IMPLEMENTING A BILINGUAL EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAMME IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

A bilingual extensive reading programme (ERP) was implemented in two primary schools in Grahamstown with all the learners who were in grade 3 in 2015. The ERP was a means of providing learners with access to appropriate reading resources and affording learners with opportunities to read books chosen by them in a social learning environment. This paper offers a detailed description of theories underpinning the design and implementation of the reading programme. It also offers a discussion of practically implementing, managing and sustaining the programme. I used cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) as my theoretical framework. I focused on the concepts of formative intervention and expansive learning in implementing the reading programme. Throughout the research process, data were collected through qualitative methods, which included videoing, observation, document analysis, questionnaire, learners' and my own reflective journals and informal talks with the participants. The results of this study show that a carefully planned reading programme, tailored for each participant's needs, can have positive benefits on the learners' academic and social skills. Finally, I discuss lessons learnt from implementing the ERP and provide suggestions on how teachers and researchers can also implement successful reading programmes of this nature.

Keywords: extensive reading programme, Foundation Phase, formative intervention, literacy, cultural historical activity theory

INTRODUCTION

It is important for learners to learn to read for meaning as early as in the Foundation Phase, because reading is a powerful tool that enables one to acquire knowledge and understanding. According to Spaull, Van der Berg, Wills, Gustafsson and Kotze (2016), the Foundation Phase is a critical phase for acquiring basic learning skills, and specifically reading skills, at school. If these skills are not fully acquired by grade 4, little learning might be expected to take place later. Therefore, like any other activity, reading needs to be practised. According to Loh (2009), one practises something by actually doing it. However, research has shown that children from economically disadvantaged communities have less access to reading material than children from higher-income families.

Spaull (2013), reports that many South African learners whether tested in an African language which is their first language, or in English, their first additional language, the results

are the same. They cannot read for meaning by the end of grade 4, and by the end of grade 6, almost a third are illiterate in English. I argue that insufficient input in both languages results in learners struggling to read and write. Krashen (2011) posits that, to become fluent in the target language, learners should be given abundant comprehensible input that is slightly above their level of competence (Comprehensible Input +1). Hence, a bilingual extensive reading programme (ERP) was implemented to expose learners to a variety of books and other literacy activities in a social environment.

EXTENSIVE READING

Extensive reading is contrasted with intensive reading, which mainly focuses on language rather than meaning, and for which the teacher usually chooses what to read (Bell, 1998; Waring, 2006). Extensive reading is sometimes referred to as reading for pleasure, sustained silent reading (Pilgreen, 2000), free voluntary reading (Krashen, 1993) or book flood (Elley, 1981). Bamford and Day (2004: 1) define extensive reading as 'an approach to language teaching in which learners read a lot of easy material in the new language. They read for general, overall meaning and they read for information and enjoyment.' The purpose of extensive reading, according to Richards and Schmidt (2002: 193-194), is 'to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading'. In extensive reading, readers choose the material in which they are interested and read at a time, pace and place convenient for them. The readers continue the reading act because they are interested in the activity. They read as much interesting material that is slightly above their level of competence as possible (Krashen, 2011).

Many South African learners come from underprivileged contexts and cannot read beyond the most basic or literal levels of understanding (Spaull, 2011). Adopting an extensive reading approach is seen as the best way to bridge this gap, as it affords learners pleasurable reading and choice, and has proven benefits.

There is an indispensable annotated bibliography and research published by researchers such as Jacobs, Renandya and Bamford (2000), Krashen (2004) and Clark and Rumbold (2006) to prove the numerous benefits associated with extensive reading. Almost every study conducted to investigate the effect of extensive reading on literacy development has reported positively about this approach, despite their different methodologies and contexts. For example, Krashen (2004), in his review of the research on extensive reading, summarised a number of studies showing the benefits of extensive reading not only for reading ability and vocabulary but also for spelling, writing, listening skills, fluency, comprehension, improvements in reading in the target language and second language (L2) competence. In addition, affording learners with opportunities to read for pleasure can contribute to positive attitudes and increased self- confidence. Learners become more creative, critical thinkers and are motivated to read because of the rich input they get when reading their self-selected books independently (Gambrell, 2004).

