

Investigating orthographic knowledge and its relationship to reading and spelling in isiXhosa home-language third grade learners

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Abstract

Despite international research confirming their importance, writing and related metalinguistic skills have often been neglected in comparison to reading in literacy research (Zhao et al., 2017; Nag, 2007; Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Cunningham et al., 2001; Roman et al., 2009; Apel., 2006). On a national level there are very few studies which have explored the writing aspect of literacy in South Africa and none which have investigated orthographic knowledge or its relationship to reading and spelling in a Southern-Bantu language, such as isiXhosa. In an attempt to address this gap, the current study, which forms part of an ongoing Master's thesis, explores orthographic knowledge as a possible key literacy skill needed for successful reading and spelling in isiXhosa.

A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted with 140 isiXhosa home language third grade learners in order to investigate word specific and general orthographic knowledge in isiXhosa and its relationship to reading and spelling while controlling for phonological awareness (PA), rapid automatized naming (RAN) and letter-sound knowledge. The word specific and general orthographic knowledge tasks were specifically designed for the study and were administered along with oral reading fluency (ORF), spelling, PA, RAN and letter-sound knowledge. The findings revealed that letter-sound knowledge and PA were the most robust predictors of both word specific and general orthographic knowledge. Further, word specific orthographic knowledge and letter-sound knowledge were the only significant predictors of spelling. Similarly, both word specific orthographic knowledge and letter-sound knowledge were significant predictors of reading (as measured by ORF), along with RAN and general orthographic knowledge. The findings of this study confirm the importance of orthographic knowledge for reading and spelling for languages with transparent orthographies such as isiXhosa.

Keywords: orthographic knowledge; isiXhosa; literacy; psycholinguistics