

## Laying foundations for academic language competence: the effects of storybook reading on Zulu language, literacy and discourse development

Danisile Ntuli<sup>1</sup> and Elizabeth J Pretorius<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of African Languages, University of South Africa, PO Box 392, Pretoria 0003, South Africa

<sup>2</sup> Department of Linguistics, University of South Africa, PO Box 392, Pretoria 0003, South Africa  
Corresponding author, e-mail: [pretorej@unisa.ac.za](mailto:pretorej@unisa.ac.za)

**Abstract:** Success at school depends heavily on language and literacy skills. Research indicates that pre-school children whose parents read storybooks to them have a linguistic and literacy head start over other children when they start school. In contrast, learners who come to school with few literacy skills are at a disadvantage. A Family Literacy project was started in 2000 in disadvantaged areas of rural KwaZulu-Natal. One component of the programme promotes storybook reading in Zulu to pre-school children in Grade R. Various aspects of the children's language and emergent literacy skills were assessed longitudinally. Children in Grade 1 who were not in the project were also assessed, and their performance compared to those of the children in Grade R. The results showed that, on the whole, the Grade R children who were in the Family Literacy Project scored better on the literacy tests and showed stronger language and discourse development than the Grade 1 learners, even though the pre-schoolers were on average a year younger than the Grade 1 learners. These findings suggest that reading storybooks to pre-school children has beneficial effects on their language, literacy and discourse development.

### Introduction

Why is it that some children seem to adapt to school and learn to read and write with relative ease while others struggle with the written word? Why do some children seem to find it easy to follow what their teachers say and they understand what their teachers expect of them, while others find the classroom a strange and confusing experience? Decades of research have given researchers and educationists greater insights into the myriad of factors that interact in complex ways to facilitate or handicap the acquisition of literacy and consequent progress in formal schooling. These factors include individual differences between children, differences in home backgrounds, the impact of cultural, political and socioeconomic variables, the nature and amount of linguistic input that children receive, variations in social interaction and discourse patterns to which children are exposed, and the effects of styles of school management, instructional methods and classroom practices.

There is often a mismatch between what the public perceives to be important in the learning context and what researchers have found to be important. For example, many parents in South Africa think that it is the responsibility of the school to teach their children to read and to introduce them to the world of books, yet there is a body of research findings that indicate that waiting for children to acquire literacy when they start school may already be too late (e.g. Snow *et al.*, 1991; Bus *et al.*, 1995; Neuman, 1999). Research in the field of literacy development reveals that children's knowledge about language and literacy *before* they start school has an impact on their subsequent literacy accomplishments, not only in the early stages of learning to read, but also for later reading achievement (e.g. Wells, 1985; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Vivas, 1996; Jordan *et al.*, 2000). Children's early knowledge about reading and writing that develops during their pre-school days is referred to as 'emergent literacy' (e.g. Sulzby &

Teale, 1991; Graves *et al.*, 1998). It includes attitudes, expectations and skills related to written language and an increasing awareness of literacy behaviours during the pre-school years. Most of this early knowledge is not taught explicitly but is acquired unconsciously through the social and verbal interaction patterns that children engage in with adults in their immediate contexts.

The purpose of this article is to examine the effects that storybook reading in Zulu had on the language and emergent literacy of pre-school Zulu children. The communities from which these children came are poor rural areas where there are high levels of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment.

### **The foundations of academic language competence**

The formal language of schooling is referred to as academic language competence and it is a factor strongly associated with school achievement (e.g. Cummins, 2000). This type of language and literacy competence is acquired primarily through exposure to written language, or to oral forms of discourse that are embedded in a culture of literacy, such as classroom discourse and the discourse related to the teaching and learning of specific content subjects. As Corson (1997: 684) explains, '(th)is is a kind of discourse where learners can talk repeatedly about knowledge gained from texts, using an acquired metalanguage set against a meaning system used to interpret and extend understanding'.

Let us now consider more closely the language and literacy development that takes place during the pre-school and early school years, and the way in which this paves the way for academic language competence, which in turn mediates successful learning at school.

Due to differences in the context in which language is acquired and developed and the functions that it serves, a distinction is often drawn between two kinds of language proficiency that are relevant to the learning context, namely Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1991; 2000). These two types of proficiency are associated with oral and written modes of language use respectively. Analyses of spoken and written discourse reveal features

characteristic of one or the other mode. For example, BICS is used in everyday communicative encounters and is described as being more context-embedded, in the sense that it contains many deictic or indexical items, the meaning of which can be recovered from the interactional context. Oral discourse also makes much use of prosody (pitch, stress, intonation and tone in the case of African languages) and paralinguistic features (gestures, expressions) to convey meaning. Because oral discourse is essentially dialogic, meaning can be negotiated in the course of interaction. In other words, oral modes of discourse are characterised by contextualised participant interaction.

A CALP type of proficiency, on the other hand, involves the use of a more context-reduced language associated with written language and with the more formal aspects of classroom and lecture-type language use which are typical of the learning context. This does not mean that written language is context-free, since no language use is context-free; rather, that the locus of meaning is typically 'built into' the text to a larger extent than is the case in oral discourse. For example, in written discourse, referents are usually identified and contextual information is lexicalised, whereas the shared context of spoken discourse makes such features redundant and hence unnecessary to state explicitly. Consider, for example, the following two stretches of discourse concerning a car accident:

(a)'Well, this car suddenly came along and hit us bang, right here. I swerved like this but it was too late and we went straight into that pole over there'.

(b)'My friend, Sarah, and I were travelling home when a car suddenly appeared from the right and hit us in the driver's door. I swerved sharply to the left but it was too late and we went straight into the yield sign on the pavement'.

In (a) the oral discourse does not pose a problem for the listener, since the latter is privileged to share the same interactional context as the speaker. The meanings of indexical items such as *this car*, *us/ll/we*, *right here*, *like this*, *that pole over there* are clarified by gestures, intonational patterns and the immediacy of the context at the time of speaking. In order to communicate this event in

writing (b) to someone displaced in time and space from the context (e.g. in a letter to a parent two days later), the context needs to be lexicalised (*right here* becomes *in the driver's door*; *like this* becomes *sharply to the left*; *that pole over there* becomes *the yield sign on the pavement*) and referents are identified (e.g. *we* is *My friend, Sarah, and I* — the writer of the letter).

One of the characteristics, *inter alia*, of academic language proficiency is the ability to shift the locus of meaning more explicitly to the language itself, to build the context into the discourse (in spoken language) or text (in written language). Exposure to storybook reading and the 'book language' of written stories provides children with opportunities to acquire this more 'context-reduced' type of language use.

### ***The role of storybook reading in language and literacy development in the early years***

During the pre-school phase, children master basic grammatical structures and oral discourse skills in their primary language from the language input they receive around them. By the time they start school, most children have already acquired fairly complex oral language abilities (e.g. Torrance & Olson, 1985; Garton & Pratt, 1989). Oral language skills form the basis on which early reading is built. When learning to read, children bring their knowledge of oral language to bear on written language. Research indicates that children who start school with poor language skills and poor understanding of the communicative process often have problems learning to read (e.g. Mace-Matluck *et al.*, 1989). However, although oral language skills form the basis on which early reading is built, oral language proficiency does not predict school achievement or reading skill *in the long run* (Saville-Troike, 1984; Wells, 1986; Snow & Dickinson, 1991). What kinds of knowledge and skills facilitate learning to read and write, and how do children cross the bridge from oral language to literate modes of discourse? In effect, what factors *do* predict school achievement in the long run? One factor that regularly emerges as playing a central role in the development of language and literacy skills is storybook reading. It is this factor which is of concern in this study.

