

UNDERSTANDING THE PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHERS IN TEACHING ISIZULU READING: A CASE STUDY OF TWO RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN KWAZULU-NATAL.

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ABSTRACT

Teaching reading in the Foundation Phase is a challenging issue since most South African learners struggle to read at their grade level. Learners in rural areas suffer the most as they are from disadvantaged homes that do not have sufficient resources for the promotion of a literate environment. The study aimed to understand the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge in teaching reading in isiZulu. A qualitative approach framed within an interpretive paradigm was undertaken. Seventeen Foundation Phase teachers in King Cetshwayo District, KwaZulu-Natal, participated in two focus group discussions. The data obtained from transcripts were analysed using a thematic approach. The findings revealed that teachers seemed to have misconceptions and inadequate knowledge of how to develop basic foundational reading skills. It was evident that the teachers lacked the capacity to choose appropriate strategies for teaching reading that suited the learners' individual needs. Thus, the study recommends multisensory and multimodal approaches to teaching reading to accommodate the different learning styles of learners.

KEYWORDS: Pedagogical content knowledge, phonics, phonemic awareness, reading comprehension, reading fluency, linguistic structure, whole-language approach

INTRODUCTION

Different research studies and assessments have revealed that most learners in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3) have reading problems, such as failing to read for meaning and following instructions (Van der Berg, 2015; Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena & Palane, 2017; Spaul & Pretorius, 2019). The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has initiated various interventions to address the challenges of reading instruction, but the problems persist. Pretorius, Jackson, McKay, Murray and Spaul (2016: 4) maintain that unless educational outcomes are improved, and all learners are engaged in meaningful activities from an early age, they might be disadvantaged for the rest of their schooling and adult lives. The challenges with reading most learners in the Foundation Phase experience are an indication that there is a deficit in the teaching of reading that might be caused by various factors, ranging from inappropriate teaching pedagogies, poor pedagogic content knowledge, socioeconomic factors and many more (Nel, Krog, Mohangi, Muller & Stephens, 2016; Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018).

Teacher quality is a crucial factor in achieving learner outcomes, specifically reading for meaning. According to Buckingham, Wheldall and Beaman (2013: 203), studies conducted in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia have repeatedly found that a large proportion of pre-service and in-service teachers have inadequate knowledge of teaching basic language constructs such as phonological awareness and morphology. The findings from a study conducted in Queensland also indicated that pre-service teachers had ‘weak’ and ‘rudimentary’ awareness of the language constructs that underpin phonics (Chapman, Greaney, Arrow & Tunmer, 2018). Findings from both South African and international studies show that teachers might not be receiving adequate knowledge and professional development in teaching reading, thereby impacting their ability to effectively teach some of the basic early literacy skills in their classrooms (Tetleya & Jones, 2014; Stark, Snow, Eadie & Goldfeld, 2016).

Based on the above-mentioned research evidence, this study explored a deeper understanding of teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge in teaching reading. Pedagogical content knowledge is described as several interconnected knowledge domains useful to teachers teaching a particular subject or skill (Pompea & Walker, 2017). Reading success is the culmination of various skills and activities a child acquires from birth. When learners start learning to read, they usually have age-appropriate spoken-language skills, including knowledge of the meanings of many spoken words (Castles et al., 2018). Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans and Jared (2006: 64) also maintain that for a learner to learn to read, they must understand more than the phonological structure of the language and its grapheme–phoneme correspondences. Therefore, teachers need to develop phonological and morphological awareness before learners begin with conventional reading (Diamanti, Mouzaki, Ralli, Antoniou, Papaioannou & Protopapas 2017; Vibulpatanavong & Evans 2019: 468; Wolff & Gustafsson 2022:1883). The study intended to reveal how teacher knowledge is used to develop reading ability and make informed pedagogical decisions about what to teach and how to teach reading skills.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The persistent underperformance of learners in the Foundation Phase signals that ‘there are challenges within the education system regarding the teaching of reading’ (Spaull, Pretorius & Mahohlwane 2020: 2). Despite several studies and improvement plans suggested very little or no improvement has been recorded (Van der Berg 2015; Howie et al., 2017; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has introduced different programmes to mitigate this challenge, such as The reading support programme for low-performing learners in Grades 1–4, the Dlalanathi reading programme focusing on training teachers, *SmartLit* aimed at high-performing learners and *Accelerated Reader* programme focusing on encouraging learners to read books. However, problems persist, mostly affecting the schools from disadvantaged communities due to the shortage of resources like different kinds of print such as road signs, alphabet books, picture books, audiobooks, board games and more. Elaborating on the same issue, Howie et al., (2017: 2) state that learners from ‘low-income backgrounds performed worse than those from affluent backgrounds in PIRLS 2016’. The lack of improvement, despite a significant investment in financial and human resources over many decades, suggests that ‘the problem of poor literacy is intractable’ (Buckingham et al., 2013: 21).

