Improving Literacy in Africa: Changes Needed in Initial Reading in African Languages, and in Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Solutions are sought for the low level of literacy in Africa, e.g., in Malawi and South Africa, where international tests indicate that 80% of African children cannot read with understanding at the end of Grade 4, not in the home language (HL) or in English second language (ESL). Two crucial pedagogic causes are not mentioned in the literature: Firstly, the phonics approach to reading is prescribed, but African children cannot say some letter-sounds the way Europeans do, unless they learnt good English early. The syllabic approach to reading is more suited to Africa's syllabic languages.

Secondly, children are taught reading in two languages simultaneously, confusing them with two sets of letter-sounds. It is due to teachers' manuals for ESL in Grade 1, e.g., SA's untried *Lesson Plan*, which contradicts the Government's policy of reading only in the HL in Grade 1 while learning ESL orally. The *Lesson Plan* prescribes much **written** ESL from early in Grade 1, depriving children in two ways: confusion adds to reading problems, and they cannot acquire sufficient English from the written words, so that they fail to understand what they later read or memorise in English. Regarding the last issue, this paper also reviews empirical research on teaching ESL.

It is concluded that there is a need for more research and for new approaches to teaching in Grade 1, both the teaching of initial reading and the teaching of ESL.

Keywords: Literacy in Africa; Literacy in Malawi; South Africa's reading crisis; Approaches to reading African languages; Second Language Acquisition Research; Preparation for English medium education.

Section 1

1.1. Introduction

1.1.1. *The state of literacy in Africa*

Literacy in Africa has been at a very low level for decades. According to international research, sub-Saharan countries had the lowest rate for youth literacy in the world in 2012, only 72% (UNESCO, 2012).

Some of the main research results on sub-Saharan Africa stated by Norton (2014:635):

- Nearly 30 million children did not attend school.
- Class sizes were among the largest in the world.
- More than a third of learners did not reach Grade 4.
- More than 50% of learners who reached Grade 4 did not know 'the basics in reading.'

The last statement is still true, as confirmed by the results of the 2016 and 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The results for South Africa (SA) are that around 80% of Grade 4 learners 'do not have basic reading skills' **in the home language** (Howie et al. 2017:11). A recent article on initial reading in African languages indicates that in SA township schools, where the majority of learners attend, only about 20% of children learn to read in Grade 1, the others passing their grades by only memorising lessons and pretending to read (Cronje 2021). A recent report by an educational department regarding the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3) also admits the poor reading results of SA learners, especially the learners using African languages (DBE, 2020).

These findings for African countries indicate a need for more research regarding the teacher education of a specific group of teachers, viz. Foundation Phase (FP) teachers. How are they taught to teach initial reading? Are different approaches used for African and European languages? Why are specific approaches prescribed for teaching in the FP? What is, according to the Simple View of Reading (SVR), the best approach to use for **African languages**? (Note: The last question is grammatically correct as a direct question within a sentence.)

The Simple View of Reading is used in this article as a theoretical framework for learning to read. It sees competent reading as the product of two essential components: decoding skills and language comprehension skills. Decoding skills refer to the ability to accurately and fluently read words, recognizing and saying the letters in words according to the rules/codes of that language. Ideally, decoding skills and language comprehension skills should both be strong for learners to read well.

the Simple View of Reading conceptual framework (Stuart et al. 2008, cited Hoover and Gough, 1986) reduces it down to two key components:

- Word recognition – the ability to decode unknown words and recognise printed words.
- Language comprehension – the ability to understand the spoken words and use this process to understand the written text.

1.1.2. *Consequences of the reading crisis*

Undesirable consequences are suffered when children do not learn to read. Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019:25) write that of South African learners who start school, half do not reach the end of secondary school, and of those writing the matric examination, 25% fail. They blame it on 'learning deficits acquired at the lower levels of education.' That SA has one of the largest percentages of jobless people in the world is probably an offshoot of poor education. In Malawi, the drop-out rate in primary schools is even higher, and many of those who drop out cannot read at all and do not know much English.

Perry (2009:59-60) mentions another consequence, saying that 'literacy is a politically loaded activity,' that can be used to control those who do not become well versed and literate in the elite language. This points to the complicated problem of classist discrimination in Africa. Perry adds that, due to the importance of the elite language, parents want their children to learn English as a second language (ESL) without realising that an English-only policy for children who still have to learn reading and ESL is not advantageous. This paper will indicate ways in which the children of the poor are kept semi-literate, while pretending to act in their best interest by teaching **written** English early.

1.1.3. *Indications that it is best for children to learn reading in the home language*

Initial reading in the home language (HL) is widely recommended and receives much lip-service in Africa, but in some countries something else happens in reality, as will be shown. Norton (2014:642) mentions the principles of the Language-in-Education Conference held in South Sudan in 2012, of which one is that additional languages should be introduced only after learners have reached reading and writing competency in the language most familiar to them. She refers to a 1995 education program called *School for Life* (SFL) that was started in Ghana for out-of-school rural youth, aged 8–16. SFL presented a nine-month course in basic literacy in a local language, at the end of the work day, limiting class sizes to 25. Yet from 1995 to 2011, over 100,000 youth graduated from SFL, more than three quarters of whom afterwards attended formal schools. SFL enhanced students' self-esteem, and being able to read the HL helped them to read English. Piper, Zuilkowski & Mugenda (2014) report on empirical research done in Kenya, 2011–2014, to improve reading ability in Grades 1 and 2, the PRIMR Initiative. It supplied learner books in English and Kiswahili. Children learnt letter sounds in Kiswahili before learning the English letters, as they started reading English three months after starting with Kiswahili, learning only oral English at first. Treatment students did better in English than the controls on every score, with reading comprehension scores more than twice as high. The impact on Kiswahili was also good.

