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*Dr. Nomfundo Nondalana-Vuzane*

## ABSTRACT

Idioms are essential language skills that enhance language proficiency in all languages. Idiomatic knowledge helps individuals to be proficient in communication in both verbal and written language. However, they are not explicitly incorporated in the early years of schooling and this could be the reason there are persisting literacy challenges in South Africa. The literacy reports show that Foundation Phase learners' language skills are not well developed. They reveal that learners have challenges in both reading and writing. The purpose of this paper is to advocate for explicit integration of idioms in Grade 3 curriculum with an aim to increase the learner's language proficiency in their home languages. This paper is grounded in Social constructivism theory to reveal how idioms as scaffolding tools support language proficiency. It is guided by qualitative research, interpretive paradigm and case study research design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants were two Grade 3 teachers and a thematic analysis helped in analyzing interview data. The findings showed that the integration of idioms could improve the learners' creative writing skills, they can help them to write meaningful sentences and paragraphs.

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# Early Idiomatic Knowledge Acquisition: A Cornerstone for Language Proficiency

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## ABSTRACT

*Idioms are essential language skills that enhance language proficiency in all languages. Idiomatic knowledge helps individuals to be proficient in communication in both verbal and written language. However, they are not explicitly incorporated in the early years of schooling and this could be the reason there are persisting literacy challenges in South Africa. The literacy reports show that Foundation Phase learners' language skills are not well developed. They reveal that learners have challenges in both reading and writing. The purpose of this paper is to advocate for explicit integration of idioms in Grade 3 curriculum with an aim to increase the learner's language proficiency in their home languages. This paper is grounded in Social constructivism theory to reveal how idioms as scaffolding tools support language proficiency. It is guided by qualitative research, interpretive paradigm and case study research design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants were two Grade 3 teachers and a thematic analysis helped in analyzing interview data. The findings showed that the integration of idioms could improve the learners' creative writing skills, they can help them to write meaningful sentences and paragraphs.*

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## I. BACKGROUND

South Africa is a multilingual and multicultural context, but only 12 languages are recognized as official languages such as Afrikaans, English, IsiZulu, Setswana, Xitsonga, SeSotho, Tshivenda, IsiXhosa, SePedi, SeNdebele, SeTswana and Sign Language. These official languages are not the only languages that are spoken in the country. The

South African Language in Education Policy (LiEP) encourages learners to be taught in their Home languages for the first four years of Schooling (Grade R-3) and shift to English from Grade 4 to 12 (Department of Education, 1997). Learners learn one language as First Additional Language (FAL) from Grade 1-12. All schools that teach Indigenous languages and Afrikaans as Home Language teach English as FAL. However, idioms as language tools that enhance vocabulary and native like language competency are not incorporated in both Home Language (HL) and FAL language curriculum.

The national and international literacy reports indicate that the South African Foundation Phase learners have challenges in both reading and creative writing. For example, the Systemic Evaluation of 2001, conducted in nine provinces of South Africa revealed low literacy performances by Foundation Phase learners, especially in writing (Department of Education, 2003:9). The Systemic Evaluation (SE) results conducted in the Western Cape showed that learners experienced difficulties in writing literacy, even though they were assessed in their home languages (DBE, 2014). These literacy reports could be highlighting that there is a need to find innovative ways by incorporating idioms explicitly from Grade 3. In addition, the idiomatic knowledge which develops native communication is ignored and learners transition to learning in their English from Grade 4 even though their vocabulary is not well developed in their HL. The aim of this paper is to argue for the integration of idioms as they are integral in language learning and develop vocabulary.

Vocabulary and comprehension are language skills that enhance both verbal and written communication. The reading comprehension and creative writing challenges will persist if the

essential knowledge of idioms is not incorporated in the Foundation Phase curriculum. International studies reveal that idioms enhance in helping English Second language students to communicate in native-like (Liontas, Mannion & Karagoz, 2025) and knowledge of mother tongue idioms enhance in learning the target language idioms (Lakshmi, Nadimpalli & Guduru 2025). This indicates that learners who do not have knowledge of their mother tongue idioms could have more challenges in learning English idioms. It is fundamental to find innovative ways that could improve the language skills of learners from early years of schooling. This paper is advocating for the explicit integration of idioms in the Foundation Phase curriculum. It is guided by the following question:

- Why should idioms be incorporated in the Grade 3 curriculum?

The aim of this paper is to justify why idioms should be incorporated in Grade 3 curriculum.

