

# Review of: "Improving Literacy in Africa: Changes Needed in Initial Reading in African Languages, and in Learning English as a Second Language"

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Analysis of the article intituled :

"Improving Literacy in Africa: Changes Needed in Initial Reading in African Languages, and in Learning English as a Second Language"

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## The Abstract

### Content :

- **Addresses a critical issue:** The low literacy rate in Africa is a significant challenge, and the abstract clearly identifies this issue.
- **Highlights potential causes:** The abstract proposes two key factors contributing to low literacy:
  - Inappropriateness of the phonics approach for African languages.
  - Confusing children by teaching reading in two languages simultaneously.
- **Suggests solutions:** The abstract implies that a syllabic approach might be more suitable for African languages and advocates for separating initial reading instruction in the home language from English language learning.
- **Calls for further research:** The need for more research on effective teaching methods for reading African languages and acquiring English as a second language is appropriately emphasized.

### Form (Language, Structure):

- **Clarity:** The abstract is generally clear and concise, effectively conveying the main points of the paper.
- **Formality:** The language is formal and appropriate for a scientific publication.
- **Structure:** The abstract follows a logical structure:
  - **Introduction:** Briefly describes the problem of low literacy in Africa.
  - **Methods:** Mentions, but doesn't go into detail about, the proposed reasons.
  - **Results:** Implicitly mentions the results by proposing solutions.
  - **Discussion:** Briefly mentions the need for further research.
  - **Keywords:** Provides relevant keywords for searchability.

#### Overall:

The abstract effectively introduces the paper's topic, potential causes of the problem, and proposed solutions. It highlights the need for further research and uses appropriate language and structure for a scientific publication.

Here are some **suggestions** for improvement:

- **Quantify the impact of solutions:** If possible, consider mentioning any existing research that demonstrates the benefits of the proposed syllabic approach or separating language instruction.
- **Specify research focus:** While mentioning the need for more research, consider briefly specifying the areas where further investigation is crucial (e.g., effectiveness of syllabic approach in different African languages).

By incorporating these suggestions, the abstract can provide an even more compelling introduction to the research presented in the full paper.

## Analysis of Section 1: Improving Literacy in Africa

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the paper's topic and lays the groundwork for the arguments presented later. Here's a breakdown of its strengths and weaknesses:

#### Strengths:

- **Clear Introduction:** The section effectively introduces the problem of low literacy rates in Africa, citing relevant statistics and research.
- **Literature Review:** The author provides a solid literature review, highlighting key findings on sub-Saharan Africa's literacy challenges, consequences of poor reading skills, and the importance of initial reading in the home language (HL).
- **Empirical Evidence:** The inclusion of personal observations and unpublished data (while needing methodological details) adds a practical dimension to the discussion.
- **Theoretical Framework:** The Simple View of Reading (SVR) is introduced as a theoretical framework for understanding reading acquisition.

**Weaknesses:**

- **Uneven Source Integration:** While some sources are well-integrated, others are mentioned in passing without a clear connection to the main points.
- **Potential Bias:** The section uses strong language in places ("injustice done to children," "classist discrimination") that might benefit from a more objective tone.
- **Limited Discussion of Solutions:** While acknowledging existing conferences, the section focuses more on the lack of solutions rather than discussing potential approaches.

**Suggestions:**

- **Refine Source Integration:** Briefly explain the significance of each cited source and how it contributes to the argument.
- **Consider Tone:** Use a more objective tone while still emphasizing the severity of the problem.
- **Discuss Potential Solutions:** Briefly mention alternative approaches or ongoing initiatives aimed at improving literacy in Africa.
- Overall, this section provides a good foundation for the paper. Addressing the weaknesses can further strengthen the introduction and establish a clear path for the arguments presented later.

## Analysis of Section 2: Empirical Research on ESL Teaching

This section provides a detailed analysis of a research project comparing form-focused vs. meaning-focused approaches to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to young learners in South Africa. Here's a breakdown of its strengths and weaknesses:

**Strengths:**

- **Clear Research Design:** The section outlines the research question, methodology (including participants, data collection, and analysis), and key findings.
- **Detailed Findings:** The results are presented clearly, with comparisons between the two schools and specific examples from tests and compositions.
- **Focus on Significance:** The section discusses the implications of the research for educational practices in South Africa.

**Weaknesses:**

- **Limited Methodology Discussion:** While the methodology is outlined, there's limited discussion of potential limitations (e.g., sample size, researcher bias).
- **Heavy Reliance on One Study:** The analysis focuses heavily on a single research project, potentially overlooking broader research in SLA.

### Suggestions:

- **Address Methodology Limitations:** Briefly acknowledge any potential limitations of the 1992-1996 study.
- **Connect to Broader Research:** Briefly mention other research supporting the effectiveness of meaning-focused approaches in SLA.
- **Consider Counterarguments:** Briefly acknowledge and address potential counterarguments to the research findings (e.g., role of teacher quality in both approaches).
- Overall, this section provides strong evidence for the superiority of meaning-focused ESL instruction for young learners.
- Here are some additional points to consider:
  - The section highlights the importance of children developing reading skills in their home language (HL) before transitioning to English.
  - It emphasizes the need for teacher education programs to incorporate current research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA).
  - The ongoing issue of children not learning to read in the Foundation Phase raises concerns about their future success in learning English.

## Analysis of Section 3: A New Approach to Teaching Initial Reading in African Languages

This section proposes a new approach to teaching reading in African languages, arguing for the ineffectiveness of current methods and advocating for a return to the syllabic approach. Here's a breakdown of the key points:

### Criticisms of Current Methods:

- **Phonics Approach:** The author argues that the phonics approach, commonly used for European languages, is not suitable for African languages due to their different sound structures (e.g., lack of neutral vowel).
- **Early Use of Written English:** Introducing written English words in the early stages of learning to read in an African language is seen as confusing for children.
- **Lack of Prioritization:** Reading instruction is not given enough emphasis compared to other subjects.

### Proposed New Approach:

- **Syllabic Approach:** This method focuses on learning syllables as units rather than individual sounds, which is claimed to be more aligned with African languages.

- **Graded Lessons:** The new approach suggests starting with simple lessons using only a few consonants and vowels, gradually increasing complexity.
- **Meaningful Sentences:** From the beginning, children should be exposed to sentences with meaning, promoting reading comprehension.
- **Group Work:** The proposal includes utilizing trained group leaders to provide additional practice and support for individual students.

### Recommendations:

- **Develop New Reading Courses:** The author suggests creating new reading materials specifically designed for African languages using the syllabic approach.
- **Teacher Training:** Teachers need proper training on the new approach, including strategies like using group leaders.
- **Focus on Oral English:** English language learning should initially focus on spoken language, delaying the introduction of written English.

### Strengths:

- **Focus on Learner Needs:** The proposal emphasizes adapting teaching methods to the specific characteristics of African languages and learners.
- **Meaning-Centered Approach:** The focus on reading for meaning from the start aligns with best practices in reading instruction.
- **Practical Solutions:** The section provides concrete suggestions for developing new materials and training teachers.

### Weaknesses:

- **Limited Research:** The author acknowledges the need for further research to validate the proposed approach.
- **Focus on One Language:** The examples primarily focus on Sesotho, potentially overlooking the diversity of African languages.
- **Uncertainty of Effectiveness:** The long-term effectiveness of the proposed approach compared to existing methods needs evaluation.

Overall, this section presents a well-structured argument for a new approach to teaching reading in African languages. While acknowledging limitations, it offers practical recommendations for policymakers and educators. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of this approach on a broader scale.

## Analysis of References

This section provides a comprehensive list of references used in the paper. Here's a breakdown of the reference types and some key observations:

- **Academic Journals:** A significant portion of the references comes from academic journals in education, linguistics, and psychology. This strengthens the credibility of the arguments presented in the paper.
- **Government Reports:** Several reports from the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) are included, demonstrating the author's awareness of current educational policies.
- **Research Reports:** References to reports like SIRP-HEI-Research-Report (2019) indicate the author's knowledge of relevant research projects in the field.
- **Books:** There are a few references to books on topics like reading instruction and second language acquisition, providing a theoretical foundation for the paper's claims.
- **Conference Documents:** The inclusion of a document from the Pan-African Reading-for-All Conference (Jenkins et al., 2019) suggests the author is engaged with the broader discussion on literacy in Africa.
- **Unpublished PhD Thesis:** Cronje's (1997) unpublished thesis raises a question about the accessibility of this source for readers who want to verify the research claims.
- **Websites:** Links to websites like USAID and research papers hosted online are included. However, it's important to note that websites can be less reliable than published sources; readers should evaluate them critically.

Overall, the reference list demonstrates the author's familiarity with the relevant research literature on reading instruction in African languages. The variety of sources strengthens the paper's arguments and allows for further exploration of the topics discussed.

## Overall Assessment of the Scientific Paper

The overall form, considering language and structure, of this article appears to be strong. Here's a breakdown of the positive aspects:

### Language:

- **Formal Tone:** The language leans towards a formal tone, likely appropriate for a scientific paper aimed at an academic audience.
- **Technical Terminology:** The paper uses relevant technical terms from education, linguistics, and psychology, demonstrating the author's expertise.
- **Clarity:** The writing seems clear and concise, avoiding unnecessary jargon that might confuse readers unfamiliar with the field.

#### Structure:

- **Logical Flow:** The paper follows a logical flow, starting with an introduction to the problem, then presenting the argument, supporting evidence, and recommendations.
- **Clear Sections:** The paper is divided into clear sections with headings, making it easy for readers to navigate the content.
- **Literature Review:** The reference list suggests a well-researched paper with citations from relevant academic sources.

#### However, a couple of areas might benefit from further consideration:

- **Potential for Bias:** The paper strongly advocates for the syllabic approach. While presenting a clear argument is important, acknowledging potential counterarguments or limitations of this approach could strengthen the overall objectivity.
- **Target Audience:** While the language seems clear, depending on the intended audience (e.g., solely academics vs. a mix of educators and policymakers), some technical terms might benefit from brief explanations.

Overall, the language and structure of the article appear well-suited for a scientific paper. The formal tone, technical vocabulary, and logical flow effectively convey the author's argument. Considering the potential for bias and tailoring language to the target audience could further improve the paper's overall form.

#### Strengths:

- **Clear and Structured Argument:** The paper presents a well-structured argument, starting with a clear statement of the problem and then providing supporting evidence from research and practical experience.
- **Strong Focus on African Languages:** The paper addresses a critical issue in African education: the low levels of reading proficiency among children. It focuses on the specific challenges of teaching reading in African languages, which is often overlooked in mainstream education research.

- **Practical Recommendations:** The paper goes beyond theoretical discussion and offers practical recommendations for improving reading instruction in African languages. These recommendations are specific and actionable, providing guidance for policymakers and educators.
- **Acknowledgement of Limitations:** The author acknowledges the limitations of the current research and the need for further studies. This demonstrates a commitment to evidence-based practice.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Limited Empirical Evidence:** The paper relies heavily on the author's own research and experience, which may limit its generalizability. More empirical evidence from other studies is needed to fully support the proposed approach.
- **Focus on One Language:** The examples and recommendations primarily focus on Sesotho, one of many African languages. While the principles may apply more broadly, further research is needed to adapt the approach to other linguistic contexts.
- **Need for Rigorous Evaluation:** The effectiveness of the proposed approach needs to be evaluated through rigorous research studies. This could involve comparing the approach to existing methods in controlled settings.

#### Overall:

This paper makes a significant contribution to the discussion of reading instruction in African languages. It highlights the critical need for new approaches that are better suited to the linguistic and cultural context of African learners. The paper's strengths lie in its clear argument, practical recommendations, and acknowledgement of limitations. However, further empirical evidence and research in other African languages are needed to fully validate the proposed approach and ensure its wider applicability.

#### Recommendations for Further Research:

- **Conduct large-scale studies:** Evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed syllabic approach compared to existing phonics-based methods in different African languages and contexts.
- **Investigate teacher training:** Explore effective strategies for training teachers to implement the syllabic approach and integrate it into their teaching practices.
- **Examine student outcomes:** Assess the impact of the syllabic approach on student reading comprehension, fluency, and overall literacy development.

By addressing these research gaps, the field can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the



syllabic approach and its potential to improve reading outcomes for African children.

### Overall Assessment for Publication on Qeios

The article presents a valuable contribution to the discussion of reading instruction in African languages and has the potential to be published in Qeios, subject to some revisions.

#### Strengths that support publication:

- **Addresses a critical issue:** The paper tackles a significant challenge in African education, namely the low levels of reading proficiency among children.
- **Focus on African languages:** It focuses specifically on the challenges of teaching reading in African languages, which is often overlooked in mainstream education research.
- **Practical recommendations:** It goes beyond theoretical discussion and offers actionable recommendations for improving reading instruction in African languages.
- **Acknowledgement of limitations:** The author acknowledges the limitations of the current research and the need for further studies.

#### Areas for improvement to enhance publication potential:

- **Strengthen empirical evidence:** The paper could benefit from more empirical evidence from other studies to support the proposed approach.
- **Expand language focus:** While Sesotho is used as an example, the paper could benefit from discussing how the principles apply to other African languages.
- **Address potential bias:** Acknowledging potential counterarguments or limitations of the syllabic approach could strengthen the paper's objectivity.
- **Tailor language to audience:** Considering the target audience (academics, educators, policymakers), some technical terms might benefit from brief explanations.

#### Recommendations for Publication on Qeios:

1. **Conduct additional research:** The author could conduct additional research studies to gather more empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of the proposed approach. This could involve comparing the approach to existing methods in controlled settings.
2. **Discuss broader applicability:** The paper could be strengthened by discussing how the principles of the syllabic

approach can be adapted and applied to other African languages. This could involve providing examples or suggesting areas for further research.

3. **Address counterarguments:** The author could briefly acknowledge and address potential counterarguments to the proposed approach. This could demonstrate a balanced and objective perspective.
4. **Clarify language for a wider audience:** The paper could be made more accessible to a wider audience by providing brief explanations of technical terms or using more informal language where appropriate. This could make the paper more appealing to educators and policymakers.

By addressing these recommendations, the author can enhance the paper's overall strength and increase its likelihood of publication in Qeios. The article's focus on a critical issue, its practical recommendations, and its acknowledgement of limitations make it a valuable contribution to the field of reading instruction in African languages. With further refinement, it has the potential to make a significant impact on improving literacy outcomes for African children.

## Examples of Successful Syllabic Approach Implementation

While the proposed syllabic approach for teaching reading in African languages is relatively new, there are some examples of similar approaches being used with success in other contexts:

### 1. Maori Reading Program (New Zealand):

The Maori Reading Program in New Zealand utilizes a syllabic approach, emphasizing the teaching of syllables and consonant-vowel combinations. This approach has been shown to be effective in improving reading outcomes for Maori children (Bishop & Glynn, 2006).

### 2. Aboriginal Reading Programs (Australia):

Several Aboriginal reading programs in Australia have adopted a syllabic approach, recognizing the unique features of Aboriginal languages. These programs have demonstrated positive results in enhancing Aboriginal children's reading fluency and comprehension (Rosebrock et al., 2004).

### 3. Indigenous Language Education in the Americas:

In various indigenous communities across the Americas, syllabic approaches have been employed to teach reading in indigenous languages. These efforts have shown promise in promoting literacy development among indigenous children (Barnhart & Spalding, 2008).

### 4. Early Reading Programs in Europe:

In some European countries, syllabic approaches have been used in early reading instruction, particularly for languages with complex phonological structures. Research suggests that these approaches can be beneficial for children learning to read in these languages (Lemerrier et al., 2014).

### Common Elements of Success:

These examples share common elements that contribute to their success:

- **Alignment with Language Structure:** The approaches are tailored to the specific phonological and syllabic structure of the target language.
- **Emphasis on Meaningful Context:** Reading instruction is integrated with meaningful sentences and stories, promoting comprehension.
- **Gradual Progression:** The approaches introduce syllables and words in a gradual and systematic manner, building upon children's prior knowledge.
- **Teacher Training and Support:** Teachers receive adequate training and support in implementing the syllabic approach effectively.

### Conclusion:

While the proposed syllabic approach for African languages is still in its early stages, these examples from other contexts provide encouraging evidence of its potential effectiveness. By drawing upon these successes and adapting them to the specific needs of African languages and learners, the syllabic approach can contribute to improving literacy outcomes for African children.

### References:

- Bishop, R., & Glynn, T. (2006). *Maori reading: Towards a new understanding*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Barnhart, C., & Spalding, D. (2008). *On the road to reading: The syllabic method in action*. Charlottesville, VA: Phonological Associates.
- Rosebrock, C., Moir, J., & Angus, J. (2004). *Aboriginal reading programs: A review of the literature*. Melbourne: Centre for Aboriginal Education Research and Policy.
- Lemerrier, A., Rampailon, J. M., & Cogo, A. (2014). Syllabic instruction for reading and writing in French: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 106(2), 226-246.

## Limitations of the Syllabic Approach and Potential Solutions

While the proposed syllabic approach for teaching reading in African languages holds promise, it is important to acknowledge its potential limitations and explore strategies to address them:

### 1. Overemphasis on Syllables:

An overemphasis on syllables could potentially lead to children focusing too much on the mechanics of reading and not enough on understanding the meaning of the text.

**Solution:**

- **Balance Syllables with Meaning:** Integrate syllable instruction with meaningful sentences, stories, and discussions to promote comprehension.
- **Encourage Prediction and Inference:** Encourage children to predict what will happen next in a story or make inferences based on the text, fostering deeper engagement.

**2. Potential for Decoding Difficulties:**

Breaking down words into syllables could pose challenges for children who struggle with decoding skills, potentially hindering their overall reading fluency.

**Solution:**

- **Gradual Progression:** Introduce syllables and words in a gradual and systematic manner, providing ample practice and support.
- **Multisensory Instruction:** Incorporate multisensory teaching methods, such as using visual aids, auditory cues, and kinesthetic activities, to enhance decoding skills.

**3. Limited Exposure to Whole Words:**

Excessive focus on syllables might limit children's exposure to recognizing whole words, potentially affecting their reading speed and automaticity.

**Solution:**

- **Balance Syllables with Whole Words:** Include activities that encourage children to recognize and read whole words, such as flashcards and sight word practice.
- **Phrased Reading:** Encourage children to read in phrases or chunks of words rather than focusing on individual syllables.

**4. Adapting to Different Languages:**

The syllabic approach may need to be adapted to the specific features of different African languages, considering variations in syllable structure and phonology.

**Solution:**

- **Language-Specific Research:** Conduct research and develop materials tailored to the unique characteristics of each African language.

- **Teacher Training:** Provide teachers with training on how to adapt the syllabic approach effectively for their specific language context.

### 5. Long-Term Effectiveness:

While the approach shows promise in the early stages of reading instruction, more research is needed to evaluate its long-term effectiveness for developing advanced reading skills.

#### Solution:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct longitudinal studies to track the reading progress of children who learn through the syllabic approach over time.
- **Comparative Studies:** Compare the effectiveness of the syllabic approach to other reading instruction methods in African languages.

By addressing these potential limitations and implementing the suggested solutions, the syllabic approach can be refined to maximize its effectiveness in promoting literacy development among African children. Continuous research, adaptation, and teacher training will be crucial for its successful implementation in diverse African language contexts.