

Reading 8

Eager to talk and learn and think

Carol Macdonald

Notes

You will have noticed that constructivist theory, particularly in the way Vygotskians understand it, places great emphasis on talk and therefore on language.

Macdonald asks the question, 'But what happens when learners aren't learning in a language with which they are comfortable? In particular, what happens when they are not learning in their mother tongue?' She suggests that the straight-to-English policies that have been adopted in many African countries severely constrain a learner's ability to think and learn.

In this article she argues strongly for more thoughtful language policies in South African schools. She notes that there is a tension between the desire to learn in English (because it is perceived to provide entry into economic success) and research which suggests that the best learning occurs when a second language is learnt only once the learner is competent in her or his mother tongue.

Again, as you read see whether you can identify Macdonald's constructivist thinking in her arguments about language. Also think about the implications of this research for your own teaching and learning.

Reading The shock of school

In industrialized societies all over the world, there are some children who are ready for the kind of schooling which they will experience. These children come from homes where the parents have had formal education and read for information and enjoyment. Their pre-school environment

*This is from C. Macdonald, **Eager to Talk and Learn and Think** (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1991).*

prepares them for the education process. Their home language is usually the language which they will use for education – right up to university level. These children adapt easily to school.

For other children, however, school comes as an unexpected shock. These children will look forward to school and all that it promises. They almost always experience disappointment on encountering authoritarian control in a disadvantaged environment. This is a problem in developing countries all over the world and South Africa is no exception.

If we look at the educational reasons why this is so, there seem to be *two* which emerge from the Threshold Project research.

These findings are very similar to research conclusions in other parts of Africa and in other developing countries, for example Colombia and Peru.

Gap between traditional, non-formal systems of education and formal, western-type schooling

The first factor is the *wide gap* between traditional, non-formal systems of education and formal, western-type schooling. Because of this gap, children don't do well at school. They cannot make the best of a western form of education.

From another perspective, the school system is not sensitive to the children's needs.

Whichever way we look at it, the result is that the child's development is negatively affected because the way of going about tasks associated with the child's own culture is not further developed by the schooling. It is also negatively affected in that the children at school do not develop new patterns and processes of thinking as quickly as people would expect them to. (These findings will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.)

When a formal education is imposed in a situation which is culturally different, the drop-out rate is a good indication of its negative effects. It indicates whether the education matches the children's needs or not. There are certainly other factors involved in these South African drop-out rates, like the lack of money, but the figures nevertheless can be used as a broad indicator of the number of children which school does not successfully educate.

Available figures don't show how many children never even start school, although it is estimated that at least two million children are not currently at school. Statistics suggest:

- that over the last ten years, of the African children who started school, only 77% would complete the primary phase (seven years of basic education);
- that, of those who completed the primary phase, only 7% would make it to matric (Grade 12);
- that, of this 7%, only one third would complete the year, and only one out of every ten would gain a pass which would allow them to go to university.

It is useful to see these figures for South Africa in a larger African perspective and to recognize that the educational problems confronting us in South Africa are not simply a product of a particular political system. So, changing our political system will not automatically solve the educational problems. However, many of the deficiencies associated with Bantu Education will affect us for some time to come.

Children learn through a language other than their own

The second, and more important reason why schooling is not effective for the majority of children is that most children have to *learn through a language other than their own*.

Straight-for-English policies

In some parts of Africa, English has been chosen as the medium of instruction in schools for reasons such as 'political unity'. Zambia chose this option at independence, so that none of the African languages of the country would have an advantage over any of the others. The straight-for-English approach, which Zambia has chosen, [...] means that right from the first grade the children learn *everything* in English, including how to read and write.

Most children enter schools without a knowledge of English. Nevertheless, these children are supposed to hear only English in the classroom. But, because they do not understand, the teacher might use Bemba, for example, which would probably be her or his language too. Many Zambian teachers are not fully bilingual and feel insecure teaching in English. Yet, their own language (Bemba, in the example) is only one subject among others.

Research in Zambian schools has shown that the children in the third year of school cannot read at all because they are required to become literate in a language (English) that is not at all related to the language which they know (Bemba). The learners, educated in English, cannot explain in Bemba what they have learnt in English. This means that they do not understand what they are taught in English.

They can also not express, in English, ideas which they know in Bemba. They find it difficult to understand new concepts in subjects like Arithmetic when they are taught in the new language. Even though they have supposedly had a lot of English in the classroom, children who leave school early (even at seventh grade level), cannot use their English in the outside world.

In urban areas such as Soweto (and even in many rural areas), parents favour the increased use of English in the schools. They want their children to have more English and to start learning it earlier.

Those who are involved in the creation of a new system of education, should not take this attitude lightly.

