

Investigation of Learners' Reading Skills in English First Additional Language Grade 11 Classroom

Thaba, RA and Motlhaka HA

University of Limpopo, School of Education, Department of Language Education

ABSTRACT

The study sought to reveal the causes, challenges experienced by learners when engaged in reading and to determine intervention strategies that could be used to improve reading skills among grade 11 learners. The study adopted grounded theory design, which is qualitative research design, to develop a theory from the reading experiences of learners. The purposive non-probability sample was used to sample 10 learners from grade 11 learners and five English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers at a rural public junior secondary school in Maleboho Central Circuit, Capricorn District, Limpopo province, South Africa. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and data was analysed thematically. The findings indicated that learners lack vocabulary skill to express themselves effortlessly and struggle with reading of words within a sentence which makes it difficult for them to understand what they read. Thus, the study recommends that teachers should be skilled through a workshop about various reading strategies and the application in the EFAL classroom to instil the love of reading among learners and to teach learners to integrate different reading strategies to improve their reading skill.

Keywords: Reading skills; reading comprehension; reading strategies; English First Additional Language.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is considered a complex processing skill in which the reader interacts with the text in order to create meaning (Molotja & Themane, 2018). It plays a very important role in learners' educational success as most curriculum subjects use text-based materials for study. Reading comprehension is a strategic process in which readers combine cues from the text with their existing knowledge and previous experience to make predictions and construct meaning from the text (Gilakjani, 2016; Madikiza et al., 2018). It plays a crucial role in learners' academic success and future life outcomes. Olifant, Cekiso and Rautenbach (2019) state that poor reading ability displayed by learners is a great challenge worldwide. There are 40% of children in the United States experiencing challenges to become competent readers. Also, Britain declared the year 2008 as a National year of Reading because of poor reading competence of learners in English (Chaka, 2015). Furthermore, a study conducted in Francophone Guinea by Abadzi (2008) states that most learners do not know the entire alphabet by the time they complete Grade two (Olifant, Cekiso & Rautenbach, 2019). Similarly, in South Africa, learners in primary, secondary and tertiary exhibit inadequately developed reading skills. Therefore, the current study aims at investigating poor reading comprehension among learners in one of South African secondary schools. It will evaluate

strategies to mitigate the issue in study as to help improve learners' reading comprehension skills.

Numerous researchers affirm that, learners (in primary, secondary and tertiary) in South Africa display poor reading ability which is cause for concern (Mukhuba and Marutla, 2019). It negatively impacts on learners' performance. As they have difficulty in comprehending what they read. According to NCS Diagnostic Report (2019), the analysis of average performance per sub-question expressed as a percentage in paper one in EFAL shows that learners achieved 59% in comprehension passage. It points that learners lack vocabulary skill to express themselves effortlessly. When they were answering some of the questions, they quoted from the paragraph, instead of explaining the meaning of words in their own words. In addition, Mukhuba and Marutla (2019) found that word recognition is the foundational process of reading and is needed to support vocabulary attainment and reading comprehension. They prove that learners struggle with reading of words within a sentence structure and therefore they are unable to comprehend the meaning within a sentence and consequently paragraphs then the whole text which affected their understanding of the text. As such, this study is relevant as it will assess challenges faced by learners in reading comprehension at one of the schools in Limpopo province. It will also examine the strategies to mitigate poor reading amongst learners.

