

# Tips for Writers to Provide Reading Material for Learners in the Foundation Phase

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**Abstract**—Reading is an activity that can break the barrier of isolation and loneliness, more specifically in the case of blind people and lonely learners of all ages. Authors are therefore important – as important as the readers reading their texts forming a link in a communicative chain reaction of stimulus and response. Authors have a huge responsibility to provide reading material exactly suitable for the learners at certain developmental stages, especially in the light of the eleven official languages used in South African schools. The large majority of schools study English as common denominator as a mother tongue or first additional language. In order for readers and writers to aim spot on it is imperative to take a look at cognitive development, the prescribed syllabus and the advice from seasoned writers to prepare to write the much-needed material. Furthermore it is vital to learn from constructivist theorists to focus on interaction and books must be written in such a manner that they encourage the interaction of the learner, teacher, parent, peer and the text.

**Index Terms**—Education, Readers, Texts and Writers.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The changes in the national curriculum in South Africa requires a new look at the reading material of the foundation phase. English as main language of instruction in a large majority of South African schools focuses attention on providing a sound range of reading books for the foundation phase specifically in the light of the changes to the teaching of languages as specified by the CAPS document [3]. The idea is also to try and remedy the problem at a young age to combat illiteracy. Since there are eleven official languages in South Africa it is recommended that the English reading books should be of a good level facilitating development since the learners have to read English when English mother tongue instruction is the focus. In this article the focus is on tips for writing for children in the foundation phase as they are exposed to English books already in the foundation phase although images and pictures still play a large role and words are kept to the minimum. A number of seasoned authors as role players in child development are reviewed as a means to cast light on the challenge to provide reading material specifically for the emergent learner. Focusing on writers' tips can provide valuable advice for the emergent writers. Developing a lifelong reader at the youngest possible age will strengthen the reader's love for reading and understanding of the world around us.

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## II. METHOD OF RESEARCH

The research paper will be a conceptual paper embracing a review of literature on the task of writing for the emergent reader. The role players in the communication trio will be explored viz.: The reader in the foundation phase, the factors influencing the ideal text for these foundation phase learners and seasoned authors will be explored as part of an endeavour to create the profile of the ideal reading material in early childhood development.

## III. FINDINGS ON THE LITERATURE REVIEWED

### A. *The Emergent Reader*

The learner aimed at in this paper is the emergent learner who will be confronted with the reading material. It is wise to create a profile of this learner before writing on what is to be used as reading material. According to Piaget the developmental stage between 2-7 is known as the preoperational stage. During this phase, children expand their use of language and other symbols. They imitate adults and develop a fascination with words. Children also enjoy playing games of make-believe and it can therefore be predicted that they will be fascinated by stories involving fantasy. Piaget suggests youngsters belonging to the preoperational stage make use of magical thinking based on their own sensory and perceptual abilities. According to Piaget the preschoolers' cognitive abilities are limited by egocentrism and the capacity to be egocentric is apparent at all stages of cognitive development, but egocentricity is specifically evident during the preschool years. Young children eventually overcome this early form of egocentrism when learning that others have different views and feelings [14].

Young children do not remember as well as older children and adults. Furthermore, these children are better at recognition than at recall memory tasks. Researchers suspect several possible causes for this development. One explanation is that preschoolers may be lacking in certain aspects of brain development necessary for mature memory skills. Another explanation is that preschoolers do not have the same number and kinds of experiences to draw upon as adults when processing information. Another reason is that young children lack attention, meaning they are more easily distracted. Foundation phase learners display an intense interest in learning. Some young children may become frustrated when learning does not come about as quickly or remembering as efficiently as older children. Teachers have to set attainable goals in order to motivate youngsters to participate meaningfully in the learning opportunities in school. Language skills also continue to develop during

early childhood. Thus, as their cognitive abilities develop and acquire the capacity for representational thinking, children also acquire and refine language skills [14].

