TEACHERS' PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES TO SUPPORT LEARNERS' FUNCTIONAL LITERACY DEVELOPMENT: THE CONTEXT OF MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGE

[1]Annette Naddumba, [1*]Logamurthie Athiemoolam
[1]Secondary School Education, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, South Africa
*Corresponding Email Author: logamurthie.athiemoolam@mandela.ac.za

Article Info	Abstract
	The implementation of mother tongue instruction in Uganda entailed teachers had to explore how best they could facilitate mother tongue instruction in the formative years of children's schooling through the strategies they implement. It is with this background in mind that this qualitative study aimed at gaining deeper insights into teachers' pedagogical practices to support learners' early literacy acquisition processes through mother tongue languages. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 teachers, focus group sessions with 16 learners and classroom observation. The accumulated data were integrated and analysed thematically according to Moustaka's (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach. The findings of the study indicate that teachers' application of storytelling, music, poetry, demonstration, and excursions, amongst others, in the mother tongue, contributed significantly to functional literacy development. The study concludes that functional literacy development in the mother tongue could be enhanced through socio-cultural learning and the inclusion of children's prior language knowledge into classroom activities.

INTRODUCTION

This qualitative study is linked to a wider analysis of the 2007 mother tongue education policy which was adopted and implemented in Ugandan primary schools with the aim of improving the quality of education and the development of literacy and life skills (Altinyelken, 2010). In the context of this policy, learners at primary 1 (grade 1) to primary 3 (grade 3) must be taught in the mother tongue of their area while English is taught as a separate subject. In primary 4 (grade 4) onwards, English becomes the language of instruction and the mother tongue language remains an independent subject. All rural primary schools are required to choose a dominant mother tongue language (Altinyelken, 2010), while urban schools are exempted from this arrangement due to a wider assumption that learners in urban schools are drawn from different parts of the country with a multitude of linguistic backgrounds.

There is extensive literature which highlights the need for the mother tongue in the classroom such as; understanding of sound-symbol or meaning symbol correspondence (Benson, 2004), easing learning of the new language through communication (Young, 2008), transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills (Kosonen, 2005) as well as confidence, self-esteem and identity (Kagure, 2010). Despite the use of MTs (mother tongues) in Uganda's education system, limited achievement has been registered across the country in improving literacy levels (Piper & Miksic, 2011; Uganda National Examinations Board, 2010; Uwezo, 2011, 2012, 2013). This paper questions Uganda's MT education policy of 2007 in terms of teachers' pedagogical practices. Thus, this paper seeks to examine current teachers'

pedagogical practices in the implementation of the current language-in-education policy. In order to provide a balanced analysis, this paper is guided by this research question: *What are the teachers' pedagogical practices, which support learners' functional and relevant literacy development?*

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the sociocultural theory to literacy development which situates literacy learning in a social and cultural context (Limberg, *et al.* 2012, p.104). Thus, literacy development through the mother tongue is perceived through the lenses of social practices which are historically situated and highly dependent on shared cultural beliefs and linked to social contexts (Street, 2005; Gee, 2008). The theory further embraces learners' ability to participate in social activities, as well as enhance our understanding of the difference in literacy development and the varying perspectives in social activities which enhance literacy development (Barrat-Pugh, 2000). This would further mean that literacy learning based on social practices is grounded in children's ability to utilize the social and cultural experiences to learn. Thus, the theory acknowledges children's literacy practices acquired in their mother tongue languages out-of-school context as a basis for learning in the classroom context.

The theory bridges and facilitates the transition stages of children's literacy development from the nonconventional to conventional level where a child is assumed to have the ability to develop relevant and functional literacies. It can further be stated that the sociocultural perspective translates children's literacy development by exploring the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the children have grown. In the context of this study, the sociocultural theory links the social practices and cultural experiences that the children acquired in their mother tongue languages out of school context to literacy acquisition and development. Additionally, the sociocultural perspective maintains the view of understanding literacy as a social, cultural practice to describe reading and writing in multiple and evolving language activities (Landis, 2003, p.283). This means that literacy development is related to actions and beliefs which a child creates to define him or herself in particular cultural settings or circumstances. These circumstances further describe what resourceful individuals like teachers would offer or create in terms of language tasks or events to help children be identified as readers and writers. It is against this background that this study examined teachers' pedagogical practices which support learners' functional and relevant literacy development.

