Concepts of Early Childhood Development (ECD), Literacy Learning and Materials Development in Multilingual Settings

Carole Bloch
Preface
Since Independence in 1990, the Namibian government has been engaged in a process of reform in education involving a change in philosophy towards teaching based on the notion of Learner-Centred Education. English was introduced as the official language of Namibia in 1990. In terms of school language policy, mother tongue education has been encouraged for the first three years of primary school. However, in reality the African languages have continued to be neglected at this level, schools choosing to begin with English medium as soon as possible. The Upgrading of African Languages Project (AFRLA) involves the National Institute for Curriculum Development (NIED), supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), in a process of implementing mother tongue education in the first three years of primary school.

A version of this paper was delivered at a GTZ/NIED seminar on Methodology of Textbook Writing in African Languages and its Linguistic Implications, AFRILA, Midgard Farm, Namibia, on 12–13 March 2001. At this seminar the relevant education officials were considering how to develop learner-centred approaches to and materials for early literacy teaching and learning in Namibian schools.
Introduction

This is an optimistic moment, one in which the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) in Namibia, with the support of the GTZ, is poised to deepen and accelerate the development of education in Namibia’s indigenous languages. It marks a starting point which can not only make a difference to the educational success of many Namibian children, but can also help to act as an example to others who are working to strengthen the movement towards equitable education for children elsewhere in Africa, where multilingualism is also the norm.

Ekkehard Wolff refers to what he calls the “big three Ms: multilingualism (and multiculturalism), modernisation of the mother tongues and mother tongue education”. He says that no successful and competitive national development of multilingual states in Africa can take place without due recognition of these factors (Wolff 2000: 23). This particular project can contribute significantly to recognising and giving shape to these “big three Ms”.

It is an optimistic moment also because you have the opportunity to creatively and sensitively shape the educational experiences of young children, at the beginning of their lives, and there is no more hopeful place than this for establishing sound foundations to build on. If all three Ms are considered, the developments in the early years of education include far more than parallel educational achievement for each separate language community; this phase also develops positive attitudes in young children towards wanting to learn, and wanting to learn about each other’s languages, and all that languages carry for us. This widens channels for mutual intercultural respect, communication and empathy and can help to contribute profoundly to avoiding divisions in society.

In Africa, and especially in sub-Saharan Africa, which is still grappling with the negative impact of colonialism and apartheid among many other things, we are painfully aware of the responsibility we hold in making decisions about how to implement what we believe to be sound policy decisions in our schools.

Language policy implementation is a critical issue – making appropriate decisions and taking action with regard to language medium is essential for educational success. But language issues never stand alone as they are intimately tied into conceptions and workings of curricula. There are many agreed upon, and a few more contested explanations given for why, despite much effort on behalf of policy makers, teachers and others, schools continue to fail children. Language medium is a central factor and so is literacy pedagogy, and our ongoing challenge with each opportunity is to know how we are to combine with local contributions, and use wisely, the guiding principles, knowledge and experiences from other contexts so as to arrive at appropriate and workable strategies that will take root and grow in their own unique ways, here in Namibia, or elsewhere in Africa.

My contribution here is to help to inform the approaches you will take towards the creation of reading materials for mother-tongue teaching and learning. I will do this by discussing some of the more relevant insights relating to the nature of young children’s learning generally and some of those that underpin and influence initial literacy learning. I will also discuss some of the challenges that teachers must meet as they teach literacy to children, not only for cognitive gain, but also so that it becomes one of the vehicles that nurture what are deemed appropriate values in schools and community environments. All of this will then be consolidated as information that can underpin and guide the development of textbooks and other reading materials for African languages in multilingual contexts.
Young children learning

A range of approaches to these considerations is not too difficult to find in theory and to a lesser extent in practice, with regard to early childhood educational situations particularly in countries of the North. Unfortunately, some of these have in many cases been packaged and applied far too rigidly in African countries. Others have been adapted more flexibly to try to combine with and enhance local situations. But it is true to say that there is a widespread crisis in relation to children's initial literacy learning - far too many children leaving primary school (if they last that long) without having incorporated the practices of using language in printed (as opposed to oral) form into their daily activities (Bloch 1999). For this reason, it is useful to discuss the interrelated and overlapping considerations implied by the title of this paper about what common or universal information and knowledge exists about how young children approach learning, how they learn language and literacy in their mother tongue and in more than one language, and how this can inform diverse African multilingual contexts.

