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In the June 1997 issue of Pacific Curriculum Network, there was an article entitled *Zambian Early Literacy Project*. It reported on an initial literacy project which was arousing a lot of interest because of its success. This issue of PCN, brings readers an update and more information on the remarkable success of the Molteno Project.

The latest estimate is that 3 million children are reached by 55,000 trained Molteno teachers in 4 southern African countries: South Africa, Zambia, Namibia and Botswana. From small beginnings in 1975, and against a background of political turmoil and poverty, these figures show the growth of the Molteno Project, an NGO which is entirely funded by sponsors in the private sector. There have been no less than 17 independent evaluations of the programmes which have all been encouraging. The two Molteno programmes that concern us are *Breakthrough to Literacy* (in the mother tongue) and *Bridge to English*. Due to the great demand for the *Breakthrough* programme, it is today available in 21 southern African languages. Developing these courses took many years as for each language there had to be a great deal of research: a core vocabulary had to be constructed, and the grammar had to be standardised.

What is the secret of their success?

This article aims to bring some of the basic tenets of the Molteno courses, with extracts from various Molteno publications and the book *Transforming Language Education in Southern Africa* by Phillida Kingwill. (Interested readers may look at these materials in the Literacy Centre, USP.)

### Which language should be used to teach initial literacy?

Recently, there has been a lot of interest and discussion about this question, particularly in Fiji, where children come from a variety of language backgrounds and many things need to be considered before making a decision.

Paula Gains, Molteno's Central Training Unit Manager, in a personal communication to the author, has this to say:

*'... our observations of schools that are opting for a straight for English approach, where the learners are all unfamiliar with English, is that the process of enliteration is being seriously hampered and children are simply not learning to read either in English or in their mother tongue.'*

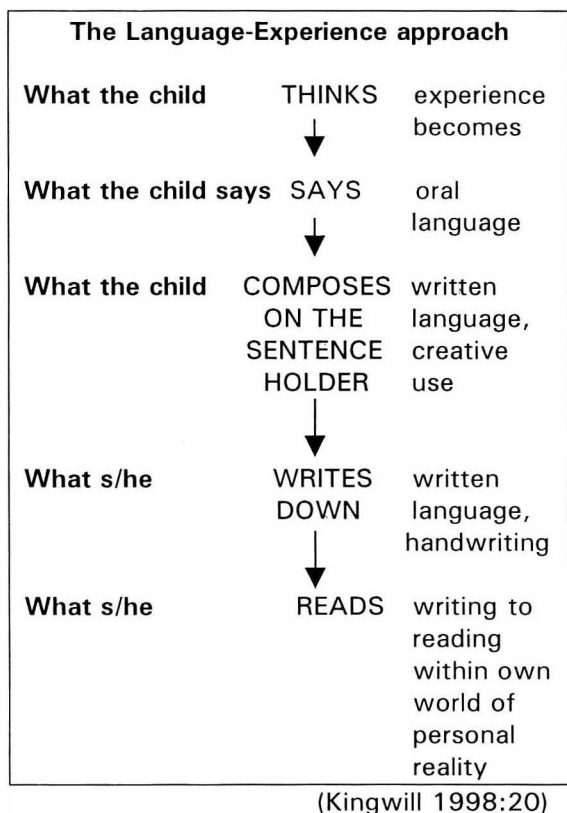
*The approach advocated by the Molteno Project is to develop initial literacy in the mother tongue ... English as an additional language is introduced in the first year and taught as a subject.'*

### The Breakthrough approach

On the approach used, Kingwill explains:

*Breakthrough [to Literacy] implemented the language-experience approach using the child's existing life experience and language knowledge as the departure point for new learning; it was child centred, hence able to counter the regimented teaching which dominated the black classroom; reading and writing were developed together; it also promoted the phonics approach.*

The table on the next page summarises the language experience approach.



The sentence holder referred to in the table above is something each child has.

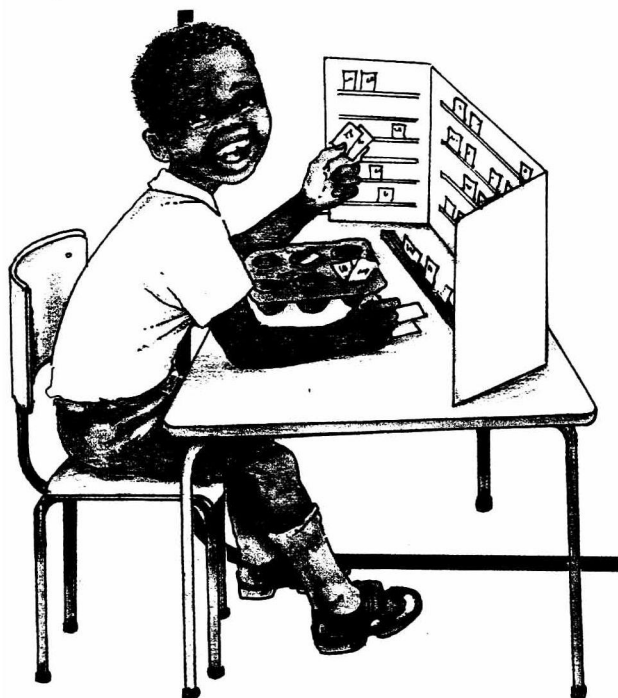


Illustration from 'Breakthrough to Isizulu'