Research throughout the world has shown that children who have storybooks read to them during the pre-school years have a head start over other children when they start school, and they achieve and maintain educational success more easily than children who do not start off with this advantage (Wells, 1986; Hiebert, 1993; Dombey & Moustafa, 1998). Why is it that exposure to storybook reading contributes so meaningfully to the early development of literacy accomplishments? A closer examination of the kinds of advantages that storybook reading confers on children reveals that, through having stories read to them on a regular basis, children show advanced language skills and gains in conceptual and vocabulary knowledge (e.g. Krashen, 1993; Neuman, 1999; Buchorn-Stoll, 2002). Not only do they extend their knowledge of the world through storybooks, but they also acquire strong emergent literacy skills and develop high expectations about print. For example, they know how to handle books, how to turn pages, they acquire a sense of narrative structure (also referred to as story schema) and their visual literacy develops (they can construct meaning from pictures). Children exposed to storybooks tend to have longer attention spans; they can sit through a storybook reading session without fidgeting (e.g. Feitelstein *et al.*, 1986). Paying attention to the task at hand is a skill that stands children in good stead when they start formal school and have to attend to what their teachers say. Children exposed to storybooks from an early age also learn to read and write relatively easily (Harris & Sipay, 1975; Butler, 1979; Holdaway, 1979; Elley, 1989). In the International Studies in Educational Achievement (IEA) study of reading literacy amongst 8- and 14-year old children in 32 countries around the world, it was found that in every country, better readers had engaged in literacy activities *before* school, such as storybook reading, and had access to storybooks in their homes (Elley, 1994: 147).

In sum, exposure to storybook reading from an early age lays the foundations for the development of academic language proficiency. In contrast, learners who come to school without any or with very few emergent literacy skills and who are unfamiliar with 'book language' and the way that books work are at a

disadvantage when they start school. They usually take longer to learn to read and write, they are unfamiliar with the formal language of schooling and they often have difficulty settling into the classroom routine.

In South Africa, many children from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas come from homes where there are few or no books, and many parents have low literacy levels. Many of these children also attend pre-school centres where the focus is on keeping the children out of harm's way and attending to basic physical needs. Although the Department of Social Development provides a framework for the standards for pre-schools and crèches (*Guidelines for Day Care*), there are no prerequisite qualifications for people running the pre-schools. In addition it is difficult for pre-schools to obtain government financial support. As a result many caregivers at such centres have little or no training in early child development (ECD) and minimal educational facilities are provided. The intellectual stimulation of these children is often not a primary concern for many caregivers. Although teaching children the letters of the alphabet and number counting are favoured activities in such centres, they are typically done in a formal, strictly sequenced and rote choral manner. By the time these children enter Grade 1 they have had little or no exposure to the literate practices and rich language experiences taken for granted in more privileged areas, where there are better qualified caregivers and more plentiful educational resources.

Once they enter the formal schooling system, these learners have few opportunities to extend and enrich the scope of their language and literacy experiences, due largely to the lack of reading materials in poorly-resourced schools. Furthermore, the way in which African languages have been taught in the past and in fact are still being taught in South Africa has often been criticised on the grounds that it does not develop academic language competence (e.g. Macdonald, 1990; Smyth, 2002). There tends to be a strong bias towards a structural grammar-based approach with very little attention given to developing academic language competencies in the African languages. Learners are not exposed to extended discourse, and extensive reading in the African languages has not been part of

classroom practice. As a result, learners do not develop foundational linguistic, cognitive and conceptual skills in their home languages. Smyth (2002) argues that in order for African languages to become vehicles for meaningful learning, the teaching of these home languages must articulate with the rest of the curriculum so that they can contribute to the building of literacy skills. In this way they can prepare learners intellectually for the later demands of switching over to English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT):

Research conducted in SA ... points to the fact that, for the majority of school children, academic language proficiency in their home language is not sufficiently well established for them to be able to transfer ideas to another language except at the most mundane level. Once these learners are forced to learn through a language which is not their home language, their concept and language development suffers in many ways. This is exacerbated by factors such as the dominance of the transmission mode of teaching and social and affective factors such as low self-esteem in learners and the low status of their home languages (Smyth, 2002: 109).

As indicated above, Smyth (2002) suggests that mother-tongue African language courses need to run ahead of the curriculum so that language, concepts and cognitive skills are established in the home language before being dealt with in the LoLT. These courses should assist learners in moving from using oral language and the forms and structures associated with it to dealing with more complex written language.

From the above it is clear that more challenging input is required to extend the range, complexity and richness of the children's language and literate experiences. Many children from disadvantaged areas have little exposure to richness of input in the pre-schools they attend, and even when they enter the formal schooling system, the kind of linguistic and conceptual input that is needed to develop academic language competence is missing. Even the rich African oral culture of storytelling is falling into disuse, especially in urban areas. Machet (2002: 5) describes this situation as follows:

Parents are too busy and too tired in the evenings to spend time telling young

children stories ... Also, many parents feel that their oral culture of storytelling does not have value today in today's highly technological world. Thus children are deprived of any form of storytelling. This has a serious effect as children start school without any story schema (i.e. the conventional way in which a story is structured within a culture).

Storytelling sessions stimulate the imagination and provide children with a rich source of oral language input. From stories that are told to them or from storybooks read to them, children also unconsciously acquire the discourse skills of how to tell a story, the notion of a story schema (i.e. the 'form' of a story) and how stories function in their particular culture. Some children's television programmes, such as *Takalani Sesame* and *Yo TV*, have introduced stimulating storytelling sessions that can help bridge the gap for many children. However, there are still many children who do not have access to television, especially in high-poverty areas and remote rural areas.

### **Developing storytelling competence**

The ability to tell a story is part of language competence, often referred to as discourse competence. Let us now briefly consider some aspects of the development of storytelling competence. Much of this research has been done in English and European languages, and so may reflect a particular cultural-linguistic perspective.

From the age of two children start 'telling stories'. There are two main types of stories that children learn to recount, namely personal event narratives (i.e. telling about a specific event that happened) and fictional stories (i.e. a fictional story derived from an oral or book story or story the child made up) (Allen *et al.*, 1994). Children use their knowledge of the world and their experiences to convey content knowledge (i.e. what happened) as well as linguistic structure knowledge to recount the story (i.e. how information is organised and conveyed). Allen *et al.* (1994) argue that personal event narratives and fictional stories are related yet distinct narrative genres. Their research shows that the underlying structures for personal events and stories follow different development paths. A simple story, for example, may reflect a series of events that follow one another in a

coordinate way (*and ... and then ... and ...*), whereas a more complex story contains an elaborated plot with embedded and/or interactive episodes.