1.1.4. *Reading for meaning*

The advantage of initial reading in the HL is that learners can better understand what they read. Spaull and Pretorius (2019:17) say that if learners cannot grasp the 'basics of decoding' in their home language (HL) in Grade 1, reading for meaning later is very difficult. Norton (2014) also accentuates the conviction that early reading skills in the African languages will facilitate comprehension. However, most children do not attend to meaning unless teachers put in special effort for it. Cronje (1997:78) wrote about a Grade 3 learner who read very well in her third language, Afrikaans, reading about brushing a donkey's neck and back, and its name being Ears because of its long ears. When asked in Afrikaans to show the donkey's ears in the picture, she could not. Neither could any classmate. Yet when told, in Afrikaans: 'Show me

your ears,' she touched her ears, her face lit up, and with great joy she showed the donkey's ears, head, neck, and back, calling out the Afrikaans words. She knew them all, but having read her HL in Grade 1 without attention to meaning, and later ESL also, she did not try to understand what she was reading in Afrikaans in Grade 3.

Van Staden and Bosker (2011) also say that reading comprehension skills are not grasped as incidental learning but must be taught specifically, starting at an early age. For at-risk learners, the teaching should be even more thorough, one-on-one or in small groups. Rule and Land (2017) noticed that most teachers who grasped from their training that comprehension was an important aspect of reading were not able to translate this understanding into educational activities. Only one teacher succeeded and used strategies for helping learners to understand, such as asking questions, engaging learners in dialogue, getting them to discuss texts among themselves, and others.

However, recently much attention is given to reading lists of unrelated words, e.g., from a teachers' guide compiled by EGRAS. Using the lists of words with similar endings, etc., learners practise mechanical decoding instead of reading for meaning. Some teachers even help their learners to memorise the lists of ESL words they have to 'read' for examinations, as apparent fluency is all that matters. (unpublished observation in Grade 2, 2019). Piper, Schroeder & Trudell (2015:14) write about word reading: 'even if reading fluency can be bought, comprehension cannot.' The present paper explains SVR strategies – to develop decoding and reading-for-meaning abilities in tandem.

1.2. Methodology followed for this paper

The purpose of this paper is to provide insights that may help improve literacy – reading HL and ESL well and with understanding – in African countries. Answers to two questions are sought:

- How should English Second Language (ESL) be taught at primary school so that learners will understand the ESL which they later read or memorise?
- How should initial reading be taught in an African language as a Home Language (HL), so that learners will read it well and with understanding, and will be able to transfer reading skills to reading ESL?

Answering both questions is very important since most learners in English-speaking African countries use ESL as the education medium and need to read and comprehend ESL at an appropriate level.

The methodology followed for this paper is a literature study, augmented by observations and test results gleaned during around 20 years of genuine involvement in FP classrooms. Amongst others, I was in Grade 1 classrooms on many days for considerable periods, trying to teach children to read. Teachers appreciated my efforts, but some discontinued their own work and responsibility, expecting my efforts once or twice a week to be sufficient. However, it enabled me to discover what children found easy or difficult, e.g., why phonics cannot work for them: they cannot say the neutral vowel because that sound is not in African languages.

1.3. Causes of the reading crisis in Africa

Many causes of the reading crisis have been investigated in South Africa, e.g., Spaull et al. (2017) mentions the quality of teachers, the availability of reading resources, the functionality of schools, the education level of parents, and socio-economic status. However, less than 30% of SA's people lived in great poverty before Covid, so if it were less than 30% of children who cannot read, poverty could have explained it – but for 80% failure, there may be another explanation. The information that in the 1990s, when teachers were not better qualified, resources more plentiful, etc., 80% of Free State township children learnt to read in Grade 1 may explain it better (Cronje, 1997:77; 89).

Two crucial pedagogic causes are not mentioned in the literature, except by Cronje (2021):

- The phonics approach to reading is prescribed, although African children cannot say the phonemes (letter-sounds) the way Europeans do because they do not have the easy neutral vowel which Europeans add to letters – though they have difficult click sounds which Europeans cannot say. The syllabic approach, which was used for reading African languages until about 1996, should rather be used. The Simple View of Reading for African languages and children is the syllabic approach.
- Most children in SA and Malawi have to learn reading in two languages simultaneously, their own and English, confusing them with two sets of letter-sounds. Most township children find it difficult to remember the sounds of the five vowels, which seem to sound rather similar to them. They can chant *a, e, i, o, u* and can match written letters, but cannot read single or mixed vowels unless using a certain strategy. Receiving two sets of letter-sounds simultaneously must be bewildering.