Preschoolers learn many new words. Parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and the media provide opportunities for preschoolers to increase their vocabulary. Consequently, the acquisition of language occurs within a social and cultural context. Socializing agents provide more than just words and their meanings. The foundation phase learner experiences an explosion of learning as they enter school. The learners of this developmental stage enter a world of story time, communicating, hands-on activities and crafts. Six-year-old children are continuing to grow longer attention spans, and will be able to handle more complicated projects and tasks at school and at home. The ability to have complex thoughts really starts to develop at this age, and six-year-olds' curiosity about the world around them will grow exponentially [13].

Children need to read a wide variety of interesting, comprehensible materials, however, children's reading expression, fluency, and comprehension generally improve when they read familiar texts. Some specialists have found the practice of repeated readings in which children reread short passages significantly building their confidence, fluency, and comprehension in reading. Children not only use their knowledge of letter-sound patterns to read texts, but they also use many different strategies. Studies reveal that early readers are capable of being intentional in their use of metacognitive strategies. Even in these early grades, children make predictions about what they are to read, self-correct, reread, and ask questions if necessary, providing evidence that they are able to adjust their reading when they do not understand. These activities may take on numerous forms. Some research, for example, has demonstrated the powerful effects that children's reading to their caregivers has on promoting confidence as well as reading proficiency. Visiting the library and encouraging independent reading and writing periods in literacy-rich classrooms also help children with opportunities to select books of their own [13].

#### *B. Texts and Reading: Bearing in Mind the Prescribed Syllabus of Foundation Phase*

In the foundation phase the following aspects are of concern. The learner must be able to sequence the letters of the alphabet; recognize the distinguishing characteristics of a sentence, read texts by moving from top to bottom of the page and tracking words from left to right with return sweep; and orally generate a series of original rhyming words using a variety of phonograms and consonant blends.

“When children start to learn an additional language in Grade R or 1, they need to build a strong oral foundation. They need to hear lots of simple, spoken English which they can understand from the context. Listening to the teacher read stories from large illustrated books (Big Books) is a good way of doing this as it also supports children's emergent literacy development. As children's understanding grows, they need plenty of opportunities to speak the language in simple ways. This provides the foundation for learning to read and write in Grades 2 and 3” [3].

South African children are exposed to a great deal of environmental print in English from the earliest years for

example in signage (traffic signs, shop signs, etc.) and packaging. Teachers can use these familiar concepts as a starting point for children's emergent literacy in their additional language, for example, by exposing learners to familiar packages or advertisements to class and seeing if the learners can recognise brand names. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> term of Grade 1, the teacher can start labelling objects in the class in both the Home Language and English. These activities encourage incidental learning and can be done when the opportunity arises.

Shared reading is introduced in Grade R and should be practised throughout the foundation phase. Learners develop concepts of print and start to recognise some written words in English. At this level, the teacher must select a very simple enlarged text (e.g. a Big Book) with a limited number of words and plenty of good illustrations. The story should have a clear, simple structure (e.g. The Three Little Pigs). The teachers should read the text several times using her finger or a „pointer to enable learners to follow her/his progress through the text; Learners are gradually involved in reading [3].

Phonemic awareness forms the first stage of learning to decode the written language. The learner then has to understand the sounds to the letters that represent them (e.g. „t, „o, „p or „sh) and then blend letters together to create new words (e.g. „top, „shop) (phonics). The learner has to interpret the words (comprehension) and encounter them so regularly in print that he/she identifies them automatically (automaticity). As soon as the learner recognises the words automatically the words become fluent [3].

#### *C. Texts: Language and Structural Aspects to Consider*

Begin with a text or book that the child can decode, ideally 19 out of 20 words should be read accurately by the child. Texts should approximately be 50 to 200 words. Children often like reading texts from a computer screen. The important point is that reading must be oral and repeated and, at the appropriate level of difficulty [19]. Seligman [18] focuses attention on reading to increase vocabulary and stresses remembering words and to make them part of the long term memory which can only happen if certain words are being repeated by the writer.

Hale [9] identifies four basic aspects to pay attention to. He asserts that one must have a main character and advises the writer to draw a picture of the character and to add other detail to a character web to plot down ideas. He focuses attention on the setting. The writer should make use of the magic ingredient of conflict when delineating the problem. These aspects give rise to tension. The more times the hero tries and fails the better as the success in the end will be earned. The resolution takes place when the hero solves the problem of his own.

