

Exploring the Role of Teaching Using Folklore in Developing Grade R Learners' Mother Tongue

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ABSTRACT This paper aims to explore the role and significance of teaching using folklore in developing Grade R learners' repertoire of skills in their mother tongue. Grade R is the reception class to formal schooling at the foundation phase. It is perceived to be the most pivotal class in developing learners' language usage, precisely that of the mother tongue. Folklore is ascertained to be one of the best pedagogies because it promotes oral communication and is believed to be ideal for bridging the gap between home and school. This is a desktop study grounded on engagement and examination of various literature sources on the role of teaching using folklore to develop young learners' mother tongue during foundation phase schooling. Existing folklore is provided to illustrate their role in the development of young learners' mother tongue. The key contribution of this paper to the South African basic education is to equip teachers with the understanding of the significance of teaching using folklore to develop Grade R learners' mother tongue.

INTRODUCTION

Formal schooling in South Africa begins at the reception year class, also referred to as Grade R (DBE 2012). In this period, learners are generally at the age of five years or will be turning five before the second semester of that particular year. Biersteker (2010: 4) notes that "the responsibility for the Reception Year (Grade R) falls to the Department of Education". This denotes that reception year class should be treated as the beginning of formal schooling in all mainstream schools. It is during this stage that Grade R is considered to be critical for learners' mother tongue to be nurtured and developed through using different strategies for language teaching (Joubert et al. 2008). Subsequently, the Department of Education postulates that for learners' mother tongue and culture are to be preserved, learners need to be taught in their mother tongue for the first four years of schooling (DBE 1997, 2011). In this stage the medium of instruction should strictly be learners' mother tongue because this is the language they have already acquired and can use for communication purposes. Different research studies conducted on the significance of mother tongue teaching in Grade R concur that at this stage learners need to be taught in their mother tongue for language strengthening and development as it is the language they already know and can cognitively think in (Joubert et al. 2008; Butzkamm 2003, 2013; Khan 2014). This assertion was advanced

by, Ball (2010) who puts an emphasis on the importance of mother tongue instruction in early childhood education. In addition, Ball (2010) extends that every effort should be made to provide education in mother tongue as it is the essential vehicle of communication and knowledge transmission. Henceforth, UNESCO (2008) advocates protecting children's indigenous languages and preserving the linguistic diversity stating that it needs serious efforts to make sure that learners can be educated in their mother tongue.

Such utterances emphasise the significance of understanding the importance of mother tongue during early schooling years. It is at this stage where folklore as oral narratives and communication plays a pivotal role in developing learners' mother tongue. Magliocco (2010) states that there is relatively a significant link between folklore teaching, language, culture and identity. The author emphasises that it is important to teach folklore to young children as early as possible because it equips them with knowledge that explains the past and gives understanding of a people's present existence through the language they best understand. Naidu (2001) articulates that African folklore are best examples of people's lived experiences, cautions about culture and cultural observations as well as identity formation which contribute to learners' understanding of the past and the future. It is against this background that this paper seeks to explore the role of teaching using folklore in developing Grade R learners' mother tongue.

Magliocco (2010) considers teaching to be very fundamental to the functional processes of folklore narration that it is indispensable to tradition. Folktales and other folklore genres were usually told by old people around fire at night. However, such times are long gone which then place the onus upon teachers to continue with the trend for language and development. He further states that since these are oral communications, thereby knowledgeable others should be passing them from generation to generation. In that way, in the classroom context it should be the teacher. However, a wide gap exists between understanding the value of folklore and application (Bowman 2006). The author continues to lament that it is very disappointing that folklore is somehow losing its status and its significance. He regards it as a field that many regard as endangered, marginalised and/or misunderstood. In support of this perspective, Kim (2006) argues that folklore plays an invaluable role, along with other cultural traditions, in bringing people closer together and ensuring exchange and understanding among them. Varga-Dobai (2008) states that it is important not to forget that the study of folklore and the study of language share a historical link. However, it has been evident that some of the folktales and other related genres have lost their status through what he refers to as 'poaching'. Varga-Dobai (2008) refers to 'poaching' as different versions and variants that each folklore genre could have due to oral communication and lack of records. Nonetheless, the consequences are perceived to be the same, developing young learners' acquisition of mother tongue.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to explore the role of teaching using folklore in the development of Grade R learners' mother tongue. Grade R is an initial grade to formal schooling (DBE 2011). During this stage most learners are aged five (5) years as stipulated by the Department of Education's South African Schools' Act No.84 of 1996 and are to be taught in their mother tongue.

