

Mind the gap: Dialogue and teaching of reading in South Africa

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Abstract

The importance of meaningful classroom dialogue in the foundation and early intermediate levels of education in creating effective literacy skills is well documented. Despite comments in a recent paper that there is a dearth of research on classroom observations around print in South Africa since 1994 at foundation level, there have actually been several studies that have observed classroom practice in this area post-1994. This paper discusses three particularly important ones that spanned some three decades in South Africa, and observed the role and practice of dialogue in classroom practice around text at foundation and early intermediate schooling levels. All three studies indicate that teaching styles have changed very little to date, and that meaningful classroom interaction between teacher and learner remains largely absent. The Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) of the participating teachers continues to restrict student agency in the area of classroom interaction. Although each of the researchers captured the evidence in different ways, they all came to same conclusion: that all teachers are still teaching restrictively and do not ask the type of open, extended questions necessary to engage in dialogue and thereby develop critical thinking or the vocabulary necessary to develop effective literacy skills in learners.

Keywords: dialogue, interaction, foundation, intermediate, classroom observation, literacy.