Related Literature

Mother tongue education in Uganda: A brief historical overview

In the African context, priority is given to international languages (Ouane & Glanz, 2012). Available research registered little success attained in African countries through mother tongue-based education policies (Bamgbose, 2000; Parry, *et al.,* 2005; Stein, 2007 as cited in Trudell & Piper, 2014, p.2). In the context of this paper, Ssembatya (2016) revealed that Uganda has lacked a coherent and consistent government policy on language use in education since the days of colonial government. Ssentanda *et al.* (2016) additionally reported that between 1960 and 2007, the use of MTs in Uganda's primary education was not formalized, and it remained a practice of rural schools. It is the 2007 mother tongue education policy which has provided room for the use of MTs in primary schools on the ground of improving the quality of education through literacy acquisition and development in the early years of schooling (Kateeba, 2009; Ministry of Education & Sports, 2004, 2008). Under this policy, learners at primary 1 (grade 1) to primary 3 (grade 3) must be taught in the mother tongue of their area while English is taught as a separate subject. From primary 4 (grade 4) onwards, English becomes the language of instruction and the mother tongue language remains an independent subject.

Literacy acquisition and development through mother tongue language

While development research provides a logical process for literacy development which begins long before children enter school at birth (Copple & Bredekemp, 2009, p.7), other studies report multiple pathways to success in learning literacy (Konold *et al.*, 2003). Specifically, learning contexts such as homes were identified to support children's literacy acquisition and development through mother tongue languages (Pianta *et al.*, 2005; Skibbe, *et al.*, 2008). This means that parents are vital in supporting their children to acquire the basic nonconventional literacy skills which could be useful at a later stage of learning. Such an understanding however is subjected to individual learners' differences and contextual factors such as the home setting (Mathew *et al.*, 2018). On the contrary, overlapping orders of literacy acquisition and development stem from literacy orientations that begin early in the life of a child especially in a mother tongue language (Shanahan, 2014, p.1). Other related findings highlight a strong positive effect on children's literacy development based on time spent at school, but with limited classroom-based pedagogical analysis and its effect on schooling across the four cardinal literacy skills in the mother tongue (Connor, *et al.*, 2006, p.668; Skibbe, *et al.*, 2011, p.43).

Such observations suggest that children's literacy acquisition may be negatively affected by many factors such as limited home support (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008, p.17). Therefore, educators need to make a conscious effort to plan and engage learners in activities and experiences that capture and optimize conditions for them to acquire literacy practices (Neuman, Copple & Bredekamp, 2000, p.35). This seems to further compel teachers to identify and implement teaching strategies based on social interactions, supported by a wide range of engaging reading, writing, and learning activities that will lead to the development of children's literacy from emergent to fluent. It is against this background that this article attempts to examine the teachers' pedagogical practices to support learners' functional literacy development in a contextualized in-depth analysis of learners' achievements backed by the lived experiences of the concerned stakeholders.

Teachers' pedagogical practices for literacy development

Literature, relating to teachers' pedagogical practices for literacy development, draws attention to high quality literacy instruction as well as children's language support for thinking and understanding rather than narrow decontextualized skills (Lennox, 2013, p.381). As such, research engagements with authentic literacy experiences provide a new perspective for examining critical ways through which literacy development can originate easily from reading as the main gate for literacy development. While Gallagher's (2009) new rationale for developing literacy tasks for children to read texts instead of reading for them, authentic literacy based on the readers' workshop model, blends personal interest with approaches to reading and writing (Brunow, 2016, p.68).

