

**PH.D RESEACH PROPOSAL**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
AND  
THE UNIVERSITEIT LEIDEN, NETHERLANDS**

**TITLE:**

**LITERACY AND LANGUAGE. RELATIONSHIPS IN FIRST AND  
SECOND GRADE.**

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Learning to read is a complex process that involves multifaceted skills and experience. Garner (1990) and Wigfield (1991) have contended that the development of reading involves an interaction or application of many levels of cognitive and non cognitive processing skills such as the ability to decode individual words as well as having the necessary knowledge of concepts and the world to comprehend the meanings of written text. Children who are given appropriate instructions and provided with environments that foster early reading practices learn to read with relative ease. To many children however, learning to read is a formidable challenge they have to encounter throughout their education. Spira et al (2005) have noted that these children are at substantial risk for early academic difficulties and their prospect for future achievement is dramatically impacted as well. In another study, Shaywitz et al (1996) further observed that those with initial problems in reading did not reach the same end point as those who started out as better readers, mainly because these children are not able to learn effectively across the curriculum.

The process of acquiring reading skills is a lengthy one which begins early in life before the child actually enters elementary schooling especially as children are more in a position to encounter reading and writing from a very early age. Bus et al (1995) observed that from eight to eighteen months, children are able to grasp the physical acts involved in reading which includes gazing, pointing, monitoring and with age they familiarize with the typical structure and language associated with books. It seems that the literacy skills that the children learn before they start elementary school act as building blocks on which academic, occupational and social success depend. If children enter without the requisite preparation therefore, their ability to acquire these essential literacy skills may be seriously hampered. Research has shown that, there is a strong relationship between the skills with which the child enter school and their later academic performance (Spira et al 2005). Chen and Denkla (1996) have argued that, children who did not display good reading skills in the first grade had approximately ninety percent

chance of remaining poor readers after three years of schooling. In other words, children experiencing significant difficulties acquiring reading skills by first grade are likely to have reading difficulties by third grade and beyond. Scarborough (2001) has postulated that, about two-thirds of the children who show sufficient difficulties to be diagnosed as disordered continue to display poor reading skills throughout their school years and into adulthood.

## **1.2 Contextual Background**

Studies exploring literacy skills in Zambia have suggested that reading difficulties are quite common among the Zambian school going children (Williams; 1993, SACMEQ; 1998, Kelly and Kanyika; 1999, Kelly' 2000, Matafwali; 2005). The study by Williams(1993) revealed low reading levels in grades three, four and five both in English and Nyanja, a Zambian local Language ( Kotze et al 1999). Another study instituted by the National Reading Committee (NRC; 1997) in four primary schools in Lusaka reported poor levels of reading in these schools. In fact, it was estimated in this study that, approximately sixty percent of pupils leaving school at the end of grade seven had extremely poor reading skills in English and were almost illiterate in their local language. Further the Southern African Consortium for monitoring Learning Quality (SACMEQ) (1998) reported poor reading performance at grade six level in the Zambian Basic schools. These findings were consistent with those of Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mauritius. The National Assessment report by Kelly and Kanyika( 1999) also revealed poor reading levels among grade five pupils in Zambian Basic schools. Consequently, a study by Kelly (2000) demonstrated that, grade six who participated in the study performed considerably below the levels expected of those in their grades. For instance, the grade six pupils who participated in this study performed within the level expected of grade four while grade five pupils fell within the performance band expected at grade three levels, whereas some grade four pupils both rural and urban schools fell within the performance band of grade two pupils.

The appalling standards of reading in Primary schools as demonstrated by numerous studies cited above prompted the Zambian government to undertake policy changes in

an effort to uplift the reading standards among school going children. This policy principle is strongly upheld in the Ministry of Education policy document (1996) where it is stated that *'the fundamental aim of the curriculum for lower and middle basic classes ( Grades 1-7) is to enable pupils to read and write clearly, correctly and confidently in a Zambian language and in English.....the Ministry of Education attaches the highest priority to the attainment of this goal'* (MOE; 1996). In this respect, the Ministry of Education changed the language policy. From 1965 to 1996, English had been used as a medium of instruction and also as a language of initial literacy from the time the child starts grade one. Research evidence (references?) has however suggested that, the impact of this language was negative as it did not succeed in generating reading competence in many children (Kelly; 2000).

The Ministry of Education policy document further states that 'Zambia has had almost thirty years experience of using English as the medium of instruction from grade one onwards.... The fact that initial reading skills are taught in and through a language that is unfamiliar to the majority of children is believed to be a major contributory factor to the backwardness in reading shown by many Zambian children (MOE; 1996). To this effect therefore, a new language policy called the Primary reading Program with the New Break through to Literacy (NBTL) as one of its major components has since been introduced as an intervention measure to improve the reading standards in schools. The new policy requires that, children in the first grade should be taught reading and writing in a language familiar to them, preferably their mother tongue (Kotze and Higgins; 1999). The programme was piloted in the Northern province in one of the Zambian local languages, Ibibemba in 1998 and the evaluation report recorded a successful story. For instance, it was reported that, children in the second who had participated in the NBTL were reading at a level equivalent to grade Four. The programme was further piloted in two other Zambian local languages Chinyanja and Silozi in Eastern, Lusaka and Western provinces. The program still proved to be successful with the literacy rate of 59% (Higgins et al 2000). The NBTL has since been implemented at the National level. Other programs implemented by the PRP include Step Into English at grade level (SITE-

taught in English);and Read on Course for grades three to seven ( ROC- taught both in mother tongue and English). Monitoring reports (2003 and 2004) of the PRP have reported achievement levels in reading of about 60%.

## **2.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Notwithstanding the achievements recorded by the New Breakthrough to Literacy (NBTL) however, there are instances where children have failed to make a shift or rather make satisfactory progress in reading as documented by Matafwali (2005). The study involved 106 grade three pupils from four selected schools in Lusaka and only one-third could had acquired the basics of reading. The findings in this study may suggest that despite having been exposed to a rich literacy program that is phonetically based, some children may not understand the concept of the alphabetic phonetic principle or they may find the shift to English in the second grade to be too complicated as they may lack the necessary language proficiency. In an effort to understand the relationships between language and literacy therefore, the current study will, take two theoretical perspectives namely the Phonological Sensitivity Approach (PSA) and the Comprehension Language Approach (CLA).

The Phonological Sensitivity Approach posits that, oral language abilities stimulate phoneme awareness which lay a foundation for emergent literacy and subsequent reading skills (Dickinson et al., 2003). Researchers argue that, vocabulary and other oral language skills play an important role in the emergence of phonological sensitivity, phonological memory and phonological naming, and it is these skills that uniquely predict reading skills once children enter school.

The Comprehensive Language Approach (CLA) on the other hand emphasizes the important role of language comprehension in learning to read. The CLA therefore posits that a variety of oral language skills are critical in emergent literacy and a strong predictor of reading skills at second grade (Poe, Burchinal and Roberts, 2004).

The current study hypothesizes that, the PSA model would be the best predictor of reading in the first grade. According to the PSA model, oral language does not seem to have a direct association with reading in the first grade but only via phonemic awareness (Poe, Burchinal, & Roberts, 2004). The review by Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) provided a model that is frequently cited to support the direct role of phonological processing in reading and indirect role of language. Their model posits 'outside-in and inside-out' skills that provide the basis for learning to read. The 'outside-in' skills reflect the ability to understand language and place the foundation in language within conceptual and contextual frameworks. The 'inside-out' skills reflect the ability to decompose units of language into sounds and units of sounds into print. They found that, children's vocabulary skills (outside-in skills) predicted their development of phonological knowledge (inside-out skills), which in turn predicted reading skills in first and second grade. A longitudinal study by Senechel and LeFevre (2002) also supports the phonological approach, but also provides evidence that vocabulary has a direct impact on higher-level reading skills as well as an indirect relation with lower-level reading skills through phonological knowledge.

The use of the local language only at first grade level under the New Breakthrough to Literacy may not adequately prepare children to shift to English in the second grade. Reading English requires a different strategy, for instance the orthographical rules are different, and as such, there could be no direct transfer of the alphabetic phonetic rules learnt in the local language in the first grade to English in the second grade. In this context, children may perceive English to be a new element and they might therefore stop practicing reading due to lack of proficiency in the English language.

The second hypothesis is based on the CLA model which posits that, although oral language is important for the acquisition of reading abilities in the first grade, it is even more critical in second grade when children are expected to read for comprehension as well as for decoding. The findings by Spira (2004) seem to suggest that, children's facility in oral language skills contribute to their capacity for reading improvement. In

this study, the children were all deficient in decoding skills in the first grade. However, those who improved by fourth grade possessed stronger oral language skills. Spira therefore concluded that, the advancement of this group in later grades on the reading composite (tests of decoding and comprehension) was partially determined by their ability to compensate for weak decoding skills by using strengths in oral language to decode on the basis of the context. It has also been noted that, the association between oral language and reading comprehension increases along with the increasing efficiency of decoding skills (Siegler, 1997) and grade level ( Flynn and Rahbar, 1998). In relation to this model, the current study predicts that, the CLA model would be the best approach at second grade level. A low proficiency in English interferes negatively with the development of reading skills on the level of word recognition as well as on the level of text comprehension.

