. Practice, access and affect are integral components of the thread that weaves the literary web together. Without proper literacy development there can be no effective schooling. Learners who live in poverty pose special challenges to teachers and schools. A language policy that ensures that these learners will receive initial literacy in their home language and that their home language will continue to be taught as a subject during their schooling years is an important cornerstone for their schooling – but not a panacea. Language policy per se is unlikely to be an active agent in *literacy* development unless it is accompanied by very real changes in the complex learning/teaching context that fosters literacy development.

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