From a linguistic point of view, at an early stage English children first tend to describe events in their order of occurrence, with a sentence for each event or a series of clauses joined by additive conjunctives such as *and* or *and then*. Children then proceed to a stage where more complex sentence structures are used, with the main clause appearing at the beginning of the complex sentence. Later children learn to use subordinate clauses in first position (Romaine, 1984). Initially additive and temporal relations between discourse units are used, but with increasing age, causal and adversative relations are used. From the age of about eight onwards children mark relations between clauses more explicitly through the use of conjunctives. Although this developmental sequence is well documented in English (e.g. McCabe & Peterson 1985; Raban, 1988; Cox *et al.*, 1990), there has been very little research in this domain in the African languages.

The norms of discourse and storytelling differ not only culturally but also socially within cultures, in terms of class or community differences. The research by Allen *et al.* (1994) showed that children with more advanced productive language abilities produced stories with more distinctive narrative structures characteristic of the personal event and fictional narrative genres (1994: 169). In her longitudinal study, Heath (1983) showed how children are helped in their transition from home to school forms of discourse via exposure to storytelling or storybook reading, as well as by the form, function and content that stories are assumed to have by different communities. The style of school or classroom discourse is closely related to the norms of written language, and the acquisition of the norms of written language, in turn, starts with exposure to storybook reading.

Book-based activities not only affect children's productive language and literacy development, but also their receptive language development. For example, in assessing the impact of literate aspects of home environments on comprehension strategies, Reeder and Shapiro's (1993) study found that

children who had been more strongly socialised into literate behaviours tended to locate meaning within linguistic units rather than the surrounding context. They showed a stronger bias towards linguistically-dependent strategies for comprehending speech acts when input was distorted, whereas the other children relied more on the context to help them comprehend speech acts. The researchers conclude that early literate experiences bring about a shift in comprehension strategies where the locus of meaning shifts increasingly from context-based to linguistic-based comprehension strategies.

There is a large body of literature that provides evidence of the overt as well as more subtle ways in which child-oriented book-based activities affect children's language and discourse development, their background knowledge, their knowledge of how stories function as well as the way in which their literacy develops. Attitudes towards reading can begin in infancy and can be enhanced throughout childhood. Parents are usually the first and primary influence, with caregivers and teachers later extending what parents have begun. When stories are read to children on a regular basis, not only does their love for books and reading grow but their confidence and ability to narrate stories increase. Children exposed to more literate modes of discourse develop language competence characterised by more decontextualised or disembedded discourse, whereas children who are only exposed to oral modes of discourse develop language competence characterised by contextualised participant interaction.

These are issues that have been well researched in studies on English language and discourse acquisition and literacy development, but there is very little local research on these topics in African languages. In this article we look at the effects of storybook reading on the Zulu language, literacy and discourse development of a group of pre-school children in a crèche in rural KwaZulu-Natal. In order to contextualise the study, an overview is first given of the Family Literacy Project of which this study was a component. This is followed by methodological details concerning the assessment of language and literacy development and the results of the study. The

article concludes with a discussion of the findings and the implications that follow from the findings.

### **Methodology**

Before moving on to the methodological details, a sketch is first given of the larger project of which this study was a part. Thereafter, the participants, procedures and analytic framework used to investigate the Zulu literacy and language development of the children are described, and the preliminary results presented. The analysis of the data includes formal aspects of linguistic development as well as features of discourse and emergent literacy development. Some aspects of this larger study have already been written up (Pretorius, 2003), where the focus was primarily on emergent literacy skills. In contrast, the present article focusses attention on the language and storytelling abilities of two groups of children, one of which was exposed to storybook reading in Zulu.

### ***Context of research: the Family Literacy Project***

In 2000 a Family Literacy Project (FLP) was started in disadvantaged areas of rural KwaZulu-Natal<sup>1</sup>. There are several components that make up the FLP; for example, it provides adult literacy classes, it trains and develops literacy facilitators, it encourages family literacy through its adult literacy classes, it promotes literate activities through its child-to-child groups, it makes books for babies available, and it puts out a community newsletter (Labuschagne, 2001; Labuschagne, 2002).

One of the aims of the programme is to promote storybook reading in Zulu to pre-school children. Caregivers (parents, older siblings and pre-school teachers) at three disadvantaged crèches that fell within the ambit of the FLP were encouraged to read storybooks to their children on a regular basis, and start-up libraries of age-appropriate storybooks in Zulu were put in the sites. In 2001 the children at these three crèches were assessed to determine whether the book-based activities were having an effect on their language and emergent literacy skills. The three caregivers at each of the crèches were undergoing early child development (ECD) training. They were encouraged to adopt a more child-centred

approach at their crèches, to incorporate more stimulating literacy activities into their daily routines, and to read storybooks to the children in their care. Some of the mothers and grandmothers of children at each of the pre-schools attended adult literacy classes and were made aware of the importance of reading storybooks to their children. One of their 'homework' literacy activities included reading storybooks to their children on a regular basis. How effective were these storybook reading sessions? The methodological aspects of the study that sought an answer to this research problem are now addressed.

### **Participants**

The children in the storybook reading programme were young Zulu children who attended three different crèches, namely Malindi (n = 32), Mbandi (n = 26) and Fundisa (n = 46) (real names have been changed to protect their identity). The crèches accommodate children from the ages of two to seven years. For logistical reasons, not all the children at these crèches were assessed. In total, 26 children between the ages of five and seven from all three crèches were assessed twice during the course of 2001 — first in April and then again in November. These pre-school children will henceforth be referred to as the Grade Rs.

Grade 1 learners selected from the nearby primary schools were also assessed in terms of the same language and literacy criteria used for the Grade Rs. The Grade 1 learners constituted a baseline against which the emergent literacy skills of the pre-school children were compared. The criterion for the selection of these Grade 1 children was that, although they may have attended pre-school before they started school, they had *not* been exposed to any storybook reading. It was therefore felt that the emergent literacy skills that they brought with them at the start of school would be representative of the school entry-level literacy skills characteristic of children in the broader community. The same assessment procedures were followed with the Grade 1 children, although they were only tested once, in February 2001. It is important to note that both the Grade R and the Grade 1 children came from high-poverty areas and attended disadvantaged schools.

The linguistic data of children from the Mbandi crèche and the corresponding baseline

Grade 1 learners from the nearby primary school were subjected to an in-depth analysis. In this article only the data from these two groups of children will be presented.

### **Procedures**

Various aspects of the Grade R children's language and emergent literacy skills were assessed at the start of the programme, early in the year (these formed the pre-tests). The same children were assessed again eight months later (these formed the post-tests). Due to the length of the intervening time, there were unlikely to be memory effects, so the same tests that were used in the pre-tests were used in the post-tests (cf Pretorius, 2003, for further details about the nature of these emergent literacy assessments).

All the children were tested on an individual basis in Zulu by mother-tongue speakers of Zulu. Two of the facilitators for the adult literacy classes were trained to assess all the children. It was also their responsibility to transcribe the tape-recorded protocols in Zulu<sup>2</sup>.

### **Assessment measures**

Although a range of tasks was designed to establish what skills and knowledge the Grade R learners had acquired in terms of emergent literacy behaviours, only those measures that relate directly to the children's language and discourse development are described here. The relevant assessment measures included the following components:

- *Story recall*: this task assessed the child's ability to retell a story that had been read to the children as a group. Performance in this task reflects not only a child's comprehension of the story but also his/her familiarity with narrative schemata.

The story, called *uBolekile*, is about a boy who unsuccessfully asks various groups of children for different things (e.g. a wheel, sweets and porridge). At the end his grandfather says Bolekile's requests were turned down because he forgot to ask for things politely.