Those of us who work with young children need to remind ourselves that we all hold ideas and beliefs about how young children learn. Assumptions we hold about children have a direct influence on our teaching practice (Bruce 1987: 3). Bruce outlines three main stances that are held towards children: at one extreme is the view that children are empty vessels waiting to be filled, at the other that children are pre-programmed to 'unfold' from within in particular directions. A combination of the two recognises interaction within and between the two extremes (see Appendix). These stances, particularly the first two, and more recently the third, have undoubtedly influenced education in early childhood settings of African countries, as has the following set of common principles Bruce identifies as being useful for looking at how young children approach their learning and how practitioners approach the development of teaching materials and teaching:

1. Childhood is a valid phase of life in itself and not only a preparation for adulthood. Thus education is for the present and not just preparation and training for later.
2. The whole child is important - health, mind and body, feeling, thinking and spirituality.
3. Self motivation, which gives rise to child-initiated, self-directed activity, is valued.
4. Self-discipline is important.
5. Special receptive periods of learning exist at different stages of development.
6. Learning is not divided up into separate parts, because everything the child learns is linked.
7. The starting point for education is what children can do, rather than what they cannot.
9. The people who interact with children are very important.
10. Education for children is seen as interaction between children and their environment, which includes other people and knowledge.

I add the following three points which have become widely accepted principles among progressive ECD educators:

- Motivation and confidence lies at the heart of successful learning, which begins at birth.
- Young children are active learners, intent on making sense of the world around them, and of constructing meaning for themselves as they gain increasing control over their environment.
- Making mistakes and taking risks is essential to the learning process.

These stances and principles, which actually relate directly to the notion of Learner Centred Education in Namibia, provide a basis for deciding how best to work with rather than against children's learning, to solve problems and confusions in trying to work with other educators, and to make decisions about teaching methods and educational innovations.
Language and literacy learning

Over the past three decades, significant interdisciplinary advances have been made in understanding the nature of literacy. These have sometimes been linked to a recognition and a growing positive acknowledgment of the increasingly multilingual, and multicultural, intercultural and transcultural nature of many countries, leading to research which emphasises the importance of understanding the ways that people use different literacies (rather than one single literacy) as part of their political, cultural and social life activities (Street, 1995). An approach has emerged which views literacy first and foremost as embedded in people’s social practice, and this stands in contrast to the idea which prevails so strongly, including in parts of Africa, of literacy as sets of autonomous skills which can be first given to people, and then used.

During the same period, there have been accompanying and complementary insights into language and literacy learning in early childhood, which have led to a recognition that young children can learn how to read and write at the same time as they begin to use reading and writing in their lives. Such insights have developed in ‘literate’ societies where young children find themselves in print-rich environments and successful young readers and writers tend often to be children who have seemingly ‘by the way’ developed specific understandings about the usefulness and purposes of reading and writing in the daily lives of the people they come into contact with. They then begin to try to read and write for themselves, making and testing hypotheses about how written language works. Gradually, through many purposeful and meaningful interactions with people and print over time, their performance moves from immature approximations of reading or writing, to the conventionally accepted modes (Ferreiro & Teberosky 1993). These insights, which tend to happen outside of school, can be likened to the way apprentices learn a trade. However, children from different contexts will have different ways of giving meaning to literacy depending on the communities they live in (Brice Heath 1983).