Despite extensive reading being well documented and recognised as an important approach in teaching reading, it is often not given the attention it deserves in many formal educational contexts and is simply tolerated as an add-on (Ramani & Joseph, 2002). According to Cunningham and Stanovich (1997), children who start reading for pleasure at an early age are exposed to greater opportunities to develop literacy skills and imagination than children denied early reading experiences. They go on to say, 'we believe that independent reading

may help explain the widening achievement disparities between the educational haves and have-nots' (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997: 68).

However, this approach to reading has been criticised by researchers in that it ignores the fact that a large amount of time must be devoted to extensive reading for one to effectively acquire vocabulary. In as much as extensive reading is given credit for learners' pleasurable reading and choice, its failure to address the needs of non-readers, who constitute the majority within schools in underprivileged contexts, made it insufficient for this study. As a result, the ERP implemented in this study was a combination of some aspects of an intensive reading approach. The bilingual reading programme implemented in this study exposed learners to a variety of reading materials. In a reading-input-poor setting like that of Site B of this study and many other disadvantaged communities in South Africa, the reading programme provided a learning experience which was different from the one dominating in many Foundation Phase classrooms, as evidenced by Flanagan (1995) and Tshuma (2014). The above context, together with the literature on the interface between extensive reading and reading in the Foundation Phase, informed the present research study, which was guided by the research goal and research questions set out in the next section.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

According to Sainsbury and Schagen (2004), there are two main goals involved in the teaching of reading: (1) instil in learners the necessary skills to read effectively; and (2) develop a sense of enjoyment towards reading. Taking this into cognisance, the objectives of this study were to:

- Design and implement a bilingual ERP at two schools for grade 3 learners and critically reflect on learners' participation through cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) expansive learning.
- Immerse learners in the experience of reading as an ongoing process of development and growth.

CULTURAL HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY TO EXPLORE AND ANALYSE THE EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAMME

The study required a methodological approach that situates literacy in the social, cultural and historical environments in which young learners acquire dispositions towards reading and are thereby inducted into the practices of reading. For this, I drew on CHAT, an interdisciplinary approach for studying learning and development which is grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Leontiev (1978) and Luria (1976) expanded upon Vygotsky's theory to include human activity and the interactions that happen within such a context mediated by tools. Therefore, CHAT acknowledges that subjects carry out activities using the necessary tools within a particular context to achieve their goals. The strength of CHAT is that it includes a range of activities that human beings carry out in everyday life, making it generic as a theory.

This implies that CHAT can be applied to almost everything that human beings do, including the implementation of an ERP in the case of this study. What also made CHAT suitable was that, since I was to implement a reading programme, I was not a mere observer of what was going on in each reading session, but as an interventionist, I actively participated. This, according to Scanlon and Issroff (2005), enables the researcher to understand and observe the

emergence of patterns in human activity in terms of achieving goals, focusing attention and tools, and understanding the learner experience.

CHAT also emphasises that research should be transformative, not only transactional, hence it is considered as a tool for transformation (Engeström, 1999). To enable transformation, the research should include the participants in meaningful ways (Engeström, 1999). In this study, I worked in collaboration with the participants to transform the object of the activity system. I observed, had conversations with learners and reflected on what had happened in each reading session. Through reflection, we looked at our own activity and planned the way forward (i.e., How can we make our writing/comprehension/retelling better? How can we make the reading programme better?). It was possible to gain a clearer understanding of the participants and the aims they wished to accomplish, which enabled the transformation of the activity. Thus, the study aimed at not only implementing and understanding the processes of the reading programme, but also assisting the participants to be able to develop positive reading attitudes, work together and independently. Hence, Scribner (1997: 3) states that 'theory is not only meant to analyse and explain the world, but also to facilitate practices and promote changes'.

Through CHAT, I saw a way of articulating this transformation, which was an important aspect of the study. During the pre-intervention phase of the study, I was concerned with the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of learners' reading practices. However, as the sessions progressed, I realised I needed to make sense of the process of the ERP. It can be argued that CHAT provides the researcher with the necessary tools to move from the identification of literacy events in a reading programme to the literacy practices, including learners' actual reading, text-based interactions and participation, because events are not examined as isolated activities but as parts of a bigger whole (Engeström, 2001). Hence, CHAT was applied to analyse and make sense of human practices within a given context (Engeström, 1999).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design. In this study, I used formative intervention, which is an alternative instructional design. It applies double stimulation to develop a learning environment and materials instead of cognitive tools for solving problems in structured situations (Engeström, 2011). According to Engeström (2005) and Virkkunen (2006), the formative intervention provides a fruitful framework for research in education conducted in real, complex and object-oriented activities. As articulated by Engeström, Sannino and Virkkunen (2014), the role of the researcher in formative interventions is to initiate and sustain an expansive transformation process led and owned by the participants.

Data collection comprised videoing, observation, document analysis, questionnaire, learners' and my own reflective journals and informal talks with the participants.

RESEARCH SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

The study employed convenience sampling which involved all the grade 3 learners from two primary schools in Grahamstown. The schools cater for children coming from disadvantaged townships. In both research sites, isiXhosa is the home language for all the learners; hence, it is used as medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase. Learners shift to English as a medium of instruction from grade 4 to grade 7. Site A has a library, but learners have limited

access to it, while site B does not have a library and has limited stock of books that learners can read for enjoyment.

ETHICS

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the institution and the Eastern Cape Department of Education. In particular, consent was obtained from the participating schools' principals, teachers and the learners' parents or guardians. Learners were informed about the purpose of the ERP and the nature and extent of their involvement. They were not obliged to participate in any research task connected to this study and could withdraw at any point. Data were collected from learners with signed consent letters.

RESEARCH PROCESS

This section presents the general research process for the reader to gain insight into how exactly the research intervention was conducted and how and what data were collected during the different phases of the research, for the remaining aspects will be better understood within that framework. I also outline a typical reading intervention session.

PRACTICAL WAYS OF SETTING UP THE ERP

The process of setting up the ERP is summarised below.

PROVISION OF READING RESOURCES

Implementing an ERP requires provision of reading materials, and there are choices to be made regarding language, genre, relevance and levels. For the reading programme to provide relevant, exciting and appropriate books, I relied on donations provided by an organisation called Biblionef and online resources from Nal'ibali, an organisation which also seeks to promote a culture of reading in South Africa. I designed a simple accession register to keep track of the books taken out and returned.

ORIENTATION FOR TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

The first two school terms were used to introduce the programme to the schools. The purpose of the ERP was explained to the school principals, who informed their school governing bodies about the programme. The teachers were also informed, and it was emphasised that they could participate in the programme voluntarily, as I was aware of their already overloaded curriculum. During these initial meetings, we agreed on convenient times during which the reading programme would be conducted. Both schools preferred it to be an afternoon programme, once a week for an hour throughout the academic year.

I also became familiar with the schools and met with the participants. The grade 3 learners were informed about the reading programme, and consent letters were sent to their guardians to seek permission for learners to participate in the programme. Finally, I compiled a list of the participating learners' names and administered pre-intervention questionnaires to the learners.

