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# Using research to enable teachers in the foundation phase to understand why their learners could struggle to develop home language abilities

## **Abstract**

Home language abilities are important upon entering school, when children learn new concepts and skills such as reading, writing and mathematics. The home language also lays the foundation for the development of a second language. In terms of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the use of the 11 official languages of South Africa has to be advanced and thus the right to be taught in one's home language from Grade R to Grade 3 is protected in the South African policies. The author opines that children's home languages are not always developed correctly

and according to the standardised form of the various home languages. The importance of home language development will be discussed in this article and also the factors to be found in the home environment and in the school situation that could hinder and delay home language development..

**Keywords:** home environment, home language, home language development, parents' influence, school environment, standardised form of a language, teachers.

## Introduction

### *Teaching in the home language*

It is accepted that home language or mother-tongue education is important, especially for young children. The home language lays the foundation for learning, for mastering new concepts and knowledge and even for learning a second language. In South Africa, parents can choose whether their children – upon entering school for the first time – should be taught in their home language or in English as a second language. Many parents in South Africa opt to send their children to schools where, in the foundation phase, they are taught in their home languages.

Research in language education and human development has shown that the use of the home language is one of the best ways to perform cognitively and to cooperate with others well (Stoop, 2017:1-2). This view is reiterated by Lafron and Webb (2010:3), who state that education in the mother tongue is much superior to education in a language that is not used at home. This viewpoint implies that it is beneficial for children in South Africa that the African languages, which are the home languages of most learners, should be used on their first school day. The home language could play a vital role in the growth of cognitive and social skills of young children. Home language abilities are important for young learners upon entering school, where they have to learn new concepts, skills such as reading, writing and mathematics, and must learn to socialise with the other young learners.

In the lives of children and adults, the home language plays an important role as it includes the culture and identities of people. A language, and specifically the home language, is tied to the idea of belonging. With regard to African languages, Deyi (2018:1) states that an “African language is not just a series of words but includes certain African nuances that emerge in the form of idioms, metaphors and euphemisms, as well as praises.”

In section 6 of the South African Constitution, the 11 official languages of South Africa are recognised, and it is stipulated that the languages must enjoy equal respect and appreciation and should thus be treated impartially. In terms of section 6, the state is also obliged to advance the use of these languages (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996:4). This gave rise to the continued use of mother tongue teaching in Grades R to 3 in South Africa after 1996.

The right and the importance to be taught in one’s home language is well protected and entrenched in the South African policies. However, the correctness of the home languages, as set out in the standards of the various official languages, is not mentioned in the policies. The question arises whether the home languages are taught correctly, so that young learners are taught the correct standardised form of their home languages.

In this article, research about the importance of the development of foundation phase learners' home language, be it the language of learning and teaching for the young learners or not, is discussed. The article specifically addresses problems that could exist with the development of young learners' home language abilities and that teachers should be aware of. The article will attempt to shed light on reasons why the home languages of some children and young learners are not developed well and also not used correctly according to the standardised form of the languages during their early years at home and in the foundation phase at school. The reasons are to be found inside the school, but also outside the school situation. The author opines that if teachers and persons involved in the education of young learners are aware of the reasons for the underdevelopment of young learners' home languages, they could be in a better position to attend to the problems and eventually the development of the home languages, which in the end could support the learners to make better progress at school.

### ***The standardised form of the home language***

When teaching a language and, even more importantly, a home language, the standardised variety of the language should be kept in mind and used. It is acknowledged that there are language varieties and dialects of a language. The term 'vernacular', which was previously used to refer to the African languages in South Africa, is for instance used to describe a non-standard variety of a language that is spoken by a specific geographical, ethnic and social group. It is used informally when talking to family, friends and neighbours. The non-standardised form of a language exists in opposition to the leading standardised form of the language (Lafon & Webb 2010:13). There are non-standardised forms of the official languages in South Africa, such as Pretoria Sotho or tsotsi language. With regard to isiZulu, a distinction is made between 'deep' or 'proper' isiZulu (isiZulu esijulile), which is the standardised form, and the non-standardised varieties used in urban areas and which is known as 'urban isiZulu' (isiZulu sasedolobheni') (Magagula 2009:1).