In SA, this circumstance is mainly due to the enforcement of an untested *Lesson Plan* for ESL in Grade 1, a document of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) that contradicts the Government's Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). These documents should have aligned, both being from the DBE, but they are opposites. Government policy is presented in CAPS documents for each subject, the CAPS for ESL saying that in Grade 1 children should read only in their HL and learn English only orally. Some extracts are below:

Extracts from DBE (2012) CAPS English First Additional Language (EFAL), Grades 1–3

> *Fortunately, children can transfer many literacy skills from their home language. When children begin to read and write in their additional language, they already know how to decode in their home language.*
>
> *It is important that in Grade 1 children develop a strong oral foundation in their additional language. Otherwise, they will not understand the words they are decoding in English in Grade 2 (DBE 2012:16).*

Despite this emphasis on **oral** ESL in Grade 1, the *Lesson Plan* prescribes much **written** ESL, e.g., 20 new written English words per week, as vocabulary, besides other work. The 20 words for Week 3 include: *backpack, favourite, listen, excited, friend,* and the 20 for Week 4 include: *ball, kick, bounce, inside, playground* (DBE 2019:59-79). With this *Lesson Plan,* 243 pages for Term 1 only, children who cannot read and could not attend expensive English crèches have to learn English as a **written** language – an impossible task. It amounts to severe discrimination against the poor.

1.4. Malawi

This state of affairs is not unique to South Africa. In Malawi, USAID, also using the name EGRA, supplies Learners' Books and Teachers' Manuals. In 2014–2016, the only teachers' manual for Std. 1 Cronje could find concerned ESL only. It prescribes the letter A, and *apple, arm, axe* and *ant,* for the first week of Std. 1, and the next alphabet letter for each subsequent week. The manual states that the three-volume teacher's guide will help learners become 'fluent speakers, readers, and writers of English.' Despite these promises, the EGRA test at the end of Std. 1 consists only of 10 letters, 10 syllables, and five HL words to be read, one word as easy as *ana*. Hoffman (2012:353) criticizes EGRA for reducing literacy to letter naming and writes that there will be 'reports of success surrounding EGRA' as the focus is on low-level literacy skills. He continues that the evaluation reports will 'create an illusion of progress…' However, the 'illusion' may also be created in another way, as will be explained.

EGRA does the assessment of their course itself. The Education Adviser for the Nkhoma area explained their 'toolkit' to Cronje in June 2015, saying that evaluating officers should choose four children per class **at random**, test them, and send each result away with the teacher's number. To demonstrate the testing process, the adviser went to a headmaster who summoned a teacher. She came with her four best learners, whom Cronje knew already. So when the adviser wanted to test those four, he was asked to rather pick four at random. It was done, and he tested them quite gently, but most could not give a single correct answer. If a sampling error is made by most evaluating officers, the whole system is flawed. (Many people knowing Malawians agreed that most officers would test the best learners. Malawians are eager to impress and will not see their modus operandi as wrong).

Cronje visited the EGRA office in Lilongwe on 26 June 2015. The official leader, a European, said they knew that the four best learners were often tested, but that it did not matter. They also said that they trained teachers to teach reading only in the HL at first, but that teachers did as they liked. That was not true. EGRA provided the Teachers' Manual, the test, etc. Indications are that a large percentage of Malawian children never learn to read, especially those dropping out of school before Std. 8. Testing of Std. 4 learners at a big school in 2015 indicated that at least a third of them could not read at all. Of the 250+ learners who had started Std. 1 in 2015, only 100 were counted one day towards the end of the school year. Was school boring? Only two of the four teachers still came to school. Between them, they indicated 11 children whom they said could read, but even they could only read a few single words (unpublished observations). However, older teachers said that formerly most Malawian children could read their HL at least towards the end of the second school year (personal communications).

The money and effort that USAID is putting into education in African countries should be applauded. However, questions should be asked about the efficiency of their programs and the motives of those running the programs. Why is this injustice done to children? Are African governments keeping the poor ignorant? If people can seem to be able to read English while unable to understand much, a free press cannot be a threat. It is quite possible that USAID leaders are not aware of what is really happening in African classrooms, and in this way, Africa is getting classist discrimination at least as bad as racial discrimination was in old SA.

1.5. Are Solutions Sought?

It does not seem as if solutions for the reading crisis are sought, or even welcome, in Africa. Cronje got an appointment with the Minister of Education in Malawi, but she only turned a deaf ear, as did some other upper-class people. There were attempts to report the matter to USAID, but in 2021, and later, the same Teachers' Manual and very poor Reader were still used. This Reader was developed by using the alphabet: the first lesson had words starting with A, the following lessons each used words starting with the next letter. There were only these unrelated words in the Reader, no sentences or texts, etc. Colleagues at a private university saw it as a joke when told that only two children in Std. 1 - 3 of their private primary school could read.

Perry (2009) wrote that literacy development in Africa receives growing scholarly attention, as evidenced by the Pan-African Reading-for-All Conferences held bi-annually, but does anything change in practice? The 11th conference was held in Uganda in 2019. Conference documents included a paper by Dr. Jenkins, who wrote that millions of books are given to schools all over Africa each year, of which most never reach the students. She had started a Before School Reading Club in Seeta, Uganda, which was so popular that student participation increased 500% during the 2006 school year. Yet when Dr. Jenkins left, school teachers were not willing to come to school early to oversee the program, and it ended (Jenkins, Jenkins & Masterson, 2019).

In South Africa, the DBE refused to give a second-year PhD student, with the necessary ethical clearance, permission to prove the merits of new approaches to initial reading and of oral ESL in Grade 1 classrooms.

