

Reading Strategies in the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3): Case Studies of Two Schools in the Libode District, South Africa

Nosisi Charity Mzimane¹ and Christabel Dudu Mantlana²

Walter Sisulu University, Zamukulungisa Site, PB X6030, Mthatha,
Eastern Cape, South Africa, 5099

E-mail: ¹<nosisimzimane@gmail.com>, ²<cmantlana@wsu.ac, zamantlanad@yahoo.com>

KEYWORDS Basic Reading Skills. Fluent Readers. Phonic Awareness. Reading Difficulties

ABSTRACT There is an outcry about learners who have reading difficulties. Learners in most schools whose first language is not English usually experience challenges in reading comprehension. The study sought to examine reading strategies Foundation Phase teachers use to improve learners' reading. A qualitative research case study was used. Data were collected through voice recorded semi-structured interviews with the permission of the participants in two rural purposefully selected schools. The sample consisted of four teachers from each selected school situated in the Libode District. All learners were isiXhosa Home Language speakers. Findings revealed that some teachers are interested in teaching reading, but others are not. Most use shared reading, reading aloud and independent reading. Teachers diagnose the reading difficulties and put in place interventions and, where possible, prevent reading difficulties. Grade R teachers have not been trained on how to teach reading; they receive very limited knowledge when they attend workshops.

INTRODUCTION

The current emphasis in reading is based on strong initial or basic instruction to reduce the number of learners who have challenges in reading at a later stage. Language is the main tool that promotes thinking, develops reasoning and supports cultural activities like reading and writing (Vygotsky 1962). Vygotsky further stated that children learn best if what is to be learned is functional and relevant, thus indicating that learning to read would be better approached as a whole or part language process which encourages an understanding and pleasure in the written word. Despite this focus on the prevention of learners' reading difficulties, a large number of middle and high school students read significantly below grade-level expectations. Unfortunately, 74 percent of students identified as having reading difficulties in the third grade continue to face significant challenges in the ninth grade (Lyon 1995). This shows that most Founda-

tion Phase (Grades R-3) learners have difficulties in reading, and teachers should develop skills to improve learners' reading.

Teachers should start by teaching phonics, which is a matter of learning sound relationships and reading and memorizing words in isolation (Adams 1990; Weaver 1990; Ekwall and Shanker 1993). A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in speech. When reading is taught, learners are taught letters which represent those sounds. Phonemes are important because they refer to the most basic unit of sound in spoken words. For learners to be able to learn sound relationships, namely phonics, it is essential that they master phonemes. Therefore, phonemes link with phonics. Phonemic awareness instruction teaches students to pay attention to manipulate sounds in spoken words (Adams 2016; Bester et al. 2012).

In South Africa, the performance of learners in literacy is poor (Department of Basic Education 2008: 5). Attempts to facilitate literacy learning need to be improved. The skill in reading can promote the acquisition of language skills like listening, speaking and writing. Learners should form a habit of reading to perform well in all subjects. A good reader has a better opportunity for greater success (Ajibola 2006). Small units like letters and short words, along with spelling and punctuation rules should not be

Address for correspondence:

Dr. C.D. Mantlana
Walter Sisulu University,
Faculty of Educational Sciences,
Zamukulungisa Site, P.Bag x6030, Mthatha,
Eastern Cape, South Africa, 5099
Phone: 082 894 8732/071 365 2609,
Fax: 047 537 0169,
E-mail: cmantlana@wsu.ac.za

taught in isolation devoid of meaning. Behaviourist scholars argue that when children learn to pronounce words correctly, meaning will follow automatically (Weaver 1994: 3). Vadasy (2008) showed that two years after learners received explicit phonemic reading instruction, they scored a mere 50 percent on decoding and reading fluency, nearly 40 percent on word reading and comprehension and close to 30 percent on spelling.

