

## Children Engagement with Literacy: A Study of Literacy Practices at a Multilingual Classroom in Cape Town, South Africa

A. Prosper

Institute of Continuing Education,  
The Open University of Tanzania  
ancyfrida.prosper@out.ac.za, ancypro@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *This paper reports on the early literacy activities which children engage with at school to develop multi-competences. It draws an understanding of literacy as a social practice given the intricacies related to a particular literacy event. In this paper literacy is understood beyond reading and writing ability in order to widen the scope for early literacy learners to explore with literacy. The data was collected through ethnographic case study design from a grade three class using observation and document analysis. The class teacher became a resource as she used linguistic competence in English, Afrikaans and IsiXhosa to teach literacy in different situations. The data shows that, language is a resource for teaching and learning literacy instead of seeing it as a problem and barrier to the learning process. Home language can be an instrument through which children develop cognitive skills for learning. The paper concludes that, despite the efforts to support learners to become multi-literate, teachers' competence in different languages is necessary to facilitate the acquisition of multilingual skills.*

**Key words:** early literacy, literacy resources, teaching and learning, multilingual approach, multiple literacies

### INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on early literacy practices of Grade III learners in a multilingual setting. The study observed children's engagement in literacy activities (Grade III), meaning making in various texts in the immediate environment. Of a particular interest to Grade III, is the linguistic profile of the Grade III teacher and the use of multilingual readers in supporting learners to develop multiple competence while discouraging literacy based on one language (Snow, 2014; Baker, 2006) (multilingual readers refers to books printed in IsiXhosa, Afrikaans and English languages dominant in the Western Cape Province). The purpose of multilingual books is to support children to read in their home language(s) and second language(s). Children with less influence from prints settings and not yet developed skills in home language face difficulties in learning literacy in the second language (Perez, 1994). The reason for difficulties in second language learning for many children can be associated with poor development of

their home language. Children require a proper transition from home language to the second language taught at school since language skills are interdependency (Baker, 2006; Turner and Youb, 2005). For example, children of diverse language and socio-cultural backgrounds normally have language/s different from the language used at school. In such situation, teachers need to help such learners to master skills in their home language when preparing them to second language learning. According to Baker (2006), home language in the classroom is regarded as linguistic capital which can be used as a resource to spark on children's literacy development. The diverse linguistic nature of learners in the classroom needs to be supported by both teachers and parents through storytelling, reading short stories in the home language while they become introduced in the target language. For example, the studied class had a teacher who could speak more than one language hence she became a resource to support learners effectively from the language they understood towards learning in a new language.

This paper explains children's engagement with literacy drawing from literature on literacy practices, language acquisition in the multilingual setting. The purpose of this paper was to explore children's behaviour with literacy, however, literacy development depend on the strengthened skills of the target language (Baker, 2006). As insisted in Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition that, acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language (Krashen, 1988). The children's interaction with literacy texts require some competence in a language that is used in the classroom setting. Although the teacher adopted a multilingual approach in teaching and learning, English overpowers Afrikaans and IsiXhosa. English is a second language to many learners but also; it is a targeted language for teaching and learning. In this paper, home language and second language are used interchangeably to indicate that literacy can be learnt in any language.

The data was collected in a diverse linguistic classroom where many learners had home languages (languages acquired in natural settings) different from the language used in teaching and learning (also known as second language) the language that is learnt in formal settings. Interestingly, this study deployed multilingual approach through reading activities whereby children had to read the story from the familiar language while being taught in the second language. This reflects that the home language can make foundation for learners to develop skills in the second language (Krashen, 1988). Children are likely to become multi-

competences through literacy engagement in the multilingual setting. Multi-competence according to Cook (2003) is referred as knowledge of more than one language in the person's mind and the languages in the individual's brain are used differently.

However, this study is interested on literacy practices of young learners as they try to make meaning through interaction with texts exposed to them in the classroom setting. Literacy practices refer to the interactions between a teacher and learners and among learners themselves (Street, 1984). The interaction is normally centred on texts whereas the event is how the literacy activities unfold in the classroom and within the broader context of the school (Heath, 1983). Literacy practices for learners in multilingual setting should reflect recognition of other languages apart from English language. This encourages learners to use their home languages as resources for learning and change the dominance of English language as termed as 'linguistic imperialism' (De Klerk, 2002; Phillipson, 1992).

It is a disadvantage for African languages due to inadequate resources such as books to afford many learners relatively to Afrikaans and English. Some of the written stories available do not reflect authentic social cultural context of children (Bloch, 1996) and some of these children have little or no access to reading materials written in their mother tongue(s). However, it is argued that, exposing children to literacy materials such as books, paper, and crayons becomes building blocks for language and literacy development in young learners (Turner and Youb, 2005; Schickedanz, 1999). Promoting literacy development in home languages requires to have written materials in African languages such as short stories which reflect events affecting children in their community. Also, establishment of reading clubs which teachers can collaborate with parents to enable children's opportunity to read in their home language at convenient setting.