Section 2

2.1. Teaching English as a Second Language to Children

Our discussion of South Africa's reading crises singled out the *Lesson Plan* used for teaching ESL in Grade 1 as key to the inability to learn to read and to acquire and understand ESL. In Malawi, written English is also introduced from the very beginning of the first school year. To substantiate criticism against such programs, a brief overview of SL acquisition research and a review of an investigation done at primary schools in the 1990s will be presented. The term 'second language' means only that it is not the first language.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a relatively young discipline, going back to about 1970 (Richards, 2006:1). The Western world inherited Traditional Formal Grammar from a time when adults learned Latin, but attempts to teach a second language (SL) to children in the same formal way were quite futile. Audiolingualism, derived from the behaviourist ideas of Skinner, was thought to be a solution for children, but it did not give the desired results. It used the same formal approach, with the focus on language *form* and not on *meaning,* Pica (2005:2) says that, after years of such training, children still have a limited understanding of the SL and are largely unable to use it in communication.

Chomsky (1980:239) opposed the behaviourist notions, rejecting the idea that language is acquired by conditioning. He

theorised that humans are born with a special language faculty that enables young children to acquire the HL easily. It was later realised that SL acquisition can be equally easy, in informal contexts, because it involves internalising abstract rules in an unconscious manner. Later, it was theorised that there is a critical period for acquiring a language unconsciously, and two Americans brilliantly upheld the theory. They did this with research on adult Chinese who had immigrated to America before or after puberty. They also found that formal ESL classes for children in China, before emigration, had no effect, indicating that children can use their age advantage only in situations where the focus is on meaning, not on form (Johnson & Newport, 1989:60–99).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Canadian Immersion

Eventually, the insight dawned that children should learn a second language in the same way a first language is acquired, and new schools using the communicative approach were launched, e.g., the *Natural Approach* of Krashen, and Asher's *Total Physical Response*, which used instructions as the first communication with children. In meaning-focused instruction and communicative language teaching (CLT), SL learners exchange information and there are information gaps, one learner not knowing what the other is going to say. Due to experiments with CLT, it was soon acknowledged as the best and became used for teaching second languages in developed countries (Richards, 2006: 22). Canadian Immersion was a CLT experiment in 1965 but has become popular practice since then. English children in Canada whose parents choose that option do their last year of pre-primary and the first two years of primary school only in French. They have native French teachers who speak no English to them, and initial reading is in their SL. They only read the HL after the three years of immersion. A bilingual school program is then followed, and they become fully bilingual. Unfortunately, the same program, and various versions of it, do not work when tested in other circumstances. Some of the conditions for successful immersion are that teachers should be (near) native speakers of the SL of the children, should use only that SL at school, and use CLT – no formal grammar teaching. It is also vital that children are proud of their HL and get a good foundation in it at home (Wesche, 2001). Note that although in Canada the goal is bilingualism, children are not taught initial reading in two languages, but only in the SL – after using only the SL orally for a year in Grade 0.

These conditions should be heeded by people in favour of 'Straight for English' schools for children who do not learn much English pre-school, especially in South Africa, where it means most children.

2.2. Empirical research comparing form- and meaning-focused ESL teaching

Empirical research done in South Africa also underscores the superiority of meaning-focused instruction for ESL. That study is discussed here for a better understanding of the injustice done to Grade 1 children when teaching them according to the DBE *Lesson Plan* with its focus on formal aspects, and not according to the CAPS prescriptions.

The purpose of this investigation was to study the different English input that children received at two comparable schools and the resultant acquisition of ESL. The study was conducted from 1992 to 1996 at schools having African teachers and learners. The theoretical framework against which the research was undertaken was Krashen's input hypothesis, which states that genuine acquisition of a second language (SL) only takes place if comprehensible input is received, from which

flowed the notion that conscious language **learning** does not turn into **acquisition** per se. Here “acquisition” is defined as gaining language knowledge that does not fade or disappear with time (Krashen 1982: 10 – 11). At School A, only form-focused input was received, as still happens at most SA schools, also due to the *Lesson Plan* discussed above. At School B, the input was largely meaning-focused, with a CLT program being followed, which was new at the time (Cronje, 1997: 179–182).

Methodology of the 1992–1996 study

The main participants were the two groups of children at Schools A and B who were in Grade 2 in 1992. At School A, there were 99 children in two classes; at School B, 143 children in three classes. They were studied for five years, unless they dropped out, e.g., by failing. (No other children could enter the test groups.) At School A, only 32% of the test group reached Grade 5 in 1995, so a great number of weak learners did not take later tests. At School B, 50% of the test group reached Grade 5 in 1995 (Cronje 1997:90). The average pass rate for primary schools was about 80% at the time. At the smaller School A, every child was usually tested, but at School B, every third child on the numbered list was screened out to get a comparable group (Cronje 1997:133). The test group children were numbered according to their school marks in Grade 4, the best learner at each school being Number 1. At School A, child A1 was the only one who knew English well in Grade 2 already.

The reading ability of the test groups was tested at baseline, finding that about 15% of School A learners could not read, and about 10% of School B learners could not read. Grade 1 learners' reading ability was tested at more schools at the end of 1995 to arrive at an average of about 20% of learners who did not learn to read in Grade 1 during the 1990s (Cronje 1997:77; 89).

The investigation was quasi-experimental because the schools were already on two different programs for teaching ESL, and intact groups of learners were used for the study. To compensate for having to assume equality between the two groups of learners and teachers, some test results were compared to results obtained from samples of similar learners at other schools on similar programs. At the time, ethical clearance documents were not obligatory, as is the situation today. It was only necessary to get permission from principals, which was done before the research began.