The picture shows a child selecting word cards which he will put into his sentence holder, the plastic stand, to form a sentence. The important thing here is that he composes and reads sentences about his life experiences using known vocabulary before writing them. Handwriting is taught as a separate skill. Other materials for the Breakthrough classroom are conversation posters, phonic posters, occupation task books and Breakthrough readers.

### Class size and group work

*'[Breakthrough] is learner centred. The learners work in small groups, at their own pace. It is highly suitable for large classes because of the emphasis on small group work.'*  
(Teacher's Manual for *Breakthrough to Isizulu*)

Phillida Kingwill describes a Breakthrough classroom:

*'We are making our way upstairs to the Grade 1 classroom. As we open the door, the teacher, Mrs Jantjies, has just finished introducing a new sentence with her teaching group.. The three other groups are busy with learning activities. "Time to change round," she calls. "Red group, you can get your readers." (She speaks Xhosa as this is their first year of schooling, when enliteration takes place through the mother tongue.)*

*The reaction is explosive. The Red Group dash across to choose their readers which are neatly stashed in a series of brightly painted shoe boxes on the window sill. In a moment they're back in their seats. They grin at us chirpily. ... Soon a quiet but audible mutter replaces the activity as they settle down to reading stories to themselves.*

*We walk around the class and watch and listen. Everyone is busy. Small faces peep up anxiously and then break into huge smiles as we nod*

*approval and show astonishment at their prowess in writing numbers, using shapes to create patterns, and illustrating the meaning of their sentence. A fourth group has joined Mrs Jantjies for their turn in the teaching corner. They are going to read Book 4 with her.'*

(Kingwill, 1998: 114)

### **An integrated programme**

While the Breakthrough programme is primarily designed for the language, literacy and communication learning area, it also deals with outcomes from the other seven learning areas: mathematical literacy, life orientation, human and social sciences, technology, natural sciences, arts and culture, economics and management sciences.

### **Bridge to English and English as the medium of instruction**

The *Beginning Bridge to English* course, taught in the first year of school, complements the mother-tongue *Breakthrough to Literacy* course. It consolidates skills developed through the mother tongue and gives children experience in using English in communicative situations. In the next few years, children will develop their skills in using English with the *Bridge Plus One* to *Bridge Plus Four* courses. Whole class teaching alternates with pair and group tasks and games. The children work in ability groups at their own pace, thereby learning to be responsible for their own learning. Communicative language use is purposeful, and provides the context for teaching new structures and vocabulary. Reading courses have been developed and teachers follow the Shared Book approach.

These are English-across-the-curriculum courses, with a strong emphasis on reading, writing, problem solving and thinking skills. The courses are all geared towards helping students develop the cognitive and language skills needed for

learning with English as the medium of instruction.

Professor Lanham, a founding father of the Molteno Project and a renowned linguist, spoke at the 1986 Molteno Project conference held at the University of Witwatersrand:

*"Readiness [to proceed with learning subjects such as mathematics, geography etc.] implies a baseline of competence in the second language usually conceived of as a knowledge of words and related concepts and an ability to use them in sentences. I suggest that this is a necessary but insufficient view to take of the baseline of readiness."*

*Lanham went on to show that a threshold level analysis that focuses solely on language 'functions' and 'notions; "remains largely a list without the coherence implied by cognition".*

*His lecture described cognitive foundations underlying knowledge and skills in such areas as reading, numeration and time. These three cognitive areas must have a firm foundation for an adequate state of readiness. (Kingwill, 1998:50)*

To achieve these ends, after years of painstaking research, the Molteno team developed their Breakthrough and Bridge courses and trained thousands of teachers to teach them to millions of children in southern Africa.

### **References**

- Kingwill, Phillida (1998) *Transforming Language Education in Southern Africa*. Braamfontein. Molteno Project.
- The Molteno Project (1998) *Breakthrough to Isizulu: Teacher's Manual*. Cape Town. Maskew Miller Longman.
- Website: [www.molteno.co.za](http://www.molteno.co.za)

### **Acknowledgement**

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