

Teach in first language, it's key to success

Switching to second-language teaching too early places pupils at a great disadvantage

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Congratulations to the Class of 2017 and their teachers for the job well done. To those who failed we say: failure is not fatal, rather it is the courage to continue that counts.

The results came at a time when we were still licking the wounds inflicted by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Pirls) 2016 report. According to the report, eight out of 10 children in grade 4 cannot read for meaning. South Africa scored last in reading out of the 50 countries assessed. This failure could seriously hamper the children's performance when they get to matric.

It is tragic that most of the pupils who performed badly in the Pirls study wrote their tests in their mother tongue. We know that children learn through language, especially the one they understand, which is their mother tongue. If they begin school in a language they know well, the language they speak at home, they can understand what is being taught, and can learn to read and write.

In its 1953 report, *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, the Unesco Committee of Experts affirmed the centrality of mothertongue instruction. But, when Unesco published the report, it was commonly thought, if children could have mother-tongue literacy and education for the first few years of school (one to three years) while also learning the international language of wider communication (ILWC) as a subject, they would develop sufficiently strong literacy skills to be able to switch from their mother tongue to the second-language medium by about grade 3 or 4.

Further research has shown us, by the end of the third year of school, most children in well-resourced African settings would have only a small fraction of the language skills in the ILWC/second language (in our case, English) that they need for learning across the curriculum. Most importantly, they would also not have mastered their first language to be able to master their subject matter.

The developmental process necessary for the high level of cognitive language proficiency required for successful learning throughout the school curriculum takes longer than most people expect. The development of the type of literacy necessary for reading and writing about science, history and geography, or understanding problems in mathematics, becomes increasingly complex and difficult from the fourth year of school onwards. This is the case for most children worldwide, and who do have mother-tongue education. It is much more arduous if children are expected to do this in a language they barely know.

Research has shown that subtractive and early-exit transitional models, that is grades 2 and 3, can only offer pupils a score of between 20% and 40% in the ILWC by the end of the school year. This is not good and it means failure in the rest of the curriculum.

Mother-tongue education needs to be reinforced and developed for at least six years, or more, of formal school for successful literacy attainment, and for the development of English as a second language and for academic success to take place.

Under optimal conditions, it takes six to eight years to learn a second language sufficiently well to use it as a medium of instruction. Therefore, it is a big ask for pupils to transit from mother tongue to English after only three years, as happens in South Africa.

It is true that language education models that remove the mother tongue as a primary medium of instruction before grade 4 or 5 will facilitate little success for the majority of pupils. On the other hand, language education models that retain the mother tongue as a primary medium of instruction for six years can succeed under well-resourced conditions in Africa.

Further research demonstrates that the longer a child can learn reading and academic content in his or her mother tongue while learning a second language, the better the chances of success after elementary school.

In one large-scale study, researchers found a direct link between the amount or duration of mothertongue instruction and pupils' average percentile rank on national standardised tests after 11 years of schooling (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

In other words, the African language pupils who received the most mother-tongue instruction in elementary school performed best on standardised tests in high school in the national language (English).

No education system can be better than its teachers. As professionals, they have been trained to teach certain subjects, including literacy and maths. Like teachers of other subjects, African language teachers too must be taught how to teach an African language as well as through an African language. Any deviation from this norm is a recipe for disaster.

They must be assisted to manage the exit from African mother-tongue instruction to English and the problems that accompany the process. They need to know the structural differences between the African languages they are teaching or teaching in and English so they can manage the differences and contradictions between them.

Literacy in a mother-tongue language needs to be developed beyond the decoding of stories or narrative texts in the first three to four years of school. The mother tongue needs to be developed to the level that written texts and oral language used for learning and teaching mathematics, science, history and geography can be understood and actively used by the pupil. In other words, the pupil needs to be able to comprehend and construct written language required for learning at upper levels of primary and secondary school so the learning process is not interrupted.

If a switch in the medium of instruction occurs before pupils have developed a high level of written as well as spoken proficiency in both their first language and second language, then

the learning process throughout the curriculum will be interrupted and frustrated, and pupils will be blamed for failing in their home language. Pupils will fall behind their peers who are taught in their first language or mother tongue throughout in other education systems.

The use of African languages as a medium of instruction for at least six years includes the teaching of English as a subject. This will not only considerably increase the social returns of investments in education but will also boost the social and economic development of African nations and contribute to the improvement in knowledge creation and scientific development.

The role of parents is similarly crucial for mother-tongue education to succeed in schools, and for the increase in literacy levels of pupils. Schools cannot work well without community involvement and support. Children are more likely to enrol in school, stay in school longer and learn more when they are strongly encouraged by parents who have a stake in the school.

When schooling uses the language of the local community, parents can communicate easily with their children's teachers and support their learning. It is important to persuade parents that children can best learn the skills of reading and writing when the teacher uses a language that the children understand, and that children who learn to read and write in the language they know best — their mother tongue — can learn to read and write in the second language better and faster.

Literacy is not only a bridge from misery to hope, it is also a social affair.

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