African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning Journal
Volume 10, Issue 1, 2026
ISSN Print: 2521-0262
ISSN Online: 2662-012X
ORIGINAL RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.70875/v10i1article12

The role of home language in early childhood education for literacy development in Soshanguve primary schools

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Abstract

Early childhood education starts at home when children are taught basic home language. Home language lays a strong foundation in early childhood education and influences learners' learning experiences and literacy acquisition. The purpose of this study was to explore the role that home languages play in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and literacy development in Soshanguve primary schools. A qualitative approach with a case study design was adopted in this study. An interpretive paradigm was applied to evaluate the day-to-day use of home languages at home and at school. Purposive sampling was used to select eight Grade R teachers and five parents. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory served as a theoretical lens. The data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and document analysis. To analyze the data, a thematic approach was adopted. The study revealed that although home language plays a vital role in ECE, teachers and parents have limited knowledge of how to balance the home language and the language of teaching and learning. The conclusion is that multilingualism and translanguaging should be embraced to support learners during their transition from home to formal schooling. This study recommends code-switching to support literacy development. Furthermore, it proposes that parents be educated to support their children's literacy development by using their home language.

Keywords: Home language, early childhood education, literacy development, multilingualism

Introduction

Despite extensive policy recognition of the importance of home language use in early childhood education, formal learning contexts in South Africa continue to privilege dominant languages and standardised literacy practices that are often misaligned with children's lived linguistic realities (Department of Education, 1997). While research has documented the cognitive and socio-cultural benefits of home language instruction in the early years, less attention has been given to how home language learning is enacted through everyday pedagogical practices within homes, particularly in contexts where parents act as primary language mediators (Vygotsky,1987). In linguistically diverse communities such as Soshanguve, this misalignment between learners' home languages and the language of learning and teaching persists, often contributing to difficulties in early reading, writing, and comprehension.

Malatji, Mavuso and Malatji (2018) talks of the importance of interconnection of home (parents) and schooling (teachers). While existing research has established the cognitive and educational benefits of mother-tongue instruction in the early years, much of the literature remains focused on policy intentions, language debates, or later phases of schooling. There is comparatively limited empirical research that examines how home language is experienced, valued, and utilised within early childhood education classrooms, particularly in relation to literacy development in the Foundation Phase (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014). As a result, the everyday realities of teachers' practices, learners' linguistic experiences, and the challenges of implementing home language

instruction in under-resourced school contexts remain insufficiently understood.

The problem addressed in this study is therefore the limited contextualised understanding of the role of home language in supporting early literacy development in early childhood education within township primary schools. Drawing on data from Soshanguve primary schools, this article seeks to explore how home language is positioned in early literacy practices and how it shapes learners' access to meaningful literacy learning during the foundational years of schooling.

Background of the study

Language plays a central role in communication, identity formation, and learning, particularly in early childhood education where foundational literacy skills are developed (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016; Nag, Vagh, Dulay, & Snowling, 2019). In South Africa, the Constitution guarantees learners the right to receive education in the language of their choice where reasonably practicable (RSA, 1996). This commitment is further reflected in national language-in-education policies that advocate for the promotion and use of indigenous languages, particularly in the early years of schooling. Despite this policy framework, the implementation of home language instruction in practice remains uneven and contested.

Research consistently demonstrates that children learn best when initial literacy development occurs in a language they understand well (Spaull, Pretorius, & Mohohlwane, 2020). A strong foundation in home language supports cognitive development, reading comprehension, and the acquisition of additional languages in later schooling. However, in many South African schools, particularly in urban and township contexts, learners are required to transition to English as the language of learning and teaching at an early stage, often before they have developed sufficient proficiency in their home language. This early shift has been associated with challenges in literacy development, academic achievement, and learner confidence (Gordon & Harvey, 2019; Spaull, Pretorius, & Mohohlwane, 2020).