The study had two overlapping phases: classroom observation and data gathering. Actual lessons were attended, mostly one or two days per week, with researchers jotting down factors concerning the SL input provided at each school. Data gathering meant that the English ability of the test groups and learners at other schools was tested and compared over five years (Cronje 1997:87–91). At the time, no English was given in Grade 1 in state schools; English teaching commenced in Grade 2 when it was supposed that children could read their HL already. English medium education started in Grade 5, and in 1995 the researcher put in much effort to study the ability of learners at both schools to use English as an educational medium (Cronje 1997:183).

Input received at School A

At School A, the English teaching was totally form-focused. Children started learning English in its written form and

repeated reading lessons excessively. They did grammar drills, practised pronunciation, and wrote weekly spelling tests, the first of which was written on 31/01/92. Comprehension received very little attention, and nouns were rather used as examples in grammar lessons than in context, e.g., lists of singulars and plurals were read in chorus: 'one boy, two boys,' etc. They repeated lines from their illustrated Reader such as: *What is the girl doing? The girl is fetching water. What is the teacher doing? The teacher is writing.* With role play, a bucket, etc., the work was made comprehensible, but the lines were not treated as questions and answers, and there was no real communication.

Throughout Grades 2–6, much hard work was put in at School A to learn English, but children never learned to speak English to each other, as real interaction was in the HL. Since they repeated the teachers very often, they 'spoke' considerably more English than the children of School B did, but it was not genuine communication. Teachers used code-switching (mixing the HL and ESL) daily, meaning that most of the time children could just wait for the Sesotho explanation of what was said in English. The field notes of 08/06/92 include that the teacher used the HL to call out two boys, to say *next line,* etc. The researcher also visited other schools to observe their ESL instruction. It was as formal as at School A, but not as much hard work was put in (Cronje 1997:91-98).

Input received at School B

At School B, a new communicative language course was used,*Bridge to English*, by Prof. Lanham of Rhodes University (the Molteno Project). Teachers had to do a great amount of oral work before the children could start reading, e.g., teachers used large pictures to teach the plural –s, asking: *How many (cats) can you see?* Children discussed pictures in whole sentences, e.g., *The dog is running (with a bone in its mouth)*, where the latter part started as an extending remark. They answered questions, memorised short stories, worked in groups, and had to react, think, and choose. There was no code-switching because using the HL in English lessons was not allowed.

Since in class discussions the teacher mostly spoke to one learner at a time, and chorusing was not permitted, there were not half as many opportunities for each child to 'speak' English as at School A. However, children listened to real communication and sometimes took part. They started reading English in the last half of Grade 2. Built into the lessons were constant comprehension checks, for example, to mark sentences as right or wrong according to a picture. They used the Grade 2 book for Grade 3 as well, as the second book of the series was not available yet (Cronje 1997:98-106).

2.3. Assessment of the English acquired at Schools A and B, Grades 2–6

Many tests were taken at both schools over the five years, e.g., three tape recordings made of elicited speech, five written compositions, two listening and three reading comprehension tests, a translation test, and three grammar tests. Some of the tests were also taken at other schools to see if School A was representative of schools on the traditional program. As no standardised tests were available, the researcher made her own, using pictures for composition writing only from unused School A books. (The tests and results can be checked in the thesis, Cronje 1997). In addition, the investigation focussed on English medium education in Grade 5, and two composition tests were written on history (Cronje 1997:134).

Test results: Compositions

Composition 4 – *The Noah Story* (Early 1996)

The purpose of this test was to elicit the use of plural nouns and the past tense. (African and European languages differ completely on plural and the he/she distinction). A large picture of Noah's ark with pairs of animals was used. Children were given the title *The Story of Noah*, but could also just describe the picture.

Table 1. *Extract from a linguistic analysis of the Noah composition*

Positive categories	**School A**	**School B**
Past tense correct per context	30%	**46%**
Plural correct per context	55%	**67%**
Continuous tense correct per total continuous	9%	**66%**
Pronoun correct per total sentences (he/she distinction)	12%	**24%**
Negative categories		
Past tense wrong per context	70%	**54%**
Plural -s omitted per context	45%	**33%**
-ing omitted per total continuous	72%	**20%**
Incomprehensible sentences per total sentences	20%	**10%**

School B learners are significantly ahead in more than 30 categories

The acquisition of plural -s

In African languages, singular or plural is indicated at the*beginning* of words in a complicated way. Because of this difference, African learners find the plural -s of English difficult. Young children cannot use grammar rules consciously and do not acquire even an easy construct such as the plural -s by drilling or having it explained. In the *Noah* test, the School B learners used the plural -s correctly far more than School A learners, whereas in earlier grades, School A often outscored School B on this construct. The explanation is that while School A children were still using learnt chunks, the School B children used the English they were acquiring to synthesise their own sentences, making progress in passing through learning stages. Many School A children avoided using plurals and wrote, for example, *I see lion.*

Table 2. Comparison indicating the acquisition of plural -s

	Spoken Eng 1993	Spoken Eng 1994	Written Eng 1996
	Sch A Sch B	Sch A Sch B	Sch A Sch B
Plural -s correct	58% **42**%	57% **49**%	55% **71**%
Plural -s omitted	42% **58**%	27% **41**%	45% **29**%
-s added wrongly	30% **20**%	16% **11**%	4.3% **3.8**%

(Cronje, 1997:150)

Pica (2005: 27) mentions the 'need for longitudinal data' in SL acquisition (SLA) research. The table above shows why it is important that research on SLA should encompass a number of years. Early results can be misleading.

