

**11 SEPTEMBER
2019**

BRIDGE EARLY GRADE READING COP MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

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01 SETTING THE SCENE

The importance of the mother tongue, and, more specifically, of mother-tongue education, is recognised globally. Use of the mother tongue is regarded as one of the most effective ways of acting and performing cognitively, socially and communally. However, mother tongue or home language instruction remains a contentious subject in the South African education space. The majority of South African children do not know how to read or write in their mother tongue as a result of the anglonormative nature of the education system. The reasons for the prioritisation of English are complex and multifaced and include cultural perceptions of the value of English as the language of business and opportunity, the complicated inheritance of the Bantu Education system and a lack of education materials in African languages. These subjects were explored in the most recent Early Grade Reading Community of Practice (EGR CoP) held on the 11th of September 2019.

02 THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Following a check-in process, Jenny Katz, a researcher and developer at Molteno, presented on the importance of Early Grade Learner and Teacher Support Materials (LTSM) in African Languages. Jenny began by highlighting the Vula Bula project.

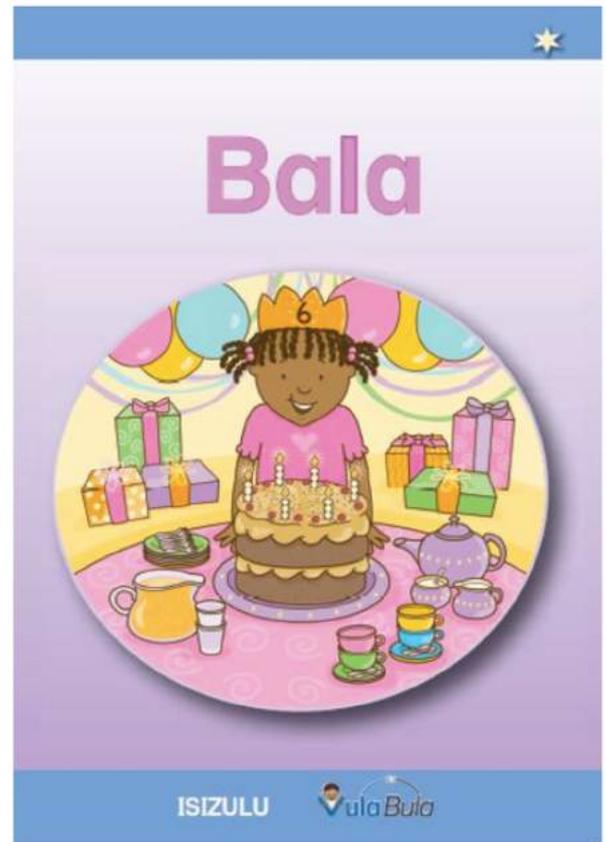
She began by explaining that the vast majority of early readers currently available in African languages are directly translated from an original English source document. This leads to the creation of complex texts that are not commensurate with the learners' level of reading.

Research on early reading instruction notes that beginner readers should receive literacy instruction using easily decodable texts at their instructional reading level (Fountas & Pinnell 1996). From a diagnostic perspective, a text in which a learner can read and comprehend 90% of the words easily is considered to be at that reader's instructional reading level; more difficult text is considered to be at the reader's 'frustration level' and will require additional teacher support (Clay 1991).

Using this research as a foundation, the Vula Bula Foundation Phase materials were developed using a phonics-based approach to teaching reading in the orthographies of South Africa's indigenous languages.

The Vula Bula Grade 1 and 2 graded reading programme is the first authentic progressive reading scheme in African languages in South Africa. Each series of 32 readers originates from the respective indigenous African language, and is carefully designed in accordance with the natural progression and specific linguistic requirements of that language. The graded readers provide multiple opportunities for group, guided, paired and independent reading practice. Simple sentence structures and familiar vocabulary enable rapid reading progress.

The Vula Bula Grade 3 graded readers provide practice for early fluent readers. Every reader contains four different stories, including non-fiction texts. Each story is preceded by a list of vocabulary words and a list of 'hard-to-read' words which learners are required to master. Readers at this level contain more pages and more text per page, longer sentences, greater variation in sentence patterns, more formal and descriptive language, and richer vocabulary. Reading now becomes more automatic, with more energy devoted to comprehension than to word attack/ decoding as learners approach reading independence. Each story is followed by a set of comprehension questions, and language and writing activities linked to the CAPS.

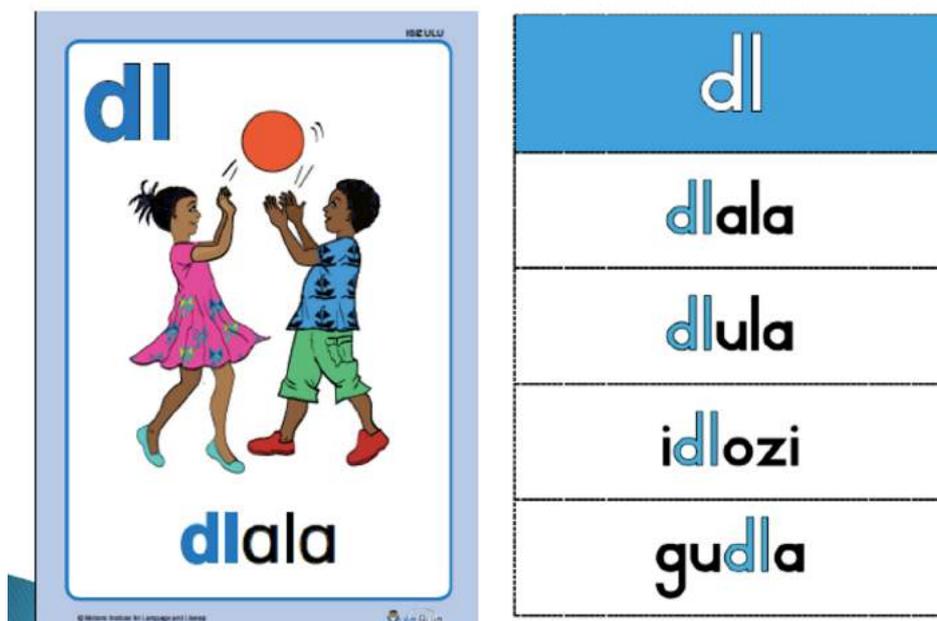


Jenny went on to identify effective reading skills and strategies:

- PHONICS and DECODING SKILLS (knowing individual sounds) are important for learning to read in all languages, especially African languages:
ubisi, icawe, idada, isikwere, ihlosi, imvubu, ndlu, ilokhwe
- SYLLABIFICATION SKILLS (dividing words into syllables) are important for learning to read in all Nguni languages:
ba-le-ka, li-xe-sha, i-ncwa-di, i-si-lwa-na-ya-na
- PREFIX, INFIX, ROOT WORD and SUFFIX RECOGNITION is important for building fluency in all Nguni languages:
ndi-ngu-Zinzi, u-titshala-kazi, asi-na-mazinyo, nase-sipilini

Alphabet frieze is a key starting point for teaching reading and introduces children to different sounds. The words that children are introduced to should be mostly phonically regular, enabling children to read them easily. Vula Bula make use of friezes to help readers focus on target sounds.

Example of isiZulu phonic frieze and flashcard words



The name Vula Bula captures the heart of these select Learner and Teacher Support Materials (LTSM). The name connects with all South African African languages: Vula means 'open' in isiXhosa, isiZulu, isiNdebele, Siswati and Tshivenda. Bula means 'open' in Setswana, Sesotho and Sepedi. Vula also means 'speak' in Xitsonga. By opening the reading books, Vula Bula hopes that children will aspire to read, write, and express their thoughts and feelings, while at the same time open their minds to the pleasure of books and lifelong learning.

Our children come to schools with so many language resources and we cast them aside by focusing on narrow monolingualism. Why do we keep denigrating home languages when so many of our learners will remain in the communities in which their home language is spoken?

Jenny Katz

To access Jenny's presentation, click [here](#).

03 QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Following on from Jenny's presentation, CoP members were invited to ask questions and/or make comments on the presentation and the topic of teaching reading more generally. Key points from this discussion are captured below:

- We need to recognise that we hold deep-rooted philosophical beliefs about which languages are inferior and which should be valued. In South Africa, African languages are often demeaned. Changing this perspective is part of the larger project of Black Consciousness.
- We need to be cognizant of the legacy of Apartheid when thinking about language and reading. Black people were forced to learn in the mother tongue by government and some black people experience their home languages as part of this subjugation.
- The language of teaching and learning is connected to political will. During Apartheid, there existed a dedication to developing Afrikaans. Our current government is reluctant to take similar steps to develop resources and reference materials in African languages.
- Part of decolonising education is understanding that African languages contain rich vocabularies despite common thinking. It's about engaging with the language to develop it.
- We must be careful not to take hold of our respective dialects to the point of excluding other dialects and versions of languages. This is a challenge for publishers who often say 'we can't use this word as this word isn't 'true' Zulu or Sesotho.
- Learning a language is also dependent on language influence. isiXhosa for example is influenced by Afrikaans – it's region specific. If a person is proficient in one of the Nguni languages, it's far easier for them to understand and learn other languages.

04 EXPLORING ONLINE RESOURCES

After the round of questions and comments, CoP members were led through the Vula Bela website. To access the website, click [here](#).

VULA BULA: READING IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES MADE EASY!

Vula Bula is the first graded reading programme in African languages where progression from level to level is based on the phonics of each language.

ABOUT VULA BULA

BROWSE BY LANGUAGE

View our comprehensive Learner and Teacher Support Materials (LTM) by language.

- ISINDEBELE
- ISIXHOSA
- ISIZULU
- SEPEDI
- SESOTHO
- SETSWANA
- SISWATI
- TSHIVENQA
- XITSONGA
- AFRIKAANS
- ENGLISH

BROWSE BY RESOURCE TYPE

Select Learner and Teacher Support Materials (LTM) from the Vula Bula catalogue from graded readers to big books, alphabet friezes and vocabulary posters.

- Anthologies
- Big Books
- Early Graded Readers
- Fluent Graded Readers
- Phonics
- Resources for Teachers
- High Frequency Words
- Vocabulary Posters

FEATURED RESOURCES

Choose from a wide range of our home language literacy resources. These can be enjoyed in the classroom, or at home.

Questions?
Please leave a message and we will come back to you shortly.

05 CHECK OUT

The day was brought to a close by Ongeziwe Nxokwana who led the group through a check out process.