

## **Developing Listening and Speaking Skills in the Foundation Phase**

**By**

**Semono TB**

Department of Language Education, School of Education, University of Limpopo

**Molotja TW**

Department of Language Education, School of Education, University of Limpopo

Email: [wilfred.molotja@ul.ac](mailto:wilfred.molotja@ul.ac)

### **Abstract**

The Foundation Phase Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement's (CAPS) objective is to equip children from Grade R to Grade 3 with the necessary and relevant knowledge, skills and values that will enable them to become productive, as well as functional participants in the Intermediate and Senior Phases of formal schooling as well as in global societies. However, literacy surveys at both national and international levels continue to demonstrate results that position South Africa at the least achieving levels. This signals that CAPS does not achieve its desired goals regarding learners' performance and educational development. There is, therefore, a need for research to explore better strategies of equipping learners with rich vocabulary for ease of language learning. This study investigated the development of oral skills (listening and speaking) in two receptive grades in rural Foundation Phases. The study was a phenomenological case-study which adopted a qualitative methodology to collect and analyse data. Data collection procedures included classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. This investigation found that listening and speaking skills are not sufficiently developed in the investigated schools, and an intensive exploration of the processes, activities, approaches and resources used for developing listening and speaking skills in both schools demonstrated that teachers lack knowledge and skills for administering activities, applying appropriate approaches and using the available literacy resources to develop listening and speaking skills. The study discussed the contributory factors to the above findings and, therefore, recommends that the Department of Education should provide Grade R teachers with in-service training and support programs. The programs should be intended to acquaint teachers with skills to use materials and to apply strategies in different ways to help all learners develop listening and speaking skills through understandable oral participation.

**Keywords:** Listening, Speaking, Literacy, Development, and Learning and Teaching.

### **Introduction**

The Foundation Phase has generally been excluded in broader South African discussions about primary education and curricular reform, despite its relative significance. This is still the case despite emerging research showing that many in-service practitioners in South African schools, particularly in the Foundation Phase, lack basic skills to teach literacy, and are thus unable to support children coming from impoverished backgrounds (Lenyai, 2011). Furthermore, a large body of literature from research based on South African township schools showed that much of learning and teaching involves a significant amount of repetition, memorisation and chorusing—which may not be sufficient for children coming into school with limited proficiency in the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). The

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works of Spaul (2011) also show that there is little or no reflective speaking, reading, writing and listening taking place, and when learners do the above practices, such practices may involve one-word answer, dictation and answering narrative comprehension texts which are cognitively undemanding. As such, there is little prospect for helping children coming from impoverished literacy backgrounds to develop effective literacy skills.

Various studies on the quality of learning and teaching in South Africa have consistently reaffirmed that the state of education in South Africa is in crisis. This state of being in a crisis is reflected in a variety of performance indicators and systemic evaluations such as TIMSS, SACMEQ, ANA and PIRLS studies. Gustafsson and Kotzé (2016) also confirm that majority of learners in the schooling system are unable to speak, read and write fluently compared to children of the same age in different nations. The challenges from which these shortfalls arise are limitedly expressed in research and thus give rise to the question; what influences the challenges of poor literacy development? It is in this context that the current study explored how listening and speaking skills are developed and encouraged to exist in classrooms as pertinent media of language skills development and knowledge dissemination. This study may contribute to a wider rethinking of the curriculum, pedagogies, language policies and practices in ways that mainstream Foundation Phase as central to wider improvement of the schooling system in South Africa.

## **Background Statement**

The CAPS (2011) has introduced English First Additional Language (EFAL) learning and teaching in the Foundation Phase (but from Grade 1 to Grade 3) in an endeavour to confront language barriers children encounter in Intermediate and Senior Phases, which pertain to using English Language as a Medium of Instruction—and thus resulting in poor learning and development. This implementation was made under the motive that children must be able to speak, read and write for comprehension in both their Home Languages (HL) and their First Additional Languages (FAL) by the end of Grade 3 (Zimmerman, Howie & Smit, 2012). The CAPS' adjustment of the additional language in learning and teaching from the Intermediate Phase to the Foundation Phase gives rise to a number of questions and implications in children's learning. For instance, this might imply that children should begin school with some levels of listening and speaking competence that will make language learning a comprehensible process (Lenyai, 2011). Thus, children in Grade R might not understand the importance and the process of learning to read and write if what they read and write does not link with what is already in their existing language repertoire. Therefore, the question that follows is: how does Grade R develop the children's listening and speaking skills that they need to function effectively in both languages from Grade one henceforth?

Keun (2013) claims that the Foundation Phase is essential for children's overall development. However, listening and speaking skills are principal to all learning (Zimmerman, Howie & Smit, 2012). Therefore, "It is important that such skills are effectively developed early in a child's academic life" (CAPS, 2011: 10). In line with the given background, this study considers Grade R as an important entry level into the formal learning environment, and also a safe haven for children's preliminary formal language skills development. Hence, the study deemed it relevant and important to investigate the development of oral language skills in Grade R in consideration of the Department of Basic Education's claim that "...children must be provided with many opportunities to use language to develop speaking skills [in the Foundation Phase]" (DBE, 2010: 10).

## **Problem statement**

This study is set out to investigate factors that interact to impact on children's poor performance in literacy, with much focus on factors that hinder effective listening and speaking development. The problem of this study is that majority of children are not able to listen, speak, read nor write effectively in both their Home Languages (HL) and First Additional Languages (FAL), particularly those in villages and rural areas. This is evident in international comparative studies such as Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2006 & 2016) of Howie, Venter, van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Dutoit and Archer (2007) and Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena and Palane (2017). Howie et al. (2007) and Howie et al. (2017) claim that out of the 40 PIRLS literacy countries, South Africa achieved last positions in both Home Language and English Language assessments. These reports all substantiate details of poor literacy performance in South Africa basing data on performance of South African children in standardised tests. While these results suggest that teaching and learning are not effectively taking place and may thus point to poor teaching of listening, speaking, reading and writing, research is still needed to examine other contributory factors towards these results.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The importance of developing listening and speaking skills in the Foundation Phase***

The listening and speaking skills are the integral components of verbal communication that are used in different discourses to share messages. Although the two skills are at times presented in isolation, they are interrelated in nature and are amicably inseparable (Lloyd, Mann & Peers, 1998). However, learners spend much of their time in classroom listening and speaking to their teachers and peers to: develop knowledge; enhance their communicative competence and to learn to read and write. This means that listening and speaking skills are essential for facilitating the development of oral communication skills as well as for learning and teaching the reading and writing skills.

Wardle (2003) claims that language learning is a complex process that involves a child learning at four basic areas: language (speaking), listening, reading and writing all at the same time. However, Nombre, Alonso and de Junio (2012) claim that developing children's listening and speaking skills prior reading and writing is important because listening and speaking skills lay foundation for the development of reading and writing skills. Learners need to acquire knowledge and understanding of different ways of producing meaning in a language to understand its written part. It is, therefore, arguable that due to children's inability to read and write, the above-mentioned knowledge and understanding could be disseminated through speaking and listening. This implies that children need maximum exposure to the spoken form of a language to acquire good language skills.

### ***How listening and speaking skills can be developed***

The success of developing effective listening and speaking skills require the following considerations: the learning environment, the activities for learning, approaches or methods of teaching, and the resources used in learning and teaching. Thus, purposeful communication in learning largely centers around the above-mentioned factors, hence, listening and speaking skills can be developed by:

### ***Setting up a good environment for developing children's listening and speaking skills***

According to Alexander (2010), the development of the listening and speaking skills

requires a learning environment that is free and that encourages independent thinking. This is an environment that does not reject or narrow the children's perspectives and thoughts. Alexander (2010) states that if teachers need children to learn to speak and speak to learn, what the learners say should be given significant attention. Children learn to listen and to speak best when they authentically use language to interact with others by expressing and interpreting thoughts, emotions and meanings (Kilfoil & van der Walt, 1997).

The development of listening and speaking skills requires an intriguing environment of engagements and interactions in the classroom (O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). Furthermore, effective listening and speaking skills development require an environment that triggers and challenges children's high order thinking (O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). Hockings, Cooke, Yamashita, McGinty and Bowl (2008) aver that learners whose thinking is challenged in classroom are more interactive during actual classroom lessons and are able to reflect, question, evaluate and connect shared ideas. Therefore, teachers have the responsibility to create learner-centered, as well as inclusive environments of learning for authentic discussions to emerge.