According to Desai (2016) and Spaul (2013), learners who are taught in African languages tend to come from disadvantaged homes and attend under-resourced schools, which are further characterised by overcrowded classrooms and poorly trained teachers. Elaborating on the problems in reading, Ardington, Wills, Pretorius, Deghay, Mohohlwane, Menendez, Mtsatse and Van der Berg (2020: vii) state that many learners have not mastered basic decoding skills by the end of Grade 3, with around one in ten learners unable to sound one letter correctly at the end of the Foundation Phase.

According to Chapman et al. (2018: 91), teaching reading skills effectively requires teachers to have a high level of understanding of the basic structure of a language. The teachers' pedagogical content knowledge is regarded as the most fundamental element of teachers' knowledge and has been studied widely (Guerriero, 2014). Arrow, McLachlan and Greaney (2015: 200) suggest that many teachers lack sufficient knowledge about the role and importance of phonological skills, including the importance of teaching the alphabetic principle and the role of phonics instruction when beginning to read.

This study investigated what pedagogical content knowledge teachers have that assists them in producing proficient readers. As previously mentioned, researchers and teachers have argued intensely about which of the whole language and the phonic approaches is the better approach (Castles et al., 2018). Although some studies confirm the importance of the phonic approach in the early grades, they seem not to have much influence as the whole-language approach is still regarded as the supreme teaching approach for all languages (Castles et al., 2018: 5; Cronje, 2021). As long as teaching strategies inappropriate for teaching reading in indigenous languages are used, reading problems will remain an intractable mystery. The voices of the teachers, as the people directly involved in the classroom, need to be heard, respected and supported.

In order to determine what this voice is, the main question of the study is: *What kind of pedagogical content knowledge do Foundation Phase teachers possess to improve the teaching of reading in IsiZulu at the Foundation Phase?*

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The study was framed by the model of pedagogical reasoning proposed by Shulman in 1986 and the simple view of reading proposed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986. The model of pedagogical reasoning advocates that during lesson preparation and teaching, teachers draw on sources of knowledge, which are identified as content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, curricular knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of aims and purposes, knowledge of learners, and knowledge of educational contexts, settings and governance (Guerriero, 2014). According to Gudmundsdottir and Shulman (1987) and Guerriero (2014), the model of pedagogical reasoning assumes that pedagogical content knowledge is influential in realising curriculum potential.

This study focused on exploring the pedagogical content knowledge of Foundation Phase teachers teaching isiZulu as a home language. Understanding teachers' pedagogical content knowledge could assist in identifying existing deficiencies towards improving the teaching of reading. Teaching reading requires specialist knowledge as the teacher has to teach and assess a series of skills to develop proficient readers. Insufficient teacher pedagogical content knowledge might impact learner performance negatively. Elaborating on this issue, Guerriero (2014: 5) maintains

that teachers' pedagogical knowledge base includes all the required cognitive knowledge for creating effective teaching and learning environments.

The simple view of reading model describes reading as 'the product of decoding (which includes knowledge of letter sounds and the ability to decipher syllables and words in and out of context) and oral language comprehension' (Joshi & Aaron, 2000:86; Nation, 2019: 48). The model implies that both decoding and oral comprehension skills are important, and if one skill is lacking, that would affect reading comprehension. Ardington et al. (2020: 3) maintain that decoding is predicted to have more influence on comprehension since learners need to master the written code where accuracy and speed matter. Word recognition is vital to reading comprehension; if children cannot recognise written words, then they will quite obviously be unable to extract meaning from them. Knowledge of syllables represented by vowels (V- 'a, e, i, o, u') or consonant vowels (CV- for example, 'ma') letters is also necessary for reading African (and Nguni) languages (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007).

