

# Literacy Programs Efficacy for Developing Children's Early Reading Skills in Familiar Language in Zambia

eTale 2022



In this study, the comparative efficacy of a phonics-based reading programme and a language experience approach-based literacy programme to develop reading skills among Zambian early childhood school learners were investigated. The learners (N = 1986) took either the phonics-based reading programme (n = 1593) or the alternative language experience approach-based programme (n = 393). Results suggest that learners in the phonics-based literacy programme demonstrated significantly better results in letter-sound knowledge and in reading skills.

**Authors: Francis K. Sampa, Emma Ojanen, Jari Westerholm, Ritva Ketonen, & Heikki Lyytinen**

Source: Sampa, F.K., Ojanen, E., Westerholm, J., Ketonen, R., & Lyytinen, H. (2018) Literacy programs efficacy for developing children's early reading skills in familiar language in Zambia, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 28(2), 128-135, DOI: 10.1080/14330237.2018.1435050

In this study, the comparative efficacy of a phonics-based reading programme and a language experience approach-based

literacy programme to develop reading skills among Zambian early childhood school learners were investigated. The learners (N = 1986) took either the phonics-based reading programme (n = 1593) or the alternative language experience approach-based programme (n = 393). Results suggest that learners in the phonics-based literacy programme demonstrated significantly better results in letter-sound knowledge and in reading skills.

- Use of the familiar language for early literacy acquisition is an international standard and especially well-founded among readers whose familial language is transparent.
- Zambia has adopted the Primary Reading Programme (PRP) and the Primary Literacy Programme (PLP) for literacy instruction in the early grades using seven familiar indigenous languages: Cinyanja, Icibemba, Chitonga, Kiikaonde, Silozi, Lunda, and Luvale.

### **Defining the Primary Reading Programme**

- This programme is a language experience programme in which learners acquire literacy for reading and writing by building on the oral language that they have already acquired.
- Familiar language was used for learning to read for one year in Grade 1 and English was used from Grade 2.

### **Defining the Primary Literacy Programme**

- This is a phonics-based reading programme in which learners are meant to acquire literacy by learning letter-sound connections in a familiar language.
- The programme focuses on a decoding process where learners are taught to break down written language into small and simple components by identifying and storing sounds of the letters and assembling the sounds according to the sequences of letters.

- Familiar language was used for learning to read from Grade 1 to the end of Grade 2, and only oral English was introduced in Grade 2.

### **The Language Experience Approach**

- This approach promotes reading and writing through the use of personal experiences and oral language.
- Learners do not breakdown sounds individually, but take words at face value and associate them with prior knowledge.



### **The study**

The purpose of this study was to compare the relative efficacy of a phonics-based approach and language experience-based approach to teaching early literacy to Zambian early-grade learners.

Research question:

- What is the comparative efficacy of a phonics-based programme and a language experience-based programme in teaching reading to Zambian early childhood learners with linguistic diversity?

**Participants** were 1986 early childhood school learners who were randomly selected from 200 schools in 16 Zambian school districts. Samples for the PRP comprised 393 learners from 40 schools. Samples for PLP comprised 1593 learners from 160 schools.

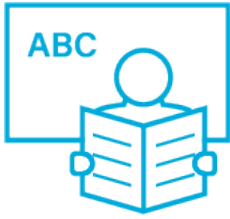


## Findings

- Learners in the PLP obtained higher mean rank scores on at least some of the reading skill tests, although the effects sizes were small.
- Overall, the results could be interpreted as supporting PLP efficacy in teaching reading to children in Cinyanja, Icibemba, Kiikaonde, and Silozi.
- Learners who used Cinyanja or Icibemba as their home language for reading instruction obtained higher mean rank scores in the PLP compared to the PRP in several reading skill tests.
- Learners who used Kiikaonde or Silozi as their home language for reading instruction obtained higher mean rank scores in the PLP compared to the PRP in letters-sound knowledge only.

## Summary

Early childhood learners taking the PLP performed relatively better in reading skills acquisition compared to those taking the PRP. This may be because Zambian languages contain grapheme-phoneme correspondences that behave consistently. All African languages are relatively new and are transparent orthographies, which makes initial literacy learning much easier than in English, where each of the vowels may represent different phonemes. Orthographic consistency facilitates more rapid development of phonemic awareness and consequently the basic reading skill. The most appropriate instruction methods focus on teaching connections between spoken and written language at the level of phonemes and graphemes. A fluent reading skill of a familiar language facilitates learning of more complicated orthographies such as English.



## **Implications**

- There was a large number of learners with a zero score in reading skill tests revealing that the implementation of both programmes was far from attaining a satisfactory level.
- Overall, the results from this study may be interpreted as being favourable toward the PLP, which has placed much emphasis on teaching the basic key components of learning to read (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension), and has also placed much emphasis on the phonics approach for teaching reading.