

# Mother-tongue literacy programme to improve reading with comprehension

Large numbers of South African children struggle to understand what they are reading. In fact, South Africa was placed last out of 50 countries in the recently released Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The study found that 8 out of 10 Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning. If children can't read, they can't learn, so are more likely to be trapped in the scourge of poverty, hopelessness and unemployment. Being able to read enables children to live a better future.



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Breakthrough to Literacy (BTL), a mother-tongue literacy course for Grades 1 to 3 published by the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy, aims to help children learn to read with comprehension, while developing their writing and listening skills.

The BTL method uses the aural and oral language skills the child brings into the classroom from home as the basis for learning to read and write.

Masennya Dikotla, the chief executive officer of the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy, says: “BTL is a very effective literacy methodology that responds to curriculum and educational contexts, ensuring that it achieves results with the children, who learn to read and write freely within the first year of schooling and with their teachers, who develop knowledge and skills in early literacy pedagogy (the method and practice of teaching) and classroom management.”

Molteno's flagship programme, BTL is available in numerous South African languages, namely isiZulu, Sepedi, Xitsonga, Setswana, Sesotho, Tshivenda, isiSwati, isiXhosa, isiNdebele and Afrikaans as well as Nama, Kwedam and !Xun.

Dikotla explains that the programme is highly effective in developing children's vocabulary and phonology (understanding how to express sounds). He adds that BTL is unique because it works in children's mother tongue and combines the different elements of literacy pedagogy into one programme that is relevant to the life and language experiences of African children.

BTL teaches children to read through various methods, including but not limited to, phonic decoding and look-and-say strategies. The phonic decoding involves children reading a full sentence, then breaking the sentence into words and then syllables and sounds. The look-and-say strategies involve children describing what they see on a conversation poster orally and then the teacher guiding them to write what they have described.

Implementing the BTL programme provides the opportunity for learning individually, as pairs, in small groups or as a whole class. As part of BTL is a teacher's guide, a learner's guide as well as a sentence maker and a sentence holder, comprising of word cards that enable learners to make a sentence. BTL also includes phonic posters with individual sounds. In order to give children the opportunity to practise the reading skills they have learnt, BTL also provides readers with engaging stories. To determine children's level of comprehension, teachers ask them questions about the stories they have read which they have to answer orally and in their notebooks.

"The programme lays the ideal foundation for teaching English as an additional language," says Dikotla. "It also provides children with the skills they need to learn through English."

## Teacher training

A major aspect of the programme's success is that it provides teacher training and follow-up support in the classroom. "We support teachers by helping them address their challenges," says Dikotla. "This provides them with necessary skills to successfully empower children with literacy, even in crowded and under-resourced classrooms."

Through using BTL, teachers develop knowledge and skills in initial literacy teaching and in learnercentred classroom management, which are transferable to other areas of the curriculum. Teachers who are good at implementing BTL are more likely to become good at teaching maths and other subjects.

BTL and all Molteno's other materials comply with the Department of Basic Education's curriculum requirements.

In addition to being available in South Africa, BTL was also available in Zambia and various other African countries.

For more information, visit <https://www.molteno.co.za/>.

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