

Laying the multilingual groundwork: why mother-tongue learning matters

By [Dennis Lamberti](#)

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Imagine moving to the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a first language English speaker and trying to learn French. The experience might be overwhelming at first, the words difficult to pronounce and the grammatical rules impossible to remember. But gradually, you'll start to find your way. The alphabet, barring the odd accent, is the same, and even if you struggle to speak French, you'll likely quickly start to recognise written words and phrases.



Dennis Lamberti, development director at Media Works

Now imagine attempting to learn a foreign language without being literate in your own. Imagine having no foundation to fall back on: no grasp of basic spelling, tenses, or parts of speech and how they work. With no one to communicate to you verbally in a language you understand, you're absolutely in the dark: the sounds around you incomprehensible and the letters meaningless.

September marks International Literacy Month. Held for the first time in 1967, International Literacy Day represents “an opportunity for governments, civil society and stakeholders to highlight improvements in world literacy rates and reflect on the world’s remaining literacy challenges,” says the United Nations. This year’s theme, “Literacy and Multilingualism”, has particular relevance in South Africa, a country known for its progressive Constitution and, famously, its 11 official languages. But what does multilingualism mean in practice in this context? And what are the benefits and challenges of prioritising it, especially in the adult education and training (AET) space?

Where language and literacy intersect

Whether learners – both children and adults – should be educated in their mother tongue or English first is a contested topic, with champions and opponents on both ends of the spectrum. South Africa’s educational policy recommends mother-tongue instruction until Grade 3, after which most schools switch to English. Generally, AET institutions adopt a similar approach.

The reasons for this have been well researched. If you don't have enough of a foundation in your own language, many local and international studies suggest, you're unlikely to grasp concepts in another. Mother-tongue instruction has also been shown to make people more confident learners, and better able to absorb another language – such as English – as they progress through their studies. Adopting a multilingual approach, in other words, largely improves levels of literacy.

In AET, it's also important not to dissuade learners who may already feel insecure about their academic knowledge or abilities. Perhaps even more than children, adult learners need to feel comfortable with the content before them. One of the most important ways to achieve this is to provide educational material to adults in languages they understand.

Shortcomings and solutions

In her [article](#) on South Africa's multilingual education policy, Kathleen Heugh suggests that the quality of the lessons and materials that children in South Africa receive complicates the language-literacy debate. "What makes it worse for children who have received poor reading and writing instruction and inadequate provision of reading materials in their home language is that they are expected to switch over," she says, "and to read, write, and navigate their way from the fourth grade on, through a curriculum in English that they barely understand."

The AET space can be problematic in much the same way. Fortunately, some of the technological advances developed by Media Works, one of South Africa's leading AET providers, have helped to deal with these issues. Media Works understands that adult learners need to work with high-quality and easy-to-understand content. Digital education has therefore been a teaching method for decades and, more recently, the Media Works team has introduced multilingual "bubbles" into its Accelerate Pro programme.

Bubbles are QR codes that are built into Accelerate Pro's material. They provide learners with immediate access to multimedia lessons that explain complicated concepts in easy and accessible ways. For the first time, these bubbles are now available in isiZulu, Sesotho, Setswana, as well as English and Afrikaans. Having this information available at the literal touch of a button enables people to learn at their own pace and in a language they are comfortable in, which fuels literacy.

When it comes to AET, multilingual instruction and material should always be an option. While the transition to English, still the language of further learning and business in South Africa, is important, this move is only going to be possible if the groundwork is laid first.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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