### 1.1 *Idioms*

Liontasa (2021) defines Idiomatic as the scientific study of idiomatic language and figurative language. This means that idiomatic means studying both literal and figurative meaning. According to Liontasa (2021) Idiomatic competence is the ability to understand idioms appropriately and accurately in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to that of native speakers, and with the least amount of mental effort. This indicates that when individuals understand idioms, they are able to use them effectively in different social contexts. For second language speakers, idioms help them to sound native like. Therefore, learners who do not know idioms of their home languages, they sound like second language speakers.

### 1.2 *Why it is Important to Teach Idioms from Early Years of Schooling*

Children are able to acquire their home languages informally, for example, they are able to acquire vocabulary and simple sentence structure without formal education. However, for them to learn idiomatic knowledge, a more knowledgeable other

like a teacher should teach them idioms and their idiomatic knowledge. This indicates that learning idioms is not a piece of cake because they have a figurative meaning which cannot be estimated from their literal words.

Learners have challenges in learning idioms in all languages, however, they are an integral part of language as they allow individuals to use any language naturally. Idioms had a positive impact in both spoken and written language. The South African literacy reports could indicate that we have these persisting literacy challenges because the learner's language skills are not well developed because the idiomatic knowledge is not incorporated in the Foundation Phase language curriculum.

Idioms are an important part of learning a language (Jbarah, 2025; Mehdi, 2024). Mehdi, (2025) is of the view that idioms offer learners a pathway to language fluency, cultural understanding and natural expression. Idioms knowledge helps learners to write meaningful sentences. Idioms enhance Grade 3 learners to integrate idioms effectively during verbal communication and creative writing (Nondalana-Vuzane, 2025). Nondalana (2021)'s findings show that there are language benefits when learners are exposed to their home language idioms from early grades like Grade 3. In the same vein, research findings show that learning second language idioms have benefits. language.

### 1.3 *What are the Benefits of Teaching and Learning to Second Language Learners?*

Teaching and learning English second language idioms are pivotal even though it is challenging (Hinkel, 2017; Lakshmi, Nadimpalli & Guduru, 2025). English second language learners have challenges in learning idioms because their figurative meaning cannot be predicted from their literal words (Jbarah, 2025). Mehdi (2024) examined the role of idioms in language learning. The findings revealed that knowledge of idioms in Second language contributes to language fluency and natural expression. They contribute to sound native like in both communication and written form. Idioms enrich learners' vocabulary and their

ability to engage naturally in conversations. Similarly, Liotas, et al. (2025)'s study revealed that even doctoral-level students enrolled in Second Language Acquisition and Technology in Education Programme face challenges in producing idioms at a level comparable to native or near-native speakers. Therefore, there are language benefits when learners are learning idioms of their second language. These findings align with studies that explored the use of idioms in Home Language speakers. Nondalana (2021)'s study revealed that isiXhosa idioms enriched the Grade 3 learners vocabulary. Learners incorporated isiXhosa effectively in their conversation and creative writing activities. In the same vein, Ramagoshi (2025)' study showed similar results and SeTswana idioms enriched the Grade 3 learner's vocabulary.

In South Africa, English is the second language of many learners, but it is the language of teaching and learning from Grade 4 to 12. Therefore, it is fundamental to develop the Grade 3 learners' knowledge of idioms in their home language, before learning English idioms. Liotasa (2025)'s findings indicate that English idioms are difficult for all levels of education.

#### 1.4 How to Teach Idioms?

Teaching idioms requires teachers to accommodate different learning styles. Mehdi (2024) is of the view that role play is an effective method for contextualizing learning. Nondalana (2021) and Ramagoshi (2015)'s studies revealed that role play is an effective teaching strategy for teaching idioms in Grade 3. For example, in Nondalana's study, learners were taught isiXhosa idioms, while it was iSeTswana idioms in Ramagoshi, the findings of both studies revealed that idioms helped learners to acquire and retain idiomatic knowledge.

Jbarah (2025) examined whether Total Physical Response (TPR), a method involving physical actions associated with language learning, is effective in improving idiom comprehension and retention among young learners. The findings suggest that TPR can significantly enhance student's understanding and retention of idioms,

contributing to a more engaging and effective language learning experience. In the context of Grade 3, physical action is one of the learning styles that should be integrated when learners are listening to a story and learning a new vocabulary, For example, there is an isiXhosa idiom "isandla sihlamba esinye" "hand washes each other", the figurative meaning means people help each other. The physical action should be acting out how each hand washes the other hand with an aim to reveal the figurative meaning. Learners could retain both literal and figurative meaning of the idiom. Learning idioms is a scaffolded activity.

