READING PROFICIENCY DETERIORATION IN ONE RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL IN O.R. TAMBO COASTAL DISTRICT OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract. Reading is a fundamental skill for learners in grade four, as well as for individuals of all ages. Without proficient reading skills, learners may struggle to grasp the content of any learning area. Reading challenges are being experienced by fourth-grade learners learning English as a First Additional Language in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District at Lusikisiki. There is limited research on specific instructional practices and resource availability in Lusikisiki schools. Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory informed the study with its relevance to reading skills considered as foundational for language learning. The qualitative research design used in this report was a case study. Ten primary schools were sampled for the study. Ten English First Additional Language teachers in grade four (one from each school) were the sampled participants who participated in semi-structured interviews. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which led to the creation of themes. The analyzed data demonstrated significant factors leading to reading challenges as follows: Lack of parents' participation, lack of support and resources, and curriculum changes. This paper recommends reducing teacher workload, building libraries in schools and communities, and integrating teacher and parental participation.
Keywords: *Grade Four, Learners, Reading, Rural Primary schooling, English First Additional language.*

Introduction

Reading is one of the most crucial and fundamental early childhood development abilities (Manas, 2020). In support of that, Castles et al (2018) assert that reading in the English language, frequently utilized for mediating global information, raises the importance of learners' reading skills. Reading comprehension is a prerequisite for learners who want to do well in English as a First Additional Language (Grigoryan, 2020). Early reading is a contentious issue that has become central to the development of children. Multiple debates have sprung up around the world concerning how reading instruction for young children should be prioritized in various learning contexts (Jeevaratnam & Stapa, 2020). After the coronavirus (COVID-19) disrupted teaching and learning strategies for reading achievement in primary schools, reading instruction appeared to decline (Van Staden et al, 2023).

Several studies have been conducted on the reading challenges in grade four classes; such studies yield no results to improve reading skills. For instance, Chua and Sulaiman (2021) conducted a study on Grade four learners in a Malaysian primary school where English was taught as a first additional language (FAL); the results were that the majority of grade four learners struggled to read with understanding. On the other hand, Collins, Compton, Lindström, and Gilbert (2020) conducted a study on the assessment of a passage in which functional reading was administered; it was revealed that grade four learners could not read text with comprehension. Aligning with the above-mentioned authors, findings in Likomeno's (2022) study showed that teachers in Zambia's school education system were of a perspective that grade four learners have a variety of challenges in connection with reading.

South Africa faces significant challenges in the realm of reading, which have profound implications for the educational and socio-economic well-being of its grade four learners (Du Plessis & Letshwene, 2020). South Africa grapples with a multifaceted challenge related to reading skills. The seriousness of the issue is highlighted by the country's poor performance in

international evaluations, such as The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Department of Basic Education, 2023). It should be noted that the primary goals of PIRLS are to evaluate the reading proficiency of fourth-grade South African learners and to pinpoint potential contextual factors that may be related, as argued by Volante et al (2020).

In line with the claims above, South Africa has remarkably low-performance levels in terms of learners' capacity to read for meaning as they approach ten years old, indicating that they are in grade four. Because of the influence of their mother tongue, learners at this developmental stage are thought to be proficient readers of English. This is false, as Idrees et al (2022) argue that difficulties with English reading are caused by learners' insufficient language proficiency at this level. The gap identified by this paper is that literature seems to be silent about teaching strategies, yet language learning, with its underlying aspects, needs to be researched in consideration that some schools, by the nature of their rural location, have been noted to experience vast challenges when equated to urban settings. This may not accurately reflect the unique socioeconomic and educational contexts of rural communities. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing targeted interventions that can improve reading proficiency among grade four learners in rural South African contexts. Considering these concerns, this paper explores the factors contributing to reading difficulties in English First Additional Language learners in rural fourth-grade classes at Lusikisiki, O.R. Tambo Coastal District.