The norms of a standard variety of a language are usually specified by an authoritative body. In South Africa, various language boards attended to the standard form of the various languages before 1994. After 1994, the boards were dissolved and the National Language Bodies (NLBs) were formed. They function under the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). PanSALB attends to issues pertaining to all 11 official languages in South Africa. The tasks of the NLBs are to attend to the standardisation of spelling, orthography and terminology of the official languages. Standard forms of the languages are thus available (Pan South African Language Board). Webb, Lafon and Pare (2010:281) opine that the African languages in South Africa are not adequately technologised and technical terms for new developments must be coined. When it comes to teaching in the home language of learners, the aim should be to develop learners' language skills using the standardised form of the language (Lafon & Webb 2010:14-15). The question arises whether teachers are acquainted with the correct standardised forms of the various South African official languages.

## ***The importance of home language development***

Discussing the use of home languages in South Africa could stir up a hornet's nest, which is not the purpose of this article. But for academic purposes, the development of children's home languages cannot be repudiated. As far back as 2003, Utne-Brock already wrote about the issue that in Africa many children's home languages are not recognised and used in schools. She states that it is a fact that the language of instruction [such as English] means a barrier to knowledge for the masses of African children. The use of a language of instruction and a culture most children are familiar with would signify on the part of governments a willingness to embark on the necessary redistribution of power between the elites and the masses. It looks like the structural adjustment policies meted out for Africa as well as capital led globalisation has led to a strengthening of the former colonial languages to the detriment of the African languages - the languages most Africans speak (Utne-Brock 2003:85).

Children's home languages are the languages which support them to socialise into their families and eventually their communities. Home languages are the medium that nurture their earliest relationships and experiences, their first ideas how the world works and their own identities (Illinois early learning project 2019:1).

In a recent study by Van Staden, Bosker and Bergbauer (2016:441), evidence is provided that children are disadvantaged when their home languages are not developed and when education for children in Grade 1 to 3 is not provided in their mother tongue. The problem is exacerbated when there are few linguistic similarities between the language of instruction, which in the South African context is usually English, and the other home languages of learners.

There are many aspects of young children's home languages that must be developed. Perhaps the main aspect is the necessity of having a vocabulary that is large enough so that it could lead into the academic language used at the various phases of the school environment. Children's oral language should also be developed, as this will eventually support reading comprehension once they start to read. Reading comprehension could be influenced if children's oral language proficiency is not at the level of the texts that they must read.

Phonological awareness is another language ability that enhances the development of a home language. Phonological awareness is an awareness of the sounds of speech that occur in a language and it does not necessarily deal with the meaning of that sound. The *th* sound in English, pronounced as /ð/ (voiced dental fricative) or as /θ/ (voiceless dental fricative), are specific sounds of the English language and these sounds do not occur in the other official languages of South Africa. With regard to the acquisition of a second language, Irujo (2016:3) states that once phonological awareness has been developed in a language, it can be passed on to another language. For most learners in South Africa, English as a second language becomes the language of learning and teaching from Grade 4 and onwards. If phonological awareness of learners in Grades 1 to 3 could be developed in their home languages, this could be a valuable asset for

them because if they have mastered phonological awareness in their home languages, it will not be necessary to develop it again when they learn English or another language. They will only have to learn the unknown sounds of the new second language.

## Methodology

In this article, both interviews and a document analysis were used. In one interview, a language expert discussed how Xitsonga is not used correctly by teachers, and in another interview a teacher explains that some of the young learners who, during the week, live in the hostel at the school where she teaches, seldom hear and use their home language during this period. The other interviews were conducted with teachers in the foundation phase in four schools in a rural part of South Africa. All the interviews were semi-structured. According to Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle (2010:124), semi-structured interviews have the same characteristics as structured interviews, because the precise time, date as well as topics also have to be determined in advance.

Some of the data that is used in this article was obtained from an analysis of applicable research documents with reference to Africa and South Africa. A literature review shows what has already been done in a specific study field, what is emerging from the research and recent thinking about the topic (Monash University 2019:1). In a document analysis, there is no communication between the researcher and participants (McMillan and Schumacher 2014:386).