The model emphasizes specific attention to learner expression and interaction in the classroom (Anatilla, 2013, p.24).   It is through carefully selected stages of the readers' workshops such as mini-lessons, independent reading, conferencing in small groups, class share and individual writing that provision of authentic and significant opportunities for literacy development is achieved. Thus, the readers' workshop model seems to serve the diverse needs of learners and facilitates writing about the reading process. Other research findings applaud the use of close reading strategies which help children complete tasks more effectively (Brunow, 2016, p.68). Close reading affords learners the opportunity to assimilate new textual information with their existing background knowledge and prior experiences to expand their schema (Fisher & Frey, 2012, p.181). By accessing the text through close reading, learners are supported to become authentic readers hence, building their analytical thoughts and actual practice. Literacy is authentically developed when learners begin to examine the craft of writing based on reading as opposed to just writing about what they read

at elementary level. Thus, active engagements between the teacher and learners provide support for reflective writing for both individual learners and groups.

Similarly, Lennox (2013, p.383) acknowledges reading aloud to children as a basis for literacy development. Through his article *'Interactive read-aloud: An avenue for enhancing children's language for thinking and understanding'*, Lennox (2013, p.387) states that there is little doubt about the value of well-planned, engaging interactive read-aloud as one of the key avenues for supporting young children's language for thinking and understanding. Similarly, Flint (2013) through his study entitled '*The social construction of literacy understanding in a 3rd grade classroom',* pointed to advanced literary understanding and better understanding of how the text was crafted for the reader as a result of read-aloud conversations (Flint, 2013, P.77). In other words, learners' increased accessibility to the text motivates them to read, and any additional classroom engagement extends the debate towards advanced literacy development.

Lastly, research points out classroom environments as providing the greatest capacity for quality educational experiences and interactions to support and strengthen literacy development (Anatilla, 2013, p.24). When teachers create a conducive and engaging atmosphere for learning, even low socioeconomic schools with struggling learners increase the chances of their learners to acquire and develop literacy practices (Van Hees, 2011). This could mean that the communication skills and ability to understand language has both a direct and indirect effect on that child's transition to literacy. The implication of this study to the teacher in a classroom setting is that it is important to provide optimal classroom conditions for the development of oral expression ultimately affecting literacy development. Ideally, this forms the basis for examining the teachers' pedagogical practices and how their interactions and patterns create rich oral and expressive environments to increase learners' literacy achievements.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research approach adopted for the purposes of this study was qualitative in nature since it explored meaning which individuals make of their lives and experiences in a natural setting (Cresswell, 2013). The qualitative approach was suitable for a study of this nature, since the focus was on the thoughts, feelings and actions of the participants (Merriam, 2014). In this study, since our focus was on exploring the use of the mother tongue-based language education policy in the development of learners' literacy we opted for the transcendental phenomenological design, which enabled us to understand human experience more holistically. Participants in this study were selected on the basis of their understanding of the mother tongue based on language education policy and how it enhances literacy development, as a result we were able to elicit data focusing on the diverse experiences of teachers and learners.

The population for the purposes of this study comprised teachers and learners from four schools in Uganda where the mother tongue language policy was being implemented. From the population of teachers and learners in Uganda, research was conducted at the Masaka and Luwero districts of Uganda because this region included both rural and semi-rural schools and the Ugandan language policy was being implemented at these schools. Schools W and Y are traditional government aided schools in the Masaka district with fairly good infrastructure and teaching resources, while schools X and Z are government aided schools in the Luwero district. While school X had quite reasonable infrastructure with adequate resources, school Z was inadequately resourced with no library, and the books were kept in a locked bookshelf, at the back of the class. However, Luganda was used in all schools as the medium of instruction and many of the learners participated actively in the lessons although some English was used by teachers, at times, during the delivery of lessons.

The data collection process involved conducting individual interviews with teachers on the strategies that they used to implement the mother tongue-based language education policy for the development of learners' literacy practices, conducting focus group interviews with learners based on their experiences of the strategies, and classroom observation based on participant observation. Interviews were conducted with 3 teachers from each of the 4 schools (12 interviews in total- Interviewees (I): 1-12), focus groups were conducted with 4 groups of learners comprising 4 learners from each school (FG 1-4), and 3 Luganda language lessons per school were observed (total of 16 lessons).

The accumulated data were analysed thematically by applying Moustakas' (1994) data analysis procedures. The process involved firstly analysing personal biases during the process, applying horizontalizing or listing relevant expressions from the transcripts, creating lists of relevant expressions from the verbatim transcripts of participants and reducing verbatim experiences from transcripts to invariant constituents. The process involved the clustering of textual meanings into themes and describing, classifying and interpreting data from emerging patterns into codes and themes. The next step involved a comparison of multiple data sources to validate the invariant constituents. In this study, themes derived from participants' experiences collected through data generation strategies such as individual interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation were compared. This was done to verify accuracy and to provide a clear representation across the data sources. For the purposes of reporting the findings emerging from the study, an integrated approach to data analysis was adopted in that, data sets were integrated into discussions relating to specific themes identified while following Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach. For the purposes of ethics, permission to conduct the research was sought from the Nelson Mandela University's Ethics Committee and pseudonyms were used for all the participants (both teachers and learners).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Research Findings
In the next section, the researcher presents and discusses the findings of the study. The research findings depict a variety of literacy instructional practices employed by teachers in the use of Luganda as medium of instruction in the classroom to support literacy development. In specific terms, the key pedagogical literacy practices which support learners' functional and relevant literacy development, highlighted in this study, are synthesized below.

Holistic learning through songs and poems
Respondents regard music and poems presented in one's mother tongue to have the power to satisfy learners' curiosity, and being familiar with songs and rhymes in a particular language enhances learners' understanding of concepts and ideas, as they can connect with these artistic forms. Thus, teachers view singing, listening to songs, and reciting poems or song lyrics as a powerful method which enhances learners' literacy practices in the classroom. Teachers expressed these views as follows:

> *"Through singing songs in our mother tongue language, learners are motivated to learn." (I-T11)*

Additionally, learners revealed through focus group discussions, that their teacher uses singing and reciting of poems for teaching pronunciation of words, and listening to songs, and that this is mainly used when introducing new topics.

> *"Sometimes we begin our lesson by singing a song or a poem in Luganda, and he can ask us questions related to it…." (FG1)*

Both teachers' and learners' responses acknowledged the use of local or indigenous songs in the classroom as not only serving as a tool for literacy development, but also for continuous practice, for practicing the pronunciation of words, predicting of the reading skill,

for confidence building, motivation, as well as for remembering and enhancing vocabulary development.

Telling and reading stories

The study's findings revealed the effectiveness of stories and how learners gradually learn to present their own knowledge intelligibly through a smooth and spontaneous flow just because they use their mother tongue language. Teachers described their views as follows:

> *"They learn to write their own stories, and they learn leadership skills through learning to express themselves" (I-T12)*
> *"It is the way of practicing pronunciation of words in their language; through telling and retelling their stories, these kids have learnt a lot" (I-T4)*

Learners also confess that they enjoy reading and telling stories, especially those blended in with words accompanied by pictures. Such stories engage them to make connections to their own language and their daily interactions in the community.

> *"The pictures are interesting, and the stories are written in Luganda language."* (FG2)

Thus, the common thread behind stories entails active participation in telling and reading stories which are familiar, listening to such stories, and discussing them which leads to enhanced literacy development.

Innovative reading method 'I do, we do, you do'

Teachers described the collaborative enhancement of literacy (listening, speaking and reading practices) through this method. This is achieved through four stages; the teacher reading to learners, the teacher reads with the learners aloud, learners read in a group while the teacher listens and corrects mistakes where necessary and learners read on their own or individually. Teachers' extensive responses are provided below:

> *"Look, this is a child-centered method because it involves the learner in all steps of the lesson, and it makes evaluation of the child easy i.e., whether she/he has understood or not, because it is done at all levels (stages) of the lesson" (I-10)*

Responses in support of this innovative reading method indicates that since the focus is on the learner there is the potential for the promotion of fluency and creativity throughout the process of literacy development.

Interactive writing

Respondents state that interactive writing which is locally known as "Akatiba" involves early writing instruction that teaches learners 'to write' in their mother tongue with confidence, and at the same time to develop dispositions towards writing. It is based on the idea that "We do; you do".   Through the focus group discussions, learners of also shared their experiences of this method as follows:

> *"We compose stories following his procedures and we keep on editing and improving on it from Monday to Friday when it is done. Thereafter, each learner is given the opportunity to present his/her composition to the class…"* (FG4)

Interactive writing of this nature develops literacy in the mother tongue while close attention is paid to all learners' writing, advancing their awareness of spelling and handwriting skills.

Scaffolding method

Respondents acknowledged the teachers' efforts to guide and support learners' learning by building on what they are able to do in their mother tongue, through reading and writing. Teachers believe that by providing cognitive support through language analysis and the completion of cognitively demanding tasks, learners will gradually be able to work at

cognitively higher levels, to initiate and sustain verbal interactions. One teacher expressed her views as follows:

> *"Like in word formation processes, it helps in evaluating whether the child needs special guidance and support or not. But generally, I have found this approach very useful in learning reading and writing, because of the continuous support I give to my learners" (I-T10)*

Through the focus group discussion, learners acknowledged the role of scaffolding in terms of the use of personal experiences and background knowledge to seek clarification easily, understand   some complex language situations and difficult words better, to use Luganda for defining new vocabulary items, to express themselves in the language they understand and to find appropriate words to use in English. These views are expressed as follows:

> *"Our teacher normally asks us what we know about the lesson content, and thereafter, when we tell her, she teaches us beginning from there" (FG1)*

In consideration of the above assertions, successful literacy development is attached to the teacher's ability to prepare and organize learning activities which engage and motivate learners to seek guidance from the teacher in a gradual and improving process.

Conversational interactions /Expression method

Through conversational interactions, teachers engage learners in meaningful activities which require them to negotiate meaning while using quite a number of conversational modifications in their mother tongue language. Through repetition, clarification and confirmation checks, learners use the available supportive structures to understand better. Thus, engaging and supporting learners' expressions in their mother tongue interactively, is regarded as the most effective way of building their literacy-based experiences.   They expressed these views as follows:

> *"Our conversations in most cases are informal, I create a moment of talking with my learners on a particular topic of interest. My focus in these conversations is on how my learners express themselves when given an opportunity" (I-T8)*

Lesson observation in school W, additionally revealed classroom engagements which added great value to their language experiences and literacy achievements. Learners were afforded opportunities for talking and listening to each other, to interact with the teacher freely and stimulated to think creatively by posing insightful questions. Essentially, conversational interactions seem to be a child-oriented literacy learning strategy depending upon the availability of literacy–rich environments which enable children to initiate and engage in conversational interactions which enhance their literacy during the early years of their learning.

Demonstrations /Oral language" (Pictorial)

Teachers' acknowledged learners' demonstrations through imaginative and interactive spheres as a basis of literacy development where learners access lesson content as well as exchange verbal interactions based on those demonstrations. Through these demonstrations, teachers apply group work – verbal interactions in small mixed or ability groups, share tasks and resources monitored by the teacher. This is done as follows as described by one of the teachers:

> *"Such innovative ideas provide opportunity for learners to generate creative ideas, analyze their effectiveness and communicate them effectively" (I-T4)*

In addition, through focus group discussions, learners' responses seem to suggest how best they learn from this approach as follows:

> *"The teacher tells us to draw pictures of happenings in our local environment and thereafter, write short stories or sentences about them, e.g. people in the marketplace"* (FG4)

The above responses indicate that the demonstration approach seems to apply generic literacy skills as a way of maximizing learners' understanding of how images and words in a particular mother tongue can be integrated to present information.

Excursion method

Excursion provides opportunities for learners to become involved in real-life learning experiences, which makes literacy development more meaningful and memorable, compared to regular classroom instructional programs. Teachers revealed that they regularly apply this method through observation; by visiting a normal learning environment like a garden to gain firsthand information and to develop their aesthetic sense; hence developing concrete skills such as note taking. In an interesting way, such activities are clearly linked to their mother tongue language. Their responses are articulated as follows:

> *"Through this method, when learners go to the garden, through guiding questions, they learn to acquire the listening skill. They also choose from a variety of things that they get exposed to from the garden, from which they get questions to ask the teacher"* (I-T6)

Thus, the above-mentioned response suggests that learners' literacy learning, based on the local environment, enables learners to acquire a better understanding of vocabulary or words in their mother tongue contexts.

Discussion

The implementation of the Ugandan mother tongue-based language policy for literacy development in the foundation phase (grades 1-3) entailed teachers need to embrace pedagogical practices that would lead to enhanced learning. Hence the study proposed to explore the strategies that teachers were implementing in their classes and how these strategies facilitated learning. The findings of the study indicate that teachers are embracing learner-centred pedagogical practices that facilitate mother tongue instruction in foundation phase classes.

The findings emerging from the study concur with language theories and available research findings in literacy development which acknowledge the significant role of mother tongue-oriented pedagogy to enhance classroom practices and support for learners' early literacy acquisition. In addition to a variety of literacy instructional practices which this study revealed, child-friendly and a positive atmosphere enhanced learners' self-esteem and motivation to engage and interact in classroom activities. Thus, it can be concluded that when the language used for instruction is understood, learners are able to develop functional and relevant literacy practices. Specifically, the key pedagogical literacy practices which support learners' functional and relevant literacy development are discussed below.

Respondents in this study agree that music and poems provide practical activities for the implementation of literacy skills such as reading, writing, and singing songs for language skills development, reading fluency, and writing progress. Classroom observations revealed further that singing and reciting poems are effective approaches for teaching the pronunciation of words. Specifically, Lennox (2013, p.387) relates learning of this nature to 'Interactive read-aloud', an avenue for enhancing children's language for thinking and understanding, while Flint (2013, p77) contends that read-aloud conversations could be associated with advanced literacy and improved comprehension. Since music and poems are presented in a language which is familiar to learners, its value in the classroom fosters creativity and transforms classrooms into positive child friendly learning environments where children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Thus, by enhancing literacy

instruction through music, learners in their early childhood literacy development are stimulated to practice the pronunciation of words, vocabulary, and word recognition, amongst others.

Correspondingly, respondents generally believed that the effectiveness of telling and reading stories in developing learners' literacy in the mother tongue language relied upon their ability to create fun-filled, memorable learning situations, raising learners' interest in listening to them, as well as speaking, writing and reading about them. The study's findings link stories to children's literacy development, since they create a window of imagination, fantasy, and reality of the world to children as they connect and engage in their understanding of the world. This entails that children are stimulated to learn if they are actively engaged in telling and reading stories which are familiar to them in their mother tongue. Correspondingly, Gallagher (2009, p.30) argues that affording learners an opportunity to choose texts and teaching them to read, supports their reading engagement and interest. This rationale for this is to develop literacy by tasking children to read texts instead of reading to them. Thus, it is through their continuous active participation and enthusiasm to learn through stories that their literacy skills are enhanced.

Unlike telling and reading stories, the study's findings revealed that the innovative reading method *'I do, we do, you do'* pedagogy tackles literacy development through a gradual, systematic and authentic process from the teacher to the learner. Through this gradual release model which has been widely recognized as a successful approach for moving classroom instruction from teacher- to learner-centered collaboration and independent practice (Fisher & Nancy, 2012), learners are taught through demonstration, guided in how to perform tasks and eventually given time to practice language skills individually or in groups. The key stages with this approach include, initial direct teaching or instruction (I do), followed by guided practice (We do) and lastly independent learner practice (You do). Throughout these stages, learners were able to learn by doing, correct mistakes, discover new knowledge built on previous knowledge, and productively work through tasks for meaningful literacy acquisition. Thus, the strategy afforded learners opportunities to internalize knowledge through listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which are the main skills for literacy development. It further paved the way for both language and literacy development through collaborative efforts in the classroom and teacher guided classroom interactions.

Another teaching strategy, which the study's findings revealed teachers engaged with, was creative and interactive writing. Respondents revealed that they used this teaching pedagogy to make the writing process visual to the class. As such, teachers used two complementary approaches; the shared or collaborative writing (we do) and independent writing (you do). At first teachers shared writing experiences with learners on a chart paper which was quite large for the entire class to observe and to respond to critically. To enhance the collaborative process, in some classes, I observed learners participating by providing the teacher with some ideas to write; getting involved in the actual writing of words, phrases or sentences on the chart with the guidance of their teacher. The second activity involved learners doing individual planning and writing on the topic of their choice guided by the themes provided by the teacher. Such an evidence-based interactive writing process seems to have increased learners' writing proficiency through authentic constructive experiences. Learners were involved in authentic and interactive writing; meaningful teacher-learner interactions, reading aloud and individual talking about their writing, which were beneficial for their literacy development. Brunow (2016, p.68) affirms that writing about reading is as important as reading itself and the use of close reading strategies helps learners to complete tasks more effectively. This further means that by utilizing the mini-briefings and accessing the text through close reading, learners are supported to become authentic readers hence building their analytical thoughts and actual practice. Therefore, because of these continuous

writing and reading engagements, many pieces of interactive writing became educational resources which teachers displayed in their classrooms to motivate learners to continue learning more about reading and writing.

Teachers also used scaffolding to enhance learners' literacy skills, which could be transferred across other new learning contexts. In this particular study, teachers used scaffolding as a strategy to assist learners to become independent learners after gaining skills in how to complete tasks successfully under the guidance of the teacher initially. Altinyelken, *et al.*, (2014, p.47) conclusively argues for teachers to translate their instruction strategies by providing authentic and supportive spaces for practice through well-planned classroom demonstrations and micro-teaching. This is done through a favorable working space where the role of the teacher in the classroom is to facilitate learning and not be an active participant. Teachers furthermore reported that scaffolding appealed to learning activities which involved, reading and writing through literature and new texts written in Luganda. Consequently, scaffolding provided in-built lesson support details that clarified each step of the instructional sequence adopted by the teacher to model and practice with learners and to simultaneously promote independent literacy development.

Through critical engagement and observation of different lessons, I synthesized the role of conversational interactions through mother tongue for literacy development as engaging and supporting learners to express their views in their mother tongue. The findings linked conversational activities between the teacher and the learners during reading and speaking activities to overall literacy achievement in Luganda within authentic contexts. Research findings on literacy acquisition and development categorize the effectiveness of teachers' verbal interaction with learners in the classroom and its effects on literacy acquisition (Van Hees, 2011). In particular, collaborative construction of meaning between the teacher and learners in the mother tongue created space for the negotiation of mutual understanding of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. Teachers provided structured oral corrective feedback which enabled learners to identify their errors and to pay attention to certain language rules and forms. Thus, through child-friendly conversational interactions, learners were exposed to their mother tongue language, which enabled them to become aware of the rules of the language. Additionally, teachers enabled learners to express their opinions freely and spontaneously with a view to stimulating their intellectual and emotional development. Thus, shared conversations appear to be imperative for the development of thoughtful literacy, but the complexity of instructional conversations would demand more expertly trained teachers in Luganda as a mother tongue, which is still lacking in Uganda.

The second last strategy used extensively by teachers was the use of visual images for enhanced learning. Teachers' responses and classroom observations revealed further that visual images provide an imaginative and interactive learning environment where learners can fully develop their literacy skills. Teachers used visual images for enhanced communication and interaction. Through imagination and interaction, learners are trained to use these pictures or visual elements to develop their visual literacy to enable them to read, write and relate images to a wider mother tongue language used in the community. Teachers emphasized the need for visual images based on sound, digital stories, cartoons, memes, and photographs as a tool for enhancing critical thinking and intellectual capacity which in turn leads to memorable learning experiences and which is transferable across literacy practices. Related findings by Akella (2010, 111) equally perceive literacy development as a concept of transforming experiences where learning begins from concrete experiences (feeling), reflective observation (watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking) and active experimentation (doing). Such stages of literacy acquisition not only stimulate and motivate learners to learn but challenge them to develop necessary literacy practices through effective thinking and problem solving. Thus, it is imperative that visual images or demonstrations

provide opportunities for interpretation and critical thinking with a view to developing an understanding of the complexities of reading and writing.

The last strategy which this study identified as having the potential to integrate literacy practice i.e., listening and speaking, reading and writing through the development of a written text, is the excursion method. Teachers argued that this strategy extended support to learners to write about their experiences and ideas while using familiar words in their mother tongue and later encouraging them to read these words. Research by Allington (2012) concludes that excursions afford learners opportunities to become involved in real world experiences which makes learning more meaningful and memorable. Similarly, Allington, *et al.*, (2014) argue for its role in providing firsthand experiences which can develop further language and literacy practices, gaining new vocabulary and problem-solving skills. Teachers acknowledged the significance of children reading their written texts, as it created possibilities for engaging with their mother tongue and ideas as they became more experienced readers and writers. The study also furthermore highlighted the importance of expanding children's literacy through interaction with an expert teacher in that particular language, which means that continuous expansion and extension of oral language based on these experiences enables learners to write about them and later read.

Some limitations of the study included potential areas of bias and subjectivity based on the research design which will be explicated further. The study only explored the use of mother tongue-based educational policy in Ugandan selected primary schools. Since the study was phenomenological, a sample of 4 primary schools from 2 districts was selected from the Buganda region, specifically 2 schools from Masaka and from Luwero districts. The focus of the study was on literacy acquisition and development for learners in primary one (grade 1) to primary three (grade 3) where the mother tongue language policy is met to be effective. No attempt was made to generalize the findings to other primary schools in Uganda. Since participants were purposefully rather than randomly selected, there was the possibility that they could not reflect the views of the entire population. Thus, the scope of this study was limited by adequate resources, time, the nature of the research design (phenomenological study) and the implementation guidelines of the mother tongue language policy in Uganda.

The implications of the findings are that firstly, since literacy development focuses on learners' ability to utilize the social and cultural experiences to learn (Street, 2005), by incorporating activities which promote active interaction and classroom engagement they are provided with additional sources through which they can fully develop their functional literacy. Secondly, since early childhood classroom engagements are based on previously acquired experiences in the use of the mother tongue, by acknowledging what learners achieved previously outside school contexts implies that children are capacitated to acquire literacy from birth to the stage of relevant and functional literacy. Thirdly, since academic achievement and literacy development was presented as activity-based learning through play and hands on-experiences in a classroom setting which appeal to both mental and physical senses, this implies that learners' literacy and expressional abilities are improved through activity-based classroom engagements. Lastly, literacy-rich environments, which this study endorsed, provided significant insights into what transpires in the mother tongue language classroom which formed a basis for interaction with varied print and visual materials. This implies that since a literacy rich learning environment goes beyond early literacy achievements to facilitate content-specific learning, children need among others, interesting books and material in their mother tongue language, a fully functioning classroom library, bulletin boards, display books, writing corners, audio and visual materials, among others, to fully develop their functional literacy.

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CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate a coherent picture which acknowledges the teachers' pedagogical practices to support learners' functional and relevant literacy development in their mother together as a matter of interest and concern. Drawing on the principles of the socio-cultural theory, which underpins the pedagogical praxis in early childhood literacy development; children are engaged in activities to learn. In the same line of analysis, teachers' pedagogical activities seem to depict active involvement and engagement of children in functional learning through their mother tongue language based on parental involvement and support as well as learners' experiences. In addition, playful, interesting, and interactive learning pedagogies were discovered by this study to be vital and the means through which teachers encouraged children to learn literacy.

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