The Department of Basic Education (2021) describes language comprehension (LC) as how we make sense of words, sentences and the wider language we hear or read. If a child is exposed to a rich spoken-language environment, that child will almost certainly learn to understand and produce spoken language. Castles et al. (2018: 8) state that when children begin to learn to read, they usually already have relatively sophisticated spoken-language skills, including knowledge of the meanings of many spoken words. Understanding the majority of individual words within a text is a prerequisite to understanding that text.

Buckingham et al. (2013) contend that there are five components of reading, also known as the 'big ideas'. Effective reading instruction should incorporate these five main components and should teach them explicitly and systematically to all learners. These components include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Rupley (2009: 134) emphasises that teachers should provide effective and explicit instruction in the critical areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Each of the five big ideas contributes to forming a braided strand that can be developed through explicit instruction and several guided practices in different kinds of text to develop reading comprehension (Buckingham et al., 2013).

Phonemic awareness should be taught to children long before they learn grapheme–phoneme skills. In elaborating on the issue, Oczkus (2011: 4) maintains that phonemic awareness involves the smallest units of sounds in spoken words only and is not about recognizing the written letters but rather the sounds. It should be used to prepare children to develop alphabetic coding skills from phonics instruction (Tunmer & Hoover, 2019: 86). Phonics can be defined as an approach to reading instruction intended to promote the discovery of the alphabetic principle, the correspondences between phonemes and graphemes, and phonological encoding (Buckingham et al. 2013: 22). The first two of the five big ideas (phonemic awareness and phonics) are especially important for beginner readers. Initial progress in learning to read requires the development of the cognitive ability to translate letters and letter patterns into phonological forms (Buckingham et al., 2013:22; Rupley, 2009).

Pretorius et al. (2016: 11) state that vocabulary refers to the knowledge of words, and a learner's ability to read depends a great deal on the number of words the learner has grasped and learnt over time. The more words the learner learns, the greater their reading achievement will be.

According to the DBE (2011: 18), fluency in reading involves, among others, ‘accuracy in decoding, the speed of reading, immediately recognising words and reading smoothly with appropriate phrasing and expression’. Fluency in reading is essential for understanding what is being read. It is considered a strong predictor of reading comprehension because it represents automatic word reading and oral LC. Reading comprehension is the ultimate purpose of reading. Castle et al. (2018: 34) maintain that the acknowledgement that reading comprehension is a complex process leads to the realisation that improving reading comprehension is not a simple exercise.

Approaches to reading instruction

Teachers must be conversant with different approaches to reading instruction to understand and accommodate the diverse needs of their learners. Phonics and whole-language approaches have both gained traction in the teaching of reading. According to Castles et al. (2018: 6), some arguments favour a phonics approach, in which the sounds letters make are taught explicitly, while others argue for a whole-language approach, which emphasizes the learner’s discovery of meaning through experiences in a literacy-rich environment. The approaches to reading instruction will be discussed in detail in the following discussions. At this point the researcher will not choose one approach over the other but will rather describe emerging preferences when the teachers' responses are discussed.

Phonics instruction

Phonics is a basic component of comprehensive initial reading instruction, which should be explicitly and sequentially taught. Phonics instruction equips learners with the tools required to decode words, especially in African languages like isiZulu, containing words that consist of single-consonant (*utamatisi*), digraphs (*uphaphhe*), trigraphs (*ingcanga*) and four-letter words (*ingeweti*). Grade 1 learners in the first term cannot read text with digraphs, trigraphs and four-letter words before they are introduced to all letters of the alphabet. According to the National Reading Panel’s (2000) findings, learners who received systematic and explicit phonics instruction were better readers at the end of the first term than learners who had received no phonics instruction. The sad reality is that phonics instruction has been regarded as a very poor teaching method and should be discouraged. According to Buckingham et al. (2013), reading methods appropriate for English or French are considered superior for reading instruction in other languages as well. Trudell and Schroeder (2007: 174) maintain that those charged with materials development in African languages might not have enough confidence in their ability to abandon reigning instructional methods in favour of methods that better fit the sociocultural and linguistic context of African languages. This lack of a sense of control or choice regarding reading methodology reflects a certain lack of ownership of the instructional process.