The article thus used a mixed-methods approach departing from a pragmatic approach. According to Armitage (2007:3), pragmatism is a workable approach as it allows researchers to study areas that they are interested in, using suitable methods, and then to use the findings in a way that is in harmony with their belief systems. Regarding education, Maheschwari (2011:4) is of the opinion that it is a social process with its roots in problem-solving. Pragmatists believe that there is a need for continuous improvement to achieve a desired result, which aligns with the aim of this article, namely improving the teaching of home languages to young learners. The article also received clearance from the Ethics Committee of the College of Education to which the author is attached.

This article attempts to shed light on factors in the home environment and at school level that could hinder the development of young learners' home language abilities. Understanding how the factors could play out in the lives of young learners, could enable teachers and persons involved in primary school education to understand why some learners' home language abilities are not developed well.

## The home environment

### *The home language of parents or substitute parents*

The language that children learn in whatever home they live as preschoolers and upon entering the formal school situation, is the home language and it is the parents or substitute parents who, albeit usually unknowingly, teach the children the language.

As discussed, in South Africa children are not necessarily taught in their home languages when they go to school for the first time. Many non-English-speaking parents opt to send their children to schools where English is the language of learning and teaching, thus choosing the straight-into-English option. Other parents' children speak a certain language at home, which is the mother's home language. But upon entering school, it is decided that the children should go to a school where the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is the father's home language. The same can also happen when the LoLT of a school nearest to where children live, is not the home language of the children, but their parents or caregivers decide for various reasons, usually economic and safety, that the children should go to this school.

There is also a growing group of children in South Africa whose parents are foreigners and who live in rural areas or in the townships, and who are not taught in a South African home language in Grades 1 to 3. Howie, Venter and van Staden (2008:551) state that the language policy in education does not make provision for the complexity of a position where learners in the foundation phase are taught in a language that differs from the language spoken at home. Therefore, young learners are not necessarily accommodated in an additive bilingual language model, where the home language is taught and developed in Grades 1 to 3, and English as the first additional language is introduced slowly. These children often feel unwelcome and even unsafe at school. Dixon (2018:2) argues that children who do not speak the language of learning and teaching of the school and who are the children of foreigners, often fall victim to bullying, racism, foreigner hatred and language prejudice. The reality is that there are children in the foundation phase who, for many reasons, are introduced into a language system of immersion (Admiraal, Westhoff & de Bot 2006:75). These children's home languages are thus not developed further in the school.

In South Africa, where the majority of children have to learn and are taught from Grade 4 onwards in English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), although it is an additional language for them, it is important that non-English-speaking children acquire English well. The continued use of the mother tongue at home can play an important role in this, as recent research has shown that the constant use of the mother tongue at home supports children's acquisition of English. "In fact, the findings suggest that the continued development of a child's home language – with explicit emphasis upon the development of strong oral language skills – is a direct source of support for a child's acquisition of English, and particularly successful reading in English" (Head Start 2019).

## ***The influence of the home environment on children's language abilities***

There are many issues involved in the development of abilities in language and conceptual skills of young children. Many of the factors are individual but there are also major general factors that apply to various circumstances. Socioeconomic status is regarded as one of the many vital factors in children's language development (Safwat & Sheikhan 2014:262). This is reiterated in a study by Niewenhuis and Hooimeijer (2016:321), in which they selected 88 articles and used meta-regression as method. They found that two of the factors that influenced the relationship between neighbourhoods and individual educational outcomes were poverty in the neighbourhood and the educational climate in the neighbourhood. This, according to the two researchers, would eventually influence the children's language development.

Brito and Noble (2018:1) state that there are 15.5 million children in the USA who come from poor households, and that the home backgrounds of these children have a significant influence on their language development. Because the language skills of these children are not developed well, it leads to gaps in their school readiness later on, and eventually also to academic underachievement.

According to David Berliner, who has done extensive research on the American school system, the big problem in the American education system is not to be found in the American schools, but outside the school. He states:

It's neither this nation's teachers nor its curriculum that impede the achievement of our children. The roots of America's educational problems are in the numbers of Americans who live in poverty. America's educational problems are predominantly in the numbers of kids and their families who are homeless; whose families have no access to Medicaid or other medical services (Strauss 2018).

