Improving Literacy Learning with African Languages

Emma Ojanen[1,5], Tamara Chansa-Kabali[2,5], Jacqueline Jere-Folotiya[3], Jonathan Munachaka[4,1], Francis Sampa[5], Christopher Yalukanda[5], Suzanne Adhiambo-Otieno[1] and Heikki Lyytinen[1]

[1]. University of Jyväskylä, Department of Psychology, Jyväskylä, Finland
[2]. University of Zambia, Department of Psychology, Lusaka, Zambia
[3]. University of Zambia, Deparment of Psychology, Lusaka, Zambia
[4]. University of Zambia, Department of Educational Psychology, Sociology and Special Education, Lusaka, Zambia
[5]. University of Jyväskylä, Department of Psychology, Lusaka, Zambia

emma.ojanen@nmi.fi

Millennium Development Goals emphasise the importance of basic literacy skills in sustainable social development and poverty reduction. However, the impact of language in literacy instruction has been largely ignored. It has been realized only recently that English language cannot be generalized to model reading acquisition in other languages. Acquiring basic literacy skills depends on the alphabetic code which determines how many letter-sound connections pupils need to learn. Transparent languages have regular connections between letters and sounds whereas opaque languages have complicated, irregular spelling. Letter-sound correspondences is the most important factor in learning to read. Learning in languages with regular letter-sound connections is faster. For example, basic reading skills in Finnish are learned in 3 months, compared to 2 years required in English. English and French have been found to be the most difficult languages to learn to read with and yet they are widely used in African education systems. Many African languages are similar to Finnish, and thus children could learn to read much faster, if the initial literacy instruction was given in local languages instead of English or French. Our research was done in Zambia, where 7 local languages are used in initial literacy instruction before pupils transfer to English. Pilot study on *Graphogame* helped Zambian children to improve reading skills. *Graphogame,* developed in the University of Jyväskylä*,* supports learning reading skills fast and cost-effectively, and records data on the learning . Two hours of playing on computer or cell phone is sufficient to improve children's literacy skills. The main objective was to find out whether Graphogame would assist children to learn to read Cinyanja and give insight on reading difficulties in Zambia. It was found out that children had difficulties with vowels which have different spellings in English and in Cinyanja. This indicates that use of two languages with different alphabetical codes interferes learning of reading. Teachers have not received adequate training to teach literacy in local languages and are unaware of their importance in learning. Education system and common attitudes strongly favor English even though using it in literacy instruction makes learning more difficult for children.