

Early reading skills related to Grade 1 English Second Language literacy in rural South African schools

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Scan this GR code with your smart phone or mobile device to need online. Background: Many South African children attend African language medium of instruction (MOI) schools, learn English as an additional language and switch to English MOI three years later. There is still much to be researched about how a child's first and second language literacy develops over time in South Africa.

Aim: This study aims to outline the first and second language skills at the start of Grade 1, which are associated with English Second Language literacy at the end of Grade 1 through the use of a longitudinal design.

Setting: Data was collected from 80 predominantly rural no-fee isiZulu and Siswati MOI schools in Mpumalanga.

Methods: A total of 1347 learners were randomly selected from these schools and were individually assessed on various first language (isiZulu or Siswati) and English skills at the start and end of Grade 1.

Results: The data show that learners begin school with varying first and second language oral language proficiency levels, and most learners are pre-literate. Decoding skills improved over the year, but 45.7% and 35% of learners were still unable to read a first language or English word correctly in 1 min.

Conclusion: The data confirm the importance of first language phonological awareness and letter—sound knowledge for later word-reading abilities in isiZulu, Siswati and English, as well as their importance for English spelling. The study highlights the importance of the systematic development of English oral proficiency during the Foundation Phase especially for rural children who are not exposed to English in their communities.

Keywords: isiZulu: Siswati: English Second Language: literacy; transfer; longitudinal: highpoverty schools.

Introduction

Early literacy has taken centre stage as one of the most important aspects in ensuring sustained learning throughout an individual's schooling career. Through the acquisition and transfer of knowledge via reading and writing, literacy allows individuals to unlock their full potential and become better contributors to modern society. Literacy, therefore, does not only hold major benefits for the individual but also has spill-over effects on the broader society, and at a national level is associated with economic growth.

Literacy rates with respect to all languages are very low in South Africa, with 78% of Grade 4 learners not having reached the low international benchmark in their first language (L1) in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) assessment in 2016 (Howie et al. 2017). Although the South African language policy promotes the teaching of reading in learners' L1 during the first three years of schooling, further learning from the fourth grade will most likely take place in English (ESL)* for the majority of learners. This implies that learners do not only need to be able to read for meaning in their L1 but also in English.

The literacy issue is complicated in South Africa. Although the Language in Education Policy (South Africa 1996) allows for L1 education, most children have L1 education for the first three years of schooling only. Because of the perceived and real economic benefits of English literacy (Casale & Posel 2011; Van der Walt & Evans 2017), most children in South Africa will attend

5. In other Squath African cluminoshum, instruction in English as a record language (ESL) is referred to as English as First Additional Language bedseter English is not recessarily a second language for most learners. However, to align with international literature, we will use the term (Si, when referring to English as First Additional Language).

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