The accepted assumption in South Africa is that after the Foundation Phase of schooling (Grades R-3), a phase to attain basic Literacy, Numeracy and Life skills, learners will be prepared for the transition from using Home Language, IsiXhosa as Language of Teaching and learning (LoLT) from learning to read to reading to learn during the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-6) of schooling using a default language of instruction, which is often English (Lessing and de Witt 2005; Moss 2005). South African researchers report learner performance outcomes associated with this transition of shifting from learning in Isixhosa to learning English (DBE 2003; Moloi and Strauss 2005). Others provide an indication of the type of interventions that are considered to promote optimum literate language development for learners (Pretorius and Mampuru 2007; Sailors 2007).

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced programs like *READ*, and there were also district competitions in order to improve learners' reading skills. The Department of Basic Education piloted with some schools to participate in these competitions, and schools with good readers were awarded trophies. This has also motivated teachers and learners to develop interest in reading. Although most of their parents are illiterate, learners are capable of getting books from school and read.

Cekiso (2012) asserts that the need for reading strategies should be used against the poor reading performance of a learner. Findings from his study revealed that explicit instruction in the use of reading strategies was essential to bring about increased use of reading strategies for learners in the experimental group. The more the strategies were used in the afore-mentioned study, the better the results for students in the experimental group; this demonstrated that there was a need to promote reading strategies awareness and application in the learning and teaching of the English language. Even the interven-

tion programs provided for at-risk learners in the South African context focus primarily on phonological awareness, which equips children with isolated decoding skills but not necessarily sufficient fluency and comprehension (Berninger 1999; Torgesen and Hudson 2006).

This all makes reading strategies somewhat content-area specific. Stopping (maybe the most undervalued strategy ever) and re-reading might make more sense in science, while Visualization and Text Connections may make more sense when reading literary works. Questioning the Text may make equal sense in both.

Independent reading (IR) requires differentiated instruction. This is especially true for English learners and struggling readers as IR experiences are even more important for these students than for others. These students need help when selecting books, more support during reading, and more strategy instruction. Most importantly, they need more IR time than other students. Poor readers typically spend less time reading both in and out of school. Their progress depends on reading practice, which they lack. Making IR contingent on work completion is a perfect example of why these students do not get the reading practice they need. Struggling readers seldom complete work early and miss the reading opportunities they need so much (Moss 2016).

In reading aloud, a storybook is read three times in slightly different ways in order to increase the amount and quality of children's analytical talk as they answer carefully crafted questions. During the first reading, teachers introduce the story's problem, insert comments, ask a few key questions, and, finally, ask a "why" question calling for extended explanation. This is accompanied by elaborations on a few key vocabulary words. Second reads capitalize on children's growing comprehension of the story by providing enriched vocabulary explanations and asking additional inference and explanation questions. Third reads consist of guided reconstruction of the story in which children recount information as well as provide explanations and commentary (McGee and Schickedanz 2007).

A shared reading session may be conducted in many ways, depending on the needs of the students and the teaching objectives determined by the teacher. Shared reading with strong teacher support and guided reading

with less teacher support are two ways the teacher can give students practice and immediate feedback, as they develop the skills and strategies necessary for successful decoding and comprehension. This section will provide a brief description of how to conduct a shared reading session. This description will be divided into three reading sections: Before, During, and After reading (Fountas and Pinnell 1996).

The aspect of phonology that has recently received more attention is prosody which is the phonological subsystem that encompasses the tempo, rhythm and stress of language. Ramus (2001) argued that the vast body of knowledge on phonology largely overlooked by reading researchers can contribute to understanding of the phonological skills required for reading development. Reading and spelling are considered interdependent, and phonology mediates them both (Bosman and Van Orden 1997).

The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) document for the Foundation Phase is very specific with regard to reading and divides the requirement for reading into Shared reading, Group reading, Guided reading, Independent reading and Phonics, including Phonemic Awareness. In order to assess reading effectively, teachers have a good understanding of the phases of reading and vocabulary in different Grades of the Foundation Phase according to Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). It is important that by the end of Grade 3, children can read well in both their Home Language and English (Pretorius et al. 2016; Tebekana and Ciske 2015). Children taught to read using phonics when they start primary school can end up with a reading ability at the age of two years above what is expected of them. Phonics education techniques have been shown to have a positive impact on literacy (Adams 2016; Bester et al. 2012).