Soshanguve, a large multicultural and multilingual township in Gauteng Province, reflects these broader national challenges. Learners in Soshanguve primary schools come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including speakers of Sepedi, Setswana, Xitsonga, isiZulu, and other African languages. Schools in this context are required to accommodate linguistic diversity while operating within policy, curriculum, and resource constraints. In some cases, English is introduced as the medium of instruction from as early as Grade R, further complicating efforts to support home language-based literacy development in the early years (Probyn, 2019; Van der Walt, 2020).

Although South Africa's language policies emphasise multilingualism and the protection of indigenous languages, there remains a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. Factors such as parental language preferences, perceptions of English as a language of socio-economic mobility, limited teaching resources, and insufficient teacher preparation continue to influence language practices in early childhood education (Heugh & Stroud, 2022; Manyike & Lemmer, 2014; Department of Basic Education, 2013). As a result, many learners experience a disconnect between the language of the home and the language of schooling, with significant implications for early literacy development (Nag et al., 2019; Spaull et al., 2020).

In contradiction of backdrop, understanding the role of home language in early childhood education is particularly important in contexts such as Soshanguve, where linguistic diversity intersects with socio-economic inequality. Examining how home language is positioned and utilised in early literacy practices provides valuable insight into the ways in which educational policies are enacted at school level and how learners' linguistic resources are either supported or marginalised during the foundational years of schooling (Pretorius, 2019; Heugh, 2019).

Theoretical framework

This study was based on Vygotsky's (1989) sociocultural theory. It links culture to the learning of a mother tongue at home and at school. Children learn not only from adults but also from each other. According to Vygotsky (1987), children constantly learn through social

interaction. This is evident in any classroom or in any setting where an individual acquires new skills. Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural learning highlights the role of social and cultural interaction in the learning process. The key premises of this theory are reality, knowledge and learning. Therefore, a sociocultural lens enables the researcher to examine the extent to which children's home language influences their literacy development.

Application of Sociocultural Theory to the study

This study adopted Sociocultural Theory to improve the use of the home language at home and at school and promote literacy development in early childhood education (ECE). Poor academic performance due to learners' poor command of their home language was interpreted through the sociocultural lenses of reality, knowledge, and learning. Social Constructivism emphasises the roles of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and in constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Amineh & Asl, 2015).

Reality

Social constructivists believe that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of society jointly invent the properties of the world. For the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered and does not exist prior to its social invention. Because their families provide children with their first interaction with their home language, it becomes their reality. In this study, this premise explains participants' realities and helps to make sense of their home language and its role in learning. As we have explained above, reality is constructed through human activity. The study examined children's communication and interaction with their parents, other children, and their teachers to understand how their home language is used and what benefits it offers.

From this perspective, reality was understood as contextually and socially constructed within the schooling environments of Soshanguve. This conceptualisation was used to interpret how linguistic practices in early childhood classrooms are shaped by institutional norms, resource constraints, and community language practices. It enabled the study to situate learners' literacy experiences within the broader socio-linguistic realities of township primary schools.

Knowledge

To social constructivists, knowledge is also a human product and is socially and culturally constructed (Kim, 2001). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with others and the environment they live in. The knowledge parents have of their home language is crucial because they impart it to their children as they interact daily. It was also important to understand that if all the parties have enough knowledge of the home language, for example, teachers who do not know the learner's home language, or parents married to someone who does not speak the language they understand.

The concept of knowledge informed the analysis by framing learners' home language as a legitimate epistemic resource in early literacy development. This lens was used to examine how learners' prior linguistic knowledge supported comprehension, vocabulary development, and engagement with literacy tasks, highlighting the role of home language in bridging existing knowledge with new literacy concepts.

Learning

The last premise focuses on learning as a social process as social constructivists understand it. Learning does not occur only within an individual. Also, it is not a passive development of behaviours shaped by external forces (Akpan, Igwe, Mpamah, & Okoro, 2020). Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities. The types of activities parents and teachers involve learners in will determine their learning and success in developing their home language. The researchers examined how long learners take to transition from their home language to the language of learning and teaching, and whether teachers can use more than one language to explain learning content.