Berliner's viewpoint surely applies to South Africa as well, where poverty still shapes the future of many children born and raised in such conditions. These children do not receive the necessary intellectual stimulation at home, and thus their social communicative skills are not developed. The delay in communicative skills can lead to poor expressive and receptive language and, according to McLaughlin (2011:1183) to "increased difficulty with reading, writing, attention and socialization."

There are groups of children in South Africa who grow up with their grandparents. This happens predominantly in rural areas where children live and go to school while staying with their grandparents. The parents of these children work in towns and in cities where there are more job opportunities. Issues surrounding the importance of an oral culture to develop a home language are surely addressed in these households, where the grandparents predominantly speak their own home languages. The children are thus exposed to their home languages at the homes of their grandparents and in the community. The culture of oral storytelling could be fostered if the grandparents are aware of the importance of telling their own and other stories to the children in their care. Taylor, Zubrick and Christensen (2016:297) state that shared book-reading at

home develops children's oral language and this provides the bridge from oral language to literacy.

In the rural areas in South Africa there is, however, usually a lack of disposable income and therefore items such as books, newspapers and magazines are hardly available. Many of the grandparents are illiterate or only basically literate and thus they cannot support their young custodians in developing language skills such as reading, writing and spelling in the various home languages (Edwards & Ngwaru 2011:442).

It is, however, not only poverty that can influence children's language development at home; insufficient language development can also be the fate of children from middle class and affluent homes. A factor that is often found in this group of families is isolation from adults, and specifically parents. Children's needs for emotional closeness to parents are often neglected because parents have professional careers, and this could mean less family time. Often, the children partake in many after-school activities, meaning less family time and time to have discussions in the home language (Luthar & Latendresse 2005:52). In one-parent families, time to spend with the children and to communicate in the home language could also be less than when there are two parents.

During an interview with a master's student, the author came to learn about another issue regarding affluent parents. Some prefer to place their children in boarding schools to provide the parents with more time to attend to their occupations and income during the week. This student was teaching at a so-called Model C school just outside one of the cities in Gauteng, and the language of learning and teaching at that school was English. Some learners in the school came from the surrounding poor community, but there were also learners from affluent families in the city and they were staying in the hostel. During the week, the hostel thus became the home of this group of learners. The parents of these learners were predominantly businesspeople and professionals who, according to the master's student, were so busy that they could not care for their children during the week and thus placed them in the hostel. In contrast to their poor classmates, these learners had everything physical that they needed and more, and received, for instance, big birthday presents, but they were often in need of emotional support (Viljoen 2012). In the school and hostel, their home languages were only spoken by learners who had the same home language, and the development of their home languages was limited to weekends and holidays at home.

There are instances where educated parents encourage their preschool children to speak English, as they associate education with a knowledge of English. These parents tend to speak their home languages incorrectly and, consequently, their children enter school speaking a mixture of English and a home language which, in the study by Mashiya, is isiZulu. These children then come to school reciting the days of the weeks and months of the year in English, and sometimes even English nursery rhymes, but unable to speak their home language properly (Mashiya, 2011:25).

From the above, it is clear that the home environment can have a profound influence of the development of children's abilities in their home languages.



## ***The influence of the community on children's language abilities***

In the research that she did at four rural schools where Sepedi was the language of teaching and learning, Masalesa (2016:190) observed that, in the communities surrounding three of the schools, isiNdebele dominated. In the one community, the majority spoke Sepedi, while in the other communities, the two languages had more or less the same population. The teachers informed Masalesa that isiNdebele was the lingua franca of the three communities. It is used in the shops and when people talk to their neighbours. Masalesa also noticed that, during break, the learners at these schools tend to speak isiNdebele when they play. She states that, at the fourth school, "where learners hear and speak their home language, Sepedi, in the school, out of the classroom and also in the community, their command of their home language is much better" than in the other three schools (Masalesa 2016:190-191).

Masalesa's observation could be proof of isolated instances, but the fact that the community and the language of the community play a role in young children's lives cannot be denied.

## **The school environment**

With regard to the influence of the school on children's abilities in their home languages, aspects such as the language used by some of the teachers, the choice of language of instruction, the availability of reading materials and the importance of reading comprehension in the home language will be discussed.