Green [8] identifies a few crucial aspects to investigate. Writers must find ideas in real-life, identify a character who faces a problem and the character must have a flaw to overcome to win the reward. Other characters to involve are villains, allies mentors and jokers. She advises the writer not to be nice to the main character and to make him struggle as the reward is then even more exciting. The climax of the story must not be neglected as it is the big event that gains attention.

Shepard [20] focuses attention on theme and maintains that theme must emerge from the story and should not be blurted out. It must preferably appear through dialogue and be positive without preaching. She also emphasises the proper use of illustrations to add meaning. She also advises writers to use the third person for foundation phase readers as they might become confused if the first person is used. First person is better for middle grade readers. The writers should not neglect the role of the pictures as they can be valuable indicators of mood. Joubert et al [11] stresses the importance of including pictures as they provide additional layers of meaning to the stories.

#### *D. Texts and Illustrations*

Pictures in children's books are not only important because of the literary value they provide to emergent readers, but they are also an indispensable element in the developmental reading process. Illustrations are often accompanying texts as it is their function to help children interpret the story behind the print. One of the main functions of illustrations in a child's picture book, is to illuminate the text. Illustrations, help today's emergent readers to decode text, developing recall and comprehension skills, and even vocabulary acquisition and development. The text and the illustrations in the best reading books are so well-balanced it is difficult to imagine one without the other. The two are sometimes so closely interlinked that the support can be total to one without the other may indeed be missing an important step in learning how to read.

It is also true that emergent readers are attracted by the colourful illustrations and they would pick a book with interesting pictures leading the topic of the story. Nicholas [16] states that after casual observation of students in environments student comments and reactions indicate they do not enjoy stories as much if the illustrations are not shared with them by adults and it is also mentioned that the younger the child the more the need for a variety of pictures. Understanding and comprehension of the overall story line through the text is not the only important function of a child's book for young readers. Understanding the words and the story by examining and visually interpreting the illustrations is vital to the cognitive development of the student. Whether it is a literature-based approach (using fiction and non-fiction) or a basal approach (the reading process is divided into a series of smaller to larger sub skills that must be taught in a rigid order by using graded texts) pictures form an integral part of the learning process and writers need to bear in mind the best illustrator to compliment their text.

Gangwer [5] emphasises the importance of visual learning claiming that 80 % of learning during the first twelve years of our lives are visually determined. He is of the opinion that the visual teacher and therefore also writer should understand the effects of visual stimulation on brain development and utilize imagery appropriate to enhance learning. Imagery communicates in an emotional and pre-rational style that can bypass logical thought. Imagery invokes the part of our brain that assembles symbols and visual elements into stories. The writer and visual teacher should actively encourage students to decode still images and pictures thus adding to the meaning of the stories.

Stokes [21] maintains visual literacy precedes verbal literacy in human development, and that it is the basic literacy in the thought processes that are the foundations for reading and writing. The child is said to look before he can speak and learning is said to evolve from the concrete to the abstract, because pictures or illustrations are said to be a reflection of experience and are only one step removed from actual events. These visual representations may be able to capture and communicate the concrete experience in various situations.

Illustrations convey meaning and carry information, especially in non-fiction books where pages are often filled with information that can be put across by the pictures and these pictures can be explanatory and illustrations can teach a lot about these places. Interpreting pictures can take time. Expose children to pictures of the unfamiliar, or use images in books to confirm and expand upon what they already know. Illustrations in children's non-fiction books can expose children to new ideas, different people, and places they've never seen. It is also generally accepted that a child's perception of a book is shaped by the illustrations and also the cover of the book. Books are judged by their covers all the time. Enticing illustrations will attract even the most reluctant learner. Readers can be hooked onto reading for life, all starting with the illustrations of their first reading books. Long before children start to read they start interpreting pictures.

Pictures enable children to discover the world within their own imagination and make connections with characters and events they see described in books. Illustrators usually tell stories with pictures. Authors use illustrations to focus attention on specific scenes of high emotion or action. Illustrators often use a variety of techniques to depict the mood and tone as well as character and plot. When illustrations mirror people, objects, and situations familiar to children, these pictures help validate their emotions and experiences. The process of making an emotional connection can equip a child to show empathy and compassion for others.