At the same time, recognition is given to the fact that the ways in which young children learn both oral and written language have more in common than there are differences. Babies learn to speak by speaking, and they would not learn to speak if there were no people in their orbit, talking around them and with them – it is a profoundly social process. Adults and caregivers seem to have faith in babies’ ability to learn speech; it is part of what we expect from babies and we help them, largely unconsciously, by setting an example through our own conversations, instructions, and various interactions, and by offering them praise and support. We are proud of their achievements and celebrate these. In doing so, we provide emotional affirmation to our children, we boost their self-esteem and motivate them to try harder, because young children want to please the people they love.

Similarly, children learn to read by reading (Smith 1978) and to write by writing. Approaches and methods that have been guided by the above insights fall under terms such as emergent literacy (Holdaway 1979), whole language (Goodman 1980) and literacy as social practice (Street 1993).

These approaches promote the viewing of speaking and listening, reading and writing (and in multilingual contexts, translation and interpreting) as all working together as aspects of language, with an emphasis on creative construction of meaning and communication. They challenge what has been an overemphasis on dividing language up into its constituent parts, with an accompanying insistence that teaching reading and writing is equal to teaching phonics, good spelling and neat handwriting. One devastating indication of how ECD classrooms in Africa are still ailing and, in terms of literacy tuition, failing, is the fact that often the activities children are asked to do are totally devoid of intrinsic meaning. I have already discussed how children growing up in ‘literate environments’ imbibe substantial aspects of literate behaviour in their home and community environments. For them, what schools do in the initial years of schooling is
reinforcing at best, and at worst irrelevant. The point that now needs to be made is that in environments where stimuli for literacy are sparse or even non-existent, and in which children are offered few clues about what written language is and why it could have significance for their lives, the practice of continuing to adopt methods in schools which concentrate on breaking up language into essentially meaningless bits, and teaching the bits separately, is not only unnecessary, but also debilitating and detrimental to successful learning.

John Holt explained as far back as 1964 how

[a] child who has really learned something can use it, and
does use it. It is connected with reality in his [sic] mind,
therefore he can make other connections between it and
reality when the chance comes. A piece of unreal learning
has no hooks on it; it can’t be attached to anything. It is of
no use to the learner. (Holt, 1964:99)

By overemphasising the bits or parts that make up the whole picture, we never get to the whole, because we are making it so difficult for children by hiding precisely that which gives language its power and seduction – its essence as a vehicle for creative meaning making and communication.

One of the challenges then, in print-scarce environments, is to create conditions for a reading and writing culture to (begin to) grow. There are many roots of literacy (Goodman 1986), and indications of what these may be lie in the kinds of activities taking place in the homes and communities outside of school. These need to be explored and then made use of in print materials and classroom practice. Learning in school has to be reconnected to real life; interconnections between homes and communities can be developed and used both to enhance the curriculum and to strengthen children’s learning. Louis Moll writes about the ‘funds of knowledge’ that exist in communities which are usually kept away from schools and curricula. He argues that schools should make such resources, knowledge and skills, including people and their languages that reside in these communities, the heart of the curriculum (Moll 1992).

In communities in many African situations, daily life activities are carried out using predominantly oral language. It is the wealth of this oral language that provides much hope for literacy development in the future. To build on young children’s competencies, we need to coax their oral ‘linguistic genius’ (Chukovsky 1963, Pinker 1994) into print. First spoken words, first play with language, the rhymes, lullabies, songs and word-plays of babyhood and early childhood that are so satisfying and meaningful to young children can become among their first words in print. This helps to make early literacy learning easy and enjoyable. Moreover, the use of stories as early reading materials is without doubt a way of playing to the ‘tune’ of the natural rhythm of childhood, the world over. We all use stories to organise our experiences and to explain life to ourselves and to others (Haas Dyson & Genishi 1994: 2). Imaginary play in early childhood is a significant way through which young children explore their lives, and stories told or read are another form of play for them, one which they identify with and know how to manipulate. Rendering the daily life ‘stories’ children tell into print is one of the easiest ways of demonstrating the link between oral and written language. It is also a way of bringing home and community life into the school, and the sharing of these stories creates a sense of community among the children and their teachers, helping them to get to know each other, and to know what they have in common with each other.