Modifying straight-for-English policies

The failure of the straight-for-English programme in Zambia and elsewhere in Africa (for example in Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone) suggests that at least some modifications are necessary. Children who come from homes where books and reading are not a part of life are more successful at learning English *if they have first become literate in their own language*. So, if a *modified* form of the straight-for-English method is tried in South Africa, the children's early literate experiences should be in the language they know best. Informal evidence suggests that a year on a programme such as *Breakthrough to Literacy* (in Xhosa, Zulu etc.) could bring children to a state of readiness for starting English literacy. This has been the experience of the Molteno Project which has developed *Breakthrough* in nine African languages.

The introduction to English as a medium would have to be carefully managed. Many African children, even in urban environments, may have had little or no experience of English before coming to school. If this is the case, the curriculum should be structured in such a way as to help the learners achieve a sufficient level of fluency, confidence, and vocabulary to enable them to cope when they are presented with more demanding and abstract school subjects in the medium of English.

Schools that adopt a modified straight-for-English teaching programme would be schools with competent principals and teachers trained and confident enough to teach in English. The reason why modified straight-for-English schools would need to be good on every level is because the learners will need as much support as possible from the teaching staff.

Re-evaluating the first language issue

One question naturally arises, 'How can *all* children get off to a good start at school?' The answer we would like to suggest is a delicate one in the South African context:

'By starting them off in their own language because it will give them the foundation on which their thinking skills and their ability to acquire and use other languages will develop.'

For most South Africans, however, the very idea of first language education has negative associations because it has in the past been misused as a political weapon. Hence this recommendation must be examined carefully and critically.

It may help us to see 'the mother tongue issue' in a different light if we look at some of the statistics from the rest of Africa. Most countries in Africa have an educational system very much like the one in South Africa.

In other words, children start off in their own language and then switch after a few years to a second language as the medium of instruction.

Africa: A move back to mother tongue teaching

But many of these countries are beginning to look again at the value of the children's first language in education. There has been a swing towards including national languages in schools.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Science, Cultural Council) figures for 1990 show that thirty-seven out of forty-seven African countries are committed to using one or more of their national languages in the curriculum and four others have embarked on a study phase prior to adopting this policy. So forty-one states out of forty-seven have given, or are about to give, full teaching status to national languages in their educational systems, although in 1976, a mere fourteen years ago, the figure was less than sixteen out of forty-seven.

If countries north of South Africa are moving towards using their own languages in the curriculum, why has mother tongue schooling been such a terrible failure here?

South Africa: The legacy of apartheid's mother tongue teaching

The answers are familiar. Bantu Education, introduced in 1953 by Verwoerd, was a deliberate attempt at keeping Africans subordinate in relation to other South Africans. The state insisted on the mother tongue (first language) policy and the African community was forced to accept it, and they did so under protest. Rejection of teaching in the mother tongue must be seen in its context.

It was regarded as inferior because of its association with Bantu Education. People believed that learning in their own language was something created to maintain inferiority. Although the state insisted that children learn in their first language, very little money went into developing suitable language courses, textbooks, dictionaries, and written literature. For example, most language courses were simply derived from missionary grammars for second language learners. So, if people felt that mother tongue education was inferior, they had good reason to do so.

In the past, African children were locked into an education without prospects. Poor first language programmes gave way to poor teaching of the two official languages. And so, school leavers were at an added disadvantage when they tried to find jobs in the world of work because they couldn't speak English or Afrikaans well. Africans felt, most strongly, and rightly so, that Bantu Education did not prepare the children properly for entrance to the economic world.

It should not be a surprise that an educationally sound idea like first language education would sink with all the negative baggage of apart-

heid attached to it. Mother tongue education only succeeds when the community acknowledges its own language and gives it the status to enable it to grow in use (in newspapers and in literature, for example).

Using mother tongue competence to develop other languages

It is important, especially in the South African context, to understand that teaching children to read and write in their own language first should not automatically be seen as a dead end. Language specialists believe that once reading and writing skills have become familiar in the first language, it is easier to apply them in another language. Indeed, ***learning to read and write in one's own language first seems to be the best possible way to allow the children's learning and language learning abilities to develop and flourish.***

Nevertheless, many Africans still feel very negative about their children learning in their own language. They ask, 'Why should our children learn in their first language? Why should they not just learn in English all the way?' They should understand that they may be placing their children at a further disadvantage in relation to the English- and Afrikaans-speaking children who are fortunate enough to be learning in ***their*** first language, from Grade 1 through to university or technikon.

The importance of the first language in education

If one sees the children at the centre of the debate, one can rephrase the questions in the paragraph above as follows:

'Are there benefits for the children if they start their learning in their first language?'