Illustrations convey meaning and carry information, especially in non-fiction books where pages are often filled with commentary that is not in the text. Be sure to "read" your way around the pages—read and discuss the captions, tables, charts, and the information conveyed by the illustrations themselves. Storybooks, although fictional, can also convey a great deal of information. A story about a trip to a farm or to the moon may have illustrations that can teach kids a lot about these places. Realize that it takes time to explore picture books when you are using them to learn about the world.

Children must be exposed to pictures of the unfamiliar, or use images in books to confirm and expand upon what they already know. Illustrations in children's non-fiction books can introduce children to new ideas, different people, and places they have never seen. Careful exploration of the illustrations may uncover new facts about familiar objects. Whether fiction or non-fiction, a picture book can help children gain knowledge and move them to ask new questions about history, inventions, nature and other cultures.

Picture books help young children understand that words convey meaning, even before they are aware of the text.

Pictures can help increase vocabulary which forms an important building block for reading. Books can help young children to identify colours, shapes, sizes, numbers, and letters. Picture books can also help build background knowledge that is essential to successful reading. A child who has never been to the zoo, a farm, or a beach can still learn all about these places by exploring picture books. Teachers should select books with simple or realistic images so that kids can point to objects and label them.

Children notice appealing illustrations in a book before they start hearing the story. The pictures provide the first indication of the meaning of the book. While you are reading the words of a picture book, your child will be looking at the pictures and will probably see many little details which you would never notice. In the best picture books the pictures and the words complement each other, with the illustrations often illuminating the story, and sometimes even saying something totally different from the words.

Wordless books communicate meaning by the illustrations that are so powerful that no words are needed at all. These books can be very enjoyable irrespective of your child's age - the youngest are able to 'read' the book of their own accord and the older ones can develop their storytelling skills. When writing it is wise to seek advice from the publishers to decide on a professional artist to do the illustrations.

#### *E. Writers: Authors and Their Tips for Writing for Children*

##### *1) Andrew davis*

Davies [4] admits that he was an avid reader who spent many hours alone at home as he was an only child who battled to adapt socially at school and the pecking order was also quite a challenge. At home he could absorb himself in texts and read to his heart's content.

##### *2) Nadine gordimer*

Gordimer [7] sees the writing process as part of an aesthetic exploration of the writer with words, patterns and language and the endless arrangements and disarrangement thereof. She also asserts that a definition of literature embraces the transforming of the world by esoteric literary styles. She also underscores the importance of a writer being an avid reader himself. Gordimer [6] reveals bits and pieces about being an author in her book *Writing and Being*. She admits that the writer's creative authority is often questioned when the reader starts reading the text. She also admits that the writer should keep track of the transformations in society as a modern child might also be more interested in modern events that the learner can relate to.

##### *3) Elsabe steenberg*

Elsabe Steenberg warns against mere didactic writing of the older regime. Steenberg gives hints with regard to stimulating reader interests. Teachers should encourage learners to read extensively by setting a positive example towards reading. She emphasises the importance of dramatised reading in order to elicit enthusiasm. She encourages interaction with the learners in order to connect with them so that a better understanding can be conducive towards achievement. Steenberg also encourages differentiation i.e. the need for reading books to cater for all

levels of learners in one class. The slow learner must also be involved and receive the required attention. Steenberg stresses the importance of relationships as topic of interest and warns against writing because of false motives. The reading books must be sincere and should motivate learners to read.

##### *4) Alba Bouwer*

According to Alba Bouwer [2] a good book contains two crucial elements viz. A good story and a good imagination. She asserts that she walks with an idea for months before sitting down and writing. She stresses the fact that the author must be able to think in the world of the child. The author must be careful of diminutives and mealy-mouthed insipidity. The author must also take note of the rhythm of the language. When using animals as characters they should also preferably be still true to their animal nature. Her final advice is: "Have a good story to tell and tell it as clearly as possible" [2].