Adapting the oral stories of the country to become first reading materials, and translating these across languages as well as creating (and translating) new stories in all of the African languages, will also provide a common store for all Namibians to draw upon. We are attempting the same process in South Africa.

Although I do not elevate the reading and writing of stories for and by young children over other forms and uses of print, it cannot be overlooked that children in print-rich environments who literally wallow in books in their mother tongue at an early age, have a much easier time becoming readers and writers. There is also substantial research evidence that points to the power of “free voluntary reading” (FVR) (Krashen 1993) for
literacy development. Krashen calls FVR, which is basically any reading that happens out of free choice, the "missing ingredient in both first language and second or foreign language instruction". He cautions that it cannot alone create competent students, but that it "provides a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency may be reached" and that "[w]hen FVR is missing, these advanced levels are extremely difficult to attain". (Krashen 1993: 1) The main points arising from his summary of research are that the longer FVR takes place, the better the results. These include growth of literacy, effective vocabulary development, improved learning of grammar, reading comprehension, writing, oral and aural language ability. There are also studies. Krashen tells us, which have shown better attitudes to school and enhanced self-esteem. In short, he claims that FVR leads to as much learning as traditional instruction. He quotes research on a 'book flood' which indicates similar positive results (reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension and writing) for second language learning in Singapore (Elley 1991). As well as several studies which report that children who read more in a second language write better in it. There is also research showing that children who reported that they enjoy reading books out of school are high achievers in reading and that it is often poor readers who say that they do not like reading.

**Literacy and biliteracy**

A small-scale South African project that I have been involved with provides some local support for Krashen's arguments, both in terms of mother tongue and 'other' tongue literacy learning in early childhood. PRAESA is in the fourth year of a programme, which emphasises learning through Xhosa as well as English, and in particular learning how to read and write in both languages. One of our focuses has been on story reading and providing children with ongoing and regular encounters with books. Some of the indicators of what we consider to be the success of this initiative are the obvious love of reading and of stories demonstrated by the children, as well as their developing reading fluency in both languages, and a positive self esteem (Bloch & Nkence 2000, Bloch & Alexander 2002).

We have also initiated the use of *interactive writing* (Robinson et. al. 1990) as a strategy for writing development, in both languages, with an emphasis on children's mother tongue. It involves letter and journal writing, whereby children have been engaged in real written communication with adults and other children. Our assumption is that reading and writing competency grows slowly over time and requires an enormous amount of practice with a variety of texts and activities. To advance in spelling and knowledge about punctuation, grammatical structures etc., children have to engage closely with print, both in reading and in writing (as well as dialogue/talk about reading and writing). There are no short cuts. Strategies using interactive writing can help to get learners, old and young, to make the connection between speech and writing. They discover meaning through writing, become motivated to want to write, come to quickly see themselves as writers and to develop energy and skill in communicating through writing. And while they write, they read. The central features of writing interactively are that it involves:

- one-to-one nurturing and dialogue
- an authentic/real and purposeful literacy based situation
- a focus on the lives and concerns of the people involved
- the use of any language/s
- mutual commitment and collaboration
- writing and reading practice
- peer teaching.

In this way we ensure that both reading and writing take place on a regular basis, and that a shortage of textbooks in Xhosa does not halt the process.

Such an approach can be introduced to teachers elsewhere, as long as they are given the necessary information and support to implement these strategies and to integrate them into their own classroom activities. At the same time, it is apparent to me that the sparse African language print environment and relatively
limited visible uses of written language in African languages have to be taken into account, with children entering school having encountered little or no print in their preschool days. When this is added to the difficult conditions of large classes, poor teacher training and having to learn in a foreign language, the challenges are daunting. The whole process of literacy learning has to be a consciously gradual one, which emphasises giving children time to develop foundational concepts about print (Clay 1991) through plenty of encounters with print and with ways of using written language.

An additive bilingualism approach

If the pedagogically sound principle of extending the first three years of mother tongue education were to be translated into practice so as to span the primary years, a major impediment would be overcome. From a pedagogical point of view, a large body of research in many different multilingual situations shows that this is the ideal situation for most children, and can be summarised in this way: For children to learn effectively, they need solid foundations in their most familiar language (mother tongue). Situations where the mother tongue is used only for a few years and then replaced by another language (subtractive bilingualism) have been shown to be not nearly as effective as additive approaches, where the mother tongue continues to be supported and extended for several years. Other languages are learned more efficiently in addition to the mother tongue and children’s learning is generally enhanced.

This additive approach means that young children begin and continue literacy learning in their mother tongue, and it also means more effective literacy learning in the second language (usually English). Evidence from biliteracy (literacy in two languages) research shows that knowledge gained in one language transfers across languages (Cummins 1986), and also that young children are quite able to (learn to) read and write in two languages, either successively or simultaneously (Hornberger 1990, Bloch & Alexander 2002). This has implications for literacy learning in multilingual situations. When there is a requirement that children should become literate in English, it does not mean that more time has to be devoted to English literacy in the early years at the expense of the mother tongue, in order for children to become competent in the language. I have seen with my own eyes the way that transfer takes place: Xhosa-speaking children who have tuition in both Xhosa and English (in other words, less teaching time for English), indeed learn more English (as well as continuing to learn in Xhosa), rather than less.

We have grounds for ending the debilitating practice of abruptly cutting children off from learning literacy in their mother tongue, and replacing it with being forced into inarticulation and frustration as they grapple with trying to learn (only) a foreign language in print. This is so because we can act on the evidence that what is learnt in the one language will enhance and enrich learning in the other language, and continue to do so for many years. In this way, we will come to enable possibilities for a smooth and complete literacy learning experience for young children in both their mother tongue and in English.

Developing environments for literacy and creating reading materials

It should be clear from all that I have said that the creation of print-rich environments for literacy and bilingual literacy is not merely an optional but an essential step to take, if a society is serious about its will to promote literacy among all of its citizens. This goes hand in hand with adequate teacher training in the 'whys' and 'hows' of teaching in multilingual situations.

The step of creating this print-rich environment can be taken in schools, not only through the production and use of commercial materials, but also through teachers and others setting an example by making regular and visible use of writing and reading in the school day. A range of printed materials is also important, from posters displayed on the walls in the languages.
of the school community providing general information, to specific notes for individuals.

The cost of producing texts in different languages is obviously a major consideration. Examples of bilingual and even trilingual texts exist (Edwards 1995, ELRU 1996), as well as separate publications of the same text in different languages, all using the same visual material. Possibilities should be explored for viable language combinations in books where appropriate. This unavoidable investment in the promotion of literacy and multilingualism will, in any case, produce rich dividends ten to twenty years down the road.

Marie Chatry-Komorek advises potential textbook authors in developing countries to avoid the pitfall of basing their work on foreign models. She suggests that there is a need to be

... open to new ideas: you should devise specially tailored answers to specific problems rather than looking for tried and tested recipes. You will have to fight against preconceived ideas, make your own hypotheses, and verify, check and analyse these. In fact you will have to become a researcher more than anything else. Otherwise what you produce will not be adapted to the needs of your country; it will be but a pale copy of existing materials. (Chatry-Komorek 1996: 39)

I would like to add to this that a fundamental challenge to sub-Saharan education systems, particularly in the ECD phase, is to break away from the ill-informed practice of producing mind-numbingly unimaginative textbooks which underestimate the abilities and intelligence of young children by over-dosing them on decontextualised, boring exercises. Severe financial constraints make it even more important that what does get produced, is worthwhile. Is there any reason why 'supplementary readers' should not be conceptualised and defined as storybooks with emphasis placed on their development and production? The store of materials could include single language texts and bilingual texts, stories for all Namibia's children translated across the various languages, and books that are selected and translated from other countries in Africa and elsewhere as well. These, together with existing and new oral language literature, deserve to be placed at the centre of language and literacy learning.

