READING TO LEARN (RTL) THROUGH STORY BOOKS: MOVING BEYOND PHYSICAL SCHOOL ACCESS TO EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS IN A GRADE R CLASSROOM IN THE EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

Tawanda Wallace Mataka 1, Tawanda Mukurunge 2, Takura Bhila 3

1National University of Lesotho, Lesotho
2,3 Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, Lesotho Campus

ABSTRACT

Learning to read is a basic skill and right that each child must be endowed with in school. Reading enables active, civic, social and economic participation. This is made possible through reading to learn. However, South Africa is faced with a daunting task to improve literacy development. From the assessments done South African learners are ranked the worst performers compared to worse off countries. Despite all, there is minimal investment in emergent literacy directed towards grade R to develop literacy behaviours. Grade R is the backbone of all the basic literacy skills that are employed in the future grades. It appears access for this cohort is only physical, past the school gate, but not epistemological. It is at the backdrop of the above that this study focused on creating opportunities for and developing Grade R learners’ emergent literacy skills. As interventionist pedagogy, RTL within an interpretivist approach was applied to weave through the learning experiences of Grade R learners with story books as learning tools; and explore the extent scaffolding in RTL affects their development of emergent literacy skills. Observations and learner work samples are used as data generation tools. Basing on the emerging post intervention data, I argue that the use of RTL pedagogy develop emergent literacy skills in Grade R learners.

Keyword: epistemology, access, Zone of proximal development, scaffolding, Reading to Learn.

1. BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Academic achievement hinges on the ability to read. This is a prerequisite skill which all learners should be equipped with to engage with learning content. However, in South Africa learners’ incapacitation is twofold, their reading skills are compromised to the extent that a greater percentage can neither read nor read to learn. Hence writing from what they have read becomes almost a challenge. In this regard they are pulled away from academic success. It has proved through national and cross-national literacy assessments that South African children, especially from former blacks’ only schools, perform two grades below that of their counterparts in other African countries. Against this background the issue of access is interrogated as to whether it is real or it is cosmetic despite education being a constitutional right. It appears it is superficial because a greater number of learners cannot engage meaningfully with the content at their disposal. Consequently, it pushes us to investigate how school success can be ensured from grade R, as the reading and writing skills children need to function at school are acquired long before they reach school going age. Against this backdrop, this study aims at using Reading to Learn (RTL) pedagogy in an English Home language grade R classroom to develop emergent literacy skills in the learners through Action research.

1.2. Literacy challenges countrywide

It is stated in the constitution that, all children have a right to a free and quality education (Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, this appears not to be the case because the issue of quality and epistemological access is questionable. To realise this right, several milestones such as policy changes; curriculum changes; and providing fee free education in poor community schools have been reached since the onset of democracy. Despite multiple policy changes, curriculum transformation, free education for the
marginalised communities, there are snail steps in literacy development. Results of the 2011 Annual National Assessments (ANA’s) for example revealed that learners’ mathematics abilities decline steadily as they progress through school (Badat & Sayed, 2014). Similarly, out of 50 African countries, South Africa performed the worst on the PIRLS cross-country literacy assessments (ibid.). It is against this background that literacy challenges experienced in the education system remain obstacles in improving educational quality and epistemological access at schools (Zimmerman and Smit, 2014).

1.3. Literacy challenges specific to grade R

According to Cooper., Murray., Tomlinson, & Vally, (2015) Grade one learners in South African schools enrol in formal schooling with very few or little emergent literacy skills. Several factors contribute to this demise, including the neglect of explicit early literacy and language development of grade R learners (ibid.). In the same vein, Mohangi et.al. (2016), argue that grade R challenges in rural settings contribute to the neglect of explicit literacy development in grade R. Among many, they identified infrastructure and provisioning: pedagogical challenges; and management and support challenges.

1.4. Formal literacy instruction

The evolution of formal literacy instruction in the grade R classroom appears to limit the development of emergent literacy skills. Of great significance is the obsession with paper and pencil, rote learning at the expense of play time ((Excell & Linington, 2011). This is against the dictates of emergent literacy instruction. At grade R emphasis is on oral language, visual perception skills, emergent reading and emergent writing (through modelling and pretence/fantasy). The formal literacy activities imposed carry no meaning for the grade R child (Excell & Linington, 2011). The main culprit could be the anxiety on teachers to get learners ready for the grade 1 formal curriculum (DBE, 2011b). Besides, there may be no play resources hence teachers resort to the wrong approach. However, Bloch (2006), argues, when babies learn to talk, there is no anxiety on the part of parents to get them ready to learn oral language because there is the knowledge that they eventually will. Therefore, Bloch (2006) advises that teachers give children the same support, affirmation, and feedback that will help them learn emergent literacy skills without the anxiety of formal learning readiness.