The answer is:

'Yes, there are. A thorough first language course gets children off to a good start in education because the language provides a bridge between the child's home and the demands of the new environment of the school.'

In their own language, children at school can ***say what they think*** if they are allowed to speak the language they know. If children can use their own language, they can ***express their own ideas; they can be creative.***

But, if children have to learn in a new language, they are put into a kind of prison. They cannot tell the teacher what they think because they do not have the words to say it. Put them into this situation and you limit

their creativity and put a ceiling on what they can do.

This also means that the children's first language must continue to be well taught even when it is no longer the classroom language. It is ineffective, for example, to use an outstanding learning-to-read-and-write (literacy) programme like *Breakthrough*, if the children cannot continue to read and write with increasing confidence in their own language. This ideal obviously requires that funds be channelled into developing language courses, readers, and books. The development of the African languages is necessary if these languages are to function well in themselves and provide a basis for learning, including the learning of other languages. To date, only one publishing house has started developing an adequate junior primary mother tongue course in Tswana.

The first language and thinking skills

Children's thinking develops most quickly and easily in their first language.

The Threshold Project research results support this view. In the southern African situation where both teachers and children are having to work in an unfamiliar language, the limits to the natural development of thinking and creative skills are greatly increased:

- first, by the *teacher's lack of confidence*;
- second, by the *children's limited knowledge of the language*.

On the other hand, when children use their first language in the classroom, especially in the early years, they can talk about their interests, their needs, and their thoughts. This stimulation towards mental growth is necessary as preparation for their education and life-skills. With this mental development, the children are equipped to deal with the wealth of information they are to meet later. Without this necessary mental growth, the pupils fail to meet the intellectual demands of school, and thus fail year after year in school until, defeated and disillusioned, they drop out and become part of the 'lost' generation.

Once they are well equipped mentally in their first language, children can *transfer* their skills and knowledge to a second language with reasonable ease.

Success in a second language programme seems to be *dependent* on success in the children's first language. The Molteno Project, for example, went into developing a first language Grade 1 programme (*Breakthrough*) as the first step in tackling African children's poor English results. The table below represents one model of thinking skills which can be applied, for example, in science teaching, although it can apply to other subjects as well. This table is intended to give readers some idea of what we mean when we talk about language and thinking skills, because the pupils' behaviour almost always requires some form of language or graphic skill.

A model of thinking skills for Science teaching

Level of thinking	Thinking skills named	Pupils' behaviour
Knowledge Retention of concepts	Recalling	Observe, match, repeat, memorize, label, name, recall, cluster, recount, sort, record, define
Comprehension Understanding concepts	Explaining, comparing	Recognize, report, find, express, identify, explain, restate, review, paraphrase, tell, describe, summarize
Application Using concepts	Applying concepts and skills	Select, show, demonstrate, use, apply, sequence, dramatize, organize, illustrate, test out, solve, imagine
Analysis Breaking down science concepts into smaller parts of information	Analysing	Examine, classify, compare, contrast, outline, interpret, debate, defend, question, draw conclusions, research, analyse
Synthesis Putting information together to form a new concept	Synthesizing	Propose, construct, plan, emulate, compose, speculate, create, design, invent
Evaluation Judging the value of a science concept	Verifying	Judge, decide, rank, persuade, evaluate, assess, criticize, value, predict, justify, verify, convince

How the second language builds on competence in the first language

If we want to argue that children should first become literate in their mother tongue, and then go on to learning a new language, we must have good reasons for saying this. Here we attempt to show how this works.

Speech acts can be easily transferred from Tswana to English

Pre-school Tswana children (for example) can use Tswana to ask for things, to make comments, to explain, to request something etc. These functions appear very early in children's lives and are a part of becoming members of their particular society or smaller social group like the family. Once these children begin to learn English, they know that those same things (speech acts) can be done in English. The fact that these speech acts are expressed very differently in English is the challenging part.

For example, when asking for things politely in Tswana, children use a special tense, but when they do the same thing in English, they need to use words like 'may' and 'can' at the beginning of the sentence. Another difference that they will have to learn is that when they ask questions in English, the question words ('who', 'what' etc.) always appear at the beginning of the sentence. This is something new, since question words generally appear at the end of the sentence in Tswana. These differences appear since English and Tswana are not related to each other.

However, the important point here is that the *same speech acts* can be carried out in both languages, and children automatically know this.

The next question to be asked is, 'What happens when the children learn to read and write?'

The English and Tswana reading and writing alphabets are the same

Let us take Tswana children again. They will learn the Tswana alphabet (which is very similar to English) and how to read and write words written in Roman script. Roman script is used because the African languages were first written down by missionaries from Europe. The spelling of the African languages is very regular and easy for the children to learn successfully. When the children start to tackle English spelling, great care has to be taken to teach them the complex spelling system that English has. (The difficulties in English spelling arise from the fact that it has been a written language for a very long time, and it has borrowed words and spelling from other languages.)