## ***The language that some teachers use***

It is often accepted that when a teacher can speak a language, he or she can teach it, without considering the teacher's training to teach that language. In a study done in KwaZulu-Natal, Mashiya (2011:29) indicates that some teachers teaching in Grade R to Grade 2 had fears about their proficiency in the home language, isiZulu. Consequently, they acted contrary to the language in education policy, preferring to use English in the classroom. Mashiya (2011:27) further opines that it is especially teachers from urban areas who were teaching in rural schools who had a lack of proficiency in the home language that had to be used as the language of learning and teaching. Jansen (2013) agrees with Mashiya when he argues that one of the reasons why English is the language of choice in some schools is that the African home languages are badly taught.

Instances where teachers speak the language of learning and teaching incorrectly have been reported. In a study conducted in the foundation phase classes of four schools in rural areas in South Africa, Masalesa did research about the teaching of reading and writing to Sepedi-speaking learners. In two of the schools she found that there were teachers who spoke Sepedi incorrectly. The teachers used, for instance, the isiNdebele

word *letha* instead of the Sepedi word *tliša* for bring; the isiNdebele word *idla* for the Sepedi word *ija* which means eat; and the isiNdebele word *ugogo* for the word *koko* in Sepedi, which means grandmother (Masalesa 2016:208). The words *gogo* and *koko* are often used in South Africa. However, when a Sepedi-speaking young learner talks about a *ugogo* in the classroom and he or she comes across *koko*, the correct word for grandmother in Sepedi, in a reader, a problem with understanding and eventually spelling could arise. The child might think that the [g] sound as in *ugogo* is pronounced and spelt with a [k] as in *koko*, not knowing that the spelling depends on the language that is used.

In her research, Masalesa also found instances where the meaning of Sepedi words was influenced by isiNdebele. During classroom observation, she noticed that the teachers and learners spoke, for instance, about *angimazi*, which means 'I do not know where he or she is.' This is a direct translation from isiNdebele to Sepedi. The learners should have said in Sepedi *a k emo tsebe*, which means 'I do not know her' (Masalesa 2016:208-209). Although incidents like these do not happen on a big scale, issues such as this incorrect use of the standardised home language could influence the correct acquisition of their home language by young learners.

There are also instances when the language that teachers speak, is influenced by dialects or local incorrect versions of the standardised language. This could result in the learners not hearing, reading or writing the correct standardised form of their home languages. After she had translated readers into Xitsonga for the foundation and intermediate phases, Mukhari (2019) was approached by a group of teachers in Mpumalanga about the translation. The teachers informed her that there were instances in the readers where the translation was incorrect. After discussions with the teachers, Mukhari realised that they were using a dialect of Xitsonga spoken in that area and not the correct standardised Xitsonga. Examples of the words that were not standardised, but that the teachers were using, are: *pela* instead of the correct Xitsonga form *hlamba*, which means to bath in English, and *khulumisa* instead of the correct Xitsonga word *vulavurisa*, which means 'to cause someone to talk' in English. There were also words that according to the teachers were not spelled correctly in the readers. In the readers, the Xitsonga word for sounds was, for instance, used. According to the teachers, the word *mipfumawulo* should be written as *minpfumawulo*. The use of a class 4 prefix (mi-) and a class 3 prefix (n) in the same word is, however, wrong. The teachers also opined that the Xitsonga for the English word 'root' is *rimintsu* instead of the correct standardised Xitsonga word *rimitsu*. It also happens that the language of the Mozambican people who live in Mpumalanga influences the correct standardised Xitsonga. Mukhari (2019) provided the following example: The Mozambican people would say "yindlu yisasekle" instead of the South African Xitsonga "yindlu yi sasekile".

From this discussion, it is clear that teachers, including foundation phase teachers, should have a sound knowledge of the language that they speak in class and use as the language of learning and teaching. When a person speaks a language, it cannot be presumed that the person knows the language well.

There are not many reported cases and studies about the incorrect use of the various home languages by teachers in South Africa, but it does happen, and it influences young learners' acquisition of the correct form and understanding of their home languages. Perhaps the Department of Basic Education could f accentuate in their policies the importance of using the standardised form of the various South African home languages and encourage teachers to teach learners' home languages correctly. Mashiya (2011:29) aptly states: "As it is difficult to undo wrong words in children, teachers should be careful about the way they use language and should check language items they are unsure of before they teach."

### ***The choice of language of instruction in the foundation phase***

There are two views about the issue whether African languages have enough terminology to be used for academic purposes. The one group of people opines that African languages do not have the facilities to allow them to be used as languages of teaching and learning. This group believes that the use of African languages in schools is a waste of time. This group thus does not support the development of all children's home languages in South Africa. The other group believes that African languages have enough vocabulary and terminology to be used for learning and teaching purposes. This view aligns with the belief that children's home languages should be developed by using them in schools to teach reading and for the development of teaching materials (Deyi 2018:1).

The development of children's home languages could also play an important role in their acquisition of a second language, which in most cases in South Africa is English. Much research has been done in this regard. The Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards: English language learner home language development (2013), states that the development of children's cognitive, linguistic and literacy skills in their home languages lay the basis for the development of these abilities in English. Children's knowledge of and ability to speak their home languages is the first step in the acquisition of literacy skills and competence in English as their second language. But when young children enter preschools where English is spoken and not their home languages, they lose their need to speak their home languages. They could also lose their ability to speak their home languages (Illinois Early Learning Project 2019:1)

In Australia, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2017) describes the importance of supporting home languages in schools as it could eventually lead to higher achievement in English. The home language lays the strong foundation for learning which will help developing English as a second language. Dixon (2018:1) is of the opinion that learners learn more when they are in a position to use their home language. If learners have the opportunity to learn another language, such as English, using their home language, their comprehension of and performance is expected to improve. If learners are able to move between two languages, the load on their cognition becomes less and, as one learner said: "I can flow with my home language" (Dixon 2018:1).

With regard to Africa, Kioko, Ndung'u, Njoroge and Mutiga (2014) report that if children are educated at school in a language that they do not understand, it is a torture for them. This happens in many countries in Africa, despite the fact that empirical studies done in both developed and developing countries have shown that learners who are taught in a language other than their home language, have lower levels of achievement and face higher dropout rates at school. In a study that the authors did in Kenya, where the learners are taught in English when they enter school, they found that 52 percent of the Standard 3 (Grade 6) learners could not read and this, according to them, was as a result of the language of instruction.

Taylor and Coetzee (2013) did a study of 9 000 primary schools in South Africa which had predominantly black children coming from poor households. In the study, they used the national survey of the Department of Basic Education for 2007 to 2011 to identify the language of teaching and learning in each of the schools. Then they combined it with the annual assessment of 2012 for children in all the grades. Using a combination of the data sets, they could separate the effects of school and home circumstances from the impact of the language of teaching and learning on the performance of learners in standardised English tests for Grades 4 to 6. Looking at the scores of the learners whose schools were of a similar quality and coming from similar home environments, those learners who were taught in their home language during their first three years at schools did better in the English test of the Department of Basic Education in Grades 4 to 6 than those who were taught in English as an additional language in Grades 1 to 3. The researchers state that the difference in the score is more or less the same as a third of a year extra learning for those learners who were instructed in their home languages during Grades 1 to 3, and this could represent a big additional academic input for them. Taylor and Coetzee (2013) aptly opine: "This finding seems to be in line with the thinking of education specialists, who have for many years promoted the advantages of mother-tongue instruction in the early stages of children's education."

### ***The availability of teaching and reading materials in all the home languages***

When one visits books shops or libraries, it is clear that there is a need for story books for young people written in the African languages. It can be presumed that the same problem exists in classroom and in school libraries. Access to print materials in the African languages in South Africa remains problematic. In turn, this also influences the use of African languages in schools and the development of learners' home languages. According to Deyi (2018:1), improving current teaching materials in schools means translating material from English into an African language and not attempting to develop authentic original African language materials. Direct translations are often criticised as errors in the specific nuances could occur.

Some teachers are positive about using the home language, such as isiZulu, as the LoLT to teach literacy, but their biggest problem is the availability of resources in the home

language. Teachers speak about the use of the home language in conjunction with the shortage of learning materials in the home language (Mbatha 2012:68).

