



UTILISING LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT RESULTS TO IMPROVE ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of annual assessments in South African schools from 2011 represents yet another attempt to remedy the low learner performance in literacy and numeracy. The education authorities have embarked on the annual practice of testing learners in Grade 1 to Grade 6 and Grade 9 for the twin purpose of measuring the performance of the education system and providing diagnostic information to teachers to guide and inform their teaching. The results have shown that there are no significant improvements in literacy in English language. In this paper, I present a review of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) reports and other relevant literature with a view to establishing the extent to which the intent of providing diagnostic information to guide teachers and provide steps to improve literacy figures has actually been met. I further discuss both the challenges and opportunities of utilising annual assessments as a vehicle for improving English language teaching and learning in the classroom. I conclude by providing suggestions on how English language learning and teaching can be enhanced through this national testing regime.

Keywords: *English language teaching and learning, literacy, large-scale assessment, Annual National Assessment, Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement*

INTRODUCTION

The paper begins with global concerns regarding literacy and numeracy, followed by an overview of literacy concerns in Africa and a discussion of South Africa and the Annual National Assessment (ANA). Next, the methodology and findings of the study are presented, followed by a discussion on the language challenges faced by teachers in an attempt to use the results of the ANA to improve teaching and learning.

GLOBAL CONCERNS REGARDING LITERACY AND NUMERACY

According to the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEY), literacy is one of the most important academic skills and is deemed a significant predictor of success in life (IRA & NAEY, 1998). Every individual needs to be literate and numerate, as these basic skills form part of our daily lives; from interpersonal communication to simple tasks like following signs and instructions. Traditionally, literacy is referred to as the skills of reading and writing, but today our understanding of literacy encompasses much more than that. Consequently, our understanding of what is required of teachers of literacy needs to accommodate this shift in paradigm. According to an education programme carried out in the United States, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) and the National Education Association (NEA) jointly defined seven standards for teacher competence in the educational assessment of students (AFT, NCME & NEA, 1990). These standards state that teachers should be skilled in choosing and developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions. Stiggins (1990), who proposed seven competencies that teachers should possess in order to be considered "assessment literate", developed a revised version of this standard.

After 20 years, Brookhart (2011) argued that Stiggins's standards do not adequately address the current education context of teachers with regard to recent conceptions of formative assessment knowledge, skills and the effects of accountability and standards-based reform on teachers' classroom practices. This limitation was addressed by proposing an extended set of assessment knowledge and skills that teachers require. Gotch and French (2014) note that assessment literacy includes using multiple high-quality assessments that are aligned with accurately defined achievement targets. From this perspective, literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication, including



spoken language, print, broadcast media and digital media. In the same way, we now think of numeracy as not just the ability to use numbers, but also the wider ability to use mathematics to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings. For all these reasons, teachers of all post-primary subjects have an important role to play in developing and consolidating students' ability to use literacy and numeracy.

LITERACY CONCERNS IN AFRICA

South Africa, like other post-colonial emerging economies, has its challenges with the development of literacy (Abadzi, 2008), and needs to respond to what has been called a crisis in literacy teaching for almost a decade. In recent years, the key focus of the transformation programme for the post-apartheid schooling sector in South Africa has moved towards assessment as a key driver for improving teaching and learning in schools (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). The problem in South African schools has been observed despite the relatively large investment made into education when compared with neighbouring countries: increased inputs, which do not seem to match the observed learning outcomes (Chisholm & Wilderman, 2013). According to Moloj and Chetty (2010), both regional and international benchmarking studies continue to show that the level and quality of learning outcomes in South African schools tend to be lower than those of countries that invest significantly less in their schooling sector. The ANA in South Africa was therefore planned as a measure that could potentially increase awareness of the challenges of teaching and learning literacy (and numeracy) in South Africa.

SOUTH AFRICA AND ANNUAL ASSESSMENTS

The ANA is a series of standardised annual examinations, which represents one of the largest education initiatives undertaken in the country, with the primary aim of improving learning through effective teaching. The ANA consists of the testing of all Grade 1 to Grade 6 and Grade 9 learners in languages and mathematics. This testing involves approximately six million learners in all the public schools in the country (Kanjee & Moloj, 2014). National assessment surveys were first implemented in 1996 on representative samples of schools and learners in Grade 3, Grade 6 and Grade 9 (Kanjee, 2009).