In essence, Skutnabb-Kangas et al. (2008) articulate that it is quite imperative for teachers to note that mother tongue is believed to have connection with learners' ancestral connections and their cultural beliefs (Leveridge 2008). Mother tongue is also linked to the closely-knit com-

munity into which the child is born. The author further states that this relationship is deep rooted in such a way that language is often used to maintain and convey cultural certain groups' beliefs. Folklore teaching therefore provides this opportunity to young learners and simultaneously their mother tongue is believed to develop.

It is alongside this that this paper anticipated to understand the significance of mother tongue teaching and learning in the early years of schooling when learners are at their emergent literacy stage. Subsequently, it anticipated to understand the role and significance of teaching using folklore in the development of Grade R learners' mother tongue. Lastly, it anticipated to understand the implications of teaching using folklore to Grade R learners' mother tongue development.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology is a strategy of enquiry that guides a set of enquiry (Petty et al. 2012). In this paper the methodology adopted was desktop study research methodology. Desktop study methodology sometimes referred to as 'desk study' refers to the "secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork" (Ritchie and Spencer 2002: 308). This study relied heavily on the already existing generated data from scholarly journals, books, thesis and online research sites. Empirical data was produced through analysing firstly literature on mother tongue teaching. Different research studies have been interrogated where teachers who are engaged in Grade R teaching need to have a specialised pedagogical knowledge (PK) on the relevance of content and teaching materials that will facilitate learners' development of their mother tongue. Shulman (1986) states that teachers should demonstrate powerful forms and ways of representing and formulating the teaching of a subject that will develop comprehensible knowledge of the content involved.

Abigodun (2012), Ball (2012), Butzkamm (2003) and Khan (2014) concede that it is necessary to teach learners in their mother tongue as this can be lasting and valuable when it is used as a language of instruction between the ages of six and eight years in primary education.

Secondly, literature on folklore teaching was also analysed in order to track down useful existing pre-published data. Existing literature re-

vealed that it is essential to teach folklore to young learners in order to develop their cultural identity and language. Bowman (2006: 76) articulates that "it is very important for teachers to know enough about the world of education to be able to 'translate' folklore to the classroom". Such knowledge should be enhanced and transmitted by teachers to young learners.

Legends and folktales in indigenous African language were used to demonstrate different aspects of the language. Through these, young learners learn new words and also gain knowledge that bad deeds have bad consequences. They also learn that age or physical appearance shouldn't detect what one is capable of doing. What emerged from the folktale presented was that young children should obey the elders as disobedience results to negative consequences. Secondly, myths and riddles were used to develop learners' mother tongue through brain teasing activities and understanding the language. Considerably, more folklore could have been presented to justify the objectives, however time and space is limited.

Lastly, literature on Grade R schooling was also analysed. It was imperative to understand that Grade R is the first grade to formal schooling. White Paper 5 (DoE 2001) stipulates that young child's rights to education in order develop his or her full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential must be acknowledged.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualising Mother Tongue in Early Years of Schooling

It is epistemologically significant to understand what is mother teaching including its value in using language to learn and learning to use the language proficiently (Khan 2014). Different literature, globally, offers several definitions of what mother tongue is. Ball (2010: 3) defines mother tongue as "the language that one acquires naturally in early years which eventually becomes an instrument of thinking and reasoning." Importantly, Abidogun (2012: 22) defines "mother tongue as the language a person acquires from birth and this can be regarded as the language a child acquires first and in which he/she establishes the verbal contacts."

However, Abidogun (2012) cites Sollid (2008) to elaborate that mother tongue is the language

that a child acquires and uses in communication with the surroundings. Moreover, it is the language that they are familiar with and that they have early experiences of. Hence, Gupta (1997: 500) raises a point that "a mother tongue is a language learnt before any language has been learnt." However, the author extends by cautioning that sometimes there is a problem in determining learners' actual mother tongues, and many children do not have a single and easily identifiable mother tongue. In such cases, Gupta (1997: 500) argues that "a mother tongue of a pre-school child is therefore a language that the child actually speaks." Thus, Phatudi (2013: 3) asserts that "the mother tongue has personal, social, and aesthetic significance to the users, over and above the educational benefits."

In elaboration to the conceptualisation of mother tongue, Ball (2010: 8) substantiates the mother tongue concept by stating that: "The term 'mother tongue', though widely used, may refer to several different situations. Definitions often include the following elements: the language(s) that one has learnt first; the language(s) one identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others; the language(s) one knows best and the language(s) one uses most. Mother tongue may also be referred to as 'primary' or 'first language.'"

It can be deduced from these definitions that, it is significant to understand the status that mother tongue holds more especially to young learners who are in their emergent literacy stage. At this stage, Grade R learners' mother tongue becomes their language of learning and teaching (LoLT) for ease of reference to preconceived linguistic experiences and comprehension (DBE 2011). Hence, it is significant in every child's life and as such their mother tongue needs to be developed at school through developmentally appropriate teaching strategies.

This ideology is advanced by Butzkamm (2003) who argues that when learners are taught in their mother tongue, the opportunity to think, communicate and acquire an intuitive understanding of grammatical and spoken skills increases. The author further emphasises that a child's mother tongue is the strongest ally that should be used systematically. Subsequently, the Language in Education Policy (DoE 1997; DBE 2011) also stress the significance of mother tongue by stipulating that learners at the foundation phase (beginner learners) need to be

taught in their MT for proper adjustment to the new context (school). Thus, MT teaching is considered to be an important component of quality education, particularly in the early years (Ball 2010). In conclusion, Laguarda and Woodward (2013: 454) state that “indeed, research has shown that early literacy and content areas are best taught in a child’s mother tongue”. Therefore, for learning to be successful, familiarity with the language and the context of learning are important, especially for young children coming from home into the new environment of a school. Khan (2014) emphasises that mother-tongue instruction should be the best way for children to learn as it bridges the gap between home language and language of instruction.

Teaching Using Folklore to Develop Learners’ Mother Tongue in Early Years

Folklore is an umbrella term that is generally used to define different traditional oral communications that are usually disseminated informally from generations to generations (Banda et al. 2013). It is usually oral history of a certain group of people that is used to preserve culture and identity. There are different definitions that are given by different authors and folklore researchers to define what folklore is. The definitions are in most instances based on their perspectives and beliefs regarding what folklore are. The term ‘folklore’ is an umbrella term used to include folktales, myths, legends, riddles and fables. He also states that stylised sayings that include proverbs and idioms are also elements of folklore, though the definition of each and the differences cannot always be clearly distinguished. Barker et al. (2012) describe folklore as the oral history of a certain group of people that is used to preserve its culture and identity in order to give meaning to their lives and their surroundings.

In essence, Naidu (2001) states that folktale is the tradition of telling tales and reliving legends amongst the individuals within a particular country, territory or tribe. These tales are usually done orally or by example as older generations tell the stories, sing folksongs, praise folk poetry and/or tell folktales to the younger members of their culture, with an intention of keeping the traditions and language alive. It is generally acknowledged that as with all folktales, there are often heroes, villains, ghosts, imps and

fairies. Thus, it becomes unquestionable that where humans exist, the language and culture is also instituted. This domestication of human language and culture becomes easily transferred from generation to generation through reliving legends and telling tales through the word of mouth. Thereby, Kim (2006: 3) states that “...folklore consists of the expressive traditions of everyday people in everyday life.”

As a result, it is generally known that young learners enjoy listening to stories, playing indigenous games as well as using folk praises, which therefore becomes the teachers’ duty to ensure that learners are told stories and folklores are not an exception. A number of folklorists like Barker et al. (2012), Bowman (2006) and Magliocco (2010) and others believe that in order to get a clear understanding of the term “folklore”, it is wiser to give distinction for each.

a) Myths

Myths are historical narratives. They are traditional stories that give explanation and value to the unknown. The narrator transforms traditional beliefs in order to make the story realistic and cautions about the wrong deeds and also aiming at stabilising humans and makes them to live in harmony with one another. This definition indicates that myths are one of the folklore genres which entail stories and beliefs that are being narrated. The main characters in myths are superhuman beings that represent certain animals, gods, goddesses, heroes and heroines. In this regard, Aasland (2009) states that in myths, the characters are belonging to another world which might be underworld or a world beyond the sky, they actually become a representation of people’s cultural identity.

Undoubtedly it is of vital significance to understand that, myths are created to explain the past and to understand people’s present existence. Myths of the gods and earth’s formation, myths of heroes; all develop as a means of representing and understanding the past and its effect on the present (Aasland 2009). The style of these myths; the chosen way of explaining the past, are the indicative of the character of their creators’ culture. These pasts are actually explained and intended to be used in each new present. The following are some of the examples of myths:

- ♦ *Myth: Uma ubona isithwalambiza endlini* [When one sees a praying mantis inside the house]
Belief: Your ancestors are going to bring you luck
- ♦ *Myth: Ungabocula ube udla* [Never sing while eating]
Belief: Uzobhimba [You will become a bad singer]
- ♦ *Myth: Ungabodlela ebhodweni* [Never eat from the pot]
Belief: Lizokuna ngelanga lakho mhla ushada [It will rain on your wedding day]
- ♦ *Myth: Ungabokuma eduze konwabu* [Never stand next to a chameleon]
Belief: Uma liguquququla imibala lifane nezingubo ozigqokile uzokufa [Once it has its colours to yours, you will die]

b) Folktales

Folktales are narratives and the author is usually unknown. Naidu (2001) states that these prose narratives are unique in every culture and the sequence of events are dependent on the narrator. It is comprehensively known that most of the authors who are interested in writing about these indigenous literatures believe that folktales as one of the folklore genre is a means of bridging gaps in human culture. Naidu (2001: 17) believes that "...they have already exploited this literary resource."

Naidu (2001) further explains that most often, indigenous folktales are 'retold' and published as examples of 'authentic' African literature for juvenile audiences. Varga-Dobai (2008: 23) refers to this exploitation of literary resource as 'poaching'. The author uses the term 'poaching' to elaborate on the influence that these fictitious oral narratives adopt along the way. This is evident through the nature that folktales possess, they are fictitious, thus narrating them may depend on the narrator who can change the characters, sequence of events and ending as much as s/he likes.

In contrast, one can notice that folktales are often presented as perfect genre aiming at passing the warning, how people should live and that failure to listen to warnings from the elderly will have negative consequences. Naidu (2001: 17) thus concludes that "...folktale texts are published in glorious, polychromatic, innovative

forms that promote the texts as both culturally educational and entertaining."

Folktales are sometimes referred to as 'fairy tales' because they are sometimes being set in an unbelievable and non-existing world, though at times this leads to confusion because many folklorists believe that fairies are not always mentioned in most folktales as some if not most folktales are narrating about human and animal's extraordinary series of events.

In most cases, in the folk narratives, it is quite obvious that characters are not complex. Instead they are stereotypes such as there is a thief, evil and wicked; the liar uses his lies to escape certain dangerous encounters or circumstances. For an example, the evil stepmother treats her stepchildren badly and displays lack of affection. In other contexts, there is a clever youth who uses tactics to escape or displays wisdom.

Varga-Dobai (2008) regards folk tales as a 'marginalised' genre of folklore. The author states that sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between a folk tale and a fairy tale. "Fairy tales as a literary genre came into existence as a result of the modifications (poaching) of folk tale elements and characters and they were written for different purposes which are to educate, to inform, to convey people of certain ideas or expose social realities" (Varga-Dobai 2008: 26). However, even when written down, these folk narratives are sometimes told in a way that sounds like the spoken words, for instance; directly addressing the reader, use of dialect or slang. For instance, in the story of Anansi the Spider as an example, when talking about her legs, she sings about them.

It is therefore sensible to recognize that "...folktale texts are a means of cultural expression from which valuable lessons about differences and similarities may be learned." (Naidu 2001: 23).