In this study, the concept of learning was used to interpret how early literacy development unfolds through learners' engagement with instruction mediated by their home language. Learning was understood as a socially situated

process, shaped by learners' linguistic backgrounds and classroom interactions, rather than as the acquisition of isolated skills. This conceptualisation guided the analysis of how home language use enabled learners to make meaning, participate in literacy activities, and develop foundational reading and writing skills in the early years.

Literature review

Home Language and Early Literacy Development

A substantial body of research highlights the central role of home language in supporting early literacy development in early childhood education. Studies consistently demonstrate that children acquire foundational literacy skills, such as phonological awareness, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, more effectively when instruction is mediated through a language they understand well (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016; Nag, Vagh, Dulay, & Snowling, 2019). Early literacy development grounded in the home language supports cognitive development and provides a strong foundation for the acquisition of additional languages later in schooling (Heugh, 2019; Gordon & Harvey, 2019).

Research further indicates that children who develop strong oral proficiency in their home language are better positioned to engage meaningfully with reading and writing tasks during the Foundation Phase (Spaull, Pretorius, & Mohohlwane, 2020). Oral language competence has been shown to be a critical predictor of later reading success, particularly in multilingual and low-resource contexts where learners often encounter literacy instruction in a second or additional language (Pretorius, 2019).

Language acquisition literature emphasises that children learn language primarily through social interaction with adults and peers within their immediate environments (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013; Safitri, 2020). These interactions provide the linguistic input necessary for the natural development of language skills during early childhood, a period characterised by rapid linguistic growth. Contemporary research affirms that multilingual exposure does not hinder language development; rather, children are capable of acquiring two or more languages simultaneously when supported through consistent and meaningful interaction (Paradis & Kirova, 2014; MacSwan, 2019). This body of work underscores the importance of recognising learners' existing linguistic repertoires as valuable resources in early literacy learning.

Bilingualism, Multilingualism, and Literacy in Early Childhood

Research on bilingualism and multilingualism further supports the educational value of maintaining and using home language in early childhood contexts. International studies indicate that learners who receive support in their home language demonstrate stronger literacy outcomes and are able to transfer linguistic and cognitive skills across languages (Paradis & Kirova, 2014; Heugh & Stroud, 2022). Evidence from multilingual contexts suggests that bilingual learners often achieve comparable or stronger academic outcomes than their monolingual peers, particularly when their home language is affirmed alongside the language of schooling (Cummins, 2017; MacSwan, 2019).

Within African contexts, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception; however, schooling practices frequently fail to reflect this linguistic reality. Research from countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa highlights ongoing tensions between language policies that promote multilingualism and classroom practices that prioritise dominant or colonial languages (Ouane & Glanz, 2010; Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2015; Mose & Kaschula, 2019). Although mother-tongue-based multilingual education is strongly advocated in the literature, challenges related to resources, assessment practices, and teacher preparation continue to constrain its effective implementation, particularly in early childhood education settings (Heugh, 2019; Shava & Manyike, 2022).

Policy, Practice, and Implementation Challenges

South African language-in-education policies emphasise the use of home language in the early years of schooling and advocate linguistic equity and multilingualism (RSA, 1996; Department of Basic Education, 2013). However, numerous studies point to a persistent gap between

policy intentions and classroom practice (Probyn, 2019; Gordon & Harvey, 2019). Factors such as parental preferences for English, perceptions of English as a language of socio-economic mobility, limited availability of learning materials in African languages, and insufficient teacher preparation contribute to the early introduction of English as the language of learning and teaching (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014; Van der Walt, 2020).

Research indicates that learners in township and rural schools often experience a disconnect between the language of the home and the language of schooling, which can negatively affect early literacy development (Nag et al., 2019; Spaull et al., 2020). Access to print-rich environments, exposure to academic language, and broader socio-economic conditions further shape learners' literacy trajectories (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). These contextual factors are particularly salient in multilingual townships such as Soshanguve, where schools must accommodate linguistic diversity within constrained institutional and resource contexts.

Gaps in Existing Research

Although existing literature provides compelling evidence for the importance of home language in early literacy development, there remains limited empirical research that examines how home language is enacted and experienced within early childhood classrooms in township primary schools. Much of the available scholarship focuses on policy frameworks, language debates, or later phases of schooling, with comparatively less attention given to classroom-level practices in the Foundation Phase (Heugh, 2019; Probyn, 2019). There is a need for context-specific research that explores how home language use shapes early literacy development within multilingual and under-resourced schooling environments. This gap informs the focus of the present study, which examines the role of home language in early childhood education for literacy development in Soshanguve primary schools.

Methods

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative research approach within a case study design to explore the role of home language in early childhood literacy development. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with Foundation Phase teachers, classroom observations, and the analysis of relevant school and curriculum documents. Interviews provided insight into teachers' experiences and perspectives on home language use, while classroom observations enabled the researcher to examine how home language was enacted in everyday literacy practices. Document analysis offered contextual understanding of policy expectations and school-level language practices. The triangulation of these data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings and ensured coherence between the research paradigm, methods, and analytical focus.

The population consisted of 180 Foundation Phase teachers and 140 parents with children in the Foundation Phase attending schools in the Soshanguve Tshwane North District of the Gauteng Province. Stratified purposive sampling was chosen as a sampling strategy. The selection criteria were based on the research question. Therefore, the sample consisted of eight Grade R teachers, as Grade R is the reception year and ideal to assess learners' language abilities in early formal education. Five parents of Grade R learners at the same school, and their teachers where selected to participate. A total of thirteen participants were selected. The data were collected not only through individual semi-structured interviews and document analysis of the school's language policy and learner workbooks, but also from the teachers and parents who were interviewed. Finally, the data were thematically analysed. This study aimed to understand the influence of home language on literacy development in early childhood education.

Research question

- What is the influence of home language on literacy development in early childhood education?

Findings and Discussion

The study investigated the effect of their home language on young learners' literacy development in primary schools in Soshanguve. The reason for this study is the challenges that arise when learners do not learn to use their home language. Home language is important because it

is the language children know and understand before they start school. The main findings of the study will be summarised in line with the research sub-themes that emerged from the data collection based on the two objectives of the study, namely:

- To examine how their home languages promote learners' communication proficiency.
- To recommend a model to promote their home language both at home and at school.

The following research sub-themes are presented and analyzed: the language of teaching and learning at school, the dominant languages spoken at the school, the use of their home language to help learners understand the subject content, the role of their home language in promoting deep learning, the teacher-parent relationship, the role of the home language in literacy development, and measures to strike a balance between the home language and the language of teaching and learning.

Sub-theme 1: Language of teaching and learning at school, the dominant languages at the school

At some schools, English was the only language of teaching and learning; at others, two African languages were used to teach:

*"**SC1-**English, **SC2-**Sepedi and Setswana, **SC3-** English and **SC4-**Setswana and Sepedi"* (Dataset: individual interview)

The study revealed that some schools used more than one LoLT. In some cases, the teachers, learners and parents were mother tongue speakers of the LoLT. If they were not, they were familiar with the language of teaching and learning. Mkhize and Balfour's (2017) study shows that even though most South Africans speak languages other than English, English remains the dominant language in the public domain. It is supported by Vygotsky (1789), whose theory serves as a theoretical framework for the current study. This theory holds that knowledge is constructed and that individuals learn from one another. The two studies above support the finding that a language that is not the child's home language can be learnt at school as pupils learn from each other and from their teacher through collaboration and interaction.

Sub-theme 2: The dominant languages spoken at the school

Although a school may have a particular language of teaching and learning, learners have different home languages. Teachers indicated that their schools were highly diverse, with learners speaking a variety of languages. The dominant languages were:

*"**SC1-** Setswana, Sepedi, IsiZulu and Xitsonga, **SC2-** Sepedi and Setswana, **SC3-** Xitsonga and IsiZulu, **SC4-** Shona, Setswana, IsiZulu and Sepedi" (Dataset: individual interview)*

T5 of SC2 commented that:

"The people around the area speak Sepedi and Setswana, and the school teaches in both the languages by having separate classrooms: one for Sepedi and the other one for Setswana." (Dataset: individual interview)