Similar development was observed with the continuous tense and some vocabulary, e.g., the verb*fetching*. This supports a hypothesis by Krashen (1982: 83–84) that conscious language **learning** does not turn into **acquisition** per se, where 'acquisition' is defined as gaining language knowledge that does not disappear with time (Cronje, 1997: 179–182).

Composition 5: The Bicycle Story (June 1996)

When in Grade 6, the test groups wrote this composition about a boy proudly riding a bicycle, waving to friends, letting go of the handles, and pedaling. Then he goes downhill, hits a stone, and falls. Six numbered pictures and the title were given. At School C, the children had to write the story in Sesotho first, then in English. Some children who used *stone, greet, fall*, etc., in their HL avoided the words in English, probably not knowing them.

Table 3. Bicycle Story, written at Schools A, B, C, E, F

Specific words used, as if by 20 learners per school	**A**	**B**	**C**	**E**	**F**
The noun *stone / brick*	11	**18**	16	16	14
greet /wave /laugh /smile /cry / angry / afraid (feelings)	8	**25**	20	28	22
get on (climb) / ride / hold / let go / hit / fall (actions)	35	**53**	22	30	14
Pos. categories: Pronoun correct per total sentences	56%	**77%**	Three	schools	45%
Continuous correct per total Continuous used	32%	**67%**	Three	schools	36%
Neg. categories: Concord wrong per Present used	90%	**77%**	Three	schools	79%
Preposition wrong per total sentences	18%	**6%**	Three	schools	20%
Incomprehensible sentences per total sentences	15%	**7%**	Three	schools	12%
Number of learners doing the test	20	40	10	10	10

Comment: School B was significantly ahead in 30+ categories (Cronje, 1997: 151–152; 253).

To counteract any advantages the three classes at School B might have had, e.g., the two exceptionally good teachers they had, one each in Grades 2 and 5, their best learners were often screened out for tests, e.g., Composition 2 was

written by 35 learners ranging from B23 to B99, and Composition 5 by 40 learners ranging from B9 to B94. Learners ranging from B58 to B99 made many mistakes, making the results more significant. At School A, many weak learners had dropped out of the test group due to failing. Yet when writing the Bicycle Story, only 3 of the 20 School A children writing it could tell the story successfully (A1, A12, A26), and 11 failed utterly (Cronje 1997:151; 253).

In practically all categories of all tests, the School B children were far ahead. Most School A children could only use English after memorising specific sentences (Cronje, 1997: 152).

Test results: Comprehension tests

The comprehension tests were devised to eliminate the possibility that they could be answered using handy strategies, e.g., finding a sentence with some/many of the same words as the question, and copying it as the answer. Many irrelevant answers were given by children who did not understand the texts or were simply used to 'doing comprehensions,' as was likely the case at School A.

Example: *Yesterday John's big dog Bruno followed him to school. It was hungry.* Question 1: Why did Bruno follow John to school? Sentence one was given as the answer to this question by 28% of learners at School A, and 8% at School B. Other irrelevant answers often given: A Yes/No question was not answered with either Yes or No, done by 60% of School A learners and 24% of School B learners for a certain question (Cronje 1997: 159–161).

To eliminate the possibility that the School A test group was an exceptionally weak group, or the School B group exceptionally bright, some tests were given to learners in higher grades who were also not repeaters. Test 2 was done by 25 School A Grade 5 learners, and 50 learners at the two other schools.

Table 4. *Test 2 (Nov. 1995): Results of Grade 5 and 6 children, Schools A, B (and F).*

Grade 5	**School A, 25 children**	**School B, 50 children**	**School F, 50 children**
Correct answers	20% of answers	**36%** of answers	15% of answers
Wrong answers	79% of answers	**61%** of answers	82% of answers
Irrelevant answers	50% of answers	**16%** of answers	49% of answers
Grade 6	**School A**	**School B**	
Correct answers	27% of answers	**58%** of answers	
Wrong answers	70% of answers	**40%** of answers	
Irrelevant answers	36% of answers	**4%** of answers	

Comprehension test results show School B significantly ahead of Schools A and F, and School B learners in a higher grade also ahead (Cronje 1997:254).

Comprehension Test 3 was also given at two other schools on the Molteno Project, though not as long as School B's test.

These schools also outperformed the traditional schools, though they did not do as well as School B did.

2.4. English Medium Education

Up till about 1996, English medium education was prescribed for nearly all SA children from Grade 5 onwards. At School B, the children were able to benefit from it, but the School A children understood too little English to benefit. Their teachers could not explain subjects such as Science in English but had to revert to code-switching. On 20/03/95, field notes included that the HL was used eight times in a Math period, and 17 times in a Science lesson on sprouting seeds. Most children did not understand much of the English notes they learnt by heart. In contrast, at School B, class discussions of lessons were deemed important, with a frequent question being *Why?* A discussion of the work done in History will highlight the difference in ESL ability (Cronje 1997:183-187).

