

## The Sentence Method of Teaching Reading Writing in the Grade 1 Classroom

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### Abstract

A plethora of studies in South Africa examined the high dropout rate and repetition in the foundation phase schools in African schools. Little, if any, has examined teacher's perspectives on the methods used for reading instruction at primary schools in these grades. This study is qualitative in nature and examined First Grade teachers' methods used in teaching reading in Setswana using Sentence Method. The researcher collected data from 1 Foundation Phase School of Brits District. The sample was drawn from one Foundations Phase Schools; one teacher was observed and interviewed on the teaching of beginning reading. The findings indicated that the teacher felt differently about the use of different methods in teaching beginning reading. This study, recommends more collaboration between teachers and local circuit and district administrators when planning and delivering teaching approaches and workshops.

**Keywords:** Teaching Reading, Foundation Phase, Children, Methods, Sentences, Schools, Beginners.

### 1. Introduction

Since 1994, South Africa experienced many changes in curriculum, immediately after the election when the National Education and Training Forum began a process of syllabus revision and subject rationalisation. This change was significant as it moved South African schools away from a fragmented, racially defined and ideologically biased curriculum that entrenched inequality.

This does not mean that the policies need changing; only refining, clarifying and simplifying so as to make the task of teachers simpler and less confusing. The issue of what and how to teach reading to beginners must receive urgent attention. The researcher, as a lecturer, will therefore argue in this paper that teachers need be given a set of desirable outcomes and to devise learning programmes that will best assist their learners to achieve these. Schools should be given materials or learning programmes that may be used by teachers who need such guidance as they plan for the year.

Reading is a single aspect or learning outcome in literacy competence which can be described as the construction of meaning for which the learner must attain a necessary level of decoding proficiency (Pressley, 2006:11-27). Reading is an act of communication in which information is transferred from a transmitter to a receiver. More than sounding letters, calling words or responding to a print, reading is the communication through language between an author and a reader (Snow, 2002:5-6).

If children do not acquire this reading skill in the Foundation Phase they will struggle to catch on, even with the help of remedial teaching, and will not progress at school. The article draws on the perspectives of First Grade teachers teaching reading Setswana to beginners, the dominant language spoken locally or in Mmakau is Setswana. Similarly, reading forms the basis of all language skills, particularly writing, because the ability to write depends on the ability to read, and what is written can only be meaningful if it can be read (Stahl, 2004:57). The ability to read and understand is the integral part of every subject at school, including mathematics. Therefore, reading and writing are mutually supportive, essential to success in any society and so highly valued and important for both social and economic advancement.

In Bojanala District, Setswana is used to introduce beginning reading in African schools. In the early grades, reading, writing, oral composition, (short story telling and narratives), recitation of rhymes and simple poetry form the major part of the syllabus. Reading lessons focus on sound symbol correspondence during the first year, while comprehension and related skills are relegated to the later part of the year. In the first and second grade reading, Au (2003:35-45) has noted that the most pressing problem was the high incidence of 'parrot reading', attributable to the reading materials and reading methods, such as chorus reading, drilling and repetition. The persistence of reading problems (Au, 2003:35-48) might be explained by the study of and research on teaching learning of African languages having been neglected in the past (*Government Gazette* No 23, Vol. 443, 16 May 2002:1-20). The limited collection of

books written in African languages is a common problem in most African countries; hence information is available only to a few educated people (Sukhraj, Mkhize & Govender, 2000:1-3).

The situation in schools in the Bojanala District at present is that teachers are faced with large classes, making the teaching of reading on a basic level very difficult, if not impossible. Lacking a conducive environment, motivation and positive attitude towards reading and writing in the mother tongue, Setswana, is problematic (Macdonald, 2002:1), and according to Marshall (2002:24) more important than class size: "The quality of teaching is more important than class size; a good teacher is good with 30 or even 40 learners, and a bad teacher is bad even with 20 or fewer learners." It is important that teachers receive coaching about classroom practice as they have to learn how to speak to learners, the methods to apply and approach to take.

The inability to read and write has been identified as one of the major causes of the poor academic performance of learners across the country. Thabo Mohlala, PEU News Oct/Nov (2007:8) substantiate that, there has been a report of cases where learners in higher grade still battle to read and write, they read so badly, they could not write their names. My concern is that there are many methods used by different teachers within the learning context of four foundation phase schools in Mmakau Circuit and within the same school which does not yield good results, so the Sentence Method can help to improve teaching beginning reading in the Grade 1 class. My passion for conducting this study on reading was also promoted by the fact that I am a foundation phase lecturer, who is entrusted with the responsibility of preparing future foundation phase teachers.