It was evident that learners mostly communicated in their home languages. During a lesson observation, learners answered in their home language, and the teachers alternated between their home language and the school's LoLT. Teachers' code-switching supplemented learners' limited LoLT proficiency, and was necessary to give feedback, maintain the flow of the lesson, and save time. This finding agrees with that of Kioko (2015), who contends that using the home language in class ensures a smooth transition between home and school. Learners get more involved in the learning process, and their basic literacy skills develop. Since learners answer questions and engage in discussions in their home language, teachers need to be more flexible, innovative, and creative when they prepare lessons. Sun, Yussof, Vijayakumar, Lai, O'Brien, and Ong (2019) affirm that teachers code-switch more often out of habit than for instructional purposes. During the lesson observation, it was evident that in formal teaching, the teachers focused on helping learners understand. Epstein's theory (1996), with its six types of collaborative involvement, supports the above finding. Collaboration implies working together and

sharing ideas. A relationship develops. When teachers use learners' home language, trust, mutual understanding, and learning are fostered.

Sub-theme 3: The use of a home language helps learners to better understand

Teachers observed that code-switching is indispensable to help learners understand. Teacher 1 noted the following:

"T1- During my lessons, I try to code-switch and use different languages, mostly IsiZulu, Xitsonga and Sepedi. Like maybe having a rhyme, I try to convert it into IsiZulu, Xitsonga and Setswana so that they all get a clearer understanding. Normally, we code-switch because English is a foreign language to most of them as they are new to the school environment. And some are new to the language itself. We try to code-switch to the language that they are most common with, which is Setswana, Tsonga and Zulu." (Dataset: individual interview)

It was found that code-switching helped learners understand and participate. It was even used at home when a parent explained homework to their child. Code-switching had a positive effect, boosting teaching and communication. In line with this finding, Memory, Nkengbeza and Liswaniso (2018) maintain that code-switching helps learners to understand difficult aspects of a lesson and to follow instructions. This finding corroborates Vygotsky's notion that sociocultural theory is a developmental theory. As parents, caregivers, or teachers talk to children, their linguistic abilities develop.

Sub-theme 4: The use of the home language promotes deep learning

The teachers shared multiple ideas to promote deep learning in the home language. Baseline assessment was used to promote participation:

"T1- I would say, in most cases, when we introduce something that is new, to as Sepedi, IsiZulu and Setswana so that they can understand." (Dataset: individual interview)

Teachers also indicated that creating space for learners to show their understanding is important. T5 contended that:

"T5 - I talk to them and read them stories. Telling them stories and playing with them in the fantasy play to allow communication in their home language, which they also learn here at school. Singing songs related to the theme that I am teaching them." (Dataset: individual interview)

The findings show that to promote deep learning, not only code-switching but also a range of learning opportunities and teaching resources are required. Teachers code-switch and use resources to promote deep learning. Most of the time, their schools' language of instruction was not the learners' home language. To engage in learning and participate fully, especially in ECE, learners must be familiar with the language of instruction. As a result, teachers code-switched to learners' home languages and provided resources to promote communication. Latukha, Doleeva, Jarlstrom, Jokinen, and Piekkar, (2015) contend that English provides access to global information, communication, employment opportunities and social mobility. Although the teachers in Soshanguve promote English as a LoLT, they readily switch to learners' mother tongues and use teaching media to help them understand and think critically. The results align with those of Dixion (2018), who finds that learners learn better when they use their home language. Their language proficiency is likely to improve, and they will be eager to engage in the learning process. This aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which involves assigning tasks that learners cannot easily accomplish on their own and providing guidance to help them. This way, teachers can progressively advance the learning process (Jadallah et al., 2011). It means that, through code-switching and the provision of teaching resources, teachers support learners' learning progress by using their home language for literacy development.