To accomplish aspects affecting reading among grade four learners, there was a question to be asked: What factors lead to learners' reading challenges in rural Grade four English FAL at Lusikisiki, in the OR Tambo Coastal District? Aligned with this research question, there is an underlying objective that aims to identify contributory factors that lead to learners' reading challenges. For the methodology, a qualitative research approach was used where the interpretivism paradigm and case study research were applied, and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews and thematically analysed.

Literature review

Numerous writers evaluated the elements that contribute to the reading difficulties faced by FAL English language learners in grade four classrooms. For instance, Webb (2018) evaluated variables influencing language and literacy progress in Australian Aboriginal grade four English FAL learners. According to Webb (2018), Aboriginal learners in Australia generally exhibit lower levels of literacy development than their mainstream counterparts, particularly in English. It is commonly known that bad health, in conjunction with historically unfavorable socio-political circumstances, negatively affects Aboriginal learners' academic progress and involvement, as well as their offspring's reading abilities.

In another study, Nasiba and Norboyevich (2022) examined the challenges with reading skills that educators and learners in English First Additional Language environments face. Reading English requires pupils in grade four to be ready and psychologically sound enough, as English is the language that is spoken worldwide by far the most. In a primary school in Central Java, Indonesia et al (2020) investigated the elements that contributed to learners' difficulties in the academic reading English Language Education Program. The findings identified two factors such as internal and external factors that supported learners' academic reading difficulties. Stress, lack of information, self-motivation, and confidence were internal influences. According to the study, fourth-grade learners' frustration stemmed from their incapacity to read.

Yaakob (2015) assessed factors affecting learners' English reading skills in primary schools. This study was carried out to identify and investigate the factors that influence learners' reading abilities in grade 4 classes. The intended audience consisted of fourth graders from Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Pelong, a primary school in Gombak, Selangor, who were in their

final year of school. Yaakob (2015) further demonstrated that the intensity of all learners was related to one another's reading skills as essential for lifelong learning. According to Hassan and Dweik (2021), it is undeniably true that learning reading skills presents several difficulties for learners because these skills are difficult to master. However, because grade four learners may find reading perplexing and difficult to understand or fail to create good reading in the English language, teachers have a tough time teaching reading skills.

With regard to reading and pronunciation, accuracy and fluency are important in the learning environment in South Africa. However, they are worthless if not understood by all learners, which is the case in most schools across South Africa. International literacy assessments indicate that countries are focusing more on reading comprehension (Bergbauer, 2016). The findings of the most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) for 2021 assessments (Alharthi, 2021) demonstrate the challenges facing the oral reading technique. Out of the fifty countries that took part in PIRLS, South Africa came in last.

A study was carried out by Hlalethwa (2013) to assess the reading difficulties that primary school learners encounter. Low matriculation scores are somewhat associated with pupils' incapacity to read at the required levels at the time of application, claims Hlalethwa (2013). Munir, Faiza, Jamal, Daud, and Iqbal (2023) assert that various factors, including socioeconomic problems and resource constraints, contribute significantly to learners' reading difficulties.

Similarly, Nkosi (2016) conducted a study on the challenges of intermediate-phase learners (grade four class included) in reading the English language. Nkosi (2016)'s research results showed several elements that affect learners' reading and proficiency. There are a variety of physical elements to consider, as well as little focus on reading abilities, a print-poor environment, little reading time, and poor communication proficiency in English as the language of learning and teaching (Fesi & Mncube, 2021). Despite all the research conducted, the reading problem persists; hence, this paper concisely investigates the contributory factors to such challenges.