The studies conducted in South Africa blame poor level of reading comprehension in learners to lack of knowledge of South African teachers on several reasons: the application of reading strategies, reading methodologies, and that many teachers are not themselves immersed in rich reading practices; teachers in lower performing schools (Quintile 1-3) seem to do less reading and own fewer books than teachers in the higher performing and more affluent schools (Olifant et al., 2019; Madikiza et al., 2018; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). In the study conducted by Madikiza et al. (2018) on EFAL teachers' understanding and their implementation of reading strategies in their classrooms, the results indicated that teachers understood what reading strategies were but they were using few reading strategies and also focused on the traditional reading strategies that did not facilitate reading. Similarly, Mukhuba and Marutla (2019) affirm that teachers approach reading differently, and this can be affected by the teaching effectiveness of feeder schools. For the same reason, Olifant et al. (2019) argue that the process of how a teacher understands and interpret the act of reading impacts the learners' academic achievements. Furthermore, Hasan (2017) asserts that learners' difficulty in comprehending the reading text is because teachers still use teacher-centred instruction and only few are advanced in teaching and learning process. It is then important for teachers to equally be trained on the application of different reading strategies. As Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) point out that teachers need to be skilled readers to develop strong literacy skills and habits in their learners. However, Hasan (2017) argues that teachers have followed English teaching training and workshop especially the 2013 curriculum training but only few teachers are active, creative and alert to do innovation in teaching and learning process. Therefore, Olifant, Cekiso and Rautenbach (2019) propose that in an education system that shows signs of high poor reading ability, it is crucial that teachers routinely evaluate their teaching approaches, methods and resources, to strengthen the

perception that reading is a vital resource within the educational environment. As teachers continuously evaluate themselves, they will be able to identify methods and approaches that works and those that need to be changed. It is then when teachers will be able to help learners improve their reading comprehension skills.

AIM OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate causes and challenges experienced by grade 11 learners when engaged in reading and to determine intervention strategies that could be used to improve their reading skills.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

South Africa is a multilingual country 12 official languages – including sign language but this is simply not reflected in our classrooms beyond Grade 3 because 79.2% of the population speak African/indigenous languages as their home languages, while 8.2% of the population speak English as their home language, which is a dominant language of instruction in South African education system (Motlhaka, 2021). This study took place at a rural public junior secondary school in Maleboho Central Circuit, Capricorn District, Limpopo province, South Africa. Learners in this study have limited English language access outside the school due to parents' inadequate literacy and English proficiency. The school is situated in a community which dominantly speaks Sepedi language, which is taught at school as learners' home language and English as First Additional Language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers used qualitative approach to investigate causes and challenges experienced by grade 11 learners when engaged in reading and to determine intervention strategies that could be used to improve their reading skills. The qualitative approach is relevant in this study as it is primarily concerned in understanding human beings' experiences in a humanistic, interpretive approach (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). Therefore, the researchers got the participants' views through having a direct personal contact with them during semi-structured interviews guided by the following research questions:

- What are the causes and challenges of poor reading among Grade 11 learners?
- What are intervention strategies that could be used in improving reading skills amongst learners?

PARTICIPANTS

The participants for this study included grade 11 learners and five teachers English First Additional Language who possess proficiency in more than one of the indigenous language such as Xitsonga, Sepedi, Setswana, isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, SiSwati and Tshivenda represented in their classroom. Learners included 5 boys and 5 girls aged between 16-18 years as well as five English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers whose home language is Sepedi language in English First Additional Language classroom. The purposive non-probability sampling was adopted.

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with 10 (n=10) grade 11 learners and five English First Additional Language teachers to elicit their experiences on the causes and challenges of poor reading in English First Additional Language classroom. The researcher prepared a list of all the questions to ask participants and the interview lasted for 10 to 15 minutes per participant. Yet, the format of the interview was open-ended, as each participant was encouraged to express his or her ideas freely, elaborate and even ask questions on their experiences. Interviews were recorded on a voice recorder for a later analysis. This study was guided by the following questions:

- What are the causes and challenges of poor reading among Grade 11 learners?
- What are intervention strategies that could be used in improving reading skills amongst learners?

DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher adopted thematic analysis method to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data. In this study, thematic analysis method of open-ended responses from transcribed interviews helped the researcher to explore the context of teaching and learning of English First Additional Language while allowing flexibility and interpretation when analysing the data to build trustworthiness and credibility with readers. Thus, analysis of qualitative data can be outlined in five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting and concluding. The transcripts were read several times to identify themes and categories on the causes and challenges of poor reading among Grade 11 learners.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will contribute to the field of English First Additional Language learning both in terms of pedagogy and research. This study will also offer significant pedagogical implications for English First Additional Language teachers in South Africa to recognize the pedagogical value in addressing the causes and challenges of poor reading among Grade 11 learners.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study aims to investigate causes and challenges experienced by grade 11 learners when engaged in reading and to determine intervention strategies that could be used to improve their reading skills. The analysis of data unearthed the following themes:

The causes of poor reading skill

There are multiple causes of poor reading among learners. Some of the causes are poor command of vocabulary, habit of cramming, no interest to learn creativity in reading but the goal to pass the examination; lack of confidence to practice how to read in class, poor motivation from teachers and parents to help develop the interest in learners to read, teachers' inadequate knowledge on using reading strategies to teach reading skill (Iqbal et al., 2015;

Mohammed &Amponsah, 2018). The above arguments correlate with the responses of the participants as indicated below:

Learner 1

I think is the lack of confidence. I am not confident enough to read in front of people and I don't practice reading, especially at home. I only read in class when asked by the teacher.

Learner 2

Eish, I think the causes of my poor reading skill is that I don't have the interest to read for pleasure. I only read when we are going to write a test or examination and when the teacher asks me to read in class.

Above responses indicate that the cause of their poor reading skill is that they do not engage in extensive reading but wait to read in class when asked by the teacher or when they are going to write examination. The findings also indicate that participants lack confidence to read in class which are supported by the findings of Mohammed andAmponsah (2018) who found that learners lack confidence to practice how to read in class and poor motivation from teachers and parents to help develop their interest in reading causes learners' poor reading skill. This is also supported by Igbal et al.(2015) who found that learners have a habit of cramming because they don't have interest to learn creativity in reading, but the sole goal is to pass the examination. Furthermore, participant three indicates that she lacks motivation and interest to read which causes her poor reading skill. Consequently, Nalisa, Chataa andMaemeko (2019) assert that it is very difficult for a learner to have interest in reading if the learner is not motivated at home or school. Filgona et al.(2020) and Nurjana(2018) support the above argument when they found that learners lack the habit to read which is caused by less motivation given by teachers or parents at home; motivation drives learners to reach learning goals. Furthermore, the above arguments about factors that causes learners' poor reading skill is supported by responses of teachers as indicated below:

Teacher 3

Some learners have lack of self- confidence, lack interest of reading. Some have poor pronunciation skills and they lack motivation, especially from teachers.

Teacher 5

The reason for poor reading is caused by poor foundation. If learners did not master the basics of reading at the foundation phase, it led to disaster.

Above responses indicate thatlearners' lack of self-confidence, interest to read as well as inadequate reading in the foundation phase contribute to learners' poor reading skills. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that it is crucial that teachers in FET phase use various strategies to mitigate poor reading among learners which motivate learners to engage in extensive reading as indicated by teachers that learners' poor reading is caused by lack of interest to read and not reading as much as they should. Similarly, Talukder(2011) asserts that extensive reading is crucial to improve learners' reading skill. According to Nurjanah

(2018), learners' poor reading is caused by learners' poor habit of reading and less interest to read.

Challenges experienced by learners when they engage in reading

Learners face many challenges in reading which prohibit their comprehension skill. Some of the challenges experienced by learners are lack of vocabulary and word recognition in the sentence or paragraph. Mukhuba and Marutla(2019) found that word recognition is the foundational process of reading and is needed to support vocabulary attainment and reading comprehension. They prove that learners struggle with reading of words within a sentence structure and therefore they are unable to comprehend the meaning within a sentence and consequently paragraphs then the whole text. Respondents highlighted the following on their reading challenges:

Learner 5

When I come across difficult words that I do not know their meaning in a sentence or paragraph, makes it difficult for me to understand the whole text or paragraph. And sometimes if I find many difficult words, I lose focus and read to finish not to understand.

Participant 7

When I read especially in class, I get scared and I panic. This makes me to read for the sake of reading and not to understand. I fail to pronounce words correctly and lose focus and when I find unfamiliar words in the text, it makes it difficult to understand the text.

The responses from participants reveal that learners' anxiety level rise when they are asked to read affects their reading comprehension and their lack of vocabulary makes them to lose interest when they notice unfamiliar words in the text. Moreover, responses from teachers indicate that learners encounter challenges of speed, decoding, pronunciation and interest to read as indicated below:

Teacher 1

Most of the learners' encounter challenges of speed. They are slow on reading and they don't finish on time. And again, decoding is the challenge that learners encounter when reading.

Teacher 4

Incorrect pronunciation is the main reason that affect their reading comprehension. They do not understand when they read.

Above responses indicate that most learners encounter reading challenges of reading slowly and incorrect pronunciation which affect their reading comprehension.

Strategies or methods to use to improve learners' reading skill

Reading strategies are detailed activities, behaviours, techniques that learners use to improve their progress in comprehending, internalising and using a second language (Molotja&Themane, 2018). Teachers need to take learners through different reading

strategies and how they can use these strategies in different academic reading contexts. According to Gilakjani(2016), extensive reading is a method that exposes learners to large quantities of meaningful and fascinating materials and activities that have a significant impact on the learners' knowledge of English as the second language. Moreover, the participants in this study mentioned the importance of extensive reading as a method to improve their reading skill as indicated below:

Learner 7

I should read a lot, like reading of magazines and English textbooks. I should use a highlighter to mark unfamiliar words, then use a dictionary to find the meaning of words. And I also think the teacher should explain to us the meaning of unfamiliar words during the lesson. It will help us to know the meanings of those words when we come across them in a text.

Learner 3

I think I can improve my reading skill by reading magazines, watching news and using a dictionary when I read. I must encourage myself to read different texts every day.

The participants view extensive reading as an effective method to improve their reading skill. They point that reading and using a dictionary is a good way to improve their vocabulary level. Learners need to be motivated and encouraged to engage into extensive reading. The teachers should use interesting texts in the classroom that will cultivate the love of reading in learners. They must be taught how to read and use dictionary to get the meaning of alien words. Furthermore, the findings of this study are supported by Nurjanah (2018) who asserts that reading can assist learners gain new words and their determination to master vocabulary should support them to find some ways to reach it. Moreover, teachers mention different strategies that they think are effective to improve learners' reading comprehension such as the use of intensive reading, leisure reading and use of games to improve reading skill as indicated below:

Teacher 1

I use intensive reading to inculcate the love of reading among learners and make them continue reading for future benefits. I choose it because it goes all about the text and learners will be able to understand the text or the story.

Teacher 2

Leisure reading is more effective. It assists learners to get pleasure out of reading. Learners choose books that are of great interest to them and by so doing they are due to improve accordingly. And I encourage them to read for pleasure whenever they can and even recommend interesting titles apart from the ones prescribed by the curriculum. I realised that reading a material that is of their own choosing comes across as not so much of a burden as opposed to curriculum studying so they improve while doing so. They approach such type of reading as fulfilling.

The findings of this study reveal that the great way to develop a wide vocabulary is through extensive reading which are supported by Olifant, Cekiso and Rautenbach(2019) who argue that intensive reading is a significant instrument for improving reading comprehension among learners.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate causes and challenges experienced by grade 11 learners when engaged in reading and to determine intervention strategies that could be used to improve their reading skills. The findings of this study indicate that participants lack confidence to read in class which are supported by the findings of Mohammed and Amponsah (2018) who found that learners lack confidence to practice how to read in class and poor motivation from teachers and parents to help develop their interest in reading causes learners' poor reading skill. Thus, teachers should use interesting texts in the classroom that will cultivate the love of reading in learners. Some of the challenges experienced by learners are lack of vocabulary and word recognition in the sentence of paragraph. The findings of this study suggest that it is crucial that teachers in FET phase use various strategies to mitigate poor reading among learners which motivate learners to engage in extensive reading as indicated by teachers that learners' poor reading is caused by lack of interest to read and not reading as much as they should. The findings of this study encourage the curriculum advisers, planners and teachers to work hard in finding ways to plan, design and apply various reading strategies to improve reading skill among learners.

REFERENCES

1. Chaka, C. (2015). 'An investigation into the English reading comprehension of Grade a. 10 English first additional language learners at a senior secondary school', *Reading & Writing* 6(1), 1-7.
2. Filgona, J., Sakiyo, J., Gwany, D.M & Okoronka, A.U. (2020). 'Motivation in Learning'. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 10(4), 6-37.
3. Gilakjani, A. P. (2016). 'How students improve their reading comprehension skill'. *Journal of Studies in Education*, 6(2), 229-240.
4. Hasan, A. (2017). *The Effect of Directed Reading Thinking Activity Method on Students' Reading Comprehension for State Islamic Senior High School*, 8(2), 140-148.
5. Iqbal, M., Noor, M., Muhabat, F., & Kazemian, B. (2015). 'Factors Responsible for Poor English Comprehension at Secondary Level'. *Communication and Linguistics Studies*, 1(1), 1-6.
6. Jackson, R., Drummond, D.K & Camara, S. (2007). *What Is Qualitative Research? Qualitative Research Report in Communication*, 8(1), 21-28.
7. Madikiza, N., Cekiso, M, P., Tshotsho, B.P., & Landa, N. (2018). 'Analysing English First Additional Language teachers' understanding and implementation of reading strategies.' *Reading and Writing*, 9(1), 1-10.
8. Mohammed, I & Amponsah, O. (2018). *Predominant factors contributing to low reading abilities of pupils at Elsie Lund Basic School in the Tamale Metropolis, Ghana. The Journal of the African Educational Research*, 6(4), 273-278.
9. Molotja, T.W., & Themane, M. (2018). 'Enhancing learners' reading habits through reading bags at secondary schools', *Reading & Writing*, 9 (1), 1-9.
10. Motlhaka, HA. (2021). Translanguaging in Collaborative Reading Activity: A Multilingual Perspective of Meaning Making. *Psychology and Education*, 58(5), 2683-2691.

11. Mukhuba, T. T., &Marutla, G. B. (2019). *Reading challenges in English: Towards a reading model for Grade 8 Learners in Mafikeng District, North West Province, South Africa*. *Journal of gender, Information and development in Africa (JGIDA)*,219-234.
12. Nalisa, T., Chataa, B.M., &Maemeko, E.L. (2019). 'Causes of Reading Difficulties in English 2nd Language in Grade 4 at a school in KatimaMulilo Circuit.' *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 7(5), 27-35.
13. Nurjanah, R. L. (2018). 'The Analysis on Students' Difficulties in Doing Reading Comprehension Final Test'. *Journal of English Language Literature and Teaching*, 2(2), 253-264.
14. Olifant, T., Cekiso, M., &Rautenbach, E. (2019). 'Teachers' perceptions of Grades 8– 10 English First Additional Language learners' reading habits, attitudes and motivation, *Reading & Writing*, 10(1), 1-11.
15. Pretorius, E.J &Klapwijk, N.M (2016). 'Reading comprehension in South African schools: Are teachers getting it, and getting it right?', *A Journal for Language Learning*, 32(1), 1-20.
16. Talukder, M.A.A. (2011). 'The reasons for the Poor Reading Skills of the Students on Entry to the Tertiary Level of Education in Bangladesh'. *Manarat International University Studies*, 2(1), 103-110.