It is integral to accommodate visual learners by using visual aids as scaffolding tools. Illustrations and idioms flashcards help to visualize the figurative meaning of idioms (Mehdi, 2024). Lakshmi, Nadimpalli and Guduru (2025) investigated the effectiveness of visual aids and native language equivalences in enhancing students' comprehension and retention of English idioms. The findings indicated that idiomatic equivalents to mother tongue and visual aids representation of the meaning of idioms in the target language can substantially facilitate a better acquisition of English. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century the integration of technology is essential.

The use of technology scaffolds the students' understanding of idioms. Dibyanti and Wahyuni (2026) explored the students' perceptions of the use of English movies specifically to increase idiomatic expression acquisition. The findings showed that students who have a higher frequency of watching English idioms via movies improved both their spoken and written communication. On the other hand, those who rarely watch movies, only few attempt using idioms in writings. The findings of Dibyanti and Wahyuni (2026) highlight that technology is a scaffolding tool that enhances students to reach their zone of proximal development. Similarly, Liotas, et al. (2025)'s findings showed that doctoral students advocated for several approaches for learning and producing idioms such as using MALL apps, exposure to authentic context, incorporating videos and movies, interacting with native speakers of English and translation, linking Arabic idioms to English and

using similar idioms. Therefore, teachers should use different teaching strategies and resources so that Grade 3 learners can grasp idiomatic knowledge.

### 1.5 The Role of a More Knowledgeable Other

Learning idioms is challenging and requires an individual to get support from a more knowledgeable person. Idioms are challenging in both learning and teaching (Jbarah, 2025). Research findings indicate that learning idioms is a scaffolded process, a more knowledgeable person should use scaffolding models so that learners can grasp idiomatic knowledge. Dibyanti and Wahyuni (2026) investigated how the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) helps students to increase their English idiomatic expression with English movies. The students revealed that human and technology scaffolding support understanding of idioms acquired from English movies. These findings demonstrate that learning idioms requires a scaffolding. In this study, students watched English movies and when they did not understand an idiom, they asked their peers and professional teachers as MKO. In addition, they used technology, they searched for idiom explanations in educational websites such as A1, online dictionaries and social media platforms. In the context of Foundation Phase, learners could watch the digital story and then the teacher could ask questions that scaffold their understanding of idioms. The digital stories can reveal the figurative meaning of idioms. Nondalana-Vuzane (2025) study revealed that Grade 3 learners are able to infer the figurative meaning of an idiom when it is incorporated in the story. Nondalana-Vuzane (2025)'s findings revealed that that Grade 3 teachers as more knowledgeable people should use teaching aids such as pictures, that represent literal and idiomatic figurative meaning, sentence strips with idioms and their meaning, and incorporate idioms in multimodal stories.

### 1.6 Culture and Learning Idiomatic Knowledge

Idioms are embedded in culture; it is pivotal to integrate it in language curriculum. Knowledge of the target language culture is essential for learning idioms. Mehdi (2024) claims to enhance

learners to understand idioms, teachers must integrate cultural and historical explanations. Idioms are deeply embedded in social context and their usage depends on factors such as register, situation and audience (Mehdi, 2024). Lontas, Mannion and Karagoz (2025)'s study found that context and cultural knowledge helped native Arabic-speaking doctoral students enrolled in a Second Language Acquisition and Technology in Education Programm in understanding and using idioms. The participants believed that learning idiomatic figurative language enhances knowledge of the target language culture. Mvanyashe (2024) assert that isiXhosa idioms help to preserve AmaXhosa history, values and culture. The exclusion of idioms indicates that learners grow up with limited knowledge of their cultural values and are not proficient in their home language.

Lontas, et al. (2025) explored the perspectives and experiences of native Arabic-speaking doctoral students enrolled in a Second Language Acquisition and Technology in Education Programme regarding idiomatics and related instructional approaches. The findings showed that participants had a strong belief that idioms should be integrated in language education for deepening their communication in the target language. Participants favored student-centered approaches with authentic, ample, engaging and multimodal input and output interaction. These findings are consistent with Nondalana (2021)'s study, which uncover that teaching isiXhosa idioms should be learner-centered and integrating multimodal input such as multimodal stories, pictures and sentence strips with idioms and their figurative meaning.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach guided this study. Qualitative research is a type of research that aims to understand human experiences. Both social practices and experiences are important in qualitative research (Silverman, 2020). According to Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004:3), the main aim of qualitative research is to gain depth rather than quantity of understanding. Qualitative research helped the researcher to get in-depth information about the Grade 3 isiXhosa teachers'