Using the example of the folktale *Kwenzeka Kanjani Ukuthi Indlovu Ibe Nomboko Omude* (Mhlope 2003) the folktale aims in passing a warning to those who misbehave and disobey the orders.

c) Legends

Legends are traditional stories narrated to both young and old regardless of gender (Banda et al. 2013). These stories are sometimes re-

garded as true by the narrator and his audience, hence, it is important to understand that they are a semi-true stories. Legends are usually passed from person-to-person and their essence relies on the narrator depending on the meaning or symbolism attached (Banda et al. 2013). Many folklorists articulate that legends as one of the folklore genres are considered to be sounding modernized than myths and folktales. They are in most cases convincing to be true. Through legends supernatural powers are narrated to describe how a certain human being has led to his/her victory which led to heroic recognition in the society and in far places (Sims et al. 2005). They usually include an element of truth and serve as an agent of warning that wrong deeds have negative consequences.

Henceforth, legends have an element of truth, however they are characterized by larger-than-life stories where the main character is victorious or is supernatural. Considering that the aim of legends is to warn and render assurance that good deeds are rewarding and greed is a deadly sin, therefore the legend of the tooth fairy is an example, how chores are distributed among family members. The story is convincing to be true and the setting is considered to be less remote, some of its characteristics can be related to modern day life. Grade R teachers should have a wide collection of such stories, either African or European, that could be read or told to learners during the story listening time. Essentially, developmentally appropriate pedagogy including pictures, promos and recorded tapes are considered to be the best teaching and learning resources when teachers are telling stories (DBE 2011). Such stories are contributing to listening skills as well as the development of vocabulary and pronunciation skills. For instance, an example is contained in the legend: *Uchakijana bomgcololo nebhubesi* where Kalulu the Hare though small but eventually became a warrior known in all the jungles. The lion “The king of the jungle” is belittled in front of all other animals he claimed to be the king of.

d) Riddles

Riddles are brain teasers (Banda et al. 2013). They have the potential of testing the young children’s intelligence. Riddles fall under folklore genre and are suitable for mother tongue development because they involve language

which has questions and answers. Normally, riddles address different concepts surrounding young children; this ranges from food, trees, games, and their everyday lives. Okrah et al. (2013: 131) state that “the use of riddles among African oral traditions can stimulate knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs”. This has an influence on interactive learning process of one’s mother tongue. Learners usually take turns in giving statements and the respondents have to answer in solving that particular riddle. Banda et al. (2013) state that each statement is coupled by an incentive; if one fails to give a correct answer the incentive is forfeited. This folklore genre is suitable for any classroom context as Banda et al. (2013) mention that it keeps young learners awake and active as correct responses leads to a reward. The authors cite Ngulube (1989) to explain that that the educational value of these riddles is to improve children’s vocabulary, train their memory, and provide instruction in local traditions and culture. Young learners’ mother tongue develops tremendously if they are engaged in activities that are play-based as it eliminates boredom and passive participation (DBE 2011). Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2011) articulate that when learners are given that peer interactions within their classroom, it plays a positive role in supporting, reinforcing, and extending their learning and developing their language. It is possible that such interactions may play an important mediating role particularly for mother tongue development.

Riddles have three aspects in them. They have an introduction which is always similar to all those who are giving a statement or a problem. They all start by saying: *Ngiphicaphica ngento yami...* [I have something...], after this then other children have to be attentive on what the riddle will be in order for them to be able to give responses as quick as they can. Secondly, they have a statement and lastly a response.

- ♦ *Riddle: Ngiphicaphica ngento yami egiy’ egiye ibuye esangweni* [Something that dances and dances and turns at the gate]
Answer: Umshanelo [Broom]
- ♦ *Riddle: Ngiphicaphica ngento yami ethi hamba ngizokugadela* [Something that says go, I will look after your house]
Answer: Ukhiye [Key/padlock]
- ♦ *Riddle: Ngiphicaphica ngento efike ihambe ngezinyawo ezine, bese ihamba ngezimbili igcine ngokuhamba ngezintathu*

[Something that walks on all four, changes to two and then changes to three]

Answer: Umuntu [Human-being]

Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2011) consider the value of riddles as an aspect of indigenous knowledge that can weave and manipulate vocabulary into complex, through-put provoking and entertaining form. It is amusing that this play-based folklore genre contributes to language, identity, cultural development and interaction among learners.

