



The importance of teaching English reading in foundation phase in primary schools: Case study in Maune Circuit, Capricorn North District, Limpopo province

Mojapelo Mmasefudi

Rhoda^{1*}

Pule Phindane²

Elias Tsakane

Ngobeni³

Itumeleng Phage⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa.

¹Email: Masefudi.mm@gmail.com

²Email: pphindane@cut.ac.za

³Email: ngobeniet@gmail.com

⁴Email: iphage@cut.ac.za



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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Reading ability is important in education as it transcends all forms of learning. Poor reading ability leads academic challenges and poor performance in school. In the South African school curriculum, most subjects are taught in the second language, which is mainly English; therefore, learning to read English early in formal schooling years forms the foundation for successful learning. The purpose of this study was to understand the importance of teaching English reading in Foundation Phase (FP) in primary schools of Maune Circuit Capricorn North District Limpopo Province. The study employed an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach. Data was collected from ten FP teachers from three primary schools in Maune Circuit, using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify categories, subcategories, and themes to interpret the findings. Findings revealed that English language is valued in South African society even though it is only a subject English First Additional Language (EFAL) in FP. Learners are challenged in English reading due to limited exposed to English at home; the mother tongue is spoken at home, and only encounter English reading in the classroom. Learners are experiencing language confusion because they are learning to read in their mother tongue as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) and English as a subject. This negatively affects other subjects; however, English reading is important in FP as it prepares learners for English as LoLT from Grade 4. It is a prerequisite that learners should acquire adequate foundational skills in English reading in FP.

Contribution/Originality: The findings of this study are intended to enable early reading and ensuring effective reading leading to good performance. The study brings to light learners' challenges in English reading in the FP to help teachers and education officials to plan strategic interventions to support the learners for effective reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is the basic life skill and cornerstone for every learner's success in school and throughout life. Many governments globally have a mandate to ensure that every learner is equipped with reading skills to empower them into adulthood. Reading forms the basis of all areas of learning and is a fundamental skill that needs to be acquired by every learner in school. Learning to read a second language is a complicated process, which is why so many learners struggle to become strong readers. For many African learners, reading proficiency must be developed in English from Grade 4, as English is the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT).

In South Africa, the constitution proclaimed all 11 languages as official, including English, Afrikaans, and 9 indigenous languages. Studies found that most learners (over 80%) speaks an African language, but at Grade 4,

learns through the medium of English, which constitutes less than a 10% native speaker population. This results in English becoming a learning barrier in the classroom, because when learners reach Grade 4, they have not acquired adequate competence in English for it to be adopted as LoLT across all subjects. Therefore, teaching and learning of English in Foundation Phase (FP), especially English reading for understanding, is a concern as learners should be ready for English LoLT by the end of Grade 3.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. English Reading as a Second Language in Foundation Phase in the Global Context

Worldwide it has been estimated that over 2 billion people, over one-third of humans, are learning English (King, 2018). China and India are described by many observers as competitive forces investing in the teaching and learning of English (Hanemann & Krolak, 2017). Hu and Baumann (2014) contended that reading has been regarded as the most important aspect of English teaching and learning in China. Nevertheless, English is not an official language in China, and is not the only foreign language in Chinese education.

According to the Indian Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2019) a key problem in India is that reading levels in the regional languages are low, and only 44.2% of the learners in Grade 5 can read at Grade 2 level text. The performance in English reading is even lower; developments over time in learners' ability to read English are concerning.

In Portugal, national standardised measures show that more than 20% of Portuguese learners have reading difficulties when completing primary school (Portugal Ministério da Educação eCiência, 2015). The introduction of the teaching of English as a compulsory component in primary education is quite recent in Portugal, even though in many European countries, English has been taught at this level and in preschool education for years (Orega, 2019).

Britain has maintained the English language in all its former colonies; the language of rule remained English such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, The West Indies, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, America, and former British colonies in Africa, including Botswana and Zimbabwe (Sanoto, 2017).

2.2. English Reading as the First Additional Language in South African Context

Fesi and Mncube (2021) posit that the teaching of English in African schools is still a challenge for current and future governments as most, if not all countries, are struggling to read in their first languages in FP.

Literacy rates in all 11 official languages are very low in South Africa, with 78% of Grade 4 learners not having reached the low international benchmark in their first language in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment in 2016 (Howie et al., 2017). Schaefer and Kotzé (2019) contend that although the South African language policy promotes the teaching of reading in learners' first language during the first three years of schooling, further learning from Grade 4 will most likely take place in English for the majority of learners. This implies that learners not only need to be able to read for meaning in their first language, but also in English.