IMPLEMENTING THE EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAMME

The implementation of the reading programme was done in three phases, guided by the expansive learning cycle (Engeström, 2015). In the first phase, I needed to gather information about learners' attitudes towards reading, what they liked to read, what they wanted to read about and their feelings towards reading, be it in their L1 or L2. I administered a questionnaire to all the participating learners from both sites within which learners were required to represent their perceptions about reading through drawings (Nkomo, 2018). Thereafter, follow-up interviews were conducted with selected learners from each research site. This phase of research was spread over 10 weeks (April-June 2015). Information gathered during this phase helped me understand the knowledge and experiences that each learner brought into the classroom. It also helped me to identify contradictions and tensions, and informed the design of a reading programme that catered for every learner's needs, which I implemented in the second phase of the study. For example, rules were established to encourage participation, respect for one another and looking after the reading resources. I also gathered that learners' preferences differed; therefore, there was a need for a variety of English and isiXhosa books.

The second phase of this research was the actual design and implementation of a reading intervention programme. A bilingual extensive reading programme was implemented informed by the findings from phase one and principles of extensive reading (Day & Bamford, 2002). As suggested in the extensive reading principles, a variety of interesting reading material written at easily accessible levels of both English and isiXhosa was made available to the learners. The book stock included different genres of books, non-fiction, magazines, newspapers, fiction, texts that inform and texts that entertain. For the most part, the books were about 10 pages long and included illustrations and drawings. These books included those donated by different organisations, namely, Biblionef, Nal'ibali and my personal collection. Having a wide selection of reading material managed to cater for most of the learners' book and language preferences.

In each reading session, learners were encouraged to choose any books they wanted to read during that particular reading session or outside of the session. Learners were also encouraged to read their own books if they had any. Each week, learners were expected to have read at least one book. Having a goal number of books per week has proven to be motivating for some learners; however, one should be careful of setting strenuous goals to read, as the real goal of extensive reading is to enjoy reading. At the end of the intervention, each learner was expected to have read at least 20 books if they read and finished one book per week over the duration of 20 weeks.

Integrated in this reading intervention were aspects adopted from the intensive reading approach. For example, learners had an opportunity to engage in typical intensive reading post-reading activities suggested by Day and Bamford (1998). Ideally, in an ERP, no post-reading work should be required, as the act of reading is its own reward. However, for this study, there were reasons for considering post-reading activities. These included the need to monitor and evaluate learners' reading, to determine if the reading was done, and to find out if learners understood and learnt anything from the reading. Another reason for considering post-reading activities as suggested by Day and Bamford (2002) was that well-chosen activities can turn the individual solitary act of reading into a community event, especially for such young children as the participants of this study.

Thus, as post-reading activities for each reading session, learners were required to submit a reading log. The reading log was designed in such a manner that it included information such as book title, author, the number of pages read and the learner's thoughts and feelings about the content. In addition, learners had to submit a reading journal and engage in book talks. Participating in these activities was optional, and learners could use whichever language they were comfortable in since it was a bilingual reading programme. Morrow and Schocker (1987: 255) make the point that 'a personal response to a text in... [a] foreign language is likely to be "felt" in the native language. Attempting to mediate the response through a foreign language will merely lead to frustration.' From my experiences working with children (Tshuma, 2014), giving learners an opportunity to express themselves in their L1 yields good conversation, and everyone participates in the discussions.

Feedback during reading sessions was done individually or in change laboratory workshops (CLWs). According to Virkkunen and Newnham (2013), a CLW is an intervention method that supports the formation of transformative agency among participants. In this study, CLWs were conducted to demonstrate, model, clarify and guide/counsel, and were a platform for teaching. In each CLW, participants were included in the process of constructing new ideas; hence, as Engeström (1987: 277-278) states, a CLW 'serves as a microcosm in which potential new ways of working can be experienced and experimented with'.