Literature indicates that it is quite imperative to engage young learners in different story genres and oral history that preserve their culture, identity and language. As a result, teachers need to engage young learners in storytelling and listening as well as having provision for opportunities that will include children's interests and promote talking and thinking. In addition to this, Morgan-Flemming (1999) states that classrooms are places of oral communication, such communications are promoting self-awareness and self-identity and this should be promoted while learners are still young. One can argue that in most cases stories usually involve a lot of dramatisation and singing along jointly in a chorus, which is what is entailed and promoted in folklore. Through these constant engagements, learners develop their mother tongue as stories are usually told in it, basically their speaking and listening skills. Davin (2013: 150) states that this is "best achieved in an informal social setting and not in a formal group exercise." By engaging learners in folktales and other folklore-related activities, is essential that learners are encouraged to share knowledge or interpretations of their own experiences and in a relaxed context using their MT. Naidu (2001) finds it amusing that different people from different global contexts have different versions of tales. This is caused by oral communications which loses the originality as the story is told from generation to generation. Retelling always introduces some modifications and/or alterations in terms of style and characters which leads to different versions of a single folktale or folk praise.

In essence, the social function of folklore is to develop and also ensure one's awareness of identity. Learners develop an understanding of their relationship to the community and their beliefs. This results in constant development in

language usage, confidence in communicating with others (teacher and/or peers), and more profoundly on understanding one's culture and identity while still young in assisting them to develop a sense of understanding who they really are. In support of this assertion, Kim (2006) concedes that folktales have been shared in every society to entertain, educate and preserve culture, and if given sufficient attention in the classroom such results prevail.

Stories assist in the formation and development of young learners' implicit knowledge of the language and its components. It also assist them with the knowledge of grammar entailed in their mother tongue through living and communicating with peers and teachers.

Thus, activities related to folklore are seen to be addressing individualised language aspects to Grade R learners and not promoting stereotypical stories. Such aspects involve listening and relating with characters as well as comprehending the character's role in that particular tale. The most important one is retelling the folktale or legend to demonstrate comprehensive understanding.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the role of teaching using folklore in the development of Grade R learners' mother tongue. Clearly, folklore teaching plays a significant role in every young learner's development of mother tongue. This is because different forms of folklore genre such as folktales, myths, legends, folk praise and riddles that are to be part of literacy teaching in Grade R. Hence, folklore empowers learners with knowledge of self, identity and acknowledgment of their own cultures. Teachers are to serve as agencies of knowledge transfer of these genres of oral tradition because they assist in bridging the gap between language used at home and the one used at school. Subsequently, it allows them an opportunity for interactive storytelling and brain teasing sessions. Young learners are offered an opportunity to develop the language they are familiar through engagement in different forms of interactive activities. Such activities also assist in bringing awareness of cultural identity to learners. They eventually learn that there is a vibrant relationship between culture and language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Literature reviewed suggests that teaching using folklore to young learners is quite significant for their mother tongue development. Grade R teachers have a very important role to play in developing young learners' mother tongue through the use of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies. Teaching of folklore to young learners will not only contribute to mother tongue development, but to their identity formation as well. Consequently, this contributes to the entire language development and also developing other basic literacy skills. Another important fact is that teaching of folklore to learners in Grade R is significant because it equips them with knowledge that explains the past and gives them understanding of people's present existence.

The author therefore, recommends that Grade R teachers should keep a bank of these folklore genres for their preservation as well as for their significance in language development. These teachers need to acquaint learners with knowledge of these folklore and also allow them to retell stories and use riddles as a form of understanding and relearning them. This will assist in developing their mother tongue and also increase their vocabulary within the language.

Learners need to understand their origins and identity; linguistically and culturally through folklore. The characteristics of African folklore contribute towards learners' understanding of their culture and language. It can never be underestimated that the understanding of one's language is shaped by one's culture. Many folk texts are seen as a means of cultural expression from which valuable lessons about groups' differences and similarities may be learned. Grade R teachers have to possess a specialised body of knowledge, and through this teach use folklore to capacitate young learners with this awareness.

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