Despite book campaigns at national and provincial level to supply 'real' books for reading and enjoyment in African languages, this type of books remains scarce. Books and reading materials are not easy to find outside the bigger cities and are often too expensive for teachers and parents to buy. Edwards and Ngwaru (2011:441) are also of the opinion that the departments of education in the provinces do not spend enough money to purchase 'real' books in the various African languages for schools. Unfortunately, according to Van Staden et al., (2016:9), the language infrastructure at schools still consists mainly of books in English.

The publishing houses play a role in the availability of reading materials in African languages for schools. Publishers argue that they do not know whether there is really a market as the government has not undertaken to buy certain books. Books cannot be printed if the publishing companies do not have the assurance that the books will be bought by schools (Edwards & Ngwaru 2011:442).

It is clear that if the Department of Basic Education is serious about home language development in South Africa, attention should be given to the availability of enough teaching and reading materials in all home languages.

### ***Reading comprehension in the home language***

Reading is one of the difficult language skills that young learners must master upon entering school for the first time. Reading comprises both the ability to decode a word or words in sentences and to understand what it means. Both these skills must be developed. Already in 1973, Goodman said that if one reads for accuracy only and not also for meaning, it is like barking at print (Dymock 1993:86). With the necessary knowledge of the sounding system of a language, any person can bark at words when reading without necessarily comprehending what is read. Reading comprehension is the process of being absorbed with a text with the idea of constructing meaning from it. It is closely related to future academic activities, as well as future life activities.

When it comes to reading, Genesee (2019:3) regards learners' home language as the most valuable resource for learning to read in English. He states that worldwide research has proved that, when children learn to read in a second language, they are able to use many abilities and knowledge from their home language to support the development of reading skills in a second language. Studies have shown that when learners have good reading abilities in their home language, they also have good reading skills in their second language, which could be English.

One of the language competences that must be mastered for success in reading is phonological awareness, which is not the same as phonics. Phonics is knowing how written letters relate to spoken language, whereas phonological awareness deals only

with oral language. Phonological awareness deals with the ability to manipulate the sounds of oral language, such as being able to distinguish the first and last letter of words. It is also the ability to split oral language such as words into syllables and individual phonemes (International Literacy Association 2018:3). Irujo (2016:1) draws attention to the fact that if phonological awareness is developed in children's home language, it will transfer to other languages that must be learned. Thus, if children in South Africa have been trained in and are acquainted with phonological awareness in their home languages, it can be transferred to English when English is learned as their second language or first additional language. Their reading abilities and reading comprehension in English, which becomes the language of learning and teaching for many learners in Grade 4, could greatly benefit from it.

Spencer and Wagner (2017:199) point to the fact that in the United States, a big proportion of non-English speaking learners are at risk of have reading problems when they enter school where they are taught in English. It is estimated that only 6 percent of learners in Grade 4 who are English second-language speakers have reading levels that are above competence in reading comprehension. At Grade 8 level, the percentage of learners who score above competence in reading comprehension drops to three percent. These children did not have the opportunity to learn to read in their home language. They thus had to master the art of decoding the words in an English text and, at the same time, understanding what is read in English as their second language. For many reasons, these children scored below the benchmark for reading in primary schools in the USA.

With regard to the South African situation, Zimmerman and Smit (2014) stress the importance of developing reading skills in the home language in Grades 1 to 3 for learners whose LoLT becomes English in Grade 4. They indicate that the basics of decoding and comprehension in reading should be in place in the home language when young learners move from Grade 3 to Grade 4. If non-English learners have mastered the basics of decoding and comprehension in their home languages, they could transfer it to English in Grade 4. This is the way in which these learners will be able to master cognitive academic language proficiency skills in English, which will help them to grasp the learning content, as well as other cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

## **Conclusion**

It is a given that the home language of children and young learners must be developed, as it lays the foundation for the acquisition of new knowledge, concepts, language skills and even for learning a second language. Savage (2017:1) aptly says in this regard: "Research indicates that having a strong mother tongue foundation leads to a much better understanding of the curriculum as well as a more positive attitude towards school, so it's vital that children maintain their first language when they begin schooling in a different language." Parents and the teaching staff at schools should also be aware of the fact that the home language has to be transferred to children correctly, as it is difficult to undo wrong words or wrong grammatical usage once children have learned it. If the

feedback from research could be considered and applied in schools, the important role of learners' home language could be an asset in their progress at school.

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