The ability to read is not in-born like the ability to speak. A learner does not acquire an ability to read, simply by watching and listening while others read. Reading is a skill that has to be deliberately learned. School learning depends largely on reading competence, thus early and sustained failure in reading can have devastating consequences in the lives of poor readers and their families and in the socio-economic life of the community (Darrel & Morris 2005:4).

Baatjies (2003:1), states that the most important element of high quality education is literacy and that without the ability to read, learners are denied pertinent information about health, social, cultural and political issues as well as sources of pleasure and enrichment. Reading is part of nation building and it enables us to act creatively and critically in a world which is ever changing and competitive, it provides rapid and ready access to new information and knowledge that will help us in life-long learning (DoE, 2008:5). Schmidt, Rozendal & Green (2002:131) infer that the ability to read is a critical component of school success and that a strong correlation exist between poor reading ability and school failure.

## **2. Literature Review**

After surveying the literature on the methods used for teaching reading to school beginners in the Foundation Phase, the following was noted: Teaching reading to school beginners is not difficult but it takes hard work, commitment and dedication on the part of the teacher, the child and the parent. Once this partnership is established at the beginning of the year, success will follow (Singh, 2009:72).

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2010:22) has recognised unique challenges facing children who are learning to read in a home language. Some issues that Foundation Phase teachers need to consider include: differences in sound or symbol relationships; differences in sentence structure; limitation in oral vocabulary; and the need for explicit teaching of phonics. In light of these differences, the DBE (2010:24) states that words and sentences should be taught informally at first; items should be labelled in the classroom; and picture stories with sounds, graded readers and sight vocabulary should be used to help children identify the differences in the sounds (DoE, 2010:10-11). The DoE (2008:8) also produced a detailed teacher's handbook on the teaching of reading in the early grades for Foundation Phase.

Cunningham and Allington, (2007:32-34) found reading methods adopted in the classrooms included the use of charts as flashcards, with the combinations of consonants and vowels that are commonly used to teach the various sound sequences of the African Languages, e.g. ma-me-mi-mo-mu. They made the children read words and sentences together in chorus in groups, though not part of the CAPS system. Early reading accomplishments included the alphabetical principle, reading sight words, reading words by mapping speech sounds to parts of words, and achieving fluency and comprehension (McCutchen & Gray, 2002:69).

According to Snow (2002:12), adequate initial reading structure requires learners to use reading to obtain meaning from print, to have frequent and intensive opportunities to read, to be exposed to frequent regular spelling-sound relationships, to learn about the nature of the alphabetic writing system, and to understand the structure of spoken words. Probably the best approach to Setswana teaching is one that balances teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches. The RNCS policy (2002:6) proclaims that every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning.

## 2.1 Sentence Method

After the first quarter to which only School Readiness was devoted, teachers under the DET were to proceed teaching beginning reading formally, following a Sentence Method scheme of work that they were provided with. This scheme of work states from the onset that during the second quarter teachers use the scheme exactly as it stands; it has been worked out to fit the correct number of periods for each week. Just as aspects of language are laid out week by week so the number of minutes the teacher has to spend on each component is also specified. For example, the scheme emphasises: do not use more half a period per item, as the children's concentration does not last longer. Essentially, the Sentence Method is still a continuation of what is done during School Readiness, as the teacher is supposed to present children with words on flashcards and five sentences in strips to read aloud.

Children match identical words on the flashcards then copy them into their books. Each week, the teacher has to add five more short sentences that have been taught, and is supposed to divide children into groups under four leaders, who then read from flashcards. The teacher begins to introduce new ones when children can recognise words, and they have to divide sentences into words and segment word into syllables. There are periods allocated for using the class reader, but the scheme is not explicit on how one has to use it, nor how children will read if they are experiencing difficulty in decoding, which they are not supposed to be taught.

However, the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000:81) states that effective reading lessons should be given each day in the languages and all reading in class should be done in groups, with each child reading individually to the group leader. Class readers should be read as available but children should complete at least two reader series during the course of the year. There are no clear explanations for why the teachers have to use this approach in beginning reading nor are there explanations for how the teacher can proceed if this approach does not work (Alloway & Gathercole, 2005:273). The researcher supports the opinion of Alloway & Gathercole (2005:273) that fluent reading involves quick recognition of individual words, oral reading, the understanding of whole phrases and sentences, and reading with expression.