However, the children will have learnt to form letters in writing, and will know that we write from left to right, and that we use very similar punctuation in the two languages. Also we read books from the front to the back (unlike Hebrew and Arabic people who do it the other way around).

Basic story structures in English and Tswana are similar

When young children listen to stories they will learn to expect that the story starts with the introduction of a main character, who usually finds herself or himself in some sort of a problem situation that has to be tackled. There are some slight differences between what we call the 'story grammar' of English and Tswana, because English stories have been written down for a long time, but the basic structure is the same. What is important is that children can listen with great pleasure to long stories in Tswana, and so gain a greater general knowledge than they would get from the very simple stories that second language learners have to begin with. English stories have to be very simple in the beginning because of the unfamiliarity of the words and the grammatical structures.

In time, children will learn that they express one idea in a paragraph, and this knowledge will automatically carry over to English writing as this writing becomes more developed. Then, when children are taught to write longer pieces of text in Tswana, they will learn the use of headings and subheadings. This too forms part of English text structure.

Later, children will learn more advanced skills like making summaries. Once again, knowing that only the main points need to be written down, is something that occurs both in Tswana and English.

In conclusion: Literacy skills in Tswana can be easily carried over to English

We could give very many examples of how Tswana children can carry over literacy skills from Tswana to English. The main point that we want to bring out is that children can very easily learn to read and write in their mother tongue, and then transfer skills to the second language.

It is *much more difficult* to start with the second language because children have to struggle with the meanings of words, and the forming of grammatical structures at the same time as learning to read and write. Reading and writing for young children is very demanding on their mental 'space', and so it is very difficult to combine this with learning a second language at the same time.

Doing this is a slow process and children will experience few feelings of success; learning to read and write in the mother tongue will bring a great feeling of success, and encourage children to continue in school.

Bilingual schooling for all South Africans

No one would want to limit children to a single language, especially in a country like South Africa, which has a history of bilingualism. Most South Africans are committed to the idea of speaking more than one language.

What is needed now is a choice from the best kinds of bilingual school-

ing. In addition, for a bilingual schooling system to be successful, it will need the approval and active support of the broader community. When these choices are made, it is worth remembering this:

a successful bilingual system needs to be manageable for pupils and teachers alike.

For African parents, the importance of being bilingual is obvious, but 'white' parents have given it little thought, especially in terms of learning an African language. 'Whites' have almost always assumed that all the other people in this country had to learn English or Afrikaans. But very few 'whites' thought it important to spend time learning an African language.

By the year 2000, nine out of ten South African school children will not be mother tongue speakers of English. Less than one in ten children will have the 'white' South African background which nowadays is still taken as the norm. Figures such as these should surely be interpreted by the 'white' community as a signal that they should enter the wider linguistic heritage of the country. 'White' South African parents should ensure that schools offer their children a good second language programme in one of the African languages taught by competent first language teachers.

Research shows that parents are much more committed to their children's schooling if they have a say in the kind of schooling it is going to be. It would be ideal, then, if a new education system were to allow communities to make up their minds about the schooling they want for their children. Parents could then choose whether:

- their children go to schools which have a predominantly English environment and culture;
- their children go to schools where they maintain their own language as the medium of instruction, but also learn a second language;
- their children have schooling which actively promotes their own language while teaching them a second language well enough to make it useful for the market place.

There will be choices of another kind, if educational planning is effective; for example, between schools which specialize in the arts, the scientific and technical fields, commerce, and a more traditional academic approach. If we accept that education is the way in which children are given the skills to become members of society, it is important to think about issues such as:

- What is the starting point for a Xhosa (or Afrikaans or Pedi) child?
- How can we make it easier for children to move from their own cultural background into the larger society?
- What must children know and be able to do to cope with the larger society?
- Are we going to change aspects of the larger society to suit ourselves, and how will this affect our education system?

- Knowing that our children come from different backgrounds, how can we make sure that their education will give them all the best possible start in life?

At present, we tend to think of educational equality in very simple terms. We want all the children to learn the same things and have the same physical resources. Questions like the ones above may give us a more insightful conception of *educational equality* in terms of learning.

Here we must distinguish between educational *opportunities* and educational *outcomes*. If we were simply to provide equal educational opportunities, children using English as the medium of instruction (where English is not their mother tongue) will be at a disadvantage because of their very heavy language learning load. Special provision must be made so that they can achieve as well as mother tongue speakers of English do. In order to achieve *equality of educational outcome*, redressing historical imbalances by special provision of materials and method will be high on the educational agenda.