Based on the Republic of South Africa 1996 constitution, in 2007, the Western Cape Education Department launched the Language Transformation Plan to promote multilingualism through educating children in their mother tongue for six years and learn the third language from grades 7-9 (Language Transformation Plan, 2007). Basically, learners would use their mother tongue as a medium of instruction for six years while two languages would be learnt as a subject. This could enable children to acquire another language without losing their first language (s) hence developing diverse linguistic competence (LiEP, 1997; Cummins *et al.*, 2005; Baker, 2006). Despite of the department of education's efforts to

establish language plan to encourage the promotion of multilingualism in schools, many schools continue to use English as a medium of instruction due to the prestige attached to English language (De Klerk, 2002). Such practice deprives children from developing and using their diverse multilingual skills brought from home. In this way, acquisition of additional language is affected yet home language can be transferred to additional language and facilitate literacy learning (Street, 1995; Cummins *et al.*, 2005; Baker, 2006). In practice of language policy, Prinsloo and Heugh (2013) noted that learners' home language development is being abandoned too early. As a result, premature reliance on a new additional language sacrifices its effectiveness as a medium of learning and teaching since learners do not have strength in their home language (Prinsloo and Heugh, 2013).

The findings from the evaluation report of literacy teaching in primary schools in Limpopo Province in South Africa revealed that, strong mother tongue and language development is essential for the development of literacy and the kind of academic language skills learners will need to access in the second language, in South Africa, English is a second language for many learners (Reeves *et al.*, 2008). Also, the report found that, most teachers instructed Grade I to III learners in their mother tongue and it was easier for the learners to develop literacy skills (Reeves *et al.*, 2008). Literacy skills such as reading, writing skill and basic concepts develop when their home language is used. The study further noted that, most teachers demonstrated proficiency in learners' home language when using it as the language of instruction because most teachers' home language was the same as the learners'. This indicates the role of language and literacy development for subsequent learning and teaching in young learners. The focus of this paper is on children engagement with literacy in the multilingual enabled settings. This paper is derived by the following questions:

- (a) What are early childhood literacy practices?
- (b) What literacy activities do children engage in at multilingual schools?
- (c) What can early childhood educators and teachers do to support children in their literacy development in multilingual setting?

### **Multilingualism in literacy teaching and learning**

Multilingualism according to Baker (2006) is the situation of using two or more languages by an individual or community of speakers. Chomsky (1965) claims that humans are born with the ability to learn language. From this claim multilingualism becomes possible given the special inborn

language capability, the language acquisition device (LAD). Steven Pinker also restates the ability to learn language as "hard-wired in the genes" (Pinker, 2009). Therefore, humans have the ability to acquire language in natural settings or learning language from the structured environment. Regardless of the context in which children acquire language, the language skills can help learners to interact with text in a meaningful way. The multilingual situation in the classroom enables learners to make use of multilingual resources to engage in literacy activities.

Studies on multilingualism and second language learning insist on multilingual situation as a linguistic capital which can be used as a resource in the community of language use (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2008; Baker, 2006; Cook, 2003). According to Garcia (2009) multilingual resources do not only mean prints but also teachers/adults/ learners who are able to translanguage across linguistic resources available in the context of language use. This entails the multilingual competence enables an individual to function in diverse linguistic settings. Garcia term the situation as translanguageing. Translanguage is also known as communication strategy used amongst bi/multilingual speakers (Garcia, 2009). For example, the linguistic profile of the teacher and the diverse composition of learners in Grade III as reflected in lesson X in this paper, it is an evidence of translanguageing from one language to another for different purposes. In line 17 and line 18 of the lesson, the teacher switches to IsiXhosa to facilitate the learning process by acknowledging language difficulties many learners encounter (Hill, 2009). The teacher made use of learners' linguistic repertoires as an advantage to assist English second language learners but also acknowledging multicultural composition in a literacy classroom.

However, it should not be understood that, multilingual approach is the one to make people literate. The argument is that, linguistic profile of many classrooms in the multilingual and advanced science and technology era are those with diverse in linguistic/cultural backgrounds (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2008; Baker, 2006; Cook, 2003). This means that, it may not be helpful to get the child into English medium of instruction while ignoring mother tongue (s) languages which could be resourceful in learning and teaching. In this paper, literacy is regarded as a talk around texts which communicate meanings (Street, 1984; Heath, 1983). Therefore, it is important for literacy engagement of either oral, written or visual texts to be inclusive in language use so that meanings communicated can be widely understood. As Baker (2006) insists the need to recognize learners' home

language (s) since they characterize multiliteracies and multicultural experiences which might be useful in teaching and learning process.

Also, Street (1995) views learners' prior knowledge as 'alternative literacies' that is necessary for school literacy development. However, after 1990 many non English learners in South Africa shifted to English medium schools which were formerly whites only (De Klerk, 2002). This was an effort searching for the language as many people believed in English as language of participation in socioeconomic activities in the wider society. Ignorance and lack of pride in indigenous languages contributed to embracing monolingual education system instead of acknowledging diverse linguistic resources through appropriate approaches to promote African languages and facilitate literacy development. Also, Phillipson (1992) calls for change in language policy to redress language education matters and promoting multilingualism that reflects natural state of language use in communities around the world.

#### METHODOLOGY

This paper draws from the data which was collected through ethnographic case study design from Grade III classroom at a multilingual primary school in Cape Town, South Africa. The study was carried out for about six month to explore children engagement with literacy. Literacy activities (refers to unfolding events that are centred on the texts (Street, 2005; Street, 2001)) can be studied better as they occur in their natural context (Spradley, 1979). Therefore, it was important for the researcher to obtain data from an insider's perspective (Henning *et al.*, 2004).

Both participatory and non participatory observation was deployed interchangeably in order to get a clear understanding of the problem. Participatory observation happened when the researcher participated in the lesson by assisting learners with their task. However, non participatory observation occurred when the researcher assumed the distance from the participants to look at the problem as an outsider. Some observed incidences were documented as field notes observation which helps in findings and discussion.

