



Tuesdays in the Trenches Literacy Presentation Series:

Week Two: 25 June 2024

Our second webinar of NASCEE's Tuesday in the Trenches series was a hugely informative session where three representatives from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) discussed literacy and bilingual education, specifically the implementation of mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE). Dr Brian Ramadiro, Deputy Director of the Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development at the University of Fort Hare, moderated the session. The three speakers Prof. Leketi Makalela (Wits University and technical advisor to the DBE), Dr Mark Chetty (Director of National Assessments, DBE) and Dr Naledi Mbude (Deputy Director General for Transformation Programmes, DBE) have all contributed to the DBE's strategic planning for the incremental rolling out of mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE) nationwide from 2025, and each presented on their area of specialisation. From next year, the current *de facto* language policy of all African-language speaking learners transitioning to English or Afrikaans as the language of learning and teaching in Grade 4 will be phased out, and MTbBE will be implemented in schools in all nine provinces.

The reading process

Prof. Makalela's overview of the different perspectives on teaching reading highlighted longstanding debates and, importantly, that how best to teach reading depends on **individual language structures**. Currently, the curriculum and policies are developed in English and based on methodologies and pedagogies derived from teaching reading in English and heavily based on phonics. These are then translated into African languages without adequate consideration of the differences in languages. Makalela emphasised that this current approach neglects the need for a **morphological awareness** centred approach to teaching reading in African languages. Without this, children learning in African languages will remain disadvantaged by a curriculum that favours reading pedagogies better-suited to the English language. We recommend watching the recording from 18 minutes for those interested in exploring this topic further.

"Access to the curriculum, not access to classes"

Since 1994, the government and civil society have devoted significant funding to uplifting the education system and improving learners' literacy performance. This has, however, not translated to the desired improvement in learning. The speakers identified the early transition to English as the language of learning and teaching and a reliance on pedagogical methods best suited to English and Afrikaans as core reasons for this poor performance. **Children who learn and are assessed in their home language do better across learning areas**. If all teaching occurs in an unfamiliar language, learners may be present at school but cannot



learn or access the curriculum and content. MTbBE will provide learners' greater access to the curriculum, and the necessary additional time to develop English competency.

Responsibility for ensuring all children can learn successfully lies with the education system in its entirety. Dr Mbude cautioned against the narrow and unjustified deficit view of Black teachers that many hold. Her plea was to **attend to the unequal education system and the prioritisation of English** before making judgement of educators, whose commitment to excellence is often undermined by the struggles of teaching in the current system. In expanding on the impact of the dominance of English, she appealed to NGOs to consider the value of literacy interventions conducted in English, when interventions supporting reading in the mother tongue are most needed.

Translanguaging as a tool for teaching and learning

Translanguaging, the practice of using two or more languages at the same time to make meaning of content, **is already happening** in teaching and learning across grades, but assessments are in English so not all learners have access to assessment content. Much of what is required for MTbBE in terms of translanguaging and using the mother tongue beyond Grade 4 occurs informally. The introduction of a formal language strategy centred on MTbBE and the provision of adequate, appropriate materials provides opportunity to build on these informal processes.

Embracing a more bilingual assessment approach

One of the crucial aspects of the formalising of MTbBE is bilingual assessment, and this was central to Dr Chetty's presentation. He stated that, from 2025, there will be bilingual national assessments that will allow learners **to show their true potential**. Currently, it is not clear if poor performance in assessment is due to learners not being able to make meaning of texts or because they are unable to access the content of a text due to it being in an unfamiliar language. The risk is that **data is distorted** which can result in misdiagnoses of reading problems when it is, in fact, the language of assessment that restricts learners' comprehension. Misdiagnosing reading or learning problems can result in implementing costly and potentially unnecessary interventions.

In describing the need to challenge whether current assessment processes offer learners a fair opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, Dr Chetty spoke in detail on South Africa's poor performance in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Study) and potential reasons for this performance. His presentation highlighted the **need for in-depth critique of the assessment procedures** used in South Africa.

Teacher training

The robust chat thread indicated appreciation for the value of MTbBE but concern with the DBE's readiness to implement the strategy from 2025. There was particular attention to how pre-service and in-service educators are being equipped for implementing MTbBE. The DBE has been meeting with universities about incorporating MTbBE in teacher training. Dr Ramadiro reported that discussions are in early stages but this crucial aspect of successful implementation of MTbBE is acknowledged. Problematically only three of the



26 universities who offer teacher training are focused on mother tongue education beyond Grade 3, and this lack of focus on the mother tongue beyond Grade 3 has to receive urgent attention.

Dr Mbude emphasised that because translanguaging is already happening informally, **educators will be key drivers** in the formal implementation of MTbBE. The DBE will be providing in-service support to strengthen the implementation of MTbBE.

The Eastern Cape pilot

Dr Mbude reported on the outcomes of the MTbBE pilot that has been running in the Eastern Cape since 2012, a project which she stated provides **justification for a much-needed nationwide roll-out of MTbBE**. She presented data on mathematics and science assessment results for Grade 6 learners in classrooms where MTbBE teaching, learning and assessment was introduced that revealed that these learners significantly out-performed the control group of peers in classrooms where English is the LoLT. Details of the pilot are available from 1 hour 38 minutes on the recording.

Community and family engagement

The role of communities and families as crucial stakeholders in identifying and addressing the core challenges to reading and literacy was referred to briefly. This is undoubtedly an area that requires further focus and the promotion of these partnerships in the new national reading strategy is a positive move towards strengthening community involvement.

Access to materials

In addition to questions surrounding educators being equipped to implement MTbBE, attendees asked about the **cost of developing materials in African languages** and whether these materials would be ready by 2025. There are already materials available in English and Afrikaans. There will be an initial cost associated with versioning these materials into the nine African languages, but printing and distribution costs will remain the same.

There was a general discussion in the webinar chat of how to gain access to materials in African languages. We know that there is a commitment to producing high-quality, appealing materials in African languages and there are amazing NGOs who are carrying out this work. It was evident, though, that there is **a need for greater awareness of available resources**. Thank you to the NGOs involved in materials development who provided information about accessing their resources. Details of these projects are provided at the end of this document.

Final thoughts

A big thank you to Dr Ramadiro for moderating this session and to all three presenters for sharing your knowledge, insights and experience with us. We had over 100 attendees, including educators, academics, DBE officials, and representatives from various foundations, corporates and NGOs. The many discussions



in the webinar chat and the feedback we have received indicate the importance of this webinar topic and an interest in learning more about MTbBE and the realities of implementing this strategy.

As an organisation, NASCEE believes that this session marks a starting point for increased interaction among the DBE, and NASCEE and its members. We need to be **focused on what works** in the South Africa context and this requires close collaboration among all stakeholders. As Dr Mbude stated, it is by **learning from each other**, drawing on each others' expertise, evaluating our work and sharing best practices that we will be able to support learners in the most meaningful ways.

Reading materials in African languages

[African Storybook Project](#) has an extensive repository of open-source children's books published in all South African languages and hundreds of other African languages.

[Bibliodef](#) donates books, in all South African languages, to schools and organisations nationwide.

[Book Dash](#) produce open-source books that are available online and in print. Book Dash's books are in all South African languages and written for children zero to five.

[Nal'ibali](#) publishes colourful, bilingual newspaper supplements that are distributed nationally and can be freely downloaded from their website.

[Room to Read](#) develops literacy programmes for Grade 1 to 3 in African languages. The development of these programmes has included producing storybooks in African languages.

[Ulwazi Lwethu](#) is The Zenex Foundation's African Languages Literacy Project. It produces open source, high-quality African language leisure and graded readers for Foundation Phase learners.

[Wordworks](#) has a variety of books, games and activities that support literacy and language development in children from birth to eight years. These can be downloaded for printing.

The [South African National Lexicography Units](#) publishes dictionaries in all nine African languages. They can be contacted on info@lexiunitsa.org