The final phase of the research process was the evaluation of the ERP, which was done during the last week of the school term in December. In this phase, I described the new practices that emerged from the research, reflecting on these and suggesting ways in which these practices might be adapted by other reading programmes. The purpose of evaluation was to monitor and evaluate the programme, which was essential to ensure the long-term sustainability of the programme and to determine whether the aims of the programme were achieved. The main tool used for evaluation was the post-intervention questionnaire, which was administered to all the participating learners. The designed questionnaire was brief and easy for the learners to complete. In addition, my observations, video recordings of all the reading sessions, and informal conversations with the learners and the teachers also served as instruments to evaluate the reading programme

The analysis of data collected during the pre-intervention phase was conducted during the June-July school holiday, while the analysis of data collected during the implementation phase was an ongoing process.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section, I provide my overall descriptive reflections about two learners from each site. I chose one struggling and one proficient reader from each site to demonstrate how they expanded their reading behaviour and attitudes due to the implementation of the reading programme.

A reflection about four readers from Site A and Site B

Site A

Sarah, an 11-year-old girl from Site A, had never read a book on her own. She mentioned that she had never been taught how to read, which I dispute as she must have had some reading instruction during her three years of schooling. She also mentioned that she had never

been taught how to choose a book for individual reading, which is understandable because at this stage in Foundation Phase classrooms, the teachers choose what to read for the learners. As a result, she did not know what type of books she enjoyed reading. A strategy that was helpful was to first build her personal confidence. She was known by many learners in class as someone who could not read and seemed to fulfil that negative expectation. In each reading session, I gave her an opportunity to choose a book that she would like to read. To get her excited about reading, the research assistant would read isiXhosa stories to her during each reading session, and they would discuss the story together. Being given the opportunity to choose books and then talk about the books read built her confidence. By week 17 of the ERP, she had gained confidence to share with the class what she would have read about with the research assistant. She became aware that not being able to read is not a hindrance to accessing stories and asked to take books home for her sister to read to her. By the end of the ERP, she had read on her own two notable books (isiXhosa and English). This might seem not enough, but because she had never read a book on her own before the ERP, it is worth noting. She now owned her reading, and a week before the final ERP session she also requested a journal to document her reading. She has benefited from finding out how to choose a book, book talks and being read to, and she has learnt that she likes reading.

Mark, a nine-year-old boy from Site A, came to the reading programme knowing how to read. He enjoyed reading and loved getting my attention. Once my eyes were off him, he became distracted often. He would close the book and put it down. At times, he would pretend to go to the toilet, yet he was going to play outside with his friends who were not part of the reading programme. Seeing this, I gave him the responsibility of managing the classroom attendance register, making sure no one was dodging the reading sessions. I motivated him to keep reading. Having this responsibility ensured that he was always in each reading session. He went from being a disruptive boy to one who participated more, read more and was even in charge of the attendance register. He began to take books home to read and always volunteered to retell in class. Although he was lazy to document his reading experience, in his journal he made three entries which consisted of two to three sentences written in English. However, being able to volunteer and share his reading with others was evidence enough that he had read. He read both in English and in isiXhosa, and his favourite book was an English book titled *George the Monkey*.

Site B

Rose, a nine-year-old girl from Site B, was rather reserved when the reading programme began. She read well, but it took time for me to notice that she was good reader. At the beginning of the programme, when asked to share her reading, she would just give a general plot of the story. As the sessions progressed, the reading journal helped her process her thinking. In her reading journal, she began analysing the characters and authors more and questioning their actions. Having a reading journal made her start thinking critically about what she was reading. When she spoke about her books, there was substance to what she said, and her journal entries were more than plot lines. She read and wrote in her L1.

Peter, a 10-year-old boy from Site B, came to the reading programme without any previous experience of reading anything that he found interesting. As a result, he was an unmotivated reader. Although he found reading uninteresting, he needed a minimum of scaffolding and motivation. He enjoyed choosing books for individual reading, and each time he did not like what he had chosen, he would get frustrated and drop the reading. As the reading programme progressed, he began to read more of the 20-page books and even took books home. On his

own, he read four isiXhosa books, and his favourite books were *Inyathi Engqubayo* and *Nabulele*, which he reread a number of times. He made these two books his own and would ask me to reserve them for him. Although he was reluctant to document his reading in his journal, he volunteered in every session to talk about his reading, which was evidence enough that he had read and enjoyed reading.