experiences and understanding of idioms and their role in developing language skills. This paper followed an interpretive research paradigm which does not confirm hypotheses or a theory, but seeks to understand and interpret how isiXhosa idioms could be used to enhance creative writing. A case study design was followed and According to Merriam (1998), a researcher who uses the case study design seeks insights, discovery and interpretation rather than confirmation of a hypothesis. Purposive sampling helped for selecting the two schools that teach isiXhosa as Home language and two teachers that teach Xhosa in Grade 3. Research ethics were observed throughout the study. Before conducting semi-structures interviews, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the University of the Western Cape, a permission letter from Western Cape Education Department, the School principals received an information sheet and signed a consent form. Thereafter, both teachers received the information sheet and signed consent forms before conducting the semi-structures interviews. The schools and the participants' details are kept confidential, in this study the schools are referred to as School A and B, and the teachers are teacher ZN and MN. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews which helped in asking follow-up questions during interviews. A thematic analysis helped to analyze data and to find themes that emerge from the interviews.

### 2.1 The Theory that Underpins this Article

This paper is grounded in Vygotsky's Social constructivism theory. Social constructivist theory has different principles which teachers could use as a guide on how they can support learners in learning idioms. Idiomatic knowledge is challenging in both home language and second language. This paper underpins the zone of proximal development (ZPD), one of the key principles of Social Constructivism (Kiraly, 2013). The purpose of the ZPD is to move the learner's knowledge from a low level to a higher level. According to Hammond and Gibbons (2005), in a ZPD the teacher should maintain high expectations of all learners while supporting them through scaffolding to complete the task. ZPD is

not fixed, but changes as individuals acquire new knowledge (Yuvita, 2018). The ZPD allows the more knowledgeable person to support the less knowledgeable (Tkachenko & Ardichvili, 2017). In the context of teaching and learning idioms, teachers support learners with an aim to help them acquire idiomatic knowledge. Research findings indicated that the use of visual aids and technology support learning of second language idiomatic language. This paper advocates for the integration of idioms in the Foundation Phase, learning idioms is a scaffolded learning journey. Learners come to school with their basic communication skills, but lack knowledge of idioms. Teachers should integrate idioms in language lessons to enrich the learner's vocabulary, using scaffolding tools until they are able to incorporate idioms effectively in verbal and written communication.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data reveals the teachers' beliefs and understanding of the role of isiXhosa idioms. The teachers' initials are used to protect their identity: MN for the teacher in school A, and ZN for the teacher in school B. Three themes emerge from the interview data such as, idioms could enhance Grade 3 learners writing skills, idioms could help learners to write meaningful sentences and idioms helps learners to acquire language proficiency.

### 3.1 *Idioms could Enhance Grade 3 Learners' Creative Writing Skills*

Both the interviewed teachers believed that if Grade 3 learners are taught idioms, their creative writing skills could develop. On the question of whether isiXhosa idioms could enhance Grade 3 learners' writing literacy, the teachers said:

**MN5:** They can help because when they write they can incorporate them to show that they understand them.

**ZN5:** They are useful because when you listen to the radio programmes they often speak about idioms. They use these idioms at a later stage. And these idioms enable them to become competent authors when they grow up because their meanings illustrate many things.

You could help a person who does not understand because a Grade 3 child can explain to an adult person.

Both the teachers were of the view that isiXhosa idioms could assist in developing learners' writing literacies. They believed that learners would be able to incorporate idioms into their writing. Their responses indicate that when idioms are taught as indigenous knowledge, they do not enhance the acquisition of oral language only, since learners would concurrently use the idioms in their sentences and stories. ZN5 asserts that isiXhosa idioms could be useful later in life when they become established authors. This indicates that if the learners' literacy skills are well developed in the Foundation Phase, the learners could become better writers up to Grade 12 and beyond. Idiomatic knowledge might even assist them to become isiXhosa authors who use idioms to enrich their writing. ZN5 mentioned that idioms are both discussed and used on the radio, which indicates the widespread knowledge and use of idioms. This finding aligns with the findings of second language scholars who find that idiomatic knowledge enhances writing skills (Dibyanti & Wahyuni, 2026).

### 3.2 *Idioms Enhance in Writing Meaningful Sentences*

The teachers had a strong understanding of idioms and their role in language development. Their perspectives on the benefits of learning idioms were also similar. On the question of the benefits of learning isiXhosa idioms, they had this to say:

MN6: They will help them in writing meaningful paragraphs, neh and for portraying what they want to explain in sentences, by using idioms rather than using simple isiXhosa language to show that they understand what they are talking about. They could learn writing by using idioms, the meaning of the sentence can be seen in the idiom without using a simple word of isiXhosa. For example, so-and-so is starving at home, but he/she could say, 'The cat is sleeping in the fireplace.'

ZN6: They will get rich knowledge. When children use idioms, they get vast knowledge so that, as I mentioned before, a child could be an author and his or her title could be an idiom 'Ah! The cow sleeps while it is being milked.' The child can write about that and explain why the cow sleeps while it is being milked.

Both responses show that isiXhosa idioms play a role in enhancing writing, although the teachers explained the idea in different ways. ZN6 mentioned that isiXhosa idioms develop the learners' cognitive skills. She stated that when learners understand the idiomatic meaning, they could use the idiom as a title. If the idiom forms part of a title, the writer would have to have a thorough understanding of the meaning of the idiom and reflect its meaning in the text.

Moreover, both teachers gave two idioms to support their statements. MN6 cited the proverb *Ikati ilele eziko* ('the cat is sleeping in the fireplace'), incorporating it in a sentence to show how learners could use it. Similarly, ZN6 mentioned *Yalala inkomo isengwa* ('the cow sleeps while it is milked'). These examples also indicate that both proverbs and idioms are an important part of indigenous knowledge, and that it is not easy to differentiate between the two metaphorical uses of language. Both teachers claimed that the statements were idioms, even though, strictly speaking, they are proverbs. According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2011:15), there are five reading components, namely, word recognition, vocabulary, reading comprehension, reading fluency and phonics. MN4's response reveals that isiXhosa idioms could enrich the learners' vocabulary, which in turn could enhance their creative writing. Idioms also play a significant role in developing learners' reading skills.

### 3.3 *Idioms Helps Learners to Acquire Language Proficiency*

The teachers felt that isiXhosa idioms are not easy to understand, since their meanings are not literal but metaphorical or figurative. However, they seemed aware of the important role that idioms

could play in helping learners acquire proficiency in isiXhosa:

*MN4:* It is for expanding the child's language repertoire and for enhancing the child's writing skills that s/he could use when writing.

*ZN4:* *I think children will acquire complicated knowledge that they did not know, knowledge of language they did not know.*

According to the teachers, the role of isiXhosa idioms is to enrich learners' language. Idioms could also be a useful resource because learners could learn a fairly complex language form and use it in their writing. ZN4's response indicates that learning isiXhosa idioms develops knowledge and understanding, assisting learners to make meaning of what is being learned. This implies that understanding isiXhosa idioms is complicated. MN4 affirmed that isiXhosa idioms could also enrich their language. The teachers' responses suggest that it could be useful to teach isiXhosa idioms in Grade 3 as indigenous knowledge resources. These responses also indicate that the teaching of isiXhosa idioms in Grade 3 could benefit the learners by increasing their home language proficiency.

#### IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to Lontas (2021) in his call "Make it Happen" he explains what each letter stands for in the word "idiomatics", m stands for "motivating educational institutions, organizations, ministries of education and school boards to collaboratively develop guidelines, standards and testing protocols for curriculum design, material creation and assessment across all grade levels and educational environment." This paper agrees with this call. It aims to advocate for South African institutions and the Department of Education to integrate idioms explicitly in the student-teachers and Foundation Phase school curriculum. This paper also highlights why it is crucial to integrate idioms from the Foundation Phase. South African literacy reports highlight that, learners have writing challenges, it is time to find innovative teaching strategies with an aim to improve the

language skills from early grades of schooling. There are limited studies in South Africa that investigated the role of idioms in language development. However international studies revealed that idioms develop language proficiency in the target language. The findings of this study reveal that Grade 3 teachers believe that isiXhosa idioms could develop the learners writing skills. Learners could write meaningful sentences and become future established authors who incorporate idioms in their writing. The findings from South African studies Ramagoshi (2015) and Nondalana (2021) are evident that Grade 3 learners are able to grasp idioms in their home languages. Furthermore, International studies uncover that knowledge of idioms helps the second language speakers to sound native like in both communication and written form (Mehdi, 2024). These research findings show that idioms should be integrated explicitly in the school curriculum from the Foundation phase particularly in Grade 3. The reviewed studies also revealed that the teacher as a more knowledgeable person in the class should scaffold idioms learning through the use of role play, integrating technology and visual aids (Dibyanti and Wahyuni (2026). Nondalana-Vuzane' study revealed teaching strategies and teaching aids that could be used by teachers in teaching isiXhosa idioms with an aim to develop the learners' vocabulary. This paper concludes that knowledge of idioms is a cornerstone for language proficiency, therefore, it is significant to introduce them in Grade 3.

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