History lessons and test results in Grade 5

The first lessons were on the Bushmen or San, early inhabitants of South Africa. The first notes the School A children copied had 12 long sentences, but shorter notes were learnt for tests, the same questions being asked over and over. Their shorter notes:

'*The Bushmen came from the Central Part of Africa. They called themselves San. The English called them Bushmen. They were yellowish in colour, (their faces) triangular in shape, and they were small, 1.5 meters tall. Their weapons: arrows, bows, knobkerries*'.

In June 1995, 30 children each at Schools A and B, and 30 at other schools, wrote composition tests for the researcher. School B gave 216 history facts in their 30 compositions, as opposed to 137 facts given by School A and 124 by the other schools. Many School A children showed that their notes were poorly understood chunks, e.g., A2: *The Bushmen were in English;* A15: *They colour this San Brown;* A15: *They are very small and tall*(Cronje 1997:191).

In November, the children again wrote a composition test in history on what they wanted to write. The School A learners mainly wrote the same notes as earlier on the Bushmen, while the School B learners mainly wrote on a first leader of white settlers, Van Riebeeck. The School A children gave on average 3 history facts per learner, compared to 7.5 facts per learner at School B. Here is an example from one of the 'best' School A learners:

A3: *The Bushmen from the central of Africa, the are very small, the are 1.5 meters tall, the are traenguleng is (sic) shape, the are yellowish in colour.*

Many School A children omitted the ***y*** of ***They***, even some who had had the *They* correct in June, showing deterioration of learnt chunks over time (Cronje 1997:186-194). The English was not acquired, for by definition, acquired SL knowledge does not fade with time.

History lessons in Grade 5 at School B

The School B children regularly discussed facts and reasons, and in the November open test for Cronje, each child wrote on what interested him, e.g., B7 wrote five sentences on the language spoken by the white settlers, B6 wrote eight sentences on their clothing, and B28 had three sentences on the ox wagon being both home and transport – *They did not pay for transport*. Other information not in their scanty notes: B10:*The slaves were sell by R12 each*; B37: *White settles wen they are at church [H] came and stole their cattle;* B12: *Van Riebeeck built a halfway station and other buildings.* Despite conceptual limitations, they tried to understand the history! (Cronje 1997:188; 196-198).

The linguistic analysis of the two sets of compositions again shows a great difference in the use of verbs. Counting the same verb only once per learner, not counting the copula, at School A, 6% of total words were such verbs, and at School B, 11%.

Table 3. *Extract from analysis of history tests in Nov. 1995, 25 learners per school*

Positive categories	**School A**	**School B**
Average number of words per child	52	**72**
Complex sentences per total sentences	8%	**27%**
Past tense correct per total sentences	28%	**61%**
Pronoun correct, number of correct instances	17	**57**
Negative categories		
Pronoun wrong, number of wrong instances	28	**19**
Copula omitted per total sentences	13%	**5%**
Ungrammatical sentences per total sentences	28%	**2%**
Incomprehensible sentences	20%	**2%**

School B learners again outscored School A learners in more than 30 categories

2.6. Discussion of the significance of the 1992–1996 research

This investigation, especially the findings at School A, shows that where an SL is important for children's future education, form-focused SL teaching can jeopardise their future. In comparison, the School B children could use ESL successfully as an education medium from Grade 5 onwards, as the CLT that was used to teach English in Grades 2–4 prepared them sufficiently for it. Yet it should be noted that even the School A children who were studied in the 1990s had an advantage over present-day African children in SA, as about 80% of them learnt to read the HL in Grade 1, meaning they had some reading skills to transfer to reading English. In contrast, for the last 25 years, most children have not learnt to read in the Foundation Phase, and traditional approaches to teaching ESL are still followed. The greatest harm is done in Grade 1 due to the aforementioned *Lesson Plan*. Teacher education in SA seems not to include Second Language Acquisition research.

Section 3

3.1. A new approach to teaching initial reading in African languages

The second question this paper set out to discuss is: How should initial reading be taught in an African language so that learners will read it well and with understanding? In the absence of other studies done on initial reading in African languages, as far as could be discerned, the Simple View of Reading (SVR) will be adapted and used as the theoretical framework for the present study. For reading English as HL, the phonics approach was found to simplify reading for English children, but as it uses the neutral vowel excessively, it cannot serve African children at all. Fortunately, there is another approach far more simple and suitable for reading African languages, viz. the syllabic approach, which was still used in SA in the 1990s when about 80% of children learnt to read in Grade 1.

However, Cronje could not find the term 'syllabic approach' in SA literature; only Williams (1998) explained it when writing about Malawi and Zambia. A detailed exposition of different approaches to reading will not be given here, only an explanation of why the phonics approach, starting with phonemes (letter-sounds), is not suitable for African children. European children add the neutral vowel to most consonants that cannot be said without adding a vowel, e.g., B, but African Bantu languages do not have the neutral vowel, and African children cannot say it unless they learnt good English early. (Just as Europeans cannot say African click sounds). Africans can say the letter B only as *ba, be, bi, bo*, and *bu*. It means African children cannot segment a word such as *bona* into four phonemes, but they can easily segment it into two syllables: *bo–na*. As African languages hardly have any final consonants (e.g., the T of*cat)*, there are only five syllables for every consonant. Children can learn the limited number of syllables quickly and can decode script easily by reading any number of syllables strung together, even if a whole sentence is written as one word (unpublished observations). The syllabic approach, and learning strings such as *ma, me, mi, mo, mu*, is natural to African languages, the Simple View of Reading (SVR) in Africa.