## 3. Research Methodology

This research is positioned as a qualitative case study, and according to De Vos, Delport; Fouche and Strydom (2006:34), it meets the interpretive researcher's purpose of understanding situations that are complex. This research is based on the information collected at schools that are complex networks in which staff members interact at various levels. Levin & Rock (2003:43) are of the opinion that interpretive social research emphasises the complexity of human beings, and attempts to construct and understand their worlds. The researchers of this paper collected data from one foundation phase school (specifically Grade 1) in Bojanala District at Brits. One teacher was observed and later interviewed on the teaching of beginning reading. In order to establish how the research was approached, observations and interviews were used to collect many views.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

The following is the presentation of the teacher's perspective which exemplifies what the researcher saw and heard in Thutong School, using the Sentence Method in teaching beginning reading. The observations focused on three things namely, the school infrastructure (the physical appearance of the schools/buildings and whether the school environment is conducive to learning), inside the classrooms (resources, teacher learner interaction), and most importantly on the methods used in the teaching of reading of children. Observations were conducted to establish. This section captures the content taught and also the results are discussed according to the participating school and teacher, and focused on five factors.

### 4.1 Case study: Mme Tau

Mme Tau is one of the foundation phase teachers teaching reading in Setswana in Thutong School. Her profile is tabled below:

School	Teacher's name	Professional qualification	Gender	Teaching Experience	Age	Home language
Thutong	Mme Tau	Primary Teachers Certificate (PTC), Further Diploma in Education (FDE).	Female	27	50	Northern Sotho

#### 4.2 *The classroom size (overcrowding)*

Thutong is a small and modest mission school with sturdy old stone buildings; it is situated on the village. The local Lutheran Church next to the school used to serve as classroom during the week, but in 1986 five new classrooms and office space were added to the school. The school has an established School Based Support Team which is a legal structure responsible for addressing the needs of all the learners. Learners sit either on the floor or on frames of broken chairs. Mme Tau's classroom was not decorated with pictures and charts on the wall, reading books were also shared amongst learners. The class has broken windows and ceiling, and there are also broken desks with boxes of learners' workbooks and textbooks. Textbooks are thus not taken home nor can they be used for homework activities, this made the teachers' job more difficult. Cursory examinations of the learners' exercise books revealed that written tasks in the classroom were irregular and far apart. In the light of these descriptions, it becomes clear that lack of adequate infrastructure, resources and relevant approaches of teaching reading to beginners in the whole school has had a great impact on the effective implementation of teaching reading.

#### 4.3 *Methods used in the teaching of reading of children*

Children were introduced to reading instructions using the Sentence Method from a reader called Fofelang Godimo. The Sentence Method would grow out of the activities and questions about the story lesson Miller, (2002:117).

#### 4.4 *Teacher learner interactions*

Mme Tau started off by asking children to say the title of the story out loud, and then talked about the pictures in the book by describing the content of the pictures. She then read aloud the first page to them and later with them and also asked questions about the progress of the story, their prior knowledge on the subject of the book, using the pictures as clues.

#### 4.5 *Lesson activities and presentations*

Mme Tau took the picture card of the man in a taxi and put it on the board, with word cards under the picture. The teacher then started off by asking them to say the title of the story out loud, and then she talked about the pictures by describing the content of the pictures. The teacher then read aloud the first page and asked questions such as; "what is in the picture?", "what can you see?", "what is the man doing?" after which the learners repeated the first page aloud to the rest of the class. If anyone could not pronounce the words in the sentence, then he helps them. The teacher also asked questions about the progress of the story, their prior knowledge on the subject of the book, using the pictures as clues, for example "what's going to happen next?" and about the learner's existing knowledge about events in the story. They continued in this manner until the last page.

The teacher indicated the topic for the lesson explained new words to the learners by using flash cards and the chalkboard. Examples of these new words are; 'ntate' (man), 'tekisi' (taxi). The teacher explained the meaning of the words and pronounced them for the class. She lead the class as a group repeat the words aloud, and then ask one by one to read the words back to her aloud. If the learners had difficulty with the pronunciation, the teacher corrected them.

She drew a picture and sets of sentence cards, based on the first set of core vocabulary, (toropo / town, madi / money, duela / pay, goroga / arrive, tsamaya / walk mosimane / boy, leboga / thank). Before they could read actual texts, teachers had to make sentence strips derived from the class reader and had learners read those first. On each sentence card, she wrote one sentence made up of the core vocabulary.

She prepared sentences which are; exactly the same as the key sentence taught in the teaching group, the same core vocabulary was used, but in different combinations. She prepared sentences for which learners can draw a picture e.g. re ya toropong ka tekisi, re ya go reka dijo ka madi, re fitlhile re a leboga, re tsamaya le mosimane. Each learner in a group received a sentence card and read it, drew a suitable illustration for the sentence card in their activity books and copied the sentence from the sentence card into their activity books. After completing the given sentence card, they choose another and do the same thing with his or her new card, this activity was done by individual learners. She then spent most of the time working with those who needed assistance.

### 5. **Interview Findings**

The information gained below was guided by the research question posed in this study: How reading and writing

Setswana is taught in the selected school?