It is against this backdrop that RtL is explored as a pedagogic paradigm in the present context, to accelerate emergent literacy skills in a grade R classroom. RtL has been applied with success in Australia where it emanated; in South Africa (Mataka, 2018) (Millin & Millin, 2015); Uganda; Kenya (Lucas, McEwan, Ngware & Oketch, 2014); Portugal; Spain; Swede; Denmark; Scotland and the Netherlands (Coffin, Acevedo, & Lövstedt, 2013).

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The reading crisis in South Africa seems not to be getting any better. It appears there are multiple factors but the key factor seems to be the lack of teaching explicit reading to learners by teachers (Klapwijk, 2012) resulting in non-readers. It is at the backdrop of the above argument that teaching of reading explicitly should be extended to the grade R classroom using RtL pedagogy for accelerated development.

3. STUDY AIM

The aim of this study is to explore the use and effectiveness of Reading to Learn as a literacy development pedagogical intervention strategy in an English home language reading grade R class.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory provides the lenses for this study. He regards learning as a social process. In addition, Halliday’s model of language as text in social context and Bernstein’s model of language as pedagogic discourse glue the study. These three theorists inform the structuring of RtL. Key to the RtL is continuous scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Social tools help learners’ access and navigate their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is, “the distance between the actual development levels as determined by independent problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.8). The ZPD is the gap between what learners can do without teacher intervention and what they are able to achieve after teacher intervention. The RtL as a classroom intervention pedagogy has potential to eliminate hidden curricula that Bernstein alludes to in his theory. This is a theory that has the potential to
democratise the classroom by closing the achievement gaps common in our schools.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

RTL is a pedagogy that has been formulated to accelerate literacy development; it is pertinent to define literacy in the context of the study.

6. LITERACY

The generic explanation of literacy is the ability to read and write. This is despite whether there is comprehension in one’s reading process. It seems Blake and Hanley (1995) are of the same view of literacy in their definition as the ability to read and write to a certain level of appropriate fluency; leaving us to grapple with the question of who decides using which measures what an appropriate level of fluency is. Richmond, Robinson and Sachs-Israel (2008, p. 18) clarifies that literacy is “reading, writing, and calculation for an individual’s own and the community’s development.” In line with the research the appropriate definition is drawn from Ginsburg, Sabatini and Wagner’s (2000, p. 148) who affirm literacy as “a set of tangible skills- particularly the cognitive skills of reading and writing- that are independent of the context in which they are acquired.” Although Ginsburg’s definition does not mention skills such as numeracy, auditory and visual abilities, it is its emphasis on the independence of context that makes it appropriate for this study. This is because South African classrooms are multilingual and multicultural, and our learners need to have literacy skills that can be used in different contexts to enable functionality in society. Skills that are context dependent do not equate to academic literacy.

The working definitions employed discriminate the grade R classroom that is devoid of formal reading and writing. Learners in grade R gain emergent literacy skills that are a foundation upon which later literacy skills will be built. It is argued that grade R learners acquire reading and writing skills before they even enter the school premise and before school going age. Therefore RTL is employed as an intervention strategy to develop emergent literacy skills in grade R. The section below briefly discusses emergent literacy.

7. EMERGENT LITERACY

In tandem with definitions above, emergent literacy is a journey to literacy and involves children developing phonemic awareness, letter and word recognition, and vocabulary enrichment (Excell & Lington, 2011). Further, emergent literacy “encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a child develops in relation to reading and writing” (Save the Children US, year unknown, p. 2). Emergent literacy involves the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998); these skills are the basic building blocks for learning to read and write.

Emergent literacy skills begin developing in early infancy and early childhood through participation with adults in meaningful activities involving talking and print. Children, for example, develop speaking ability without being taught in a classroom; they learn from listening to spoken language in their immediate environment. However, when it involves reading and writing children tend to be taught as these are deemed more complex skills. Emergent literacy is all about providing an environment and opportunities that help learners develop literacy behaviours and skills as illustrated earlier on. In the following section, the RTL pedagogy will be discussed to understand its foundational elements and why it is an effective approach to providing grade R learners with an environment and opportunities that enable development of their emergent literacy skills.