## **2.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to examine the relationships between language and reading skills in the first and second grade. The study will further attempt to determine whether children who exhibit difficulties at reading in the first grade would remain in the same performance band at the end of second grade.

## **2.3 Hypothesis**

1. It is expected that the Phonological Sensitivity Approach (PSA) will apply more to first grade than to second grade.
2. The Comprehensive Language Approach (CLA) applies more to second than first grade.
3. Both language skills and phonological knowledge are directly related to the acquisition of reading skills.

## **2.4 Objectives of the Study.**

The study will be guided by the following objectives.

- Establish whether poor readers remain in the same performance band after Second grade of schooling.
- Determine whether there are relationships between literacy and language in first and second grade.
- Ascertain the role of phonemic awareness in the development of reading skills.

## **2.5 Research Questions**

The study will be guided by the following questions.

- What is the general level of reading at the end of first grade?
- Are there relationships between language and reading in the first grade, or does reading change over time, with language becoming a stronger predictor of reading skills by second grade and phonological knowledge being a stronger predictor in the first grade when children are beginning to read?
- Will the PSA model be the best predictor of reading in the first grade?
- Will the CLA model be the best predictor of reading in the second grade?
- Do children experiencing difficulties acquiring reading skills at grade one remain at the same performance level in grade Two?

## **2.6 Significance of the study**

It is hoped that the study would generate information on the relationship between language and literacy and clarify effects of first grade instruction in the local language and effects of the sudden shift to English in second grade.

The findings of the study might also help establish the proportion of children who fail to make progress in reading after the second grade of schooling and why.

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

The chapter is divided into the following subsections: the first section describes the study design, population, sampling procedure and research instruments while the last section comprises analysis of data and research plan.

### **3.1 Research Design**

This is a longitudinal study that compares reading performance of children in their first and second grades. Both qualitative and quantitative research designs will be used.

### **3.2 Population**

- The target population of phase one of the study would comprise children enrolled in grade one from six randomly selected schools in Lusaka Province. The same population will be followed up to second grade.
- Classroom teachers.

### **3.3 Sample and Sampling Procedure.**

- Six schools will be randomly sampled from the four districts of Lusaka Province. The schools will be distributed as follows: 2 urban schools; 2 peri-urban schools and 2 rural schools.
- A total of hundred and forty four children will participate in the study. Six children from each grade one class

### **3.4 Research Instruments**

The following research instruments will be used to collect data.

- (i). Subtests from the Basic Skill Assessment Tool (BASAT) will provide individual measures in phonemic awareness and reading. BASAT is an individual Assessment instrument developed by the Ministry of Education, Zambia, primarily to assess basic reading and writing skills in grades one and two. This test will administer in Nyanja in the first grade and both in English and Nyanja in the second grade.
- (ii). Rapid Associate Naming (RAN) tests with objects, numbers, letters and colours will be used to test the children's fluency level. The Test will only be administered in Nyanja at both first and second grade levels.

- (iii) A Narrative test based on pictures will be used to test the narrative skills of the children. Children are asked to tell a story to the examiner about a series of pictures that form a story. The test will be administered only in Nyanja in the first grade and both in Nyanja and English in the second grade.
- (iii) An expressive vocabulary test is applied. Children are asked to name as many objects as possible on a picture. The test will be administered only in Nyanja in the first grade and both in Nyanja and English in the second grade.
- (iv) As an receptive vocabulary test the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test is applied.
- (v) An interview inventory will be used to capture the following information:
  - Personal data of the participants (name, age, sex, family situation)
  - Home possessions (list of ??)
  - Socio-economic status (parental education?)
  - Other social factors within the child's environment like?
  - 
  - Children's Interview schedule about the independent-reading?.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

A variety of methods will be used to analyse the data.

- Descriptive analysis will be done to find out on which variables poor and good readers differed significantly.
- A multivariate analysis of variance will be used to explore the underlying differences in performance between the two grades.
- Hierarchical regression analyses will be used to investigate the underlying relations between variables which are attributed to reading development.

### **3.6 Research Plan**

The study will be a longitudinal study to be conducted in two phases. Phase 1 of the study will be undertaken at the end of the first grade (very beginning of second grade) while Phase 2 will be done at the end of the second grade. This will help ascertain whether children who are identified as experiencing significant difficulties at acquiring grade level reading skills would make some progress at the end of second or whether they would remain at the same level.

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