The social constructivist theory of Vygotsky (See Figure 1) was used in this work (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory of learning places a strong emphasis on how actively learners create their knowledge and understanding through interactions with their surroundings. We believe that theory has a significant bearing on how reading skills are developed in fourth grade and beyond. Magro (2018) contends that the need to actively participate in the learning process is emphasized by constructivism. This implies that during reading, students should actively interact with texts, pose questions, formulate hypotheses, and draw connections between previously learned material and newly discovered information. A deeper comprehension of the material may result from this active participation (Li et al, 2019).
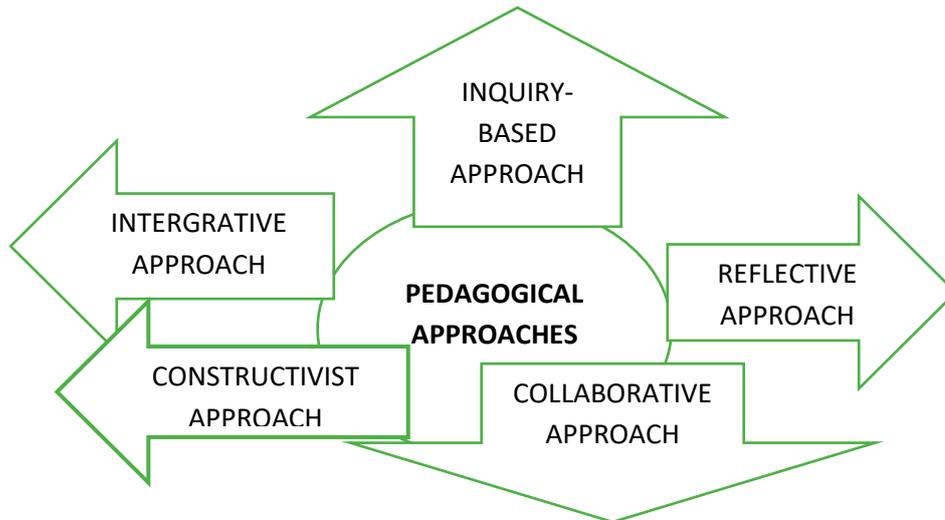
*Figure 1: **Intertwined Approaches of Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978)***

The approaches above are inquiry-based, reflective, collaborative, constructivist, and integrative, and qualify the logic of collaborative strategies for enhanced academic attainment. Henceforth, Social Constructivism also recognizes the significance of social interaction in learning. Collaborative reading activities, such as group discussions, literature circles, or peer-led book clubs, can enhance learners' comprehension and critical thinking skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivism, as argued by Keep et al. (2017), encourages critical thinking in learners by letting them work on their own without guidance from the teacher. It is necessary to encourage learners' reading habits as a result. The researcher in this paper supports that constructivism can significantly enhance the development of reading skills in grade four and beyond by promoting active engagement, social interaction, and personalized learning experiences. The theories and principles associated with constructivism offer valuable insights into effective reading instruction, helping learners become proficient readers and critical thinkers.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used in this work. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) claim that the goal of the qualitative research approach is to investigate and comprehend the subtleties, meanings, and complexity of social processes. It is frequently used to research subjects where the objective is to obtain insight into people's experiences, perspectives, and behaviours in the social sciences, humanities, and other fields. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2017) contend that one distinguishing feature of qualitative research methods is their focus on gathering and evaluating non-numerical data, including observations, interviews, and written or visual materials.

The concept of interpretivism was applied. It is a philosophical and methodological approach in the social sciences. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasize the significance of comprehending and interpreting people's subjective meanings and views within their social and cultural settings. Creswell and Poth (2018) alluded that it is particularly relevant to qualitative research methods because it provides a framework for conducting research that explores the rich and complex aspects of human experience, often involving in-depth interviews, observations, and the analysis of textual or visual data.

As outlined by Kumatongo and Muzata (2021), it is predicated on the idea that investigators ought to employ the philosophical and/or methodological strategy that proves most successful for the particular study problem under investigation. In this instance, for

example, the study looks into the variables that contribute to reading difficulties in fourth-grade learners.

A case study was adopted as a research design. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state that case study research aims to thoroughly investigate a particular case or cases, allowing researchers to gain a rich and detailed understanding of the subject. In this case, the researcher investigated the contributory factors to reading challenges in grade four.

To gather information, **semi-structured interviews were employed**. Ruslin et al (2022) posit that semi-structured interviews are a qualitative research method that allows for a combination of predetermined questions and the flexibility to explore deeper insights during the interview process. The researcher used predetermined questions on the interview schedule. Ten fourth-grade teachers (grade four) were purposefully sampled to be interviewed. The fact that the participants were fourth-grade English teachers served as the selection criteria, as Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) postulate that in the purposive sampling technique, participants are hand-selected by researchers according to a predetermined set of characteristics or criteria relevant to the objectives of the study.