##### *5) Julianne Moore*

Julianne Moore succeeds to tap gently into the minds of young children and is well-known for her *Freckleface strawberry* series. It is about a feisty freckled girl who discovers that what is different about you is actually what makes you unique. She is of the opinion that a kind of magic allowing the child to imagine himself to be something else like a certain animal in order to protect the person from harmful remarks by others, can do the trick [15].

##### *6) Deborah hopkins*

According to Hopkins [10] a writer should be a reader before embarking to generate reading material. She also emphasizes the importance of parents reading books to their kids. She stresses the importance of including history books as part of the learner's reading repertoire. When writing about history the writer must try and make the story as accurate as you can. One of her latest books is *Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek*, which is about Abe Lincoln's childhood when a boy named Austin Gollaher tried to save him from drowning. She aims at causing the little readers to become historians themselves. She advocates an approach that would encourage learners to listen and adjust their antennae.

Writers should also realize that kids are far tougher than we realize. She thinks there is not much reading material a child cannot cope with emotionally. She refers to golden oldies such as references to the Black Death e.g. "Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posy, ashes, ashes, all fall down". She also recommends the writer to carry a field journal and make notes on expeditions that can later become stories.

##### *7) Beatrix potter*

Beatrix Potter remains one of the best-selling authors of all time. Her books are choc full of outstanding vocabulary and her narrative style is depicted as heart-warming and funny. Some of her stories such as *The Tale of Peter rabbit* and *The tale of Benjamin Bunny* are old time favourites. Beatrix Potter was one of the inventors of the contemporary picture book, and her small novels published at the turn of the twentieth century are still available and popular today. Writing in code is the first book-length study of Potter's work, and it covers the entire oeuvre. Daphne Kutzer reveals the depth of the symbolism in the stories and relates this to the issues of the author's own development as an

independent woman and writer. Potter perfectly weaves the subtle themes inscribed in her own stories with the concerns and temperament of the author who wrote them. Potter was also an inventor of the contemporary picture book and was a fine artist and illustrator herself. She was apart from being able to draw well also interested in the words rather than the pictures in her books. Her books display an adult sensibility and contain adult themes e.g Peter Rabbit who works through life threatening experiences and she does not fight shy of including threatening and serious issues [12].

To write for children demands an almost superhuman discipline. In order to grab and hold the learner's attention the story must have a perfect flowing effect from beginning to end. Children persist with their own fantasies and every book carries with it a mystical quality which makes a book immortal.

#### 8) Roald dahl

Dahl's children's stories are usually shared from the point of view of a child. The stories typically involve adult villains who loathe and bully children, and feature at least one kind adult to counteract the evil character. These stock characters are possibly an analogy to the abuse that Dahl experienced in the boarding schools he attended.

*The BFG* is another example of the good character representing the "good adult" archetype and the other giants representing the "bad adults". Dahl also features in his books characters who are very obese, usually children who are either unpleasant or gluttonous children. In *Matilda*, Bruce Bogtrotter snatches cake from the evil headmistress and is obliged to eat a gigantic chocolate cake in the presence of the school.

Dahl's insight into what children want stem from his own background as a child when parents died young and was sent to boarding school. Dahl knew that what children want in literature is the complete opposite of what they actually want in life. He was of the opinion that children love and hate their parents in equal measure. He lifts the lid and allows children to have that hate feeling towards adult carers. Dahl's books are about the triumph of the child over the old, greedy and the wicked.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Authors should be the seismographs of society. With whatever resources they do have schools and other educational institutions can encourage the culture of reading and open up to students the life-long pleasure and illumination of intellect and spirit that comes from literature and the written word. Ways to assemble a reading culture are to establish reading circles encouragement to use municipal libraries and to have the reading corner in class

where learners may sit from time to time to relax and enjoy. Blatchford [1] asserts that children will prefer potato chips and chocolates in equal measure. If they are deprived of reading books at home their learning will end up as "less a priority than wall-to-wall television". Writers should take note of the cognitive level of learners, the role of illustrations and even the prescribed syllabus when embarking on writing for youngsters. They should acknowledge their vital role on promoting literacy and entertaining.

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