Researchers suggest that teachers should know a variety of reading methods, for an example, phonics approach or a language approach and that they should not resort to one method of teaching (Adams 2016; Bester et al. 2012). The process of reading spelt out by Gibson and Levin (1998) is that the reader constructs the meaning for himself/herself as his/her eyes move over the page, form a hypothesis about what is to follow and pauses for fixation occasionally to confirm what he/she has been predicting. Here

the emphasis is on meaning. They further state that the first thing to emphasize is that reading is an adaptive process. It is active and flexible, and one has to acquire processing strategies to meet the demands of the text and the purpose of the reader. According to Cullingford (2001: 199), fluent reading depends on the ability to respond to a text in a variety of different ways and finding appropriate types of responses.

Concerns associated with learners' development of basic reading skills at the foundational levels of education (Block 1997; Hugo et al. 2005; Lessing and de Witt 2005), concerns about their acquisition of more advanced literacy skills in high school (Matjila and Pretorius 2004; Pretorius and Ribbens 2005) and concerns about their attainment of the academic language skills needed for tertiary level education (Banda 2003) are consistently reflected in local research.

Reasons for learners' low reading literacy outcomes are varied and often difficult to pinpoint due to a complex interplay of socio-economic, linguistic, cognitive, educational and personal variables. Most learners in rural schools of Libode District are black learners. The recognized official language in most rural schools in Libode District is IsiXhosa. Unfortunately, as a child grows older, it becomes more difficult to teach him or her to read. The window of opportunity closes early for most children. If a child does not read well by the end of the third grade, the odds are that he or she never catches up. The effects of falling behind, and feeling like a failure can be devastating. Many children learn to read by first grade regardless of the type of instruction they receive. Children, who do not learn, however, do not seem able to catch up on their own. Three quarters of learners who are poor readers in the third grade may remain poor readers in high school (Shaywitz 1997). These facts highlight the importance of providing a strong foundation for reading from birth through age five, especially so from ages 6 to 8.

Research conducted internationally, in South Africa and locally explores reading strategies from different perspectives. For example, locally, Cekiso (2012) examined the reading strategies used by Grade 11 English Second Language (ESL) learners and the possible effects of reading instruction on their reading comprehension and strategy awareness. A study done by Madalambana (2014) explored Grade 10 English Sec-

ond Language learners' reading difficulties in Dutywa. Cekiso and Madikiza (2014) looked at reading strategies used by English Second Language learners. The main objective of their study was to investigate the reading strategies used by Grade 9 English Second Language (ESL) learners and to establish if there was any significant difference between perceived strategy use and gender.

For this paper, the first researcher, a Foundation Phase teacher, and most teachers in the Foundation Phase reported that most learners in the Foundation Phase are unable to read well. This triggered the researchers of this paper to investigate reading strategies that Foundation Phase (Grades R-3) teachers use to improve learners' reading abilities in two schools in the Libode District, hence this study. It is against this background of learners' reading difficulties that the researchers sought to examine reading strategies that Foundation Phase teachers use to improve learners' reading. Thus, this study filled a gap; as a result, it came up with a new contribution to the current body of knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

The researchers used Piaget's Schema Theory. The effectiveness of readers' background knowledge on reading comprehension is typically labelled as schema theory (Anderson and Pearson 1984). This argues that what one knows affects what one understands. Word recognition is the foundation of reading proficiency (Daneman and Stanovich 1991). Of those word recognition tactics available to readers, phonological recording via phonemic awareness seems to be most important in the stages of learning how to read.

Objectives of the Paper

This study sought to examine reading strategies Foundation Phase teachers use to improve learners' reading. This paper is part of a larger study on Reading Strategies in the Foundation Phase, Grade R to 3 in Libode District, Eastern Cape (Mzimane 2013). This paper addresses the following research question:

- ♦ What are the current reading strategies used by educators in the Foundation Phase?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This is a qualitative research in the form of a case study design. Qualitative research allows the researchers to get data directly from participants by conversing with them and hearing their views, voices and perceptions in detail (Cohen 2006). Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding where a researcher develops a complex holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell 2005). He further stated that qualitative research, as a methodology, is concerned with understanding the processes and the social and cultural contexts which underlie various behavioural patterns and is mostly concerned with exploring the research questions. The researcher is regarded as the main tool of data collection and asks the participants broad, open-ended questions to allow them to share their views about and experiences of the phenomenon.