Whole-language approach

Whole language (also known as whole-word, look-see, or sight word) can be described as teaching reading contextually and holistically, using content-rich literature and operating within a print-rich environment. In a whole-language approach, learners are encouraged to use context or prior

knowledge to make predictions about words rather than using grapho-phonetic cues (O'Carroll 2011: 8).

Buckingham et al. (2013: 22) indicate that, unfortunately, whole language advocates deny the importance of phonic skills in learning to read, claiming that reading is acquired naturally, like speech. However, advocates of evidence-based effective reading instruction do not promote phonics as a singular, complete approach to the teaching of reading (Buckingham et al. 2013: 22; Castle et al. 2018: 8).

Morphological structure of isiZulu

The structure of isiZulu words, as with other African indigenous languages, is unique and different from English. IsiZulu has an agglutinating structure, which means it has a complex morphological structure, comprising roots to which several prefixes, infixes and suffixes are added to convey semantic and syntactic information (Jukes, Pretorius, Schaefer, Tjasink, Roper, Bisgard & Mabhena 2020; Spaul et al. 2020). English has an analytic structure, which refers to the use of helper words, prepositions, and word order to convey meaning. According to Ardington, Wills, Pretorius, Deghaye, Mohohlwane, Menendez, Mtsatse and Van der Berg (2020: 4) IsiZulu like other Nguni languages also have a conjunctive orthography where morphemes (the smallest meaningful unit) are merged into single written words for instance, in English the statement 'I have a daughter', in IsiZulu it is one word "Nginendodakazi". Some isiZulu words constitute digraphs, trigraphs, and four consonants or even five consonants. This makes it difficult for learners in Grades 1 and 2 to read the text with complex consonants without having mastered all single consonants. Elaborating on the same issue, Ardington et al. (2020: vii) state that the lack of familiarity with complex consonant sequences is a major inhibitor to reading; it is not possible to begin reading a passage without mastering these sequences. Ardington et al. (2020: vii) also report that Grade 1 texts in Nguni languages require that learners know complex consonant sequences. This information is crucial and indicates the importance of using a differentiated approach to African languages rather than simply adopting Western approaches to teaching reading. The perpetual prevalence of reading problems in African languages is an indication that something is wrong. Hence, this study sought to explore teachers' knowledge of teaching reading in one of the Nguni languages, isiZulu.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A case study research design was chosen to produce data for this study. One benefit of using a case study research design was that it allowed for a systematic, in-depth study of one particular case, i.e., two groups of teachers from two schools (Rule & John, 2011). The researcher adopted interpretivism as a suitable paradigm for this study because it holds that the best way to learn about people is to access their natural settings to obtain rich information about their lived experiences (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Interpretivists draw on a range of methods, tools and techniques to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The study took a qualitative approach as it has the exploratory capacity to investigate, interpret and understand the problematic issues inherent in qualitative research studies (Creswell, 2013).

Participants and setting

The study was conducted in two schools in KZN in the King Cetshwayo District. Seventeen teachers from two schools were purposively selected because they met the appropriate criteria required by the study to yield rich data, such as having willingness to participate in the study, the relevant qualifications and experience in the Foundation Phase. The participants formed two focus groups: 12 participants from School A and five participants from School B. The total number of participants in the study was seventeen (17). The selected participants were considered the most likely to provide the study with rich information as they were directly involved in teaching reading in the Foundation Phase. According to Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016), purposive sampling is also called judgement sampling since it is the deliberate selection of a participant based on the qualities they possess.

Research instruments

Focus-group discussions were used to generate data for the study. The focus groups assisted in obtaining firsthand information from participants involved in the day-to-day teaching of reading in isiZulu. Using focus groups assisted in exploring the participants' rich and detailed sets of data about their perceptions, thoughts, feelings and ideas about a topic (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick & Mukherjee, 2018: 21). The focus group discussions enabled the researcher to probe participants to clarify some of the given answers (De Vos et al., 2011; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019: 2). The researcher recorded the discussions and took field notes to ensure a backup of the information (Tessier, 2012: 448). The researcher used an interview guide to assist in directing the discussions. Data were collected from two focus groups from different schools, which ensured triangulation as the data were contrasted and validated to determine if they yielded similar findings.