Data analysis is the collection and systematic interpretation of information from the field in empirical research (Alem, 2020). The obtained qualitative data was **thematically analyzed**. Building on Boyatzis (2018), teacher interviews were transcribed and used to describe emerging themes in the data collected. The figure 2 below illustrates thematic analysis processes, as carried out when data for this paper was scrutinised.
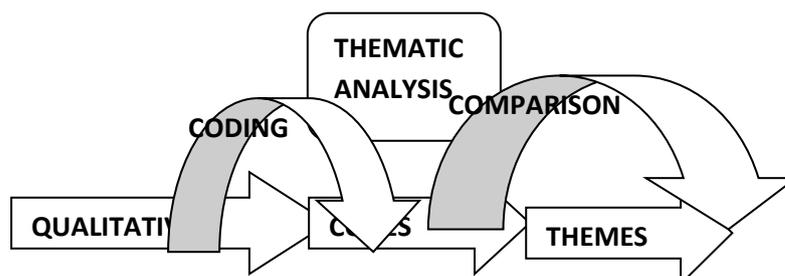

Figure 2: ***Steps for Qualitative Thematic Analysis (Boyatzis, 2018)***

Ethics in research examines how to conduct research in a responsible manner that maintains the integrity of the scientific process (David, 2015). It is a philosophical field concerned with the ethical implications of scientific study. The researchers addressed ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent, and the participants were told that participation is voluntary. There was an assurance that the participants' names and identities would never be disclosed.

Research results

Themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews are as follows:
- Parents participation
- Lack of support and resources
- Curriculum Changes

Parents participation

The teachers who were interviewed mentioned the lack of parental participation in the education of their children.

Their responses as verbatim quotations are as follows: *Our Department of Education introduced the workbooks, the DBE workbooks. We try to involve the parents by tracking the*

way a particular learner is doing homework, our findings are that parents do not take part in it and are not helping their children to do schoolwork at home (Teacher A).

Another participant responded as follows:

Parents do not cooperate with us as teachers because if maybe you give learners homework, the learners would not write the homework because of the challenges of their parents, because their parents are-- and also, their parents are incredibly young; they are out there, you know. The parents of today are incredibly young, they are out there. I mean they are still immature to parent their children (Teacher D).

In rural areas like my school, the parents are not supportive; for instance, if you give the learner homework, parents do not intervene in their children's education. We try as teachers to support our learners. Learners do not practice writing at home. Some learners do not understand writing at all (Teacher F).

From the above responses, there is no doubt that not all parents are participating in the education of their children, which we think makes learners not perform well in their reading skills. The study clearly shows that parents are not cooperating regarding their children's education, and some of the parents are too young and too immature to give time to their children.

Lack of support and resources

Almost all the participants had an outcry that there is no support and resources to teach reading. They responded as follows:

There is no support from the government. The schools should be provided with remedial teachers. The workshop does not provide any support. There are no teaching resources at my school; for instance, there is no library, there is no computer laboratory, and the environment is not user-friendly and conducive for teaching (Teacher B).

No! There is no support; there is no reading material and resources such as magazines and newspapers. We do not have an overhead projector; there is an unavailability of reading resources. It becomes difficult to teach visual texts (Teacher D).

Here in my school, there are few textbooks and readers in grade 4. In fact, in the entire intermediate phase, we must go outside and borrow from the neighbouring schools (Teacher G).

There is no library in my school, that alone defeats our goal to be a reading school. Also, there are no reading clubs (Teacher E).

The other participant firmly said:

There is a lack of support because there are limited resources, our walls are not print-rich, and the department and government are not helping me. There is always a cry about a budget cut that detrimentally affects the LTSM for teaching reading skills (Teacher H).

The responses revealed that there is partial support from the Department of Basic Education.