Sub-theme 5: Teacher-parent relationship

A positive relationship between their teachers and parents helps learners to learn better and enables holistic support. Modern parents not only send their children to school but also participate in their learning development. Most teachers agreed about the cooperation between themselves and parents:

"T1 - I have cooperating parents who are normally willing to support the learners. I call them; give them some work to assist the learners work. We have a message book and files to send home and show what we are doing in class: the theme and how they can support the learner. I also send home and tell the parents what we are busy with and what they can do with the learner, and how they go about teaching the theme at home." (Dataset: individual interview)

The teachers concurred that they worked in conjunction with parents and that they assisted one another in supporting the child. This is corroborated below:

"T4 - I give parents guidelines at the beginning of the year on how to help the child with homework so that we can work together. If the learner struggles, I call a parent to the school so that we can talk about how to assist the child. I show the parents the challenges as well and then I explain the parent's role at home so we can achieve the outcomes." (Dataset: Individual interview)

The findings highlighted a good relationship between teachers and parents. Parents showed their support by attending parent meetings and assisting learners with their homework. On their part, teachers regularly informed parents of their child's progress and advised them on how to assist their child. It is true that some parents, especially those whose children were doing well, did not communicate with the teachers and relied on their progress reports. The results showed that some parents and teachers were difficult to work with. The literature stresses that parental involvement in a child's education is of paramount importance. According to Boonk, Gijselaers, Ritzen, and Brand-Gruwel (2018), parental involvement, although it may differ across ethnic groups, contributes significantly to learners' academic excellence. The results showed that, in many families, children's language development is better at home than at school. This means that children simply speak to adults more often when they are at home (Muller & Kerbow, 2018). Because their child did well, some parents did not see the need to participate in parental activities.

Sub-theme 6: The role of the home language in literacy development

The ability to read, write, communicate, and critically analyse information lays the foundation for literacy. Their home language is a tool children use to become literate. Therefore, their home language must be fully established so that they can easily acquire literacy skills. During the interviews, all teachers agreed that the home language was indispensable for literacy. T1 commented as follows:

"T1- Yes, it does. You know, what I have learnt from my personal experience. In our school, our Lolt is English. However, when children start from the lower grade learning in English, it enhances their confidence unlike a child in the rural area who does Maths in Sepedi, that problem of not knowing English will affect them. And even in interviews or presentations, they encounter language barrier[s] and become discouraged or demotivated. So, home language plays a major role if it's the same as the language of school. Otherwise, it's a disadvantage if you are going to a different language school. Learners learn more when they can use their home languages. Using home languages can provide insight into other cultures." (Dataset: Individual interview)

The findings of this study show that learners do not come to school as empty vessels; they bring knowledge and a language background. A home language lays a solid foundation for literacy development and learning. It also provides insight into the child's culture. According to Brown and College (2014), a strong language foundation lays the groundwork for literacy and reading development when children are given opportunities to engage in purposeful, meaningful language and early print activities. Malatji, Mavuso and Malatji (2018) argue that parents must ensure language support for literacy development by using their mother tongue at home. A study conducted in Australia by Eisenchlas, Schalley, and Guillemin (2013) shows that the cost of not investing in home language literacy programmes is, in the long run, significantly higher than their implementation costs. Countries such as Australia were advised to consider supporting grassroots home language literacy programmes to improve

overall literacy outcomes for Australian home language speakers.

Recommendations

- Teachers must use code-switching in teaching and learning.
- Schools' language policies must reflect the needs of their communities.
- Teaching aids should support the home language.
- Parents must be educated on the promotion of the home language at home.
- Communication should be in the home language from an early age.
- Strike a balance between the home language and the language of teaching and learning through multilingualism.

Conclusion

The study revealed that primary school learners in Soshanguve speak a diversity of languages. Although English is the language of teaching and learning at some primary schools, teachers use one or more African languages in most. The study showed that home language is important for learning and communication. Because parents are unsure whether to speak the language of instruction or their home language at home, greater awareness of the value of the home language is needed. The study also found that when English is not the learners' home language, learning and transitioning to English take much longer. That is the reason code-switching is common in such schools. The study recommends not only collaboration among teachers, learners, and parents, but also education on the significance of the home language to strike a balance between the language of instruction and learners' home languages.

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Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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