Ethical considerations

The ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the university that the researcher is attached to (Ref: 2022/11/09/90214331/50/AM). Permission to conduct the study was then sought from the DBE, KwaZulu-Natal province, as well as from the two school principals of the selected schools. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants, who were requested to sign informed consent forms after being assured of confidentiality and the freedom to participate or withdraw at any stage of the study.

Procedure

The researcher conducted a 60-minute focus group interview with each group. FG 1 exceeded the planned time by 20 minutes because it consisted of many participants. The FGs were conducted at the respective participants' schools after school hours. The researcher used an interview schedule as a guide to asking questions and also used probing questions whenever there was a need to do so. The researcher would pose a question and then give each participant the opportunity to respond.

DATA ANALYSIS

This study employed interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which assisted the researcher in examining different participants' perspectives, highlighting similarities and differences (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The researcher looked for consistency, frequency of comments, extensiveness and finding the main idea (Morgan & Krueger, 1998), and followed six phases of thematic analysis: familiarising herself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

RESULTS

The study aimed to understand the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge in teaching reading in isiZulu. The results showed that teachers used alternative strategies to overcome difficulties when teaching various reading components to isiZulu Foundation Phase learners at two rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The interview questions were based on the conceptual framework that framed the study. Each question became a major coding category. Five themes emerged from the generated data: discrepancies in the development of phonemic awareness, explicit teaching of phonic skills, techniques to develop vocabulary, different techniques for teaching reading comprehension, and challenges in developing reading fluency.

Discrepancies in the development of phonemic awareness

Participants were asked to respond to this question: *How do you teach phonemic awareness to address reading difficulties?*

In response to the question, Participants 1 and 3, Focus Group 1, reported that they taught learners to sound words. They indicated that they taught learners to associate the target sound with the sound of something else. P3 reported:

If for instance, I was teaching the sound 'm', after sounding it, I would ask learners to say which animal makes a similar sound 'mmm', learners would say it is a sound made by a cow. I believe that assisted learners to remember the sound 'm' by associating it with the cow. (P3)

Participants 5, 6, 7 and 8 stated that they used flashcards to teach phonemic awareness. They wrote words on the flashcards and asked learners to identify the sound at the beginning or end of words.

The responses from participants 5, 6, 7, and 8 above indicated poor knowledge of what and how phonemic awareness can be developed in learners. Phonemic awareness does not include written text but rather involves an awareness of sounds. It is crucial in preparing learners for conventional reading.

The follow-up question was: *How do you develop phonemic awareness in Grade R as flashcards are not relevant to them?* P5 answered:

We teach our learners to write in Grade R although it is only words with single consonants. (P5)

Both FG1 and FG2 demonstrated limited knowledge of how phonemic awareness should be developed. Two participants (P14 and P15) from FG2 indicated that they used flashcards and word puzzles to teach phonemic awareness. One of the participants reported:

The initial skill that I teach to my learners is phonemic awareness. I use a variety of resources like flashcards and word puzzles. (P15)

It is concerning that some teachers in both groups reported that they developed phonemic awareness using text rather than oral activities. The use of written text is wrong; it limits prospective activities and does not serve the purpose of laying strong foundational skills before conventional reading can begin. A variety of words with different structures in isiZulu can be used to develop phonemic awareness as learners in Grades R and 1 can pronounce words with three and four letters, although they cannot write them.

Explicit teaching of phonic skills

Phonics requires learners to know and match letters or letter combinations with word sounds, learn the rules of spelling, and use this information to decode (read) and encode (write) words. Participants were asked to respond to this question: *How do you teach phonics to address [the] reading difficulties?*

Six participants (P4, P5, P6, P7, P11 and P12) from Focus Group 1 reported that they used flashcards to address reading difficulties in phonics. Below are some of the verbatim extracts:

I rely on flashcards to support learners who have challenges in phonics. I sit down with learners and show them how to build a word. (P4)

I keep about ten sets of flashcards in my classroom. I give them to learners and ask them to show me certain letter sounds; for instance, show me the sound 'd'. I would then ask them to build the word 'idada'. (P11).

