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Biliteracy reading development trajectories in a multilingual school : assessement of IsiZulu and English grade 4-6 bilingual readers

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ABSTRACT

Reading development among learners with an African language background has been misconstrued through the hypothesis that there is a bi-directional transfer of literacy skills, behaviours and strategies between one's first and a second language. As a result, languages have been treated in silos and emphasis has been put on a linear way of acquiring both literacy and languages ignoring the rich but complex linguistic repetoires that children bring to school. This study investigated the reading development trajectories of grade 4-6 bilingual readers who do not have isiZulu as their mother tongue, reading in isiZulu and English. Three sets of data obtained through vocabulary tests, reading speed tests and comprehension equivalent tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics involving means to measure the central tendencies and standard deviations to measure dispersion. The findings revealed that reading performance of non-mother tongue speakers suggest that the effects of reading in two languages that are not their first languages are not radically different from children who have at least one of the languages as their mother tongue. Taken together, the results provide evidence that emphasis on mother tongue in acquiring literacy is irrelevant and an integrated reading for biliteracy development is necessary for multilingual speakers instead of treatment of literacy in silos. Recommendation for teaching, policy, and further research directions on translanguaging are highlighted for adaptation in similar 21st century's classrooms.