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BILINGUAL LITERACY TRAJECTORIES IN THE EARLY GRADES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INTERFACE BETWEEN PEDAGOGY, TEXTS, AND CLASSROOM PRINT ENVIRONMENT

by

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Abstract

In South Africa, the bilingual education program currently being implemented implicitly suggests that learners of African descent are to be taught to read in their first languages (L1) for the first 4 years of schooling (grades R-3); as these grades are meant to build strong reading literacy foundations for reading to learn beyond Grade 3. However, a second language (L2) is introduced in Grade 1 as a subject for learning to read, side by side with the first language, thus, creating a biliteracy context. This L2 is to be used for teaching and learning in grades 4 and beyond. This gives learners a total of three years (Grade 1-3) to master the L2 to competency levels before it can be used for teaching and learning (Pretorius, 2000). Because of this sequencing of languages and their uses, the foundation phase becomes a critical phase through which learners should be competent bi-literate readers for academic success beyond Grade 3. This study contributes to what is known about biliteracy reading development in a rural biliteracy foundation phase classroom. Mainly, how the classroom interfaces between two languages, texts, and teacher pedagogy and the learners play a role in biliteracy reading development. Using mixed-methods research methodology; the study is informed by a two dimensional theoretical framework comprising of the Cognitive efficiency mechanism frameworks which includes the simple view of reading Hoover and Gough (1990), Linguistic interdependence (Cummins, 1979) ; and the Socio-cultural frameworks which include the continua of biliteracy (Hornberger, 1989), and translanguaging (Garcia, 2009). The investigation involved the surveying of Grades 1-3 environmental print and classroom libraries with a focus on the text-types and their quality in both Xitsonga (L1) and English (L2). This was followed by reiterative lesson observations and reflective teacher interviews; finally, an inventory of biliteracy reading comprehension with the learners. The key and interesting finding from the study is that teachers in the foundation phase do not prioritise the separation of languages, that is, Xitsonga for teaching and learning, and English during the English time slot. Instead, teachers use a language they believe learners will access the content through, in different situations. This finding shows that what Probyn (2009) calls the 'smuggle of the vernacular' into the English classroom is not vernacular sided (one-sided), but that the 'smuggle' can take place for any language.

Keywords: Teacher beliefs, classroom practice, text types, environmental print; expository texts, narrative texts, biliteracy, foundation phase.