### ***Pertinent activities for developing listening and speaking skills***

Field (2009) claims that listening and speaking skills can be taught and practiced simultaneously, but this implies that the classroom activities need to portray the true nature of real-life interactions. Thus, the below activities are tailored at stimulating the children's listening and speaking skills without eradicating the true sense of authenticity in classroom interactions.

### ***Learning-enriched play***

According to Greasser, Conley and Onley (2012) learning-enriched play is a mediated play which allows children to freely engage with the subject content through fun activities. With the consideration that children in Grade R are not yet acquainted with the reading and writing skills, Neuman and Dwyer (2011) suggest that listening and speaking skills can be developed through play, repeat, predict and recall activities. The Grade R comprises of minor children who rely heavily on fun activities to learn. Thus, through the use of learning-enriched play and fun predicting or recalling activities, teachers can create enriched oral language teaching platforms that can enhance learners' oral skills through fun.

### ***Dramatic play***

Dramatic play involves both children and the educator participating in a shared activity of acting. This activity could be fruitful in exposing children to the wide range of accents that exist in a language. Van Der Walt, Evans and Kilfoil (2013) claim that it is beneficial for learners to be exposed to the accents of their everyday communication. Additionally, drama exposes children to the rapid vocabularies of everyday conversations. In drama, the teachers need to use various accents, be fluent and use appropriate facial expressions to role model the authentic ways of speaking, rather than emphasizing words, being slow and too pronounced because the latter do not give children motivation to listen nor stimulate interest to speak for meaning.

### ***Shared story reading***

Teachers have the responsibility to select relevant and interesting materials for shared story activities. The shared story reading is pertinent and bi-dimensional in that it promotes children's listening skills and simultaneously creates an awareness of print (reading). Thus, when the educator reads and makes meaningful statements from the story, children become aware that books carry meaning. The shared story activity may be followed by learners'

dramatic play of the story, oral summaries, question and answer sessions and role-play to create a good balance of the grasp of both skills (listening and speaking). Moody, Justice and Cabell (2010: 15) claim that the shared story reading or telling activities must not be teacher-dominant nor centralised on “children’s attentiveness to a storybook and their ability to sustain attention over time”.

### ***Developing and using fruitful classroom resources for developing the listening and speaking skills***

#### ***Digital Technology***

The use of technology is increasingly becoming a norm and is spreading across homes and schools. Children are becoming exposed to smart phones, televisions, DVDs, video games, computers, digital and interactive toys, electronic books and internet (Shamir, Korat & Heibal, 2013). Among many digital and technological resources, the mostly recommended tools are the DVDs and TV programs because they are both auditory and visual. Nachoua (2012: 115) claims that “...more learning occurs when information is received in two perception modalities (vision and hearing) rather than a single one.” This is true with regard to sustaining the attention of minors in the sense that, they need fascinating learning resources for them to engage in listening and speaking. Thus, children’s visual contact with what they hear could help them to compare and contrast their versions of the stories (as depicted by predictions), with the ones presented to them. Children will therefore become aware of the different contexts of word usage and understanding of what they hear. This would in turn, enrich their vocabulary through the search for meaning in what they see, hear and say. Nachoua’s (2012) suggestions are relevant considering that children need an exposure to digital literacy to function well in the 21st century and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

#### ***Print resources***

Palmer (2014) asserts that teaching occurs much often in spoken form than it does in written form; and oracy plays a vital role in acquainting learners with writing skills. However, print can also be used for developing oral skills especially in contexts where children have limited or no access to digital technology. Teachers can use print resources such as story books, big story books, picture story books and flashcards to improve learner’s listening and speaking skills. The story books can be used for shared reading and be followed by dramatic play of the shared stories, role play and characterization. Children can be assigned different roles of the characters in the stories but act in ways they would have reacted to particular situations that emerged in the story.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative methodology to collect and analyse data. This methodology was preferable because, in Schutt’s terms (2012), it enables the researcher to deal with texts that represent the participants’ experiences and social settings out of which answers for the prolonged questions of a study can be deduced. Data were collected in two primary schools using observations and semi-structured interviews.