Furthermore, is there any good reason why literacy textbooks cannot involve tasks and activities based on collections of stories, songs, rhymes, riddles and other authentic print material in the languages of all the people?

If we do this, we will be helping to bring into being a meaningful curriculum. Those who develop and use such a curriculum will then have the ongoing responsibility to make it a curriculum that helps children know and understand about their past and their present, that promotes the kinds of attitudes that reflect and respect both the diversity and commonalities within society, and that gives children the capacity to be able to negotiate their futures with confidence.
Appendix

Stances towards the child
(adapted from Bruce, 1987)

- **Empiricism**
  This involves a deficit approach where the adult’s role is to identify missing skills, concepts and experiences. The appropriate ones must then be chosen and taught to the child, with learning being broken down into bits, and taught step by step. Slowly the child is moulded into shape. This approach has influenced skills-based, rote learning teaching methods.

- **Nativism**
  The dominant idea is that human beings are biologically pre-programmed to unfold in certain ways. There is sometimes the fear that adults may interfere with children’s development in the wrong way at the wrong time. The adult’s role is to offer help but not insist. This approach has influenced the child-centred approach in ECD.

- **Interactionism**
  There is a merging of both of the above perspectives, so that interaction takes place between what is external and internal (within the child).
  
  The adult’s role is to facilitate and enable the child to initiate his or her own learning, develop his or her own strategies and responses. A central notion is that of reciprocity - it is sometimes the child who takes the lead and sometimes the adult. This approach holds present day influence as the most appropriate for communicative and constructivist approaches to learning.

Notes

1. I describe it as a starting point, because research and experience tell us that three years of mother tongue education are not enough, if the mother tongue is then dropped and replaced by another language for learning and teaching in school. Resources permitting, when English is added as an additional language of learning every effort should be made to continue to maintain and support the mother tongue as well. This too offers the best chance of learning English well.

2. For the purposes of this paper, I am leaving aside making arguments for preschooling before formal education, although there is no doubt that children’s lives and their learning begin at birth and that this should be catered for in appropriate ways by all governments.

3. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the historical and political factors contributing to classroom difficulties, though of course a combination of factors prevails. I confine myself here to the issues pertinent to the work at hand.

4. For instance, several of these principles are to be found in some form in the official documents for South Africa’s new curriculum for schools, Curriculum 2005.

5. These are environments in which there is evidence of and use of written language - such as books, magazines, newspapers, notes, calendars, diaries, junkmail, signs, notices, letters etc.

6. When young children have opportunities to explore books, they often ‘pretend’ to read, either making up the words from the pictures, or if the text is familiar, they get to know it by heart. This is in fact a critical part of learning to read. Similarly with writing, young children’s scribbles and invented writings can be seen as evidence that they are engaged in a most powerful process moving towards conventional writing.

7. I use the term ‘print-scarce’ to describe settings where there is little evidence of various forms of print being available, used or displayed in one or more languages.
8. It should be noted that Krashen was referring to the 'literacy crisis' in the United States. The severity of the crisis in African literacy situations is far greater, highlighting the importance of the lessons he points to.

9. These include understanding that print carries meaning, what a letter, a word and a sentence are, which way print runs across the page, that different languages carry different conventions – e.g. we read from left to right in our scripts, that pages are numbered etc.

10. This is the approach taken in the 1997 Language in Education Policy for schools in South Africa, but as yet, implementation strategies have not been supported by government.

References


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