The ANA was piloted in its current design in 2010 as a national strategy to monitor the level and quality of basic education with a view to ensuring that every child receives a basic education of a high quality, irrespective of the school they attend.



The ANA was introduced due to the repeated findings that South African learners were underperforming in relation to the financial and resource inputs that the state was investing in education (Chisholm & Wildeman, 2013). Therefore, a presidential injunction was issued to conduct the ANA and monitor performance, with the target set at 60% of learners in Grade 3, Grade 6 and Grade 9 achieving acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy by 2014 (Republic of South Africa, 2011a). According to the plan, the ANA is expected to improve learning in four key ways: exposing teachers to best practices in assessment, targeting interventions to the schools that need them most, giving schools the opportunity to pride themselves on their own improvement, and giving parents better information on the education of their children (Republic of South Africa, 2012a:49).

Despite the cycles of the ANA that had been completed, there had been limited research and information regarding the extent to which the objectives of the ANA were being addressed in schools, or the challenges and opportunities that teachers were encountering in its use to improve teaching and learning. The purpose of the ANA, as indicated in the reports, provides a glimpse of what should be expected from its outcome.

A summary of the purpose of ANA is listed below:

- Measure performance of the education system:
 - Overview of improvements and/or decline in different areas of the education system
 - “In-house” data to compare with international assessment data
- Provide diagnostic information to the teacher:
 - Clearer picture of the nature of the problems in the system
 - Information to teachers regarding what the learners are actually failing
- Guide and inform teaching and learning:
 - Identification of problem areas should provide insights into the contents that require new teaching strategies
 - Opportunities to plan and prepare accordingly

(Republic of South Africa,
2011a; 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2014)



PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RATIONALE

Although current debates concerning the value of the ANA and its impact on improving teaching and learning continue, and accepting the idea that the ANA should serve as a catalyst for spearheading reform in the classroom, the critical challenge of assessment results shows that there are no significant improvements in the literacy figures. However, instances of Grade 5 learners reading at Grade 1 level still remain.

There are many limitations to the ANA, as identified by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and other stakeholders. However, a lot can be learned from these assessments in terms of areas of difficulty for second-language and multilingual learners. Having assessment results that reflect global annual improvements and/or compare schools within a district or province and/or compare one province with another potentially provides valuable feedback. However, these assessments should be learner-centred and provide assessment feedback based specifically on the sections of the curriculum that certain groups of learners are struggling with and why. Special attention should be paid to the language of instruction, as well as teaching and learning strategies and the support that is required to facilitate learning and ultimately improve learner achievement. The assessment results should be able to provide teachers with information regarding the area of the curriculum students are struggling with, and thus provide an opportunity for the development of appropriate and practical in-service training that is aimed at providing teachers with the tools to better teach these content areas. Popham (2009) argues that usable information from the ANA can have a positive effect on classroom practices and consequently improve teaching and learning.

From this point of view, this paper investigates key challenges and opportunities for language teachers as they strive to use the ANA's results to improve learning and teaching in South African schools, focusing on the following questions:

- In what ways have the results of the ANA served as a catalyst for improving literacy?
- How should the assessments facilitate learning and improvement?
- What purposes should the reports on the assessments serve?

METHODS

The data analysis used in the study consisted of the systematic review of the reports on the ANA of 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 (Republic of South Africa, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014). It also included the Diagnostic Report and Framework for Improvement for First Additional Language. The diagnostic analysis for Grade 4 to Grade 6 was compared for the years in question. The recommendations for the national interventions, the language framework, as well as the proposed strategies for strengthening the teaching and learning of English First Additional Language (EFAL), were analysed and compared. Other documents reviewed included the following:

- Review of the Language Component of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)
- Analysis of guidelines for the teaching and learning of language (English)

These findings for the reviews indicated above were subsequently compared to selected literature, focusing on the implementation of the recommendations for the improvement of learner performance, particularly in literacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the reports on the ANA and the diagnostic report, with a focus on EFAL components, are very revealing (see Tables 1). It is commendable that, in the full reports, the DBE is upfront about the shortcomings and the logistical challenges encountered annually. Some of these are as follows:

- Better logistics in the distribution of ANA materials to schools
- The late arrival of the required materials in the right languages to schools in the 2011 school year
- More rigorous quality assurance measures in the verification of the ANA
- Standardisation
- Better data collection procedures

(Republic of South Africa, 2011)



It is also commendable that the DBE goes into detail in the diagnostic reports about the challenges the learners are experiencing. The results of this review study have shown that the contents of these reports are predictable. While intervention strategies are in place to address the identified learners' gap in language learning, there is no evidence to suggest that the proposed interventions are being adequately implemented. Focusing on what it is that learners need to improve on is an excellent strategy, provided that the teachers are experienced in teaching these language contents and are themselves suitable models of the target outcome.

