

Nal'ibali highlights the importance of first languages in literacy development

National reading-for-enjoyment campaign Nal'ibali has collaborated with South African role models and public figures to highlight the importance of first languages in children's literacy development this International Tongue Language Day on 21 February.



By asking participants to try and read a children's story - in a language they didn't understand - Nal'ibali has created a poignant Public Service Announcement (PSA) highlighting the challenges faced by many young children as they engage with print and other literacy materials in unfamiliar languages on a daily basis.

"Regular interaction with interesting and challenging books and stories in home languages allows children to build a deep understanding of their mother tongue. This ensures a firm foundation for learning not only an additional language, but for all other school learning too," explains Carole Bloch, Director of PRAESA (Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa) which is running the Nal'ibali campaign.

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"All children, and not only English speakers, deserve significant exposure to the finest of locally written and international literature in their first languages. Until we achieve this, we continue to disadvantage learning opportunities for the majority of children in South Africa," Bloch continues.

Showing just how meaningless receiving news and information in a language you don't understand can be, South African public figures including YouTube sensation, Suezelle DIY, actress and Freshlyground lead singer, Zolani Mahola, as well as soccer players Cecil Lolo and Ziyaad Eksteen from Ajax Cape Town Football Club all had a turn to be filmed reading a story in a language they did not know.

"It is of utmost importance to me that my child speaks the language of his mother and the people who came before her. For him to have access to the rich culture I came from would be one of the biggest gifts I could ever pass on to him and reading in his mother tongue would open the windows of that world even further to him," commented Mahola.

The "wrong" language

Taking up the challenge, and reading snippets from a story in the "wrong" language on air, national radio stations RSG, SAfm and Umhlobo Wenene FM, who typically broadcast in Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa respectively, surprised their listeners and helped spread the message even further.

"It takes many years to learn your mother tongue well and reading and talking about books in your home language enriches children's language enormously. So, to help your children have the very best chance of success at school, the golden rule is to start talking and reading to them in their mother tongue/s when they are babies and keep doing this throughout their lives, even as they learn other languages at school," concludes Bloch.

And, for those wanting to access children's stories and other literacy materials in a range of South African languages, they need not look further than the Nal'ibali reading-for-enjoyment supplement. Issued each week during term time, the supplement is the only fully bilingual resource of its kind offering children's stories, literacy activities as well as reading tips and support in four different language combinations. These resources are also freely available from the Nal'ibali [web-](#) and [mobisite](#).

This video emphasises the challenges faced by many young children as they engage with print and other literacy materials in unfamiliar languages on a daily basis. Local celebs such as YouTube sensation, Suzelle DIY, actress and Freshlyground lead singer, Zolani Mahola, as well as soccer players Cecil Lolo and Ziyaad Eksteen from Ajax Cape Town Football Club, tried to try to hilariously read a children's story - in a language they didn't understand!

Watch to see what happens:

Nalibali.org