Some techniques used to collect data include observations, recording of literacy lessons and analysis of learners documents. Observation of some literacy lessons was done for the duration of six months in order to understand children's behaviour in a literacy classroom. The observed lessons were documented systematically to make data analysis clear.

Lessons observation was important to understand the literacy lesson development and efforts taken by teachers to support learners they engage in literacy activities. Literacy activities could be observed when children are engaged in meaningful text (Kress, 2003). The text can be initiated by the teacher or learner's interest on a particular topic of discussion. It was observed that, the teachers' activity was based on short stories which were developed in different aspects of literacy. However, the focus of this study was to understand children's engagement with literacy particularly the written texts. In this article, the daily literacy practices evidence includes some literacy lessons and learners' texts which reflect the kinds of texts children engage with in the classroom. To triangulate the data gathered through observation, document analysis was necessary to trace matters that arose from observation of literacy practices in the school daily routines. Some learners' written texts were reviewed to find out literacy activities children engage with when they receive instruction from the teacher. The learners' texts include those about preserving environment and letter writing. Those texts were developed at the end of the lesson and the teacher encouraged learners to write their story based on the same topic. The learners' texts reflect that children engagement with literacy differ from one learner to another given the diverse experiences which they bring in the classroom (Baker, 2006).

### **Participants**

This article presents data and findings of Grade III teacher and Grade III learners. Grade three learners were purposively studied for about six months to observe literacy activities particularly literacy lesson in order to understand how teachers support multilingual learners at the foundation phase. I observed some specific learners from Grade III where I selected few strong learners, average and learners on intervention programme to trace their literacy development. Individual learners' observation was based on the interaction with the written texts. The written texts in the Appendix indicate that learners' interaction with text is meaningful depending on the learners' interest (Kress, 2003).

The specific learners involved in this study could explain the message entailed in the texts though individual explanations to the researcher. Importantly, some texts could be understood through the written prints and the message can be clearly communicated. Strong learners in literacy classroom are the ones who can perform at the expected level of learning. Average learners normally perform at the satisfactory level and learners on intervention programme explain learners who perform below the expected level in the literacy classroom. Interesting observation about the

categorized learners is that towards the end of the study, learners on intervention had improved writing literacy as their written prints changed over time.

### Teacher and learners' Language profile

**Table 1: Grade III learners' linguistic profile**

Home Languages	IsiXhosa	IsiZulu	Afrikaans	English	<sup>1</sup> Others	Number of Learners
Grade III	16	4	5	7	8	40

The Grade III teacher was involved in this study so as to trace the benefits young learners get from multilingual teacher in a multilingual classroom. The teacher linguistic profile shows multilingual competence as the teacher can speak more than two languages. The teacher could speak IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Afrikaans and English consecutively. This study meant to find out how the multilingual teacher is beneficial to multilingual learners. Also, the study wanted to determine the use of teachers' linguistics resources in various contexts particularly in assisting young learners to reach at their potential level of learning.

**Table 2: Grade III teacher's linguistic profile**

Home language(s)	IsiXhosa and Isizulu
Other language(s)	Afrikaans and English

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Rich prints environment stimulates early literacy development

Children growing in the environment in which cultural and social practices involves prints, they are likely to develop literate behaviour given the influence from adults (Perez, 1994). Similarly, the observation in this study reflected different settings characterized by literacy resources. For example, in the classroom phonic charts, calendar, birthday charts, alphabetical charts, multilingual indicators and educational puzzles were evident. Calendar was used when the teacher requested learners to write their dates. The teacher emphasised on learners to refer to the calendar so that they can learn to write dates and make meaning from the process. Vygotsky (1978) supports such practice in the classroom as he reiterates that, literacy skills are socially constructed in the process as learners make meaning and negotiate identities in the interaction and cultural settings

<sup>1</sup> Others refer to home language(s) for some Foundation Phase learners include isiSwana, French, Lingala, Shona, and Kirundi.



(Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2008; Cummins, 2007). Classroom activities were normally happening concurrently as part of literacy practices for learners as they come to their classes. Similarly, the alphabetical and phonic charts were used for learning purposes but also learners were entertained through singing rhymes and songs by making use of alphabets and phonic sounds. This discussion depicts that, engaging learners in literacy materials help young learners to see the learning process more interesting and meaningful. This view is supported in Raison (1994) that, it is important to expose young learners to authentic prints as they become aware about the role of written materials in their contexts.

Vygotsky (1978) learning process is a social construct which involves social practices and interaction between people surrounding the learner and the learners. He argues that learners understanding depend on the interrelationship between social cultural paradigms in supporting the learning process. For example, engaging learners with funny activities such as singing rhymes of phonics, alphabets and playing education puzzles assist learners to acquire necessary literacy skills through playful activities. Such activities can help learners to learn new words as they play with sounds speaking, and writing skills might be supported in process. Also, Gambrell *et al.* (2007) reiterates that, those learners who are taught through games and songs may become richer in vocabulary which is necessary for literacy development.

Kenner (2000) cited in Jewitt and Kress (2000) on the other hand argues that, the environments which surround the young learner may either become constraints or offer possibilities for the learner to explore with prints. For literacy to develop, children need exposure to prints and necessary guidance and support in place to inculcate such skills appropriately (Schickedanz, 1999; Heath, 1983; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). The classroom environment displayed materials that are necessary to support the development of literacy in young learners.

Apart from having teaching aids such as calendars, phonics charts and alphabetical charts, the study also noted the presence of other educational resources that communicate awareness to learners. For example, the data from the text 2D shows the emergency procedures and health life at school. However, Text 2E portrays the classroom rules which need to be followed by each individual learner in the classroom. Text 2F is a notice on bullying whereby all learners in Grade III classroom are informed about bullying behaviour and results of such actions. Such prints are crucial in the learning

context as they help young learners try to develop understanding of environment and appropriate actions in the classroom and society at large.