2.3. English Reading Challenges in Foundation Phase

Learning to decode and to understand the written word can be very challenging for learners, and for those who learn to read in a second language, which is the case in many countries across the world, where learners are taught English as an additional language (Dearden, 2014) or regions where the first language of most of the population is not English. Spaul and Hoadley (2017) wrote about a study undertaken by the Research on Socio-economic Policy team at Stellenbosch University. The team did a few tests on 740 Grade 3 African learners, for example, on letter-sounds as well as word reading, oral reading fluency, and oral comprehension. Of the 740 Grade 3 learners assessed, only 25% could name at least 40 letters correct per minute, and the 25% slowest learners scored at most 15 letters correct per minute. In a study by Diemer, van der Merwe, and de Vos (2015) various tests on phonological awareness were performed using 31 isiXhosa learners in Grade 4. Participants obtained an average of about 90% on

the syllable segmenting and blending tasks, but only 12% on phoneme segmenting. Two-thirds of those Grade 4 learners had not one correct answer on phoneme segmenting. The study concluded that we should not assume that African learners can attain phonological awareness the way English learners can. African learners should not be expected to pronounce all letter-sounds. Learners could not pronounce certain letter-sounds the way Europeans do.

3. METHODOLOGY

Polit and Beck (2012) refer to a paradigm, also known as a worldview, as a general perspective on the complexities of the real world. According to Goodsell (2013) the interpretive paradigm aims to understand human problems, thoughts, feelings, and morals, which positivism failed to investigate. Thus, interpretivists strive to understand people's actions the way they are and try to give meaning by interpreting them. This study adopted an interpretive paradigm as it acknowledged the experiences of participants from three primary schools in Maune Circuit, Limpopo Province.

A qualitative approach based on the interpretive paradigm was used in this study. This study was better addressed by a phenomenological study because it considered human beings' subjective interpretation and their perception of the world as the starting point in understanding the importance of reading in the FP.

3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, interviews were used to collect data, particularly semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used because it allowed for the preparation of questions ahead of time and to maintain objectivity. A few guiding questions allowed the researcher to ask questions and probe for responses, thus enabling deeper exploration of the research problem.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher with one participant at a time, taking one week of school days per school. That means three weeks were set aside for interviews to cover three schools. Each participant chose a suitable date, time, and venue convenient to him or her for the interviews. The researcher obtained consent from each of the participants to audio record the interviews. This was done to avoid an interview turning into an interrogation, and remained a conversation without any writing or note taking but focusing on building relationship through a friendly discussion maintaining eye contact. Only English was used for communication during interviews as all the research participants were comfortable in expressing their views in English; wherever there was a need to explain, or paraphrase follow up questions were raised for clarity. The interviews were conducted according to the interview schedule.

This research study was conducted in Maune circuit, which is in Capricorn North district in Limpopo Province of South Africa. Maune circuit has seventeen primary schools, which are all public schools. All the primary schools have a FP; that is, Grade R to Grade 3. Only four of the seventeen schools have FP departmental heads. Hence the research population of this study were all FP teachers in the 17 public primary schools. FP teachers were relevant to the study because they are delivering the curriculum to the learners. Moreover, they know what is expected in FP, and what is good and advantageous to learners in this phase.

The study employed an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach to investigate the research problem. Data was collected from ten FP teachers from three primary schools in Maune Circuit, using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to draw out categories, subcategories, and themes, and to interpret the findings in this study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this empirical study are based on the findings of the secondary research questions, supported by verbatim quotes from participants.

Research question 1: What are the teachers' experiences of English reading in Foundation Phase in Maune Circuit primary schools?

Teachers are experiencing more challenges than successes in English reading in the classroom. Learners who cannot read are found in all schools, including schools excelling in English reading competitions. Learners are experiencing basic reading problems in Grade 3 that includes decoding problems, word recognition problems, and phonemic and phonics problems.

School C Teacher 3 said, "They struggle; some of my learners they read but they cannot even answer questions orally."

Learners are failing to pronounce words as they cannot link sound to letters. They read letters in a word instead of reading the word. Most learners cannot distinguish the difference of sound in vowels between English words and Sepedi words.

School B Teacher 3 said, "For instance learners do not even know how to recognise any English word. We have difficulty there as learners recognising that now this is what we are doing in English not what we do in Home Language."

School A Teacher 3 indicated that, "Learner's spell words when reading, they cannot read fluently."

School A Teacher 4 expressed that, "They are unable to use words when given sounds. Even if they have learnt the sound, it is still difficult to form words due to lack of reading skills."