#### ***Population and sampling***

The study was conducted in Maleboho-East Circuit, Capricorn District in Limpopo Province. The Maleboho-East Circuit comprises of 94 primary schools which are facilitated by approximately 938 teachers. Therefore, the researcher conveniently selected two primary schools from this circuit based on the proximity among them and the researcher.



A non-probability purposive sampling was applied to select teachers and principals in both schools. The study also used the criterion sampling to select 12 learners during observations. The criterion to select learner-participants in two primary schools states as follows: the researcher initially conducted class observations during which he used three categories of learners (i.e., the highly participating, average participating and the below-average participating) to identify two learners out of the whole class for each category. Thus, the study comprised of an overall sample of 16 participants i.e., two Grade R educators, two school principals in Maleboho-East Circuit and 12 learners.

### ***Data were analysed as follows***

The data collected through observations included video recordings, field notes and observation checklists. The audio recorded data from the semi-structured interviews and observations were transcribed for analysis. For the school principals and teachers' interviews, the researcher intensively studied the transcriptions of their recordings and labelled the corresponding responses and contradicting ones in terms of how they relate to the curriculum and the classroom practices. For the two school principals' responses, the researcher studied their transcriptions and coded the repeated responses and examined how they correspond with the ones of the educators. Thereafter, the researcher discussed such important insights in relation to what has been observed, as well as to the stipulations of the curriculum regarding the initiatives the respondents take to develop the listening and speaking skills. Thus, data from various instruments were merged and analysed through a thematic lens in consideration of Hancock, Ockleford and Windridge (2009)'s claim that thematic analysis gives the researcher the leverage to intensively study the collected data to reveal vigorous insights that can be integrated to create solid arguments.

## **Presentation of findings**

### ***Findings from observations***

The observations have revealed that there were important factors in both schools that determined learners' efficiency or inefficiency of developing listening and speaking skills. Such factors had strong capacities to either stimulate or hamper learners' participation in oral activities and writing activities. These were contextual factors relating to the physical environment of learning and teaching, as well as the pedagogic environment of learning. The physical environments of both schools demonstrated lack of resources for learning and teaching in general—but with extremity, lack of oral skills development apparatus. This study found that learners in both schools were divided into two groups during most oral lessons to share resources. However, the remarkable feature about the categorization of learners into two groups was that while one group was given an activity to read aloud, do oral activities, and interact with books, another group had to sleep, or witness the tasked group. Thus, it was observable that teachers' strength did not allow them to give equal attention to both groups, particularly the second groups.

It was also revealed that second groups' interactions with teachers and print were not fruitful nor contributory towards effective listening and speaking skills development. These events served as pre-highlights that teachers are faced with difficulties of time management and whole-class teaching approaches, which challenged them when developing learners' listening and speaking skills. This is because both teachers in the investigated schools split learners into smaller manageable groups when administering activities and sharing learning resources, which in turn, subjected the second groups of learners to failure of completing activities on time nor participating in oral activities. Alexander (2010) claims that learning is

sometimes affected by numerous contextual matters of the learning environment, ranging from the physical to the pedagogic matters. Thus, under physical factors of the observed schools, the researcher revealed that lack of furniture, limited learning space, lack of listening and speaking supporting devices and time limitations had a great impact on teachers' capabilities to teach learners listening and speaking skills. On the other hand, the pedagogical factors revealed that that teachers lack knowledge and skills for administering activities, applying appropriate approaches and using the available literacy resources to develop listening and speaking skills.

### ***Interviews***

Teachers expressed that they develop listening and speaking skills through interactive teaching approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). They stated that they use question and answer sessions at the end of all activities to assess learners understanding and progress towards the development of listening and speaking skills. Teachers further expressed concerns regarding lack of listening and speaking supporting apparatus, and have demonstrated that their limited access to different resources incapacitate them to diversify teaching methods nor apply varying approaches to accommodate all learners. Therefore, learners who struggle to learn through the predominantly used and perhaps the only available resources become vulnerable to the risk of being excluded from learning throughout the length of the theme or content through which that resource must be utilised. In addition, teachers also expressed that they are not given adequate support in forms of workshops and in-service training on how they should teach Grade R learners the variety of skills.

### ***Data analysis: Emerging Insights***

According to the Department of Education (White Paper 6, 2005) success in developing literacy skills (listening and speaking skills in this context) lies with the relevance and application of teaching and learning approaches, activities and resources that teachers adopt. Additionally, the roles that teachers and learners play in different lessons have great impacts on lesson outcomes. Thus, this study has developed three themes based on the findings regarding how listening and speaking skills are developed in Grade R, namely:

- How teachers apply the teaching and learning approaches to develop listening and speaking skills in Grade R
- The potency of activities and resources teachers use to develop listening and speaking skills in Grade R
- The role of teachers in developing, and the role of learners in acquiring listening and speaking skills

How teachers apply the teaching and learning approaches to develop listening and speaking skills in Grade R

Data from the observation checklist revealed that 33% of activities in the investigated schools were used to promote listening skills, whereas 25% of the activities thrived to develop learners' speaking skills. The results also indicated that 25% and 17% activities sought to develop learner's reading and writing skills respectively. These results correlate with the argument of Sekhukhune (2014) that the process of learning and teaching in elementary grades is predominantly premised on orality (listening and speaking). It is noticeable from these results that majority of the time was spent in classroom by children listening and speaking than they were reading and writing. Additionally, the reading resources were the pictorial story books which required learners to interpret, sequence or

summarise events as demonstrated by pictures through oral presentations—which ultimately motivated them to speak.

Although the listening and speaking activities were prevalent in both schools, the observation transcripts revealed that the practices of developing these skills were not effective. Gruegeon (2010) cited by Birbili (2013) claims that effective listening and speaking skills development occurs in authentic communication spaces which are characterised by discussions, dialogue, debates, arguments, reasoning-gap activities, agreements and disagreements among many other reciprocal communicative tasks. On contrary to the above claim, this study found that there were parallel communications between learners and teachers in the investigated schools. Learners only spoke under instructions to read picture story books, to mention functions of different body parts and to answer teachers' questions. This devalued the principles of CLT approach in that it dismissed authenticity and interactivity in communication. According to Koosha and Yakhabi (2013), CLT regards activities such as drama, debates and role play as pertinent activities for improving learners' (interactive) listening and speaking skills.

### ***The potency of activities and resources teachers used to develop listening and speaking skills in Grade R***

According to Excell and Linington (2011), listening and speaking skills can be effectively developed through activities that encourage meaningful interactions. This includes activities that Van Der Walt, Evans and Kilfoil (2013) regard as natural listening activities which encourage authentic dialogues and daily life conversations. Thus, amid the numerous activities outlined on the daily programme of the DoE (2019), the observations revealed that teachers relied greatly on Morning ring activities, My Body activities, storytelling and retelling activities and the subsequent question and answer sessions to develop children's listening and speaking skills. The above-mentioned activities are interactive in approach but are greatly dependant on administration to either work for or against the anticipated subject and curriculum goals.

Educators claimed that the above-mentioned activities are most enabling for them to develop children's listening and speaking skills. For instance, through these activities Teacher A (TA) said, "I am able to talk to them [learners] and assess how they develop mentally. Does this learner understand me? Do learners hear what I say? When I give them feedback after speech, does this learner hear me? Some totally do not hear me and some do." How do you help those who do not hear you, the researcher asked, and TA responded: "We just try to engage them because we cannot discriminate them?" On the other hand, Teacher B (TB) said: "In Grade R, we develop oral which is to listen and to speak, and the written language, which is to read and write. We also teach stories and other things. We encourage the listening and speaking skills through poetry and story lessons. After poetry and story lessons we ask them questions and that will be their opportunities to speak. We also encourage story telling-(TA) and story re-telling-(TB) and through it, [them], they are able to speak."

Data from the observation checklist revealed that although there were story sharing activities as well as question and answer sessions, 46% of the content of these activities was based on discourse. Discourse connotes that the activities are premised on oral communication and encourage learners to speak about what they feel, see, think and know (Ziegler, Paulus & Woodside, 2014). In the context of this study, such activities included Weather charts, My body theme, Birthday songs and telling or re-telling stories. The checklist results further demonstrated that 36% content was based on the functional use of language. In



function, learners and teachers engage in authentic communication that requires them to use everyday language to learn in classroom (Tomlim, 1990). This use enables learners to draw from their pre-existing experiences and repertoires of languages to make meaning in new interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Interactions and form (each) comprised 9% of the content of the above-mentioned activities. Language form entails the formal activities such as writing vowels and numbers (Tomlim, 1990). When learners performed activities in formal content, teachers encouraged them to remain quiet, not interrupt one another and focus on their own works. Hence the incapacities of the formal activities to yield effective findings regarding the development of listening and speaking skills.

### ***The role of teachers in developing, and the role of learners in acquiring listening and speaking skills***

This study found that teachers in both schools authoritatively dominated classroom interactions. Teachers' practices contradicted the notion of Vygotsky (1978) that their role is to mediate learning, thus, helping learners to bridge the gap between their existing knowledge and their potential knowledge. This study unveiled that learners played passive roles in learning, while teachers played the most dominant roles.

The grounds for the argument presented above is that learners played passive roles during classroom interactions, and that teachers were observed to speak for one to two minutes and only prompted questions that required learners to give one-word response, which a learner would do in less than ten seconds. Although Chomsky (1999) claims that meaning is not centred around the quantity of words in a sentence, prolonged oral expressions remain central to the development of effective listening and speaking skills. After the long expressions from teachers, they (teachers) asked learners if they understood through phrases such as "akere" which means -is it? and "le a nkwa" -do you hear me? or "le a nkwešiša?" - do you understand me? Thus, learner's responses to these statements were always a loud yes, expressed in Sepedi as "Ee".

Palmer (2014) claims that teachers cannot rely on learners' responses 'yes' as evidence that they have understood. Teachers must ask thought provoking questions that encourage learners to express views, than to give singular answers. Thus, it was typical in the efforts to develop listening and speaking skills that teachers in both schools did not ask learners to make meaningful contributions to classroom discussions, let alone affording them the freedom to orate story summaries in their own words. Thus, learners were deprived opportunities to talk, ask or answer questions nor participate in story activities as active speakers and listeners. This had negative effects on the development of the listening and speaking skills and it shut down the thoughts of majority learners in the classroom.

When asked about the abilities of learners to use language to acquire the listening and speaking skills, Teacher A (TA) claimed that "They use language to express their views by doing rhyme activities. They do rhymes, poems, songs, stories and drama so that they can speak and know language." Teacher B on the other hand, expressed that "Learners can express their views by asking questions where they do not understand." None of the processes mentioned above was feasible during classroom observations. The most reliable activities for oral skills development observable was the story telling activities. However, during the story lessons, the observations revealed that children spoke in class only when they were instructed to do so. In other words, learners spoke through a point-to-point narrative with teachers closely monitoring their talk. As already highlighted, both educators did not offer children opportunities to raise questions, seek clarity or express their own views at meaningful levels. For instance, in transcriptions, educators dominated classroom

interactions and encouraged very minimal oral contributions or participation of the learners. Most of their questions required fixed answers and irrational phrases at times.

For example, TA asked: “what do we use the nose for?” and later, “What do we use eyes for?”. TB asked: “What do we see with that it is hot outside?”. To the first question, a learner responded, “To release mucus”. To the second question a learner responded, “To put in medication- Go tšhela sehlare”, and to the third question a learner responded, “With eyes”. That is, we use the nose to release mucus “Go ntšha mamina”, we use eyes to pour medication “Go tšhela sehlare”, and we see with eyes -“ka mahlo” that it is hot outside. All these responses were declared wrong and were later followed by the question ‘akere?’ - to which learners confusedly responded with a yes ‘Ee’. Three insights emerged from the above incidences.

The first one is that the phrasal question ‘akere’ played a decisive role in creating confusion and marginalising the oral contributions of the learners as well as to reject their thinking. It appears that learners were subconsciously propelled to shove their own knowledge and ingest that of a prominent educator. The second insight is that the classroom conversations were arranged in a manner that postulated learners as the main listeners and educators as the main speakers. When teachers speak for long and learners speak in response to formula questions, it yields a lot about participation imbalances between learners and teachers. In simple terms, this suggests that in classroom, there are those who speak and those who listen, and this rarely, if not never, turns the other way around. Thus, it could be argued that the observed educators only listened to the literal words learners said in response to the questions asked, instead of the meanings beyond learner’s literal words.

The third insight is that teachers demonstrated lack of skills to contextualise their conversations with learners, particularly their questions. Consequently, they got trapped by search for accurate answers into rejecting the learners’ responses. Nachoua (2012) argues that contextual awareness is important in teaching listening and speaking skills than it is in reading and writing. This is because written texts could be re-read for clearer sense, but spoken messages are hardly repeatable. Thus, the above misunderstandings between learners and teachers demonstrated that there is lack of context awareness between educators and learners to which the educator owes responsibility to make children aware of. Nachoua (2012) claims that how a learner would respond to a medical doctor when they ask, “how are you?” could not be the same as how the same learner would respond when asked by an educator even in the same physical environment. The different responses are influenced by the context beyond the physical environment within which conversations occur.

In this case, one finds that the learners’ responses were tied to the previous interactions that they have had with the teachers or their classmates. More even, they may emanate from their pre-school encounters. In particular, the learners’ responses may have been linked to their previous lessons on the theme ‘My Body’. Thus, the children make meaning of the teachers’ questions based on their pre-contextual encounters with the question. With light to Vygotsky’s (1978) perspective of background knowledge and pre-existing experiences, it is arguable that much of the responses teachers rejected echoed learners pre-experiences with the subject content. Thus, when educators say “We do not use the nose to release mucus”, “We do not use eyes to pour medication” and “We do not see with eyes that it is hot outside”, without engaging further on the responses learners have given, and without providing or clarifying the contexts of their questions, but persisting to get correct answers, learners start to feel obliged to agree to everything educators approve of. As such, children’s responses “yes” to “akere” cannot be reliably used as measures of

understanding nor misunderstanding because they emanate from fear of rejection, confusion and lack of context and understanding. Van der Berg (2015) expresses this better when stating that learners are used as casualties to teachers' goals. In short, the above incidences portrayed teachers as dominant knowledge gate keepers whose responsibilities were to transmit rigid knowledge to learners. Whereas, learners were perceived as passive knowledge recipients whose knowledge was rejected, belittled and reformulated.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study has found that to ensure that children acquire effective listening and speaking skills through the oral medium, teachers engaged learners in activities such as story reading, story-telling and re-telling as well as the question and answer activities which occurred through Morning ring activities, My body and Weather chart interpretation activities. Although the activities and approaches that were used were in the best interest of enhancing the oral and aural activities, of which they were capable, they did not seem to be applied or practised in the manner that allows them to support the learners' development of listening and speaking skills. The researcher has observed that the endeavoured activities that were applied to develop listening and speaking skills were applied in manners that were ignorant to the interactive nature of meaningful communication. Thus, this study has demonstrated that teachers lacked good skills for developing listening and speaking skills—and in some contexts, they were deterred by the limitations associated with the physical and pedagogical environments of learning.

## **Recommendations**

Teachers should revise and stick to the goals of teaching listening and speaking skills. This would encourage them to use materials and to apply strategies in different ways to help all learners develop skills through understandable participation. This gives teachers the responsibilities to acquaint themselves with skills of evaluating learners' strong modes of knowledge acquisitions. This knowledge would enable them to adjust lesson contexts and language register to the learners' levels of proficiency. Consequently, this would trigger learners' interest and motivation for meaningful participation. Teachers should lift themselves amid the limitedness of resources in their schools. They should diversify ways of teaching even if it is through similar resources. They can perform group discussions, role play, debates, fantasy plays such as Masekitlana and Mantlwane (Sepedi fantasy plays). The confines of oral teaching resources should not deter teachers from encouraging reciprocal communication and active participations. It would be effective for teachers to introduce lessons and outline the main objectives of the lessons. This would give guidance to both learners and teachers regarding the roles each must play during the lessons. The Department of Basic Education should strengthen its support to the Foundation Phase teachers and provide them with adequate resources to use in developing listening and speaking skills.

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