### Children construct meaningful texts

Vygotsky (1978) reiterates that teachers are facilitators of the learning process to enable learners construct ideas based on particular idea to make up paragraphs. The same is reflected in the data (Text 2C) where the teacher wrote topic sentence 'I can' then learners constructed sentences using the given topic. In this text, many ideas are generated in sentences as the teacher writes them on display paper (Raison, 1994). However, Kress (1997) emphasizes that, children do not communicate their experiences in written words only, they are able to communicate through illustrations e.g. drawings and pictures. This reflects that learners have the ability to represent and communicate meaning in many ways different from that of adults (Kress, 1997).

**Table 3: Literacy materials which displayed and used for learning and teaching in Grade-III**

<p><b>Calendar</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Learners are always reminded by their teachers about the importance of writing dates.</li> <li>-Before they begin to write anything for the day the teacher will ask learners what is the date today?</li> <li>-Sometimes the grade three teachers will mention the wrong date to see if learners can follow dates, then learners would respond by saying the right date.</li> <li>-All the grades have calendar to help learners see dates and practice them daily.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Educational games</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Grade I-III learners have the opportunity in a week to play with puzzles. Teacher gives learners' opportunity to engage with these puzzles trying to solve problems and stimulating their thinking.</li> <li>- Lots of learners like to play with puzzles and they like to show their teacher or someone in class of what they have achieved.</li> <li>-Learners concentrate so much when organizing puzzles you would hear the soft talk around how can they built right thing as people in the group.</li> <li>-Teacher make sure that everybody is engaged and they working on a puzzle.</li> <li>-Those learners who do not want to play with the puzzle would also choose their favorite books from their reading corner and then begin to read.</li> <li>-These activities capture learners attention as they become interested</li> </ul>
<p><b>Phonic charts and Alphabetical charts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Grade I-III classrooms have PHONIC CHARTS and ALPHABETICAL CHARTS,</li> <li>-these literacy resources are useful particularly where learners still refer to these charts when they say sound.</li> <li>-I noted they use charts on the wall to remind themselves when the teacher ask them to say sound of a particular word because they know the use of these materials on their walls.</li> <li>-They also use alphabetic charts to say alphabets.</li> <li>-The grade II teacher regularly referred to these charts because many learners in the first term of the year could not recorgnise the letters in the word.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Physical appearance of classrooms in relation to literacy.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-wall displays appears to be mainly in English.</li> <li>-I found multilingual displays on the cupboard in Grade I class and Grade II class, in Grade III class key</li> </ul>

indicators are in English.

-the key indicators give learners the meaning of the same word for example cupboard in English, Afrikaans and IsiXhosa.

-It is important in literacy environment because learners will be able to learn and acquire vocabulary in three languages.

At the reception of the school there was an indicator which appeared in two languages that is Afrikaans and English.

-I found out why only English and Afrikaans noted that the school language policy stated the use of Afrikaans and English as medium of instruction.

#### **Educational charts displayed in the foundation classrooms**

-colourful posters, phonics charts children artwork, calendar, birthday charts, alphabetical charts.

- teachers make use of these resources as teaching aids to demonstrate the lessons for learners to understand.

#### **literacy material**

-learners have a separate book to do their painting

-They have painted materials on the wall

-they have story book in English

- series of multilingual comic books (same content printed in three languages English, IsiXhosa and Afrikaans)

-book layout: visual images on cover, colorful, some of them bigger in size A3

#### **Use of Colours in the classroom**

-Teachers use colour as a sign of discipline behavior of the learners in the classroom.

- Learners know that when teacher say a particular colour it an indication that they should do something or something need to be attended urgently.

- Teacher for example would say red to indicate that their noise behavior is becoming unruly and therefore learners will immediately put their one hand on their head and a finger on their lips to show that they urgently need to keep quiet because its danger.

Learners can be in position to write up kinds of texts depending on their experiences on a particular text (Raison, 1994; Heath, 1983; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, the children in this study (Grade III) produced their own texts such as letters and environmental awareness texts. For letters, the teacher had taught learners on how to write friendly letters (see text 1A and 1B). It was observed that, learners were guidance on letter writing format. In another text, learners wrote the caution or awareness messages on some of their texts reflecting the exposure to such genres in their immediate environment (see text 1C to 1F). The Grade III wall displays portray different messages including awareness on behavioural matters (see 2D classroom rules and 2F anti bullying). For example, the study observed the notice about bullying behaviour and the shortcoming of such actions.

The writing developmental continuum encourages teachers to recognize skills, attitudes and knowledge which children bring to the classroom (Baker, 2006; Raison, 1994). This necessitates the integration of prior knowledge in teaching and learning of literacy which can have influence on confidence in young learners. In that way, diversity is valued and

consolidated during classroom literacy practices. Learners' text IC and ID are examples to show evidence of learners' existing knowledge that is necessary to facilitate during the classroom teaching and learning activities (Baker, 2006; Cook, 2003). The two texts were produced by learners of different linguistic and social cultural background however the two texts appear to communicate the same message though they might have different viewpoints. They both speak to awareness to keep the environment clean. This implies that, the learners have rich experiences depending on nature and exposure of individual learners (Stein and Slonimsky, 2006; Prinsloo & Stein, 2004). Text IC and Text ID were created by learners freely without enforcement from their teacher. This is an indication that learners also can respond to societal issues which they wish to communicate.

However, some learners may face difficulties to choose the means to deliver their messages to intended audiences (Hill, 2009; Stein and Slonimsky, 2006; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004; Kress, 1997). The learners' texts speak on environmental conservation which is one of concerns which is normally addressed in media. Alerting messages from the government and Non Governmental Organisations are normally communicated in various ways to encourages people take-up a full responsibility of their surroundings. Therefore, for a Grade III learners to write such messages, must have seen posters in the streets or they were informed through media particularly television and Radio. This is an indication that, the environmental exposure has influence on the texts children prefer to create at their free time (Stein and Slonimsky, 2006; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004; Bloch, 1996). It is important for teachers to identify such texts so that learners' efforts can be recognized by providing positive rewards and those educational texts should be displayed on walls to encourage other learners to be creative by writing texts of their own interests during free time. In so doing, the teacher may be developing the culture of creativity in young learners as they engage with literacy activity.

### **Literacy is a developmental process**

Drawing from the three phases of the writing developmental continuum, literacy is a process and it develops over time (Raison, 1994). Learners' written texts reflect that generally Grade III learners have developed some writing skills and their texts make sense to readers. In text IA, the message is clear however, the learner still has to acquire skills on the use of capital letters and various positions which can be applied. The same text shows that the learner has not yet fully mastered directionality in writing and to

make sure that all words appear in a straight line. On top of that, punctuation only appeared at the beginning of the text but the rest of the text does not have any punctuation marks. The writing convention should not be the focus when developing literacy however there is a need to explicitly inform learners on the significance of conventions in written text (Raison, 1994). In text IB, capital letters appears to be appropriately used even though punctuation marks are rarely used. Also, the space between words in text IB, the learner still needs to use the finger to indicate space between words. The two texts show how much the development of literacy differs from one child to another though they are instructed by the same teacher.

The point to draw from the writing developmental continuum is the fact that writing does not occur in a linear order. It recognizes that classroom is composed of learners of different socioeconomic and linguistics background and they have different learning styles (Stein and Slonimsky, 2006; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004; Bloch, 1996). This means that, it might be problematic when learners are expected to develop literacy skills in a linear order despite of having varied experiences which are brought to the classroom.

### **A multilingual approach to teaching and learning literacy**

As stipulated in the CAPS (2011) that, children should be given proper foundation of reading and writing skills in their home language(s) before they can be introduced to first additional language. For the Grade III learners, the teacher was able to facilitate the process as she could read IsiXhosa, Afrikaans and English. The teacher started with an IsiXhosa reader before they could read the same story in Afrikaans and English. The idea was to help learners read the story in their home language(s) to facilitate a better understanding of an English story. Foundation phase teachers were encouraged to use multilingual readers regularly to facilitate the development of multilingual literacy skills (LiEP 1997; Baker, 2006). Becoming literate in the second language requires time, the skills developed in the home language, the type of the second language instruction, and the status of the second language (Baker, 2006; Cummins 2007).

Observations reveal that, foundation phase classes had reading corners where they kept reading materials. This corner was known to learners and they were guided by their teachers when appropriate to use it. Some reading materials observed in the reading corner were the multilingual books known as books of the same content printed in three languages

dominant in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. These readers were printed in IsiXhosa, Afrikaans and English for the purpose of assisting learners to read books in languages at their exposure. This is meant to encourage learners to read in the language they understand but also create opportunity for learners to acquire other languages that are spoken in their surroundings (Baker, 2006; Perez, 1994; Bloch, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Children acquire the foundations of literacy within their native language and culture (Stein and Slonimsky, 2006; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004; Wong Fillmore, 1991; Cummins, 1989). Therefore, when learners use home language(s) in reading stories help them to understand the English content (Baker, 2006; Cook, 2003; Krashen, 1988).

Reading a book of the same content in many languages facilitate the development of multilingual skills which is advocated in the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP, 1997). In such practice, children are likely to develop multilingual literacies as proposed by the school of New Literacy Studies (Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000; Street, 2001; Stein, 2008; Bloch, 1996; Gregory, 2000). The more languages exposed to learners with appropriate support and guidance, children are likely to acquire more linguistic skills instead of losing the acquired language (Snow, 2014; Baker, 2006; Gregory, 2000; Bloch, 1996). In such instances, additive bilingualism is likely to happen and subtractive bilingualism can be discouraged (Perez, 1994; Cummins, 2005). This argument is supported in the 2011 Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS, 2011) as stated that learners' literacy skills in their home language should be advantageous to introduce learners in the first additional language. This will enable learners to develop a strong literacy foundation in the home language while building onto literacy skills of the target language (Snow, 2014; Bruner, 1996; Goodman, 1992; Langer, 1984).

Moreover, multiple discursive practices also known as translanguaging occurs in the multilingual situation whereby people engage in multiple forms of literacies while translating the content in a language that is better understood (Garcia, 2009). For example, in line 19 and 20 of lesson X, the teacher recognizes the role of language by switching to IsiXhosa translating the same idea that was explained in English. In this case, home language has been deployed as a resource to influence learners to understand English content (Baker, 2006; Bloch, 2002; 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). The role of language support is seen in line 21 to 26 as many learners appear to be interactive in learning after the teacher's linguistic support. Lesson observation reveals the use of home language(s) in an English classroom.

In the light of the above, Baker (2006) further insists that language may be interpreted, translated, and create classroom materials using multilingual resources available in the classroom to overcome learning difficulties when the first language is not well grasped (Cummins, 2005; NCS, 2002; Turker, 1986).