Besides using the SVR principle, two other changes are necessary for initial reading at school to become successful:

Firstly, learning to read should be prioritised. Not only should the confusion caused by written English stop, but also the early use of numerous written words in the HL, e.g., the names of days, numbers, etc. The written names of numbers up to ten have about 14 more letters in Sesotho than the 39 of English. As long as children cannot read, it serves no purpose to write such words for them, and they should rather be learnt orally only. Thus, time can be saved in other subjects to be used for more reading periods, at least two per day in Term 1. If learning to read is prioritised in the first two terms, reading and writing all the words known orally already will serve a purpose.

Secondly, teachers should again use graded first lessons, unlike current practice. Children should first master the vowels by using strategies 1 and 2 below, then start with easy lessons with which they can cope. Cronje's first lesson in Malawi uses N and K with vowels, but for the SA language Sesotho, we use only M with vowels for eight sentences. Lessons 2–5 add one consonant each; further lessons may add more. Lessons consist of four sentence pairs, each pair creating a context which can sometimes be role-played, e.g., from Lesson 1: *mme o a ema. o ama mimi. – Mother stands up. She*

touches Mimi. The sentence pairs are written on the board and memorised, one pair a day, with single words on flashcards also, while also mastering the five vowels. Children soon know what is written where, so that they can "read" the six or eight sentences on the board. Then the 8 sentences are read in mixed order to group leaders, who have the mixed sentences on A4 sheets over which they move a paper with a window cut in it. Each group member reads what he can see through the window, which is real reading and not simply saying from memory.

The new strategies for reading are:

1. Using a reference to find the sound of a vowel, or to find a word/sentence.
2. Using trained group leaders to give much individual practice in real reading.
3. Practising segmenting into syllables by pointing with one finger below one-letter syllables, and with two fingers below two-letter syllables (easy for children).

Teachers should move among the reading children, check on group leaders, and ask questions, e.g.,*What does Mimi do?* While still learning sentences, children also learn the syllables *ma, me, mi, mo, mu*, and read them when mixed. The five syllables of every lesson stay up as references for many weeks, as do the vowels, single words, and sentence pairs. After about six lessons, the consonants with *–a* are also read in mixed order, e.g.,*la, ba, ka, sa*, and dictation tests are written on them to build letter knowledge without expecting children to read the letters *l, b, k, s* alone. Dictation should be written daily, from week 1 or 2.

The reason for starting with **sentences** is that children should read for meaning from the beginning, a principle of the whole-language approach explained by Rayner et al. (2002:86). The group work is an answer for big classes and teaches children to work together and help friends master reading, not by giving answers but by helping to use a reference to find an answer. Children can match a vowel in hand with one in the reference, but tend to forget the sounds. Reciting the vowels up to the one needed provides the sound, and with practice, it comes automatically. Group leaders can give individual practice, which is lacking at present due to big classes (Unpublished observations).

The strategies mentioned above may be the answers sought by the SIRP project, as one of the objectives of the Sesotho and Isizulu Reading Project (SIRP) of 2019 is to identify ‘strategies for teaching reading in African languages.’

3.2. Conclusion and recommendations

Although more research on each of the issues discussed is needed, this paper has indicated possible reasons for the inability of most Malawian and SA children to read the HL and ESL:

- The phonics approach to initial reading is not suited to African children and languages; the old syllabic approach gave better results and should be used again.
- Non-English children have to do initial reading in two languages simultaneously, which may cause confusion and prevent the attainment of reading skills.
- Most children fail to acquire sufficient levels of ESL when young, due to a form-focused approach, so that they cannot understand what they later read or memorise in English. Meaning-focussed teaching of ESL should be considered,

which should start in the preschool year(s) because of the age advantage of younger children.

It is possible that new research and new approaches and strategies will improve education in Africa, but such changes will require from the academics who advise authorities in education to re-evaluate some of their assumptions about teaching initial reading in African languages and about teaching ESL. Hopefully, the necessary investigations will lead to reforms in teacher education and in-service teacher training. Political will should also be mustered, and USAID should develop and print new teachers' manuals and first readers for Std. 1 in Malawi and elsewhere. The value of this paper is limited by many uncertainties, but in the meantime, there are indications that grave injustice is being done to the children of Africa's poor.

Recommendations

Some practical solutions for the reading crisis have been explained, of which institutions concerned with teacher education hopefully will take note. When planning empirical research on the solutions advocated in this paper, the following will be necessary:

- For each African language, a new first reading course should be developed, using the syllabic approach and graded lessons consisting of meaningful sentences. In SA, new lessons are needed only for the first eight to ten weeks, whereafter the current workbooks can be used, preparing the same kind of group work on the workbooks.
- Teachers should receive the necessary training and materials for using new reading strategies, especially to use group leaders for much individual reading practice. (In big classes, group leaders may hold small vowel cards upside down, or even read on the wrong side of the paper if the writing shows there. If the five vowel cards of each leader have lines over the top in a specific colour, cards will not get mixed up, and all will know the top.)

Care should be taken that children learn to read for meaning from the beginning, e.g., teachers should often put questions to individuals.

Any prescription to use **written** ESL in Grade 1 should be withdrawn. Teachers should be convinced and taught to use only oral English in Grade 1 and be given new courses for teaching oral ESL, e.g., by teaching children to give instructions to each other.

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