The finding is supported by Spaul and Hoadley (2017) that almost the entire group of Grade 3 learners read 15%-20% of the letter-sounds they attempted incorrectly. As a result of failing to pronounce letters and words, learners' reading is slow and fragmented and they cannot understand or comprehend the meaning of the words.

Research question 2: What are the factors contributing to English reading in the Foundation Phase?

Teachers did not regard themselves as contributing to the reading problems at all. The learner-related factors identified by the research participants included lack of motivation, limited vocabulary, and languages confusion.

Learners are not motivated to engage in English reading; they lack motivation. Learners have limited English vocabulary for them to read effectively.

School B Teacher 3 said, "I think the kids they are demotivated, and they lose interest in knowing how to write how to read because there is nothing that is motivating." Hu (2009) contends that learners with reading problems show less interest and confidence in English reading, even fear and worries in some cases.

Limited vocabulary negatively affects their pronunciation and understanding. Even though LoLT in the other three learning areas in the FP is in Sepedi, the learners are also doing EFAL as a subject; the reading of two languages at the same time is causing language confusion. This is happening at a time when learners have not yet understood reading in Sepedi itself, but they are expected to be reading English at the same time.

Due to the age cohort policy, learners are pushed to the next grade without ascertaining whether the learners have developed the competencies required for the next grade. The system forces learners to proceed without well-developed foundational skills in English reading. Not only the system is to blame; however, the teachers are not explicitly accepting the blame. Sentiments were raised that learners are not being taught properly in the lower grades to acquire the required English reading basics.

School B Teacher expressed that, "some progressed to next class because of age cohort. They did not develop well in the previous grade. The other one they are still far behind with their sounds."

The study found that the home background of learners is contributing to English reading problems. Learners from a poor socio-economic background lack a supportive environment at home with books to read, or literate parents or guardians to help them with English reading homework. Some of the parents are staying with grandparents who are old and illiterate and cannot help to the learners with English reading. As English is not their mother tongue at home, some learners encounter English only in the classroom and are not exposed to any form of English media at home, which are mainly in rural areas.

School B teacher 2 indicated that, “They are not staying with their parents they are staying with the granny’s regarding that they do not take care of their homework so that they can go on with what they have learnt in the classroom.”

Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) Identified socio-economic background and parents’ illiteracy as some of the reasons for poor reading performance of learners in South African primary schools.

Research question 3: How English reading competence of learners influence learning success in learners?

Teachers expressed that the English reading problem does not affect other learning areas in the FP much because the other three learning areas are taught in Sepedi, the mother tongue, and English is only restricted to EFAL as a learning area or subject. However, this study found that the major challenges come when switching subjects as learners cannot distinguish the difference between Sepedi and English when reading. English reading difficulty is delaying the development and growth of learners, and in some cases, learners are stagnating in their reading development.

School B teacher 3 aired that, “Learners get confused because they do numeracy in Home Language and when they get home a one is treated as one in English not in the Home Language, we have difficulty there as learners recognising that now this is what we are doing in English not what we do in Home Language so that the two subjects do not normally interact that much. Learners still have complications or rather which subject or language now when it comes to letters or sounding of words.”

School A Teacher 1 mentioned that, “They can’t develop they stick to one thing they don’t know what they are doing they read without understanding.”

Gordon and Browne (2014) supported this and argue that when the learners obtain meaning from the text, their word recognition, accuracy, and fluency skills will also improve.

This results in curriculum backlog as teaching and learning cannot effectively proceed without learners understanding the basics of reading. Teachers appreciated that the ability to read English successfully makes learning meaningful to the learners. It creates a reading culture in the learners as learners will enjoy reading more if they understand English, and it further broadens their vocabulary. Successful reading in the FP prepares learners for Grade 4 onwards when they switch to English as LoLT hence English reading impacts other subjects even more after the FP.

Research question 4: What are the challenges teachers faces in teaching English reading in Foundation Phase in Maune Circuit primary schools?

Learners are experiencing challenges such as lack of understanding as they lack English vocabulary. Failures of learners to pronounce and read the words limit their vocabulary and understanding the meaning of English words. English language has become a barrier in EFAL learning and learners are not comfortable with the language, so they avoid English reading situations at all costs. Not only because learners cannot read words or recognise English words, but they are also experiencing spelling problems, resulting in poor performance in EFAL and to some extent other subjects because of language confusion. Limited time for remediation is the main challenge faced by teachers, as most of the learners have not yet understood the foundational skills in English reading.

School A Teacher 4 said, “Most learners use common transport to come to school, so it becomes a challenge when I am supposed to help them after hours. The other thing is that during remedial lesson learners will be already tired they lack concentration.”