Two participants from FG2 reported that they taught phonics to address reading difficulties using flashcards and deconstructed words into syllables (P15 and P17). Below are verbatim statements by two participants from FG2 who provided different strategies:

I use puzzles to overcome phonics challenges. Learners like puzzles they enjoy using them. (P13)

I use colourful pictures. I choose a picture that represent the sound that I want to teach, I show it to learners and ask them to pronounce the word. (P16)

Most participants from both FGs reported that they used flashcards to teach learners to build words. Although the use of flashcards contributes to the effective teaching of reading, more resources involving multiple modes should be used to accommodate the different learning styles of learners as well as to enhance the acquisition of letter-sound knowledge. Learners whose style of learning is tactile benefit from playing with cards and developing words, but learners who learn well through audio-visual media need to be accommodated as well. Only two participants reported that they also use word puzzles and pictures to teach phonics. Other participants seemed to rely on flashcards only.

Techniques to develop vocabulary

Participants were asked to explain how they taught vocabulary. They were asked to respond to this question: *How do you teach vocabulary to address [the] reading difficulties?*

The participants in FG1 provided the various strategies they used. Nevertheless, the participants seemed uncomfortable responding to this question. P4 and P5 indicated that they always asked learners to sound out the words, copy and read them:

I make copies of the new words that learners need to know and ask them to practise reading at home. (P3)

I find it very helpful to use pictures to teach new words because it helps learners to always associate words with the pictures[,] which also assist them in remembering the letter sounds. (P6)

Two participants from FG2 (P14 and P17) reported that they used flashcards. They let learners pronounce new words and then gave them flashcards to build the words:

I give the learners new words to read at home (P13)

I write a list of new words on the board and asked learners to read them aloud. (P15)

The participants seemed not to consider teaching vocabulary crucial and required to be taught properly. The techniques that some participants from both FGs used were just giving words to learners to read at home (P3 and P13) and writing a list of new words for learners to practise (P3 and P15). Some said they wrote words on the board and asked learners to copy them. Their responses did not convince me that they knew effective strategies for teaching vocabulary.

Different techniques for teaching reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is the ability to read text, process it and understand its meaning. Participants were asked the following question: *How do you teach comprehension to assist learners who experience reading difficulties?*

Two participants from FG1 provided different responses. Below are some of their verbatim responses:

I start by teaching learners short sentences and ask questions to find out whether they understand sentences. I, thereafter, teach them to read a paragraph and ask questions to check whether they do understand what they have read. (P1)

I model how to read while they are listening. I ask them to read with understanding in groups and individually. (P6)

Participants from Focus Group 2 reported different strategies for teaching reading comprehension. Below are some of their verbatim responses:

Before I teach a story, I first identify difficult words from the text. I use pictures and write new words on the board. I then read the story and ask questions from learners. (P14)

I try to model reading, I read slowly. I then ask learners to read as the whole class and ask them questions. (P17)

Some participants were reluctant to respond to this question; they stayed silent. When I tried to prompt them to respond, one indicated:

Reading comprehension is a big challenge, learners cannot read with understanding. The main problem is that they cannot recognise most words in a story. I try to use flashcards to practically build words that I see they are challenging (sic) but it seems as if there is something wrong in the way we teach. (P15)

The participants' responses revealed that it was difficult to teach reading comprehension because most learners could not decode words, mainly caused by poor recognition of letter sounds. Without reading comprehension, reading is meaningless. The participants provided the strategies they applied in their classrooms, but these were not adequate, as most learners could not comprehend what they were reading (Muller & Stephens, 2016; Castles et al., 2018).

Challenges in developing reading fluency

The participants were asked to respond to this question: *How do you teach reading fluency to address [the] reading difficulties?*

Participants from FG 1 did not seem confident in responding to the question. Two participants reported that they focused on teaching the learners punctuation (P8 and P9). They indicated that they believed learners failed to understand what they read because they did not observe punctuation marks, and that made it difficult to understand the story. Three participants provided similar responses, namely that they made learners read together as a class and in groups (P5, P8 and P10).

P3 and P4 stated that they experienced difficulties in teaching reading fluency because most learners struggled to read most words. The participants continually emphasised that it was difficult.

Participants from FG2 provided different responses. Some verbatim extracts are supplied below:

I use [a] