

# A new language doesn't hamper kids learning. Other things do

April 8 2019, by Michelle White

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South Africa is a linguistically and culturally diverse country. There are 11 official languages and several other minority languages. But English continues to be preferred as the [language of learning and teaching](#).

Many South African children are still in the process of learning English by the time they first start going to school. In a single English-medium classroom, one can find children with various levels of English proficiency; from children with English as their [mother tongue](#) to children who have never learnt English before.

This situation poses a range of challenges for both the teacher and the children. One of the biggest challenges is that a certain level of proficiency in English is required for the children to be able to perform well academically in an English-medium school. It's a [widely known fact](#) that academic success is very much dependent on [language](#) competence and proficiency.

This means that there's a great need to understand how language develops in children's early school careers. It is also important to understand the cognitive mechanisms that underlie language learning. To further explore how this happens in the early years of schooling I did a [study](#) involving pre-primary children in an English-medium school in Cape Town.

The group consisted of children who were still learning English as well as children whose mother tongue was English. The children were very diverse – there was a total of nine different home languages in the group of children who were still learning English.

The findings showed that the ability of children to develop their language skills didn't depend on whether they were proficient when they started out. Their ability to learn and advance – or not – was in fact dependent on a range of other factors, none of which had to do with English language proficiency.

## **The findings**

The research aimed to understand the link between language and working memory development. I did this by tracking how working memory developed for the children chosen to take part in the study.

Working memory is the ability to store and use information in the short-term and is important for our everyday lives. For example, we use working memory when we need to remember an address that we just heard while we are looking for a pen to write it down. Working memory also underlies many important academic competencies, like reading and mathematics.

The children were broken into two groups: those with English as their primary language, and those still learning English. They were given the same tasks; these were an English language assessment and working memory tasks. They were assessed three times over the course of the year – at the beginning, middle and end.

The results showed that both groups improved over the year on the assessment of English language abilities. The results also revealed that great improvements were made in language development during the first year of formal schooling. Results from the working memory tasks indicated that children who were still learning English, as well as the children who have English as their mother tongue, performed the same on these tasks and achieved comparable scores. Children in both groups saw their language abilities and working memory abilities improve over the year.

The most interesting finding is that the route, or trajectory, the children's cognitive and language development followed was the same for both groups, regardless of the English abilities they had at the beginning.

Importantly, the result that working memory scores between groups were comparable also indicated that the amount of knowledge of English that

a child had didn't affect their working memory abilities.

What this points to is that, if a child's working [memory](#) scores are low and the trajectory of the development is not the same as their peers, there may be cause for concern. In this case, the [children](#) should be referred to an occupational or speech therapist for further assessment. Our research shows the fact that they're struggling can't simply be explained away as a "symptom" of the child not knowing English well enough.

## Falling through the cracks

Studies like these are important for giving professionals better ways of seeing if a child has a disorder or is only struggling because they have not acquired a sufficient level of English yet.

In the context of a classroom with various languages and proficiencies of English, it is easy for a child with a disorder to be overlooked.

Along with the under-resourced schools and over-burdened teachers, heterogeneity among learners results in them not receiving the support that they need, be it academic or linguistic. Those whose primary language is English as well as those learning English suffer alike. The upshot is clearly seen in the worsening educational crisis in South Africa.

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