Although different languages encode requests in different ways, linguistically and pragmatically (e.g. with gestures and body language), politeness is a universal phenomenon. Children are socialised from an early age to be polite and, since the

pictures in the book depicted black children in rural settings, it was thought that the story would provide a familiar frame of reference.

The main events in the story were identified and the main items in each child's recall compared to this template. This task was tape-recorded. In order to contextualise the story for the storyreading session, each child was asked to read the story of *uBolekile* to a black doll called Thabo, to cheer him up since he was not feeling well. To avoid testing memory during the story recall, the child was given the book to page through and to show Thabo during the 'reading' and recall task.

- *Free storytelling*: the child was asked to talk about a personal experience, for example, his/her first days at the pre-school. This task was tape-recorded and provided data on personal event stories.
- *Book behaviour*: the facilitator observed the children's familiarity with storybooks, whether they held the book correctly (the right way up), turned the pages in the appropriate direction, could identify a page number and a word on a page, etc. These behaviours were noted on an observation sheet and a percentage score was computed for each child.
- *Language development*: the data in the story recall and free storytelling tasks provided information on the child's language development. For each story protocol the following aspects were noted:
  - Mean length of utterance. Because the African languages are richly agglutinating languages, the morpheme was used as the basic unit for determining utterance length. Thus, a word such as *ngahamba* consists of three morphemes: *nga+hamb+a*.
  - Counts of nouns and verbs. The number of verbs and nouns (repetitions not included) that the child used in each protocol was counted to get an idea of the child's conceptual 'richness' of language use.
  - The use of past and present tenses was noted in the protocols, as well as specific syntactic structures.

The data were captured on computer, using the statistical package SPSS.

## Results

The main question that is addressed in this article is: *did storybook reading have an effect*

*on the language, literacy and discourse development of the children?* In order to arrive at answers to this question we will first consider the data from a quantitative perspective, in terms of morphosyntactic features and specific emergent literacy behaviours. Thereafter we will examine the data from a qualitative perspective, in terms of narrative and discourse features.

### **Language and literacy development**

A set of five measures was used here to assess the language and literacy skills of the learners:

- Each child's *mean length of utterance* was measured in terms of the number of morphemes reflected in the utterances in the two recorded protocols (the personal event narrative of the first day at school, as well as the recall of the story read to the group as a whole). These are given as raw scores.
- The *verb frequency* and *noun frequency* measures reflect the average number of different verbs or nouns used in the protocols. Thus, if a child said *ngangihamba* and later used *ngahamba*, the verb *-hamba* would be counted once. These verb and noun frequencies are also given as raw scores.
- For the *story recall* measure, a template was made of the main events in the story and the number of main events recalled by the child was measured against this template and converted to a percentage score.
- A set of features was also compiled for the category *book behaviour* (e.g. child holds the book the right way up, child turns pages in right direction, can identify words from pictures, etc.) and a percentage was computed for each child, based on observations of their behaviour when handling books.

These five measures of language and literacy development are shown in Table 1. The second column in the table reflects the pre-test and post-test changes in the performance of the Grade R children on these five measures, while the last column reflects the school entry level performance of the Grade 1 children on the same measures. It should be noted that the *mean length of utterance* measure was computed on the basis of the number of children in each group who actually produced utterances. For example, in the Group R pre-test for story recall, only five children recalled

**Table 1:** Differences between Grade Rs (in programme) and Grade 1s (not in programme)

	Grade R		Grade 1 (baseline)
	pre-test	post-test	
Mean age		5.8	6.8
Mean length of utterance			
Personal event	15.5	30.5	20.7
Story recall	73	95.5	89
Mean verb frequency			
Personal event	2.7	4.7	2.7
Story recall	6	6.8	6
Mean noun frequency			
Personal event	2.5	3.7	3.5
Story recall	4.8	6	4.3
Story recall (%)	50	61	25
Book behaviour (%)	40	63	20

something of the story while they all ( $n = 6$ ) produced story recalls in the post-test; in contrast, only three of the six Grade 1 children produced story recalls.

As can be seen from Table 1, the Grade R children showed improvements in all the measures from the pre-tests in April 2001 to the post-tests seven months later in November 2001. In the recall protocols, the children produced longer recalls, their utterances were on average longer and their vocabulary was more varied. They also remembered far more of the main events of the story that had been read to them, and observations of their book behaviour also showed greater familiarity with storybooks.

At the beginning of the year the children's lack of familiarity with storybook reading was noticeable. Their classroom routine did not include sitting on the floor around an adult to follow the pictures and story in a book. There were several children who were very shy and gave minimal responses or did not say anything when asked to retell the story. The presence of the tape recorder might have inhibited them in performing this task, but even when the facilitator encouraged them to page through the book and asked them questions, they were still reluctant to say anything. Reluctance to perform a task could be taken to indicate inability to perform the task. It is rare for children who are accustomed to storybook readings and encouraged to talk about the story afterwards to display this kind of response. By November, they were far more at ease with storybook-reading activities and their

recalls reflected longer and more accurate renditions of the original story.

Similarly, it was interesting to note qualitative changes in the Grade R children's book behaviour. Initially it was clear from classroom observations that the children had had very little experience with books; they held the books clumsily, turned pages awkwardly, and were unsure which things on the pages signified meaning. Some children did not show much interest in the books, and some were not even aware that they were looking at the books upside down. By November there was a marked change in their handling of books. There was greater spontaneity when they sat on the floor and paged through books, which were held the right way up. Some of the children sat in pairs and commented on the pictures or 'read' the story aloud to themselves. They also put books back in the bookshelf when they had finished reading them.

In contrast, although the Grade 1 children had been at school for two months and were a year older, their recall protocols were shorter, they showed slightly less variation in vocabulary use, and they revealed poor book behaviours and story recalls. As can be seen from Table 1, by the end of their pre-school year, the Grade R children had outperformed the Grade 1 learners in all five of the quantitative measures, even though they were a year younger than their school-going peers.

### ***Discourse development***

In this section we look more closely at possible changes that occurred in the discourse of the

children, as reflected in the recorded protocols, with regard to their personal event telling and their recounting of the fictional story (retold with picture stimuli).

#### *Free story recall: personal event-telling*

In order to examine their personal event-telling abilities, the children were asked to tell about their first day at the crèche (Table 2). The most obvious change between the pre-test and post-test protocols was the length of the stories. Two of the six Grade R children did not say anything in the pre-tests. All the children were shy and the kinds of activities they typically did at the crèche did not require them to engage in extended discourse such as telling a story. They seldom recounted more than two events (as seen in Bonga's pre-test example), and the events were usually presented in the order of occurrence. Thandeka was the only child who was quite talkative. She used the past tense and simple sentences with six different verbs to recount the events and although there was some confusion as to the sequence of events

(*Ngabhala, ngahamba* was followed by further activities), she mentioned at least nine events. She also provided closure at the end of her story — *kuphela*.

By November, the personal event narratives were longer, with at least five to six events recalled. The event sequences reflected real order of occurrence. In her post-test story, for example, Thandeka shows use of a wider range of grammatical structures. Whereas in the pre-test she said *sabukela izincwadi*, 'we looked through books', in the post-test she said *uMiss wasifundisa ngezincwadi zale khreshi*, 'Miss taught us by means of the books from this crèche'. The noun *izincwadi*, 'books', was now used as an adverb *ngezincwadi*, 'by means of books'. She also used the possessive construction *zale khreshi* to refer to the crèche (in the pre-test nothing was mentioned of the crèche).