Sample

The sample was made up of four Foundation Phase female teachers from each of the two randomly selected rural schools in the Libode Education District. This made a total of eight (8) FP teachers.

Data Collection Procedure

All 8 participants (teachers) were interviewed at their respective schools as this was where they felt comfortable, relaxed and at ease (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). The conversations were audio recorded with the permission from participants, and notes were taken. Responses were transcribed after the interviews (Cohen et al. 2007), and all transcriptions were kept safely for data verification.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis begins with the identification of recurring words and ideas, which are then flagged as possible themes often used in narrative accounts (Yin 1984). Data was coded; units and categories were formed; patterns and relationships in the data were identified and

themes emerged. These were also guided by the interview guide. Content analysis was used to analyze data, and verbal quotes reflecting the main findings were presented (Mc Millan and Schumacher 2006).

FINDINGS

The study sought to find out the reading strategies that teachers are using in the Foundation Phase (Grades R- 3). Participants responded in various ways during interviews regarding reading strategies they use to improve learners' reading. It emerged from the study that teachers were using different reading strategies and amongst the strategies are: Shared reading, Independent reading and Reading Aloud.

Reading Strategies that Teachers Use in the Foundation Phase

For this study, below are reading strategies that teachers use in the Foundation Phase.

Shared Reading

Foundation Phase teachers indicated that they do shared reading during their reading periods. They said that this type of reading helps the learners who have difficulties in reading, because they imitate what they hear from others.

One teacher had this to say:

"It's advantageous to use shared reading because it provides struggling readers with necessary support."

She further stated that: *"Shared reading allows students to enjoy materials that they may not be able to read on their own"*

Another teacher also added on the above:

"Shared reading is flexible; it fits into any age group and grade level."

In the context of literature, shared reading needs to be carefully planned and can be used with any age or ability group and age level. It extends learners' sight and listening vocabulary.

Reading Aloud

Teachers indicated that this is one of the strategies that they use in the Foundation Phase. One teacher said:

"This is a good reading strategy because when the teacher reads aloud to the class or to

a particular group, learners listen attentively and with interest."

Another teacher highlighted that:

"Reading aloud to young children is one of the most important activities because it builds motivation, curiosity and memory."

This means that it is very imperative for children to be exposed to books so that they could develop curiosity and be motivated. Reading Aloud builds many important foundation skills, introduces vocabulary, provides a model of fluent expressive reading and helps children recognize what reading for pleasure is all about. Reading aloud to the learners helps them to do better at the beginning phase of reading.

Independent Reading

The responses also revealed that teachers allow learners to read independently to ensure that they have understood the context and have to retell the story to the class. The following statement reveals the findings:

"I like independent reading because learners develop confidence; as a result, they are capable of selecting their own books according to their own interests and abilities to read. Learners with learning barriers are identified easily when reading independently".

Another teacher had this to say: *"Independent reading is the purposeful planned activity. Learners choose their book according to their own interests and ability."*

Teachers should always observe, listen and gather information about learners' reading sessions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that: Educators were using appropriate reading strategies, namely, shared reading, reading aloud and independent reading. The Foundation Phase teachers indicated that they do shared reading during their reading period. They reported that this type of reading helps the learners who have barriers to reading because they listen to what they hear from others and imitate it. Teachers praised them as a way of motivation. Shared reading extends learners' sight and listening vocabulary. This concurs with Fountas and Pinnell (1996) that it is through Shared Reading that the reading process and reading strategies that read-

ers use, are demonstrated. In Shared Reading, children participate in reading, learn critical concepts of how print works, get the feel of learning and begin to perceive themselves as readers.