### **The dominance of English language in a multilingual classroom**

Although home language(s) in the English classroom was used to facilitate teaching and learning activities, English language continues to dominate the other languages in and outside the classroom (Phillipson, 1992; de Klerk, 2002). The dominance of English was depicted in the learners' written texts which produced free written texts to convey particular messages to fellow learners in the classroom. For example, the messages that were alerting about keeping the classroom environment clean as it reads "*Keep the class clean*" and "*throw the papers and plastic in the bin*". One would expect learners to produce such messages in their home language(s) since they voluntarily wrote such messages. This means that, although there are opportunities to use languages apart from English, there are no or less attention drawn into developing writing skills. This observation is not surprising since the language of learning and teaching is mainly English despite the school being part of the literacy project which intends to develop multilingual literacy skills in young learners. The dominion of one language in context of teaching and learning is likely to affect learners' attitudes on their linguistic repertoires which are influenced by multicultural/multilingual situations (Phillipson, 1992). However, de Klerk in the article titled *Language Issues in Our Schools: Whose Voice Counts?* she suggests the need to have a curriculum which provides mother tongue education to facilitate early literacy and language development while creating opportunities to guarantee equal access of English language (de Klerk, 2002). This expresses an urgent reaction that should be considered to transform curriculums taking into account the multilingual situations in many schools and also, accessibility of English is necessary to enable learners to communicate across boundaries (Bloch, 1996; Phillipson, 1992).

### **Appropriate teaching approaches develop literacy in young learners**

The learner can be an active constructor of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Yilmaz, 2008) when such opportunities are created using suitable teaching approaches and strategies in the lesson. Lesson analysis reveals that Grade III teacher made use of balanced approach, or whole language approaches, phonic approach as well as look and say approach to support learners as they engage with literacy activity. The teacher used balanced approach thereby language learning is through range of texts within a particular

context (Edwards, 2009; RNCS, 2002; NCS, 2002; Bloch, 1996). Learners become interactive by learning application of linguistic features in different situation. In line 9, 10, 11 of the lesson X, learners used sight words to familiarize with the sound system of those words. Learning of phonics was not done in isolation of language context to enable learners make meaning of the learning processes (Edwards, 2009; Schickedanz, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978).

Such integrative and balanced approaches are informed by constructivism theory which regards learners as a contributor of the learning process instead of being just a receiver of knowledge (Yilmaz, 2008; Bloch, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, the entire lesson reflects questioning strategy that could make learners interactive but also inculcating critical thinking in the process of teaching and learning. The lesson was drawn from a story which was used as base to draw up variety of linguistic features to be achieved in the lesson. In Line 6, 7 and 8 of lesson X the attention is centered on the story thereby the teacher builds on the content of the lesson. This shows that, learners engage in literacy activities which enable them to make sense of language features acquired during the process of learning (Cummins, 2007; Schickedanz, 1999; Turker, 1986).

Phonic approach and look and say approach can be seen in line 7 to 15 where the learners are exposed to recognition of sounds but also they learn to pronounce the sounds. Also, in line 32 to 33, learners try to read the story individually but also the teacher encourages learners to say the sound of the words as they read. This lesson shows that the teacher is subscribing to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS, 2002) as it encourages teachers to make use of integrated approach to enable learners understand (Vygotsky, 1978). It is important for teachers to design the lesson that will stimulate learners' comprehension as they acquire new knowledge. Learners need to be supported to enable them reach the potential level of learning (Baker, 2006; Gibbon, 2002; Cummins, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978).

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Literacy in young learners is a socially constructed phenomenon which require rich print environment to facilitate children's engagement with literacy and to support the interaction between the text and the learner (Street, 2001; Perez, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Learners can explore with literacy in any form of their interest based on awareness of the available resources in the immediate environment (Kress, 2003). Learners learn by seeing and emulating from the available examples (Bloch, 1996). Literacy



materials such as phonics charts, calendar and alphabetical charts are necessary in the young learners' classroom. As some authors insist, learners need exposure to rich prints and necessary support from the teacher on the use of literacy resource for literacy engagement (Schickedanz, 1999; Heath, 1983; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978).

Also, learners can create meaningful texts just as adults (Kress, 2003). Children can make meaningful text through other forms of communication such as visuals, not necessarily in a written word. They have the ability to present ideas through pictures and drawings different from adults' communication (Kress, 1997). However, the teachers/adults need to be facilitators of the learning process (Bloch, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). The activity designed for learners should be stimulating and helpful for learners to create the meaningful text. It is important to note that literacy is not a linear process (Raison, 1994). It should not be expected that all learners will acquire necessary literacy skills at the same level. Some learners will be fast in learning but many learners may require attention and more time for improvement. It is important for teachers to assist learners to bridge the knowledge gap (Bloch, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). It is important for teachers to understand that each learner has potential for learning. Therefore, appropriate support from teachers is significance to facilitate the development of literacy in young learners.

The role of language and literacy in preparing young learners for educational success cannot be overlooked. However, the challenge facing the education system is language policy and the dominance of English at the early stage of learning. There is a need to give enough time for children to master potential skills in home language (Reeves *et al.*, 2008; Baker, 2006). This can be done by overseeing proper implementation of language policies and understanding advantages of multilingual approach which favour developing of home languages while learning a new language. This is supported in several reports conducted in South Africa about literacy in the foundation phase classrooms e.g. some evaluation reports on learning and teaching literacy in primary school in South Africa (Prinsloo and Heugh 2013; Reeves *et al.*, 2008).