As shown in the reflections, I believe that, by the end of the ERP, an impact was made on both proficient and struggling readers. I expanded learners' reading opportunities and supported them in becoming readers throughout the reading programme. As a result, they became enthusiastic about reading, improved their confidence as readers, self-esteem and reading fluency, and read more books. As evidenced, a struggling reader even attempted to read in English, a language that many are not familiar with or exposed to beyond an English class in school.

For struggling readers and proficient but less confident readers, reading aloud or sharing their reading was initially stressful, but by the end of the implementation phase, all learners seemed to have fewer problems speaking in front of the class. Therefore, if this high interest in reading for pleasure and willingness to learn how to read could be maintained in grade 3, it is quite possible that learners would be prepared for the shift of learning to read to reading to learn in the Intermediate Phase. Learners would also become more successful in other subject areas and become eager and interested in learning.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAMME

The concept of sustainability has been approached from several theoretical standpoints, for example, economic, environmental, organisational and educational sustainability. In the context of this study, Setireka and Tanrikulub (2015) provide a working definition of sustainability: the persistence and the capacity of the reading programme to continue for a long time, or the ability to maintain a certain condition indefinitely or make progress.

Generally, sustaining funded reading programmes has not been successful in most cases, due to running out of funds, little or no evaluation of the programme, or lack of a plan for sustainability (Snyman, 2016). In the case of this study, as the ERP was part of my defined research period, I had to consider ways that would sustain the reading intervention. Post intervention I focused on Site B, a school which did not have a library or books that the learners could read for pleasure. More books were sourced from a number of literacy organisations. In addition, the school now has a refurbished container library through collaboration with other stakeholders.

REFLECTION ON IMPLEMENTING AN EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAMME

Through conducting this study, I have learnt to appreciate the benefits and value of reading interventions and reading programmes. When designing and implementing an ERP, it is of importance to recognise the following:

- The context and purpose of the ERP ought to be explained to learners. For example, in this study, once learners knew the purpose of the reading programme was to read for pleasure and that no formal assessments were to be carried out, reading became a fun and pleasurable activity for most of the participants.

- The diversity and richness of experience and expertise that children bring to school should be acknowledged. This will result in the implementation of an ERP that will cater for all the learners' needs.
- As a researcher or teacher, one should be aware of cultural differences within the same context. This will create opportunities for collaborative learning and learning from each other. Hence, the role of a more knowledgeable other is fluid.
- Learners should have the freedom to use the language of their choice and to code switch when necessary. This allows for active participation and meaningful discussion, as there will be no language restrictions.
- The teacher should create a learning environment where reading is scaffolded through talk and collaborative peer interaction. A range of scaffolds to support reading, such as reading with the learners or reading to the learners, should be considered. This encourages even struggling readers to take part and actively engage in the reading experience. However, the degree of scaffolding needed will vary over time, context and degree of content complexity.
- A social learning environment, where rules of conduct are set in collaboration and supportive attitudes of peers are actively fostered, is important.

CONCLUSION

As shown in this study, there is evidence that a well-designed reading intervention, guided by theory, can yield positive results. I created a supportive and sustaining print-rich environment in two research sites through the implementation of an ERP which brought back reading into the learners' lives both at school and at home. By implementing such a programme, I also began to change the conditions of learning (Cambourne, 1995) and reclaimed education and literacy as a public good. The present study sought to make modest theoretical contribution by designing and implementing an ERP as an intervention informed by diverse hypotheses and views. There is a need for programmes that accommodate each learner's reading personality (Cole, 2002) and that learners should be provided with reading material in both their L1 and L2 (Camiciottoli, 2001). The participants and I collaborated to transform the activity, and in most cases, practical solutions were offered, mainly regarding the tools and the object of the activity system. This study confirmed that considering aspects from extensive reading and intensive reading can be beneficial to teachers and learners in the language classroom. It is at these stages of a reading programme of this nature where sustainability is possible.

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