If learners are consistently weak in an area of learning, one probably needs to take a closer look at the teaching methods and put systems in place to support teachers who are faced with the challenges of teaching in an additional language in multilingual contexts.

The reports revealed the following:

- Schools, districts and provinces are provided with feedback from an item-level diagnostic analysis of what learners were able or to demonstrate (or unable to demonstrate) in the tests in terms of requisite knowledge and skills at each grade level.
- The DBE has put a comprehensive plan in place that includes detailed curriculum interventions, step-by-step guidance to teachers on how to mediate in the identified challenge areas, as well as pedagogic guidelines on how to teach specific concepts in the curriculum.

A slight shift is needed in this top-down approach, which is used to disseminate the results. Plans need to be collaboratively developed, with teachers in the affected areas working alongside specialists in the field. The teachers are most likely experts in their contexts and could detail the actual challenges they face in their schools and could indicate the specific support that would benefit them.



Table 1: Diagnostic summary of assessment results

Year	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 9
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of events in the story An inability to understand characters in the story An inability to interpret the information given in an advert Poor understanding and use of different part of speech Inability to rewrite sentences in a different tense Lack of understanding of meta-language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of events in the story An inability to interpret the characters in a story or identify the lesson of a story Inability to write a summary Poor understanding and use of different part of speech Inability to rewrite sentences in a different tense Lack of understanding of meta-language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of events in the story An inability to interpret the characters in a story, make inferences and give an opinion Lack of familiarity with different figures of speech and insufficient vocabulary to comprehend their meaning Insufficient vocabulary to understand the question or the text Inability to write a summary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of events in the story Inability to recognise either the author's purpose or the narrator of the story Inability to interpret characters in a story, make inferences and give an opinion providing reasons and explanations Lack of familiarity with different parts of speech Insufficient vocabulary to comprehend meaning





Year	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 9
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to punctuate a sentence and add capitalisation • Poor knowledge of spelling rules • Insufficient vocabulary to understand either the question or the text • Very poor grammar and spelling • Minimal vocabulary, inability to write complete sentences • Inability to construct meaningful sentences to form a logical story 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to punctuate a sentence and add capitalisation • Poor grammar and spelling • Inability to construct meaningful sentences to form a logical paragraph • Failure to write on a given topic • Failure to write a recount in a logical and sequential way 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to identify the topic sentence of a paragraph, and distinguish the main points from the supporting details • Inability to identify the source of an information text • Poor understanding and use of different parts of speech • Inability to rewrite sentences in a different tense • Lack of understanding of meta-language • Lack of editing skills • Inability to convert active to passive voice in sentences or direct speech to indirect or reported speech • Lack of familiarity with modals • Weak writing of story and diary entry



Year	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 9
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sourcing information from a given text • Inability to provide synonyms of given words • Inability to write sentences from one tense to another • Story writing based on mind maps – learners could not follow guided questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to provide logical reasons for answers given for true or false questions • Inability to place commas correctly and use capital letters for proper nouns in the middle of a sentence • Finding a main idea in an information text • Lack of understanding of the text • Lack of understanding of what a rhyme is • Inability to change verbs into simple present tense • Inability to use adjectives in the superlative degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of active vocabulary for the appropriate grade • Inability to respond to open-ended questions that require a motivation • Limited knowledge of literature features • Inability to identify the main character in a story • Poor understanding of different figures of speech • Inability to transform sentences into the negative form • Inability to provide examples of antonyms and synonyms of given words • Inability to identify parts of speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weaknesses were observed with parts of speech: textual editing, grammar, spelling and punctuation • Inability to use active and passive voice • Inability to use direct and indirect speech • Identification of the topic sentence in a main clause





Furthermore, a review of literature has revealed that teachers say they do not know how to use the ANA reports. Although they agree that the information from the ANA can assist them to improve their learning, there is very little knowledge on how to go about it. There are no plans in place at their schools for the use of ANA data. A significant proportion also indicated that they received little or no support from the school district on how to use the ANA results to address the following:

- Reading
- Fluency
- Comprehension
- Spoken language difficulties
- Written language difficulties

CAPS GUIDELINES AND TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement is a detailed document, which emphasises that assessment should not just be of learners or of the learning, but should incorporate assessment for the purpose of learning. Using assessment to facilitate learning is critical because then assessment is no longer seen as punitive or judgmental, but rather as a process to identify areas where further learning should occur and in what format.

CAPS identifies a six-point framework that should be used:

- Clarifying, understanding and sharing learning intentions, learning objectives and criteria for assessment with the learners
- Managing effective classroom discussions, tasks and activities that elicit evidence of learning
- Providing feedback that moves learners forward
- Activating learners as learning resources for each other (peer assessment)
- Activating learners as owners of their own learning (self-assessment)
- Improving further teaching and learning

(Republic of South Africa, 2012a; 2012c)

Interestingly, some teachers are not aware of the six-point framework. It was found from the studies reviewed (Chisholm & Wildeman, 2013; Kanjee & Moloi, 2014; Spaul, 2015) that many of the teachers were not aware of what they actually needed to do in real terms. They found the administrative paperwork overwhelming and saw

this as an offshoot of the assessment requirements (e.g. continuous assessment). For teachers, the benefits of all these assessments are not altogether clear, and some felt they needed more training to do their jobs effectively.

The overall consequence is that teaching and learning in the classroom is business as usual for the majority. Therefore, the cycle of poor performance in literacy and language continues.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

There is no doubt that the ANA, as is the case with other large-scale assessments, has its shortcomings, but it also has value for different groups if used appropriately. Diagnostic information on language achievement or literacy could be one of the tools for addressing the challenges posed by learning an additional language in a multilingual context. Additionally, such information could be used to determine levels of home language competence, as well as to determine the systemic barriers, such as gaps in teacher education and a decline in reading culture in a digital age. This information, however, has to be used appropriately. Reports that sit on shelves in libraries and the offices of school principals will not facilitate the change in literacy levels that are required.

Teacher training institutions need to be more proactive in leading a change in approach to the language teaching content and pedagogy for trainee teachers. I believe a different kind of analysis can be conducted from the ANA data. An example is secondary error analysis that could reveal the areas that teacher training should be focused on.

For the multitude of teachers already in the system, in-service training could focus on these problem areas, and workshops should be engaging, directed and contextually appropriate. Workshops should also not be treated as information sessions, but as hands-on engagement sessions that involve manageable numbers of teacher participants (a maximum of 20).



Research has shown that there is a link between fluency and comprehension, and through the integrated language system, we know that challenges with one aspect of language learning more often than not leads to associated challenges in other areas. It is therefore critical that a systemic approach is used to combat the low level of literacy across the board. Table 1 shows the compounded nature of language challenges if unresolved in the Foundation Phase.

Interestingly, during the 2015 ANA, teachers' unions refused to cooperate with the DBE and went further to threaten not to participate in the ANA. Some of the issues they raised were that there was not enough time to adequately remediate because the tests were written annually, and that there was a need for a more intensive programme of teacher development to properly address the shortcomings identified through the assessments (Republic of South Africa, 2016). One could say that this action by the teachers' unions is a move in the right direction because there is now a process in place for the assessments to be redesigned.

CONCLUSION

There are many opportunities for research into the practical use of the ANA results, not just for literacy and language, but for numeracy and mathematics as well. We need active conversations on the subject if we are to break the cycle. Part of this is further research that involves the further interviewing of teachers for their perspectives on these issues. The move by the teachers' unions in 2015 is a clear indication that teachers themselves see a need to step away from using the assessments as merely a judgment of what learning has taken place (or not), to actually using the assessments as a tool for the purpose of learning. With the latter, assessment becomes an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Results are not simply statistics, but real information that could form the basis for systemic evaluations, the development of support strategies and the in-service training of teachers. The results could also be pointers to the nature of the interventions required by both teachers and learners, and at what levels.

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