Curriculum changes

Changing from one curriculum to another brings confusion to teachers. They reported that in the old curriculum there was enough time that was allocated for reading in the classroom setting. They also reported that CAPS is dictating them to spend the prescribed time to teach a certain skill. Participants responded as follows:

There is insufficient time for me; there is too little time at school to teach reading, and CAPS gives us limited hours to teach reading per two-week cycle (Teacher F).

The Curriculum Policy Statement (CAPS) instructs me that I must be finished teaching reading at a particular time, which consequently makes us, as teachers, rush the syllabus, yet we leave learners as blank slates. CAPS is difficult to implement (Teacher G).

The system of education dismally fails us as teachers and learners; for how many times will this curriculum change? We need to go back to our roots where we could read like nobody's business (Teacher B).

We, as teachers, do not give learners enough time to read. Hence, they are not used to reading; the learners that I teach come from grade 3, where they were taught in their native language. The syllabus makes us rush things. You see, reading skills need a lot of time (Teacher D).

The curriculum changes are a problem because they change from now and then, and I end up complying to finish the syllabus. Remember that we are dealing with learners who are in grade four, and they need a lot of attention (Teacher A).

The responses from the participants revealed that the current curriculum does not give teachers enough time to teach learners reading skills.

Discussion

The results of this study support Vygotsky's (1978) foundational theory, which encourages learners to actively engage in the process of building their own knowledge and understanding through interactions with their surroundings. This suggests that learners should actively engage with texts while they read, asking questions, coming up with theories, and making connections between what they have already learned and what they have just learned.

With reference to parent participation, the results are consistent with those of Graham et al (2018), who reported that the reading competencies of learners who get support from family members are high compared to those who do not get help from their family members. Teachers from the sampled schools, however, believe that parents are not active in their children's teaching and learning activities, which Swart and Pettipher (2015) state hinders learners' capacity to pick up English reading quickly.

As present researchers, it is important to make the parents aware that they need to take full responsibility in supporting their children with schoolwork; for instance, uninvolved parents are said to have a direct and detrimental impact on how well young learners are taught to read. The results also revealed that some parents of grade four learners are immature, and they struggle to take responsibility for helping their children to read. That statement is supported by the findings of the Statistics South Africa (2019) survey, which discovered that many young parents in South Africa are immature, may not have completed their own education, and have low literacy levels. This can make it difficult for them to support their children's reading development when they themselves struggle with basic reading and comprehension. Mavundla (2019) also discovered that young parents may lack the knowledge and experience to effectively support their children's education. They may not have access to parenting programs or resources that could help them develop essential parenting skills.

In response to the lack of support and resources, textbooks and other learning and teaching resources significantly contribute to boosting the standard of learning and enhancing learners' performance, according to a study by Adebayo et al. (2020). Hoadley (2024) states that many South African schools face resource constraints, including a lack of textbooks, reading materials, and technology. We believe that education nowadays may require unreliable resources, making it difficult to implement effective reading instruction. However, families have few reading resources, little teaching time, and a high prevalence of parental illiteracy. According to Orr et al (2015), educational institutions and programs should have an adequate and equitable supply of books, other learning resources, open educational resources, and technology that is non-discriminatory, learning-friendly, learner-specific, cost-effective, and available to all learners—adolescents and adults—as well as accessible to all learners. The successful implementation of teaching reading skills depends on well-trained and supported teachers.

However, there have been concerns about the adequacy of teacher training and professional development opportunities, which can hinder the effective delivery of reading

instruction. Hlalethwa (2013) is in agreement with the above scholars by alluding those socioeconomic factors and scarcity of resources play a significant role in the reading difficulties of learners. Xiang et al (2018) state that libraries and computer laboratories are essential resources to aid the reading skills of children. Fox (2018) emphasized that parents should have home libraries to enhance their children's reading skills. Rule and Land (2017), in their study, it was revealed that in rural areas, there are no reading clubs to promote reading culture in children. To show the importance of such clubs, Pretorius (2013) encouraged that schools should create reading clubs so that teachers with their learners can share their reading experiences and support each other.

Aligning with the theme of curriculum changes, given the fact that the reading time every two-week cycle is five hours, teachers are compelled to rush to complete the syllabus. Various authors have criticized the curriculum, the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). For instance, Selemela (2020) criticises that CAPS is vague and has broad learning outcomes. Critics argue that the outcomes lack specificity and clear guidance for teachers in terms of what exactly learners should achieve in reading. This can make it challenging for teachers to design effective reading instruction. Magumbo (2022) mentions that CAPS is often is being too content-heavy, leaving limited time for in-depth teaching of reading skills. The extensive curriculum may lead to teachers rushing through reading lessons and not providing learners with sufficient time to develop strong foundational reading skills. Jones (2021) argues that CAPS places excessive emphasis on assessment, which can lead to "teaching to the test." This approach may encourage rote learning and memorization rather than fostering a genuine love for reading and comprehension skills in grade four learners. This is preventing teachers from providing the necessary attention to learners.

As a key performance criterion, the obligation to finish the curriculum is a significant obstacle to teaching learners how to read. Schools should thus consider modifying their curricula to incorporate programs that will help learners transition from grades three to four, such as informing them that the workload in the foundation phase differs from that in the intermediate phase. The findings support Guerriero (2014), who noted that even though the school education department has produced a condensed syllabus, teachers must still find time to teach while scheduling mid-term, revision, and practical exams within a two-month period. Teachers are, therefore, unable to cover the necessary content for instructing English reading. Due to district-level instructions to conduct exams, they are under much pressure to finish the curriculum.

Conclusions

The aim of the study was to identify contributory factors that lead to learners' reading challenges in rural primary schools at O.R. Tambo Coastal District. The paper identified that reading challenges in grade four result from a combination of factors. Such factors as lack of parent participation, lack of support and resources, and curriculum changes are contributory factors to reading challenges in grade 4 English FAL classes.

As LoLT competency interrelates with its learning outcomes, therefore, the study suggests that schools consider modifying their curricula to include programmes that orientate learners from grade three to grade four, making them aware that the workload in the foundation phase is different from the workload in the intermediate phase. Learners can be sufficiently prepared for the obstacles they may experience in the intermediate phase if they take this action. With that being said, below the recommendations are listed:

Reducing the workload for teachers

Public school infrastructure standards and teacher support regulations support teaching practices. In the English language classroom, teachers rushing to finish their syllabus is a problem. Thus, the research suggests schools adopt flexible teaching methods. Thus, instruction should be step-by-step. Verbal instructions and presuming comprehension are insufficient. Thus, teachers should speak slowly and clearly to allow students to comprehend. Give learners sufficient "wait times" before asking questions and while awaiting responses. In addition to encouraging teachers to give short, clear, and precise instructions, the instructional model should encourage students to ask questions. This may include encouraging continuous reading and use of the native language to promote cognitive growth and facilitate transfer learning, where a child's home language topics can be easily transferred to the First Additional Language (English). Instead of assigning random vocabulary terms, teach in context.

Integrating teachers and parental support

The Ministry of Education's language in education policy and school access and attendance policy aim to promote full participation in society and the economy through equal and substantive education. Thus, poor parental involvement hurts grade-four English reading. Thus, the research suggests that teachers and parents should work together to improve language development in all domains and in all school activities. Language awareness in classrooms and families of language learners can achieve this. By connecting learning processes and increasing parents' knowledge of interrelationships, learners can develop critical reading, writing, and learning skills. It is recommended that young and immature parents should undergo training sessions on how to help their children in doing schoolwork. That can be done by both the Department of Basic Education and Social Development.

Libraries to be built in the schools and in communities

Fourth-grade education and learning might be hindered by the absence of libraries in primary schools. Teachers have lobbied for the development of libraries, which must be stocked with books by the government.

Department of Basic Education should ensure that LTSM is adequately provided to the schools

It would be immensely helpful if the department could provide computer laboratories to enhance literacy at schools.

Acknowledgements

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