Teachers must go back to the basics of English reading; it is more pronounced in Grade 3 as teachers should come back to Grade 1 and 2 work and take learners from there. This implies Grade 2 and 3 teachers are always starting with the foundational reading skill of Grade 1.

Most schools are experiencing lack of resources such as adequate English reading books to give learners individually at school. Mullis and Martin (2017) agree that under-resourced schools produce lower results in the Grade 4 PIRLS reading test. Contrary to this view, Van der Berg (2015), based on the analysis of the Southern

Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) results for South Africa, argues that school resources in the country matter only conditionally and there are vast differences between schools in their ability to convert these resources into outcomes. Worse still, there is limited support from home as most families lack resources also. There is lack of complimentary support from home as some parents are not cooperative, they do not attend when they are called to parent meetings, and are illiterate.

Research question 5: What strategies can be employed to improve English reading in Foundation Phase?

This study found that learning is starting where the learners are. Teachers are taking time to know the learners' areas of need and strength. Planning is then informed by an understanding of learners' learning needs and strengths. Instructions are differentiated so that learners are grouped according to their level of understanding, and provided with instructions at their level and pace. In other classes, teaching is staggered as learning is done at different levels on the same concept, depending on learners' functional level in that skill. However, this study found that some teachers are using fixed ability grouping in the classroom, meaning learners are being screened and placed in fixed ability groups according to their performance in some tests done quarterly.

In their attempt to revisit the foundational skills to improve the basic English reading skill of learners, teachers are using alphabet charts to improve sound-letter link. Concrete objects and pictures are used to provide meaning to words. Stories in the learners' context are used to illustrate meanings of the words in real life contexts and to work on the use of English language.

Code switching is used to improve comprehension of English words. Word bank is used to increase learners' vocabulary as new words are noted, pasted in the classroom, and used daily until learners understand them. In cases where parents are cooperative, teachers engage parents as much as possible for practice reading to be done at home.

Teachers suggested that the classroom environment should talk or speak to the learners as much as possible, meaning the classroom should be resourceful and engaging. Colourful pictures, concrete objects, drawings, and constructions should be in the classroom. English words should be presented in multi-modes such as drawings, pictures, physical objects, stories, and rhymes for learners to understand.

School C Teacher 3 said "Suggestion that I can give is that wall of class must speak to the learners. In FP wall must be talking walls reading corners must be there, every sound taught must be on the wall not in the cupboard."

The School Management Team and Department of Education should respect teachers' specialisation and allow those trained in FP to teach FP to improve the teaching of foundational reading skills in the learners in the FP. Adopting of English as a language of communication in the school was suggested as the best way of exposing learners to English language to motivate and improve English reading in the classroom. The use of teacher assistants in the FP was suggested as a way of reducing the teacher learner ratio and support differentiated teaching in the class, given the backlog in foundational skills development and limited time for individual remediation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that English reading in the FP provides the fundamental skill that prepares learners for meaningful learning from Grade 4 upwards when English becomes the LoLT in most South African schools. Lacking foundational skills in English reading for understanding in the FP completely shuts down the learning effort of a learner across all subjects from the Intermediate Phase onwards, as English imposes language barriers in the classroom. Limited time for individual remediation due to the different teachers teaching different subjects system excludes learners with a poor English foundation from classroom teaching and learning. The ability of learners to read English in the FP motivates learners towards independent reading, which cultivates a reading culture in the academic life of a learner at an early age. Besides being able to read English, it enables learners to execute instructions not only in the examination, but in their daily life outside the classroom, as most of the printed signs are in English in our society. Teachers are emphasising the value of English in society to motivate learners to

take English reading seriously. The English language, although valued and appreciated in South African society, is imposing challenges and sets learners up for failure in the early years of their academic life. FP teachers are inadequately trained to teach English reading. In Grade 3, more time is spent teaching Grade 1 and 2 English reading skills that there is not enough time to prepare for English LoLT in Grade 4.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Young learners in the FP learn through vicarious learning experiences. Teachers should be role models in the way they speak and pronounce English language for learners to learn through imitation.

Teamwork, through knowledge and experience sharing opportunities among teachers, should be created where teachers observe classroom practices of others. This helps to improve English reading teaching strategies, as teachers share their experiences in the classroom.

Teachers' specialisation should be respected in the allocation of classes to teachers by the School Management Team and the Department of Education. Teachers trained to teach FP are better equipped in teaching foundational skills such as reading to young learners.

Because English is adopted as LoLT in most of schools in South Africa from Grade 4 upwards, to effectively develop English reading foundational skills, more time for EFAL should be allocated in the FP.

The teacher-learner ratio in the FP should be reduced to allow more time for individual attention in the FP for the development of English reading skills.

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