Educators indicated that this is one of the strategies used in the Foundation Phase. They said that this is advantageous because the teacher reads aloud to the class or to a particular group, so learners listen attentively and with interest. One of the teachers indicated that they do reading daily so that learners are used to read. Reading aloud is one of the most important things parents and teachers can do with children. Reading aloud builds many important foundational skills, introduces vocabulary, provides a model of fluent, expressive reading, and helps children recognize what reading for pleasure is all about. The finding on reading aloud concurs with Michener (1988: 118) who indicated that reading aloud to children is the most important activity for building knowledge required for eventual success in reading. The most effective read-alouds are those where children are actively involved, asking and answering questions and making predictions, rather than passively listening. This finding concurs with that of McGee and Schickedanz (2007) that repeated interactive read-alouds, a systematic method of reading aloud, allow teachers to scaffold children's understanding of the book being read, model strategies for making inferences and explanations, and teach vocabulary and concepts.

Independent reading is done in both schools that participated in this study. To ensure that children have read their books independently, teachers discussed what they have read with them, or the learner was required to re-tell the story to the class. This happens especially with Grade 2s and Grade 3s. Findings on the use of independent reading concur with the recommendations from Moss (2016) that every child needs a chance to read independently in school. In the frenzy to prepare students for large-scale assessments, some schools are limiting independent reading (IR) time. Nevertheless, the Common Core State Standards themselves advocate student independent reading from a multiplicity of genre. In fact, some argue that Common Core materials should "increase regular independent reading of texts that appeal to students' interests while developing both their knowledge-base and joy in reading.

However, they cannot do it successfully without assistance from the parents since most learners are staying with their grandparents, most of who are illiterate and speak *IsiMpondo*, a local IsiXhosa dialect that is not recognized for use in schools in South Africa. This is in line with findings from Tebekana and Cishe (2015) that due to the fact that English is not the Home Language of learners and parents in rural areas of South Africa, there is lack of parental involvement in children's education, and this contributes to inability to develop good reading skills. This is not conducive to improving reading performance of the learners. Teachers also believed that the use of a variety of reading strategies may improve learners' reading.

Teachers were willing to revisit the reading strategies they are currently using since some learners were still struggling to master reading. The findings confirm the views held by Pretorius et al. (2016) that it is important that by the end of Grade 3, children can read well in both their Home Language and English. Children taught to read using phonics when they start primary school can end up with a reading ability at the age of two years above what is expected of them. Phonics education techniques have been shown to have a positive impact on literacy (Adams 2016; Bester et al. 2012).

With adequate help, struggling readers can succeed. For 85 to 90 percent poor readers, prevention and early intervention programs can increase reading skills to average levels. These programs, however, need to combine instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling, reading fluency and reading comprehension strategies and must be provided by well-trained teachers (Lyon 1997).

The findings indicated that from Grade 1-3, what learners are able to read, they also can write. This connects reading with writing as Clay (1991: 234) stated that reading also involves certain concepts of print. Children practice writing, especially in Grade 1, and also copy what is written in the blackboard. Teachers also emphasized that this practice encourages learners to work independently.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, it was indicated that good reading strategies were of utmost importance in the Foundation Phase; therefore, teach-

ers must use them to improve learners' reading abilities. Reading using basic skills is important for the beginners because if they are unable to read, that may cause a lot of frustration on them resulting in an unstable defeatist future. The findings of the study revealed that educators were using appropriate reading strategies, namely, shared reading, reading aloud and independent reading.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that teachers be urged to teach reading to learners in a way that would benefit learners. The use of reading strategies ineffectively needs more attention. It is recommended that teachers need not wait for the Department of Basic Education to initiate professional development, but rather develop themselves professionally and academically and that school managers should support such ventures. Teachers should remain learners and readers themselves. Boosting learners' self-esteem may improve their reading; therefore, it is recommended that teachers should praise learners who read well and show interest in reading and encourage those who are struggling. Teachers are advised to prepare corner libraries to motivate learners to read and use independent reading more often. More research on the development and effective use of reading strategies would advance reading proficiency of learners.

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Paper received for publication on October 2015
Paper accepted for publication on December 2016