8. READING TO LEARN (RTL) PEDAGOGY

Grade R has been included in the foundation phase of schooling of the South African department of education recognizing that “early childhood care is...the first and essential stage of the basic education process” (UNESCO, 1992, p. 10). This new development should move beyond recognition but practical measures need to be taken to ensure that grade R learners are indeed educated because South Africa has a tendency of having good (educational) policies that lack efficient and effective implementation (Phaswana, 2009).

Upon the basis, RTL pedagogy intervenes to minimize the ability inequalities and thus close the low literacy achievement gaps between learners of different social backgrounds. As a literacy reading acceleration pedagogy that was developed to assist indigenous Australian learners from low class backgrounds, it focuses on teaching reading
skills explicitly. RTL as a pedagogy draws inspiration from Bernstein’s pedagogic discourses, Vygotsky’s model of social learning, and Halliday’s language model (Rose, 2005). These three theories emphasize that schools do not only transmit knowledge but there is a hidden curriculum that transmits order and relations contributing to inequalities in learner abilities; that learning can be mediated so that learners can reach their optimal level of performance without assistance, and that teaching should be explicit to maximize simultaneous meaningful learning and minimize inequalities in learner abilities (ibid.). This is done using a six-stage curriculum cycle discussed below.

8.1. Preparing before reading

This first stage of RTL entails the teacher preparing text for reading and reading it out loud to learners (Rose, 2005). Learners absorb what is read, listening to how it is read and making meaning out of it guided by the teacher’s summaries of the text. This step lessens the learners’ anxiety that comes with reading, as they do not have to decode unfamiliar text (ibid.). By the end of the read aloud process, learners have gained a general understanding of the story.

8.2. Detailed reading

New expressions and technical terms are explained in this stage of RtL (Yi, 2011), with the teacher facilitating the identification of words that show key information (Rose., Lui-Chizivhe., McKnight., & Smith, (2003) There are three important cognitive functions in reading: “interpreting words in the contexts of whole sentences; attending to the sequences of meanings in a sentence, and then recognizing what each wording means” (Rose et.al., p. 4, 2003). Based on these functions, all learners have an opportunity to make meaning out of presented texts.

8.3. Preparing before writing

At this stage sentences from the above two stages are arranged in strips or taken down as notes, and they are used to practice spelling and grammar (Rose, 2005). What Rose (2005) highlights is that in RtL steps, movement is top-down, moving from meaning making in whole sentences to breaking down letter patterns. This in contrast to how the CAPS curriculum in South Africa promotes reading literacy.

8.4. Joint Rewriting

The same words or context from the above steps are used to collectively form and write a new story as a class in this stage.

8.5. Individual Rewriting

This stage is the same as the joint rewriting stage, the difference being that the learner rewrites on their own. Factual texts are rewritten using notes.

8.6. Independent Writing

This final stage of the cycle is where learners can be assessed (Mgqwashu & Makhathini, 2017). Here, learners work without support in constructing a story as they were supported by teacher and peers in all the preceding stages. These stages are cyclic and learners are slowly weaned as they become independent writers and readers. The cycle relies more on continuous scaffolding of the learners towards independent operation.

9. METHODOLOGY

This research design employed the qualitative approach. It involves exploring to gain an understanding of and the meaning individuals attribute to social phenomena (Creswell, 2014). In addition, this study uses action research. According to Ferrance (2000), action research is typically undertaken in school settings, is a reflective process that allows for inquiry, and looks for ways to improve instruction for better student achievement. Action research is a cycle of questioning, gathering data, reflection and acting on the data at hand (Ferrance, 2000). Learner work samples were used as data generation tools. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Neuman (2006), affirm that, purposive sampling targets individuals who fit a criterion. For the purposes of this research project, all participants meet the criteria of being in a grade R class that is being taught reading literacy in English. They were learners in my student’s class, so they were easy to access.

10. FINDINGS

10.1. Cycle 1

My body was the theme for this week, and I used Mhlobo Jadedzweni’s (2006) uTshepo Mde (Tshepo is tall enough). The lesson was done using the six-
cycle stage of RtL, aligned with the CAPS milestones for the theme.

**Preparing before reading:** The topic of discussion was the cover of the book. We counted the number of boys and animals in the cover and spoke about length. I asked all learners to stand in a line according to height with the shortest in front. We distinguished between short and small, and tall and old as learners used these words interchangeably.

**Detailed reading:** I read aloud the following sentences to learners:

“Wowu, I wish I could have these sweets!” says Tshepo. He climbs on a chair. He tries to reach the sweets on top of the cupboard.

This tree is beautiful. It is tall enough. It can see everything. It can reach everything. Tshepo cannot wait. He wants to become a tree.

After reading the text, the following questions were asked:

- Which word tells us Tshepo is struggling to get to the sweets?
- How tall is Tshepo? How do we know?
- What are the properties of the tree that make Tshepo want to be a tree?

One of the learners I will assess exclaimed:

C1L1: (I am tall enough, unlike Tshepo)

These questions prompted learners to talk about their bodies. What their bodies can do, what they can do when their bodies fail them etc. We spoke about differences in height and acknowledged that all heights are special.

**Preparing before writing:** I took two sweets and placed them on top of a cupboard in the class. I asked the four learners under assessments to reach the sweets. Two learners (L1 and L2) took chairs to climb and reach the sweets. L3 took a broom, and L4 stood and asked other learners in the class to assist him.

**Joint and individual writing:** We continued with the rest of the story and learners had an opportunity to go outside and plant themselves as Tshepo with help from other classmates taking turns. I observed this activity closely managing conflict.

**Independent writing:** I asked learners to draw two pictures, first picture of Tshepo trying to reach the sweets and second picture of Tshepo planting himself as a tree. I asked them to draw a third picture of how they would have wanted Tshepo’s story to end. I analyzed the four learners’ pictures and wrote reflections on their sheets.

10.2. Cycle 2

I read Amaso ka Mpumi amangalisyayo (Masango & Morulane, 2018), a children’s book outside the formal school curriculum. I did the lessons in line with the steps of the RtL pedagogy as seen below.

**Preparing before reading:** I introduced the cover of the book and asked questions about it. Learners had to predict the story based on the cover. This exercise aimed to give learners background knowledge on the text. They asked questions and commented on the cover. One learner exclaimed:

C2L1: (look teacher our hair).

At this comment, I came in and affirmed that the hair and skin really looked like ours. I then summarized the story, telling learners it is about our afro hair and how beautiful it is. I explained that Mpumi’s hair had magic beads that allowed the girl and her friends to travel to places they wished. A discussion on what wishes were and what the learners wished for ensured.

C2L2: (miss, can we go to Spur if we wish? Onje has beads on her hair she can make a wish. I want to go to Spur).

I told the learner we could go outside and test if Onje’s hair would take us to Spur after we finish reading the book.

**Detailed reading:** Learners were supposed to read a short passage with me. However, because this is a pre-grade class, I selected one short passage and read it to them, then asked questions on the passage. The passage read as follows:

The beads jiggie, wiggle, and shine. The girls laugh happily. Suddenly, they fly away into the clouds, way up above the city! Then they suddenly fall, into a big crowd; the stand up, and shake themselves slowly. “Where is this place that we have never been before?” But they are not the only ones. They can see other girls and boys, mothers and fathers, and plenty of wild animals: A Gorilla, a lion, a bear,
and a parrot shouting, “Welcome to the Gauteng Zoo!”

This exercise affirmed learners’ confidence in the text by using questioning. The following questions were asked:

- What words tell us what the beads did?
- Can Onje’s beads do the same? (call Onje to front to jiggle their beads)
- Which word tells us the girls were happy? Show me how you look when you’re happy
- How many animals are at the zoo? Let us count them

Instead of writing down or highlighting words, we sounded the words and acted them out too. For example, the words that tell us what the beads do, I wrote and asked learners to imitate. I wanted them to extract meaning from the words, in line with Rose’s (2005) assertion that this stage develops sentence structure and vocabulary.

Preparing for writing: I pasted two printed images illustrating the paragraph I read above. One was of the girls flying and one was of the girls in the zoo. I asked learners to point at the image of what the girls did first. Most of the learners pointed at the image of the flying girls. They were asking how this was possible and some said the story was a lie.

Joint and individual writing: I asked learners to tell me what happened in the paragraph so I could draw it on the board with their help. I asked which animals were not mentioned would they have liked to be in the story. They mentioned a dog and I drew it as well.

Independent writing: Learners were given pencil, paper, and crayons to draw their own versions of Mpumi’s magic beads. Appendix A contains some of these images.

Cycle 1: Rose 2018 analysis tool of learners’ work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Were the drawings by learners in line with the theme of the CAPS section for the weeks in which I implemented RtL?</th>
<th>L1: Successful, in line with age and grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L2: Almost there, needs refinement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L3: Almost there, drawing not in line with age and grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L4: Not successful, learner needs a lot of assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field</td>
<td>Is the plot well illustrated?</td>
<td>L1: The plot is well illustrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L2: The plot is well illustrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L3: The plot is slightly illustrated; one gets an idea of what story is about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L4: Plot is not well illustrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>The visuals are expressive of the theme. If not “visuals are still to be refined, theme not clear.”</td>
<td>L1: Visuals express the theme well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L2: Visuals express the theme well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L3: Visuals are still to be slightly refined; theme is a bit unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>L4: Visuals need major refinement; theme is not clear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Lexis              | The different visuals are representing an assortment of words not spoken. | L1: Learner was imaginative; included own objects in drawing  
L2: Learner showed a little imagination  
L3: Learner only drew what was discussed in class  
L4: Visuals not clear |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reference         | The characters are the drawings. Are they representing their characters? I “You write “clear reference of characters illustrated through the visuals.” | L1: Clear reference of characters illustrated through the visuals  
L2: Clear reference of characters illustrated through the visuals  
L3: Somewhat clear reference of characters illustrated through the drawings  
L4: Visuals are unclear, no clear reference to characters |
| Grammar           | Grammar are their pictures telling a connected story.                   | L1: Yes  
L2: Yes  
L3: Yes  
L4: No |
| Presentation      | Are the visuals well-presented?                                          | L1: Yes  
L2: Yes  
L3: Yes  
L4: No |

| Total             |                                                                         |                                                                 |

**Cycle 2**

| Purpose           | Were the drawings by learners in line with the theme of the CAPS section for the weeks in which I implemented RtL? | L1: Successful, in line with age and grade  
L2: Successful, in line with age and grade  
L3: Successful, in line with age and grade  
L4: Almost there, still needs a bit of refinement |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Field             | Is the plot well illustrated?                                                                                        | L1: The plot is well illustrated  
L2: The plot is well illustrated  
L3: The plot is well illustrated |
<table>
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<th>Mode</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<td>L1:</td>
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<tr>
<td>L2:</td>
<td>Visuals express the theme well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L3:</td>
<td>Visuals express the theme well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L4:</td>
<td>Visuals need a bit of refinement; theme is a bit unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexis</td>
<td>The different visuals are representing an assortment of words not spoken.</td>
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<td>L1:</td>
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<td>L4:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2:</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>L3:</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>L4:</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

11. ANALYSIS
From the findings RtL pedagogy can accelerate development of emergent literacy skills in a grade R classroom. The intensive nature of the scaffolding cycle of RtL appears to be the reason why there was a high level of success, because there was equitable support and feedback among all learners (Rose and Martin, 2012).

Over ten lessons, using two story books, assessing four learners, and scaffolded read aloud activities
were carried out. The findings that emerged revealed that scaffolding in RtL accelerate emergent literacy skills. Two learners (L3 and L4) from the four that were assessed showed significant improvement in drawing visuals that illustrated comprehension of learning content. It is in this regard that the continuous practice of scaffolding during RtL resulted in constant exposure to print, which was of benefit to both learning and writing skills of learners. Correspondingly, Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) posit that “scaffolding may result eventually in the development of task competence by the learner at a pace that would far outstrip his unassisted efforts” (p. 90). Despite accelerated improvement of L3 and L4, L4 showed slow development but in cycle 3 there was progress. This is true to the assertion that continuous scaffolding allows for steady literacy development. Rose and Martin (2012) confirm that, it is through iterations of the teaching and learning cycle that learners especially disenfranchised learners who have experienced limited success in school may begin to develop advanced literacy practices.

While analyzing the visuals, I did not add any numerical scores hence there are no totals. In grade R learners are not given scores. Rather, through play, drawings, rhymes etc., the teacher uses her professional discretion together with CAPS guidelines to determine whether learners are progressing well or not. As the tables above show, two of the learners (L3 and L4) struggled at first.

12. CONCLUSION

The findings that emerged revealed that scaffolding in RtL does to some extent accelerate emergent literacy skills. This strengthens Rose and Martin’s (2012) assertion that continuous scaffolding allows for steady literacy development, especially in learners that have experienced limited success in school. Outstanding was the ability of learners to turn their stories into pictures.

13. RECOMMENDATION

I recommend the use of the RtL pedagogy from the grade R class until the end of grade 3, to ensure that learners enter grade 4 adequately equipped to deal with the curriculum demands and the additional cognitive demands that come with being taught in a second language.

All learners should be equally treated as they enter they enter physically to enable epistemological access.

Reading to Learn pedagogy should be made part of the South African curricula to enable literacy development across the board.

Lastly, teachers and parents should be trained on the use of RtL to assist their learners and children as is done in Australia and other developing and developed countries.

REFERENCES


[26] Save the Children US, year unknown. Emergent Literacy: Investing Early for Exponential Outcomes