### 5.1 Responses to Interview Questions

Interviewer: What methods/approaches do you use to teach beginning reading in mother tongue?

Mme Tau stressed that Grade 1 learners would need to have school readiness class before she could begin introducing the Sentence Method.

Interviewer: Why have you chosen to use this method to teach beginning reading? And how do you use it?

Mme Tau said she liked this Sentence method very much because she does not start with vowels, a, e; i, o, u, and the letter of the alphabets, because learners got them during school readiness programme. By the time she or he gets to formal work, she or he is already used to it. School readiness has its own good. She explained that in reinforcing the words or sentences that had been taught, she is supposed to divide learners into groups under four leaders, and then learners would read them from flash cards. She explained that the sentence method would grow out of the activities that had been done in the school readiness program during the first quarter.

Interviewer: Are your learners able to read?

Mme Tau believed that when learners were still in school readiness class, they can be given books to serve as pre-literacy. She described the kind of reading that learners did in her class, she said, they have books, their library books, but they simply page through looking at pictures. He or she would just look at pictures and read on his or her own way. He or she will read the book the way he or she sees it, that this picture means this or that. She said they usually give them books just to read pictures on their own, to lie as they say what pictures mean. You hear one of them say, "mosimane o palame tekisi, (the boy is in the taxi). Yet it is not there in the book.

Interviewer: What problems do you have with the method you use?

Mme Tau felt that the school readiness was originally designed with a white learner in mind, both in activities learners had to do and the language medium in which it was presented. She said among whites, the learner simply learns words as a whole, completely by sight, for example, cat, dog, and so on, this is because white learners are exposed to a lot of pictures and all sorts of things. Learners, who wanted to do meaningful reading and writing when they started school, were delayed. Learners who were not ready were neglected.

Mme Tau said that there were other aspects of sentence method that were not useful to teachers and learners. Teachers had to wait until late in the third term to teach word segmentation. She noted that beginning with a sentence did not work for learners and it wasted their time. She explained the difficulty some learners experience in writing isolated words if they had been taught appearing in a sentence. Learners tended to write only those words that were associated with the original sentence.

For instance, as she demonstrated to the researcher, when learners were asked to write the word buisa (read) most of them could only write "o buisa buka" (she is reading a book) as the sentence had been presented to them. She noted, "You can't give words that have not been taught because they did not learn syllable separately". If learners are given a sentence to read or write like "lesea le batla dijo" (the baby needs food), they will only know those words. If learners did not learn syllable by syllable, e.g., "ba, be, bi, bo, bu", they could only read and write "lesea le batla dijo" (the baby needs food).

Interviewer: What resources do you use?

Mme Tau said that the difficulty here is that you have to look for materials for yourself. You should stay awake thinking that if you do this lesson, you have to collect quite a good range of materials that you will use so that you do the lesson real well. If you do not have materials to use, you will not be able to do anything; the learners will do nothing too. Since the school had to provide all learners with copies, they had to struggle to get charts to make sentence strips to use as substitutes for books.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This research overview shows a general consensus that reading is vital and that it makes a difference in children and adults' general life. It shows that in order to improve reading skills more practice at school and more importantly at home is needed. The children need to be in an environment that is conducive to reading and value the importance of reading (National Literacy Trust, 2006:27). Teachers are key role players, transmitting aspects of curriculum innovation to learners. Close interaction with teachers will give policymakers, curriculum implementers and education officials an idea of the extent to which methods of teaching beginning reading has made its way to beginners. The article will assist in giving expression to teachers' opinions, ideas and recommendations in current debates on the challenges of methods of

teaching reading to beginners.

Teachers carry out teaching in complex context in schools, thus analysis of teachers' work and perspective is important in understanding teaching. For this reason it is essential that teachers be listened to, supported and be partners and collaborators with all parties involved in decisions making that will impact their work in the classrooms. If teachers are dissatisfied, they may put less effort in their work, and learning will be affected, something that schools can least afford.

Teachers bring various experiences and knowledge into their teaching, such experiences and knowledge has strengths and weaknesses. Teachers individually and collectively could be in better position to confront problems that constrain them if they are aware of their needs and together sought possible alternative ways to emancipate and empower themselves. When teachers emancipate themselves learners will be beneficiaries.

Teachers need support, resources and encouragement to explore and push the limits of the potentials of both students and themselves. Given that teachers bring various experiences and styles to teaching, it should be expected that sometimes there could be irreconcilable differences of opinions for example, with new ideas and innovations. Some teachers will be enthusiasts and easily embrace them, while others will be disgruntled. Such differences should be seen as an alternative potential for new possibilities which should be pursued and understood without ridicule or reprimand.

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