Also, teachers training should aim at producing multi-competent teachers (Cook, 2003), teachers who have knowledge and ability to function in different languages. This will make availability of resourceful teachers who are able to help learners learn from one language to another, a process known as "translanguaging" (Gracia, 2009). Embracing multilingualism in schools will enable learners to strengthen skills in their home language and

they will be able to add skills in a new language without sacrificing any language to subtraction (Baker, 2006).

### Acknowledgement

I thank my employer, The Open University of Tanzania for affording me the opportunity to write up this paper successfully. Many thanks also should to my Masters supervisor, Prof. Vuyokazi Nomlomo at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa for invaluable contribution to this work and to the editors for having interest in reading this work.

### References

- Baker, C. (2006). *Foundation of bilingual education and bilingualism* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Bloch, C. (1996). Literacy in the Early Years: Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Early Childhood Classrooms. *PRAESA Occasional Papers*, 6.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cook, V. (2008). *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*. London: Arnold.
- Cummins, J. (2007). Promoting Literacy in Multilingual Contexts. What works? Research into Practice. Available on [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/litercaynumeracy/inspire/research/whatWorks.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/litercaynumeracy/inspire/research/whatWorks.html). Accessed on 2015/02/08.
- Cummins, J. V., Bismilla, P., Chow, S., Cohen, F., Giampapa, L., Leoni, P., Sandhu and P. Sastri. (2005). Affirming identity in multilingual classrooms. *The Whole Child*, 63(1), 38 - 43.
- Cummins, J. (1981). *Empowering minority students*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education
- Department of Education (DoE), (1997). *Language in Education Policy*. Government Gazette, 17997 (383) Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Department of Education (DoE) (2002b. C2005). *Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-3 (Schools) Foundation Phase*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Department of Education (DoE) (2002b. C2005). *Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-3 (Schools) Languages-English Home Languages*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Department of Education (DoE), (2002a). *Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (schools) Policy*. Government Gazette, 443(23406) Pretoria: Government Printer.

- Department of Education (DoE), (2011). *National Curriculum Statement Grade R-12 Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Department of Education (DoE) Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Foundation Phase Home Language Grades R-3.
- Department of Basic Education (DoE), (2011). *Report on the Annual National Assessment of 2011*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- De Klerk, V. (2002). Language issues in our schools: Whose voice counts? Part 1: The parents speak. *Perspective in education*, Volume 20 (1).
- Edward, V. (2009). *Learning to be Literate: Multilingual Perspectives*. Great Britain: MPG Books Ltd.
- Edwards, V. (1983; 1987). Language in Multicultural classroom. *Education in a multicultural society*.
- Garcia, O. (2009). *Bilingual Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: A Global Perspective*. Singapore: Utopia Press Pte Ltd.
- Gambrell, L.B., Morrow, L.M. and Pressley, M. (2007). *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*. New York: A Division of Guilford Publications, Inc.
- Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning: Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom*. United States of America: Heinemann.
- Goodman, K.S. (1992). Why whole language is today's agenda in education. *Language Arts*, 69, (188-199).
- Gregory, E. (1997). *One child, many worlds: early learning in multicultural communities*. USA: David Fulton Publishers.
- Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Health, S. (1986). Socio-cultural contexts of language development. In *Beyond language, social and cultural factors in schooling language minority children* (pp.143-186). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and assessment center, California State University.
- Hill, A.M. (2009). "An investigation into reasons for underperformance in Literacy in Grades 3 and 6 in selected national quantiles 1,2,and 3schools in the Western Cape Educational Department". Educational Papers and Report. Paper 4. [Online]. Available: [http://dk.cput.ac.za/ed\\_Papers/4](http://dk.cput.ac.za/ed_Papers/4). [Accessed on 20march, 2011].
- Howie, S; Venter, E; and van Staden, S. 2006. The effect of multilingual policies on performance and progression in reading literacy in South African primary schools. University of Pretoria. SouthAfrica. [Online]. Available: [http://www.iea.nl/fileadmin/user\\_upload/IRC2006/IEA\\_Program/PIRLS/Howie\\_et\\_all\\_2\\_final.pdf](http://www.iea.nl/fileadmin/user_upload/IRC2006/IEA_Program/PIRLS/Howie_et_all_2_final.pdf). [Accessed on 3November, 2010].
- Howie, S., Venter, E., van Staden, S., Zimmerman, L., Long, C., Scherman, V. and Archer, E. (2007). *Progress in reading literacy study (PIRLS)*:

- South African children's reading achievement. Summary report. University of Pretoria.
- Jarvis, S. and Pavlenko, A. (2008). *Crosslinguistic influence in language and cognition*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Jewitt, C. & Kress, G. (2003). *Multimodal Literacy*. New York: Peter Lang publishing.
- Jordaane, S. and Pillay, R. (2009). Beginning my journey of professional development: The Language Teacher and the Teaching Profession. In Ferreira, A. (ed.). *Teaching Language*. (pp.1 - 10). Northlands: Macmillan South Africa.
- Kenner, C. (2000). Children writing in a multilingual nursery. In, M. Martin-Jones and K. Jones (eds) *Multilingual literacies: Reading and Writing Different worlds*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Krashen, S.D. (1987). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Prentice-Hall International
- Krashen, S.D. (1988). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Prentice-Hall International
- Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Langer, J. (1984). Examining background knowledge and text comprehension: *Reading Research Quarterly*, 68, (629-481).
- Latham, D. (2002). *How children learn to write: Supporting and Developing Children's Writing in School*. London: Sage.
- Martin-Jones, M. and Jones, K. (2000). *Multilingual literacies: Reading and Writing Different worlds*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Perez, B. (1994). Spanish literacy development: A descriptive study of four bilingual whole language classroom. *Journal of Reading Behaviour*, (26) 14-94.
- Phillipson, Robert. (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-437146-8
- Pinker, S. (2009). *Language Learnability and Language Development*, With New Commentary by the Author. Harvard University Press.
- Prinsloo, M. and Stein, P. (2004). 'What's inside the box'? Children early encounters with literacy in South African classrooms. *Perspectives in Education*, 22(2): 67-84.
- Prinsloo, C.H. and Heugh, K. (2013). The role of language and literacy in preparing South African learners for educational success: Lessons learnt from a classroom study in Limpopo Province. Pretoria: *Human Sciences Research Council*.

- Raison, G. (1994). *Writing Developmental Continuum*. Education Department of Western Australia, Australia: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Reeves, C., Heugh, K., Prinsloo, C.H., Macdonald, C., Netshitangani, T. (2008). Evaluation of literacy teaching in primary schools in Limpopo Province. Pretoria: *Human Sciences Research Council*.
- Scribner, S. and Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Snow, C.E. (2014). Language, literacy and the needs of the multilingual child. *Perspectives in Education Special Issue*. 32(1), 7 - 16.
- Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. (1993). Introduction: The New Literacy studies. In: B Street (eds.) *Cross-cultural Approaches to literacy*. Cambridge: University Press, 1-22.
- Street, B. (1995). *Social Literacies*. London: Longman.
- Street, B. (eds.) (1997). Social Literacies. In V. Edwards & D. Corson (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, 2, 33-41 Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Street, B. (2000). "Literacy events and Literacy Practices": Theory and Practice in the New Literacy Studies. In: M. Martin-Jones and K. Jones (eds) *Multilingual Literacies: Reading and Writing different Worlds*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin's, 18-29.
- Street, B. (eds.) (2005). *Literacies Across Educational Contexts: Mediating Learning and Teaching*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon Publishing.
- Street, B. (2006). Understanding and Defining Literacy. Paper commissioned for Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for life: 1-25. [Online]. Available: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001461/146186e.pdf/> [Accessed: March 2011].
- Schickedanz, J. (1999). *Much more than the ABC: The early stages of reading and writing*. Washington DC: NAEYC.
- Turner, J. and Youb, K. (2005). Learning about Building Literacy Communities in Multicultural and Multilingual Classrooms from Effective Elementary Teachers. *Literacy Teaching and Learning* 10(1), 21 - 41.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Western Cape Education Department, (2006). WCED Literacy and Numeracy strategy 2006-2016. Provincial Government of the Western Cape. Cape Town: Government Printers.
- Western Cape Provincial Government, (2007). Launch of the WECD Language Transformation Plan by Western Cape MEC for Education, Mr. Cameron Dugmore. Cape Town. 03 February.

Wongfillmore, L. (1979). Individual differences in Second Language acquisition. In D.J. Fillmore, D. Kempler and W.S. Wange (Eds), *Individual differences in language ability and language behavior* (PP-203-228) San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Yilmaz, K. (2008). Constructivism: Its Theoretical Underpinnings, Variations, and Implications for Classroom Instruction. *Educational Horizons*, 86(3), 161-172.

### Appendix 1: Lesson Observations

#### Summary of lesson X to illustrate teacher approaches to support learners' literacy practices

Activity by learners	Teacher Activity/Strategy	Example from the lesson
Listen	Questioning for baseline assessment	Line 1
Give response (little)	Provide a synonym word (small)	Line 2 and line 3
Learners responding to questions	more words to give synonyms such as start/begin, rich/wealth, under/below	Line 4 and line 5
Responding to questions with help from the teacher	Draw questions from the story, ask about title and cover of the story book	Line 6 and line 7, line 8
Responding to questions independently	Rephrase questions and give some clues to questions	Line 8
Focus on sight words on the board	Refer learners to sight words on the board to identify sounds of each words	Line 9
They say the sounds in the given word	Ask sounds can be heard from the word 'planet'	Line 10 and line 11
Learners continue responding to questions	Compliment learners as they respond to questions correctly Encourage learners on intervention programme to speak as well	Line 12 and line 13
Reading sight words loud	The whole class requested to read sight words	Line 13 and line 14
Reading the story together with the teacher	Ask learners to focus on the story (shared reading)	Line 15 and line 16
A learner try but could not get it right and silence	Ask learners to explain concept of planet	Line 17
Silence	Switches the languages from English into IsiXhosa to explain the concept of 'a planet' and paraphrase the questions	Line 18, line 19, line 20 and line 21
Responded to concept planet as South Africa and another learners responded	Pick up a learner to respond to the question	Line 22 and line 23
Responding to question without justification while a learner explain the notion of earth rotation	Asks another question based on the same concept	Line 24 and line 25

Activity by learners	Teacher Activity/Strategy	Example from the lesson
Listen to explanations	Teacher explain the notion of earth rotation which lead to day and night	Line 26
Listen while responding to questions related to story	Teacher continue to read the story while questioning learners (shared reading)	Line 27 and Line 28
A learner volunteers to read the story	Request learners to volunteer read story	Line 29
A learner reads the story	Points to words while for all learners to see while a learner reads	Line 30
Read the story individually	Instruct learners to read the story individually (independent reading)	Line 32
Begin to write a story	Instruct learners to write a story for today at assembly title: remember the eagle	Line 33
Proceed with story writing process	Instruct learners to develop their story using pictures and words (independent writing)	Line 34