In contrast, the Grade 1 event narratives were similar to the early Grade R ones at pre-test time, consisting mainly of two-event protocols, despite the age differences between

**Table 2:** Grade R pre- and post- personal event narratives

Grade R — My first day at the crèche Pre-tests	Post-tests
<p><b>Bonga</b> <i>Ngangihamba nosisi. Ngafunda</i> [I was walking with my sister. I read (past).]</p>	<p><i>Ngangihamba noMama, ngabuye ngahamba ngedwa. Ngadla isinkwa nesobho. Ngabuya ngedwa.</i> [I was walking with my mother, I also walked alone. I ate bread and gravy. I came back home alone (past).]</p>
<p><b>Noxolo</b> — She does not say anything.</p>	<p><i>Ngafika noSindi. Safunda amagama, sasika izithombe. Sadlala amapholi, sabuyela emakhaya.</i> [I arrived with Sindi. We learnt words, we cut out pictures. We played <i>amapholi</i>, (and) went back home (past).]</p>
<p><b>Thandeka</b> <i>Ngalethwa ubaba nomama. Ngadla irayisi nobhontshisi nophuthu nemifino. Ngabhala ngahamba. Ngasika izithombe, ngasika amakhanda, sabukela izincwadi, sabhala amagama ethu, sasika amagama ethu — kuphela.</i> [I was brought by mom and dad. I ate rice and beans and phuthu (pap) and spinach. I wrote (and) left. I cut out pictures, I cut out heads, we looked through books, we wrote our names, we cut out our names — that's all (past).]</p>	<p><i>Ngangihamba noMazuzu kaGogo MaNgcobo. Safunda noMiss, ses' Thani. Safunda izincwadi. UMiss wasifundisa ngezincwadi zale khreshi. Sathi sesiqeda sahamba nezingane zale khreshi.</i> [I was walking with Mazuzu of Gogo MaNgcobo. We read with Miss, Sister Thani. We read books. Miss taught us by means of the books from this crèche. On completion, we left with children from this crèche.]</p>

**Table 3:** Grade 1 personal event narratives

## Grade 1 — My first day at school

**Sanelisiwe***Ngangihamba noSindi noNdumo noMpume. Sanikwa izitifiketi.*

[I was walking with Sindi and Ndumo and Mpume. We were given certificates (past).]

**Simo***Wayengishaya uMawi, wangilamulela uMondli, wase engiyeka. Ngahamba.*

[Mawi hit me, (and) Mondli helped me, and she let go of me. I left (past).]

**Sisekelo***Kwakumnandi, akekho owangishaya.*

[It was nice, no-one hit me (past).]

the children. Some samples of Grade 1 event narratives are shown in Table 3.

On reflecting on these stories, there seem to be three basic episodes that frame this type of personal event narrative, namely: identification of the person who accompanied the child to school, description of a significant event (or events) that happened at school, and some kind of closure at the end, such as returning home. While the second episode was invariably included in the recall, the first and third seemed to be optional. The inclusion of all three basic episodes resulted in a more coherent recall. It is noteworthy that, while the Grade Rs usually included all three episodes in their post-test recalls, the Grade 1 recalls were sparser, with the second episode flanked by either a first or third episode, thus creating the effect of less coherent, less 'rounded off' recalls.

Affect is also an integral part of storytelling, since what we tell in personal stories concerns events or states that have significance for us. Children's narratives reflect the representation of things that matter to the children. It is thus interesting to note the differences in the content of the events depicted in their little stories. The events that the Grade R children described in their post-test recalls reflected several literate activities (*safunda amagama*, *sasika izithombe*, 'we learnt words, we cut out pictures'; *safunda izincwadi*, 'we read books') whereas this was not the case with the Grade 1s. In fact, little learning seems to have taken place at school, and some of them seem to have had rather unhappy experiences on their first day at school! In contrast, Thandeka's post-test recall

(Grade R, above in Table 2) in particular emphasises the book-based activities, more so than her pre-test, suggesting that these activities featured quite prominently in the pre-school children's routine at their crèche.

*Storybook recall: recounting a fictional narrative*

The story that was read to the children concerned a boy called Bolekile, who unsuccessfully asked different children for things and at the end his grandfather reminded him to say 'please' when making requests. To avoid memory effects, the children were given the book when asked to recall the story, on the pretext that they were reading the story to the doll, Thabo, who was sick.

The Grade Rs were noticeably more confident when retelling the story in the post-tests than they had been in the pre-tests (Table 4). This suggested greater familiarity with storybooks and talking about stories. On the whole, the recalls were longer in the post-tests, and they also contained greater elaboration of events.

Bonga was the shyest child in the Grade R group and also the one whose progress during the year was the slowest. It is interesting to note that Bonga's mother did not attend the adult family literacy classes, so the only storybook reading to which he was exposed was that of the teacher reading storybooks during pre-school time. He said nothing in the pre-test story recall, but in the post-test, although unable to recall the story accurately or in detail, he did proffer some information. He included the negative form of the copula

**Table 4:** Grade R pre- and post-test recalls of fictional story

Grade R Pre-tests	Post-tests
<p><b>Bonga</b> Pages through the book tentatively, but does not say anything.</p>	<p><i>UBolekile wayeboleka isondo. Umkhulu wathi akasenalutho, akasenaswidi, akasenanduku. Iyaphela.</i> [Bolekile borrowed a wheel. Grandfather said that he didn't have a wheel, he didn't have a sweet, he didn't have a stick any more. It's the end (of the book).]</p>
<p><b>Nkululeko</b> <i>Uyaboleka induku, uyala, uboleka umdokwe, uyala, uboleka uswidi, uyala.</i> [He is borrowing a stick, he refuses, he is borrowing porridge, he refuses, he is borrowing a sweet, he refuses (present).]</p>	<p><i>Uthi uBolekile, "Ngiboleke izinduku". "Ngeke, sizithole ehlathini". "Ngiphe umdoko". "Ngeke, siwuthole kumama". "Ngiboleke isondo". "Ngeke, ngilithole kubaba". "Anginaswidi, anginamdoko, anginasondo, anginanduku". Uthi umkhulu uBolekile ukhohlwe igama elibalulekile elithi, "ngiyacela".</i> [Bolekile says "Lend me sticks". "No way, we got them from the forest". "Give me soft porridge". "No way, we got it from Mother". "Lend me the wheel". "No way, I got it from Father". "I do not have a sweet, I do not have porridge, I do not have a wheel, I do not have a stick". Grandfather says Bolekile forgot the important word which says "please" (present — he is narrating as if the actions are happening now).]</p>
<p><b>Noxolo</b> <i>Sengimkhohliwe ukuthi ubani lo. Abavumi ukumnika induku lo. Uthi uBolekile, "Ngicela ningiphe umdokwe". Abavumi, bathi nabo bawuphiwe. Uthi uBolekile "Ngicela isondo". Umfana akavumi, uthi naye uliphiwe ubaba. Uthi uBolekile, "ningiphe uswidi". Abavumi, bathi nabo bawuthengile. UBolekile nangu useyisono lana. Uthi umkhulu kuBolekile, "Uhlulwe yinto eyodwa". UBolekile la useyisono.</i> [I have forgotten who this is. They are refusing to give him a stick. Bolekile says, "Could you please give me soft porridge?" They are refusing, they say that it was also given to them. Bolekile says, "Can I please have the wheel?" The boy refuses, he says that he too was given it by his father. Bolekile says "Can you please give me a sweet?" They refuse, they say that they too have bought it. Here is Bolekile looking worried now. Grandfather says to Bolekile "You were unable to mention one thing". Bolekile is looking worried now.]</p>	<p><i>UNobuhle wayeboleka izinto. Wathi umkhulu iyodwa into ekade kufanele ayisho. UNobuhle uthi Anginanduku, anginamdokwe, anginaswidi. Nami awungiphe uswidi. Wathi angimboleke isondo. "Nami ngililikwe ubaba". "Awungiphe umdoko". "Nathi siwuphiwe umama". Wathi "Aningiboleke izinduku". Bathi "Nathi sizicoshe ehlathini".</i> [Nobuhle used to borrow things. Grandfather said there is one thing that he was supposed to have said (past). Nobuhle says "I do not have a stick, I do not have soft porridge, I do not have a sweet". "Please would you also give me a sweet". He said that I should lend her the wheel. "I was also given it by my father". "Give me porridge". "Mom also gave it to us". He said "Lend (please) me ( some) sticks". They said "We also picked them up in the forest" (past).]</p>
<p><b>Thobeka</b> <i>Nangu uBolekile usehleli lana. Usethi uBolekile, "Ngicela ningiboleka induku". Bathi "Hhayi, nathi sizithole ehlathini". Wathi uBolekile "Ngisacela ungiboleke isondo". Bese wathi "Hhayi, nami ngilitholile". Bese wathi uBolekile "Awungiphe uswidi". Wathi "Hhayi, nami ngiwuthenge esitolo". Bese uBolekile useyisono. Bese umkhulu useyakhuluma, bese umkhulu nomama, umkhulu</i></p>	<p><i>Lona uBolekile. Wayethanda ukutsholeka. Wayetsholeke izinduku zabafana. Bathi abafana "Hhayi, sizithole ehlathini". Uboleka umdoko wamantombazana. Athi amantombazana "Hhayi, siwuphiwe umama". Waboleka isondo labafana. Bathi "Hhayi, siliphiwe ubaba". Waboleka uswidi kumama. "Hhayi, ngilithenge esitolo". Usethi, "Angisenanduku, angisensamdoko, angisenasondo,</i></p>

*usekhomba umama. UBolekile useyisono.*

[Here is Bolekile sitting here. Now Bolekile says "Please would you (pl) lend me a stick". They say "No, we also got it in the forest". Bolekile said "I'd still please like you (sg) to lend me a wheel". Then he said "No, I also found it". Then Bolekile said "Please give me a sweet". He said "No, I also bought it at the shop". And then Bolekile is worried. And then Grandfather is talking now. And then Grandfather and Mother. Grandfather is accusing Mother now. Bolekile is worried now].

*angisenaswidi". Uthi ubaba "Ukuthi ukhohlwe yigama elilodwa, Bolekile". Nakhu la usebambebele esilevini — wamtshela-ke ukuthi ukhohlwe yini: "Ukhohlwe ukuthi 'Ngisacela ungphe'".*

[This is Bolekile. He liked to borrow. He borrowed the boys' sticks. The boys said "No, we found them in the forest". He borrows the girls' porridge. The girls said "No, Mother gave it to us". He borrowed the boys' wheel. They said "No, Father gave it to us". He borrowed a sweet from Mother. "No, I bought it at the shop". Now he says "I no longer have a stick, I no longer have any porridge, I no longer have any wheel, I no longer have a sweet". Father says "It's just that you have forgotten one word, Bolekile". Here he is now, supporting his chin — then he told him what he had forgotten: "You forgot to say 'Please would you give me'".]

predicates, e.g. *akasenalutho, akasenaswidi*. In contrast, Sanelisiwe in Grade 1 was unable to recall the story at all, despite the fact that he was given the book to page through.

Besides the fact that Nkululeko's pre-test recall is shorter and far less detailed than his post-test recall, his pre-test discourse is also far more context-embedded. For example, he makes no distinction between the referents for *u-* in *uboleka* (Bolekile) and *uyala* (the other characters in the story). Given the fact that he is looking at the pictures while he retells the story, Nkululeko assumes that the listener shares his context and therefore knows to whom he is referring. In fact, he starts his story with the Class 1 subject prefix for 'he/she' without first stating who the person referent is in *Uyaboleka*.

In the post-test the discourse is more disembedded from its context. Although Nkululeko is still paging through the book as he narrates the story, he identifies the person referent explicitly at the beginning of the story *Uthi uBolekile*. Furthermore, Nkululeko attempts to create a dialogue between Bolekile and the people with whom he interacts in the story. Later, when the grandfather is introduced into the story, he is explicitly identified, *Uthi umkhulu ...* There is no digression in the story and far more information is given than in the pre-test. Grammatically, there are more complex constructions, e.g. the imperative with subject prefix: *ngiboleke, ngiphe*, 'lend me, give me', whereas in the pre-test only the indicative mood present tense is used. The emphatic

exclamation *Ngeke!*, 'No way!', is used with the past indicative, e.g. *...Ngeke, siwuthole kumama*, 'No way, we got it from Mother'. A relative construction, *elibalulekile* or 'important', is used to qualify the noun *igama*, 'word', e.g. *... ukhohlwe igama elibalulekile elithi...*

Noxolo's post-test narration also shows traces of some changes. Whereas in the pre-test she started her recall by saying that she had forgotten the name of the story character, in the post-test she explicitly identifies the person (albeit a wrong name, i.e. Nobuhle instead of Bolekile). She first frames the story as if to contextualise it (*UNobuhle wayeboleka izinto. Wathi umkhulu iyodwa into ekade kufanele ayisho*).

Similarly, Thobeka's post-test recall also shows features of a more disembedded discourse. She too frames her story recall with an introductory thematic sentence that helps to contextualise the story: *Lona uBolekile. Wayethanda ukutshelaka*, 'This is Bolekile. He liked to borrow things'. The ensuing dialogue between characters in the story also explicitly identifies who is speaking (*bathi abafana ... athi amantombazana ... Athi ubaba ...* ('the boys said ... the girls said ... Father says'). In the process of narrating the story, Thobeka was paging through the book and attempted to create a 'dialogue' with Thabo (the doll/listener). This is a typical of the way in which adults mediate a story to children during storybook reading. This is indicated by the use of phrases such as *Lo uBolekile*, 'This is Bolekile' and *Nakhu la usebambebele esilevini*,

'Here he is now, supporting his chin'. Like Nkululeko, Thobeka rounds off her narration at the end with reference to the implied moral of the story — asking for things in a polite manner.

Although the Grade 1s were a year older, their story-retelling skills were not as good as the Grade R children. Some samples of the Grade 1 recalls of the story are shown in Table 5. Two of the Grade 1 learners did not say anything, suggesting unfamiliarity with storybook reading and retelling stories. One of the children did not want to engage in the task and said that he had forgotten the story (*Angisayazi, sengiyikhohliwe*, 'I don't know it anymore, I have forgotten it'). Because it is easier to remember things that are understood, the tendency to forget a story is often an indication that the child did not understand it very well in the first place.

Although two of the learners made an attempt to say something, their rendition of the story was not totally accurate and they did not always identify the relevant characters. For

example, Simo's narration starts somewhat unexpectedly ('Thabo is now exclaiming'), without orienting the listener by creating a context. Some details about the story are inaccurate, for example the sequence of events is wrong; at a more mundane level, he refers to the main character as Thabo, not Bolekile, and in the story Bolekile does not speak to his father but to his grandfather. Furthermore, in Simo's story Thabo keeps asking for items from various characters but Simo does not indicate what their responses were.

Although Nomfundo's recall is creative in that she reconstructs the story differently, her recall is in effect inaccurate and lacks coherence. In the story it is Bolekile who unsuccessfully keeps asking for different items from various people. Instead, Nomfundo mentions about five different nameless individuals who are borrowing things. In her recall, while paging through the book, she seems to treat each page separately, and describes the boy depicted in the illustrations

**Table 5:** Grade 1 recall of fictional story

---

Grade 1: Recall of story

---

**Sanelisiwe**

Pages through the book but does not say anything.

**Sisekelo**

*Angisayazi, sengiyikhohliwe.*

[I don't know it anymore, I have forgotten it.]

**Simo**

*UThabo useyababaza, UThabo usekhuluma nobaba wakhe. UThabo usethi "Mama, awungiphe uswidi". UThabo usethi "Mntwana, awungiboleke isondo". UThabo uthi "Ngane, awungiphe umdoko". UThabo uthi "Awungiboleke induku". UThabo usekhathazekile.*

[Thabo is now exclaiming. Thabo is now talking to his father. Now Thabo says "Mom, please give me a sweet". Now Thabo says "Child, please lend me a wheel". Thabo says "Child, please give me porridge". Thabo says "Please lend me a stick". Thabo is worried now (present).]

**Nomfundo**

*Lona ugqoke izimpahla zabantu, uzitsherekile. Nangu futhi omunye otshelaka izimpahla zabantu. Nangu owatshelaka izimpahla zabantu, ehlala ngazo ekhaya. Nangu futhi omunye, uselambile. Usethi akamtshelake leziya zinto. Wathi "Ngizitshelake kumama". Nangu omunye useyabekezela — akanaswidi, akanalutho. Usecela umdoko. Wathi "Hhayi, ngiwuthathe kumama". Nangu umkhulu. Usekhamisela ingane yakhe. Akayiboni nalo otshelaka izimpahla zabantu.*

[This one is wearing people's clothes, he borrowed them. Here is another one who borrows people's clothes. Here is someone who borrowed people's clothes/stuff and (at the same time) keeps them at home. And here is someone else, he is hungry now. So he says he should lend him those things over there. He says "I borrowed them from Mother". Here is another one, he is patient/long-suffering — he doesn't have a sweet, he has nothing. Now he asks for porridge. He says "No, I got it from Mother". Here is Grandfather. Now he looks at his child. He doesn't see him with this one/person who borrows people's clothes (present).]

---

on each page as a separate individual rather than as the protagonist, Bolekile. She thus fails to draw out the narrative thread in the sequence of pictures. Her narrative account is context-embedded in that she uses deictic or indexical items whose meanings need to be recovered from the interactional context, e.g. use of the pronouns *lona*, 'this one', *leziya zinto*, 'those things'. Characters in the story are not clearly identified; instead she refers to them as *nangu omunye/nangu futhi omunye*, 'here is another one/here is yet another'. Most of the sentences start with the demonstrative copula *nangu* 'here is', which assumes shared participation in the discourse.

In sum, the Grade Rs outperformed the Grade 1 learners in all the language and literacy measures, even though they were a year younger than their school-going peers.

### Discussion

The research question that informed this study was: *Did storybook reading have an effect on the language, literacy and discourse development of the children?* On the whole, the Grade R children not only showed improvements in all the language and literacy measures after eight months of pre-school attendance in which they were regularly exposed to storybook activities, but they also consistently outperformed their older peers in these measures. In the post-test protocols, some of the Grade R children were also showing early features of a more context-disembedded style of discourse than their Grade 1 peers. The Grade 1 learners were a year older than the pre-school children and had already been at school for two months when they were assessed, but they had not been in a storybook programme before they started school. Their recall protocols were shorter and less accurate than those of the Grade Rs, and their language use was not as rich and varied.

In other words, the Grade R children would subsequently start school with stronger emergent literacy skills than their Grade 1 counterparts had done the year before. They had stronger notions of story schemas and of what literacy entailed, and they were more familiar with book-based activities. These emergent literacy skills have been shown to provide a sound foundation on which later literacy skills are built. As Mace-Matluck *et al.*

(1989: 205) point out: 'Children who are well prepared at entry to take advantage of what school has to offer make progress ... Children less prepared often get off to a slow start (and they) lag behind their more advantaged peers as they progress in school'.

The power of storybook reading derives from several factors. Storybook reading provides opportunities for exposure to vocabulary and linguistic structures not frequently encountered in other types of interaction (see Snow & Dickinson, 1991). The Grade R children certainly showed richer and more varied language use than the Grade 1s. Storybook reading also provides opportunities for adults and children to engage in extended discourse on a topic. This effect was strongly evident in the data — by the end of the year the Grade R children were producing samples of quite extended discourse; this was not markedly evident in the Grade 1 protocols.

As indicated at the beginning of the article, oral language ability facilitates entry into the world of reading and writing. However, oral language *per se* does not predict school success in the long run. Some children may show good conversational skills when they go to school but research suggests that some oral language skills '... are relatively irrelevant in explaining individual differences in literacy accomplishments, whereas others are crucial precursors to aspects of literacy achievement' (Snow & Dickinson, 1991: 186). One such precursor is decontextualised or disembedded oral language ability. This is language use which does not rely strongly on an interactive conversational partner and does not assume shared knowledge with audience; instead, context becomes lexicalised and the locus of meaning resides more strongly in the language itself rather than in the interactional context. The kinds of tasks that help to develop this kind of language ability are activities that require extended discourse such as storybook reading, telling stories, giving descriptions of things or events, explaining ideas and planning future events. Activities that require short responses to known questions (for example, chanting the letters of the alphabet or numbers in choral unison) do not develop extended discourse, yet it is often such activities that figure prominently in pre-schools. Some of the post-test story recalls of the Grade Rs show features of

disembedded language where the context is lexicalised and referents explicitly identified. The Grade 1s who had not been exposed to opportunities for extended discourse via storybook reading did not produce language with these features.

The Vygotskian theory of child development (e.g. Vygotsky, 1986) emphasises the centrality of language in learning. If children do not develop appropriate language competencies, especially academic language competencies, then their ability to acquire new concepts and to engage in higher order and more abstract ways of thinking is jeopardised. The development of academic language competence can already

start in the pre-school years with exposure to storybook reading. The development and maintenance of language competence in the home language is particularly important, for it can facilitate the transfer of skills to other languages.

### Conclusion

All the children in this study come from disadvantaged communities and they attend schools that are poorly-resourced. Even though poverty and low literacy levels tend to go hand-in-hand, children from high-poverty schools do not inevitably have to be doomed to a fate of low literacy accomplishment. To illustrate this



**Figure 1:** Exterior and interior views of the Grade R pre-school. Achieving a lot with a little

point, Figure 1 shows the modest crèche which the Grade R children in this study attended. Despite its unprepossessing exterior, it provides a print-rich environment inside. The caregiver at this small pre-school exposes the children to book-based activities and several of the mothers of children who attend the crèche read little storybooks to their children. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not so much abundance of resources (of which there is not much at this school) as engagement of learners in meaningful print-based activities that lays sound foundations for the development of academic language competence.

Caregivers, educationists and applied linguists should not underestimate the powerful effects that a seemingly mild activity such as storybook reading has on language and literacy development. Introducing storybooks and shared book-based activities into pre-schools and primary schools does not require fiscal extravagance nor does it require extensive in-service teacher training.

Not only does storybook reading lay the linguistic and literate foundations for the development of academic language competencies, it also helps to improve the

confidence and self-esteem of learners. Through the shared experience of engaging with storybooks in a meaningful yet fun way, they also learn to associate books with reading for pleasure. Furthermore, early and regular exposure to a variety of storybooks in the children's home languages will help to increase the status of African languages and validate these languages as viable vehicles of literate activities.

*Acknowledgements* — The authors would like to thank Ms Snoeks Desmond, the facilitators Phumzile Ngcobo and Nonzuzo Mbanjwa, and all the learners, for the opportunity to become involved in the Family Literacy Project. Thanks are also extended to the organisation that generously funded the project and ultimately made this research possible. Finally, appreciation is expressed to the anonymous reviewers who provided helpful comments on the article.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ms Snoeks Desmond developed the project and has been the co-ordinator since its inception in 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> The first author of the article analysed the Zulu data.

### References

- Allen MS, Kertoy MK, Sherblom JC & Pettit JM.** 1994. Children's narrative productions: a comparison of personal event and fictional stories. *Applied Psycholinguistics* 15: 149–176.
- Buchorn-Stoll B.** 2002. The influence of storybook reading on language development. *Language Matters* 33: 25–48.
- Bus A, Van Ijzendoorn M & Pellegrini A.** 1995. Joint reading makes for success in learning to read: a meta-analysis of intergenerational transmission of literacy. *Review of Educational Research* 65: 1–21.
- Butler G.** 1979. Guy Butler and Chris Mann on a new book of South African verse in English. *English in Africa* 6(1): 1–11.
- Corson D.** 1997. The learning and use of academic English words. *Language Learning* 47(4): 671–718.
- Cox BE, Shanahan T & Sulzby E.** 1990. Good and poor elementary readers' use of cohesion in writing. *Reading Research Quarterly* 25: 47–56.
- Cummins J.** 1991. Conversational and academic language proficiency in bilingual contexts. *AILA Review* 8: 75–89.
- Cummins J.** 2000. *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Department of Social Development.** *Guidelines for Day care*. Pretoria.
- Dickinson DK & Smith MW.** 1994. Long-term effects of preschool teachers' book-readings on low-income children's vocabulary and story comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly* 29: 104–122.
- Dombey H & Moustafa M.** 1998. *Whole to Part Phonics: How Children Learn to Read and Spell*. London: Centre for Language in Primary Education.
- Elley W.** 1989. Vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories. *Reading Research Quarterly* 24: 174–187.
- Elley WB (ed).** 1994. *The IEA Study of Reading*

- Literacy: Achievement and Instruction in Thirty-two School Systems*. New York: Pergamon.
- Feitelson D, Kita B & Goldstein Z**. 1986. Effects of listening to series stories on first graders' comprehension and use of language. *Research in the Teaching of English* 20: 339–357.
- Garton A & Pratt C**. 1989. *Learning to be Literate: the Development of Spoken and Written Language*. London: Basil Blackwell.
- Graves MF, Juel C & Graves BB**. 1998. *Teaching Reading in the 21st Century*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Harris AJ & Sipay ER**. 1975. *How to Increase Reading Ability: a Guide to Developmental and Remedial Method*. New York: D Mackay Co.
- Heath SB**. 1983. *Ways with Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hiebert EH**. 1993. Young children's literacy experiences in home and school. In: Yussen SR & Smith MC (eds) *Reading across the Life Span*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag. pp 33–55.
- Holdaway D**. 1979. *The Foundations of Literacy*. Sydney: Ashton Scholastic.
- Jordan GE, Snow CE & Porche MV**. 2000. Project EASE: the effect of a family literacy project on kindergarten students' early literacy skills. *Reading Research Quarterly* 35: 524–546.
- Krashen S**. 1993. *The Power of Reading*. Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited.
- Labuschagne S**. 2001. Family Literacy Project: evaluation report, October.
- Labuschagne S**. 2002. Family Literacy Project: evaluation report, October.
- Macdonald CA**. 1990. *Crossing the Threshold into Standard Three*. Pretoria: HSRC.
- Mace-Matluck BJ, Hoover WA & Calfee RC**. 1989. Teaching reading to bilingual children: a longitudinal study of teaching and learning in the early grades. *Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)* 13(3): 187–216.
- Machet MP**. 2002. Addressing problems of literacy in disadvantaged communities. *Language Matters* 33: 1–24.
- McCabe A & Peterson C**. 1985. A naturalistic study of the production of causal connectives by children. *Journal of Child Language* 12: 145–159.
- Neuman SB**. 1999. Books make a difference: a study of access to literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly* 34: 286–311.
- Pretorius EJ**. 2003. Differences in emergent literacy skills between children in the family literacy programme and children not in the programme. Report, KwaZulu-Natal 2001.
- Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)**. Available at <http://timss.bc.edu/PIRLS2001.html>
- Raban B**. 1988. Speaking and writing: young children's use of connectives. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* 4: 13–25.
- Reeder K & Shapiro J**. 1993. Relationships between early literate experience and knowledge and children's linguistic pragmatic strategies. *Journal of Pragmatics* 19: 1–22.
- Romaine S**. 1984. *The Language of Children and Adolescents*. London: Basil Blackwell.
- Saville-Troike M**. 1984. What really matters in second language learning for academic purposes? *TESOL Quarterly* 18: 199–219.
- Smyth A**. 2002. *Testing the Foundations: an Exploration of Cognitive Academic Language Development in an African Home-language Course*. PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Snow C, Barnes WS, Chandler J, Goodman IF & Hemphill L**. 1991. *Unfulfilled Expectations: Home and School Influences on Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Snow CE & Dickinson DK**. 1991. Skills that aren't basic in a new conception of literacy. In: Jennings EM & Purves AC (eds) *Literate Systems and Individual Lives*. New York: State University of New York Press. pp 179–218.
- Sulzby E & Teale W**. 1991. Emergent literacy. In: Barr R, Kamil ML, Mosenthal P & Pearson PD (eds) *Handbook of Reading Research, Vol. II*. New York: Longman. pp 727–758.
- Torrance N & Olson DR**. 1985. Oral and literate competencies in the early school years. In: Olson DR, Torrance N & Hildyard A (eds) *Literacy, Language and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp 256–284.
- Vivas E**. 1996. Effects of story reading on language. *Language Learning* 46: 189–216.
- Vygotsky LS**. 1986. *Thought and Language*.

Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

**Wells G.** 1985. Preschool literacy-related activities and success in school. In: Olson D, Torrance N & Hildyard A (eds) *Literacy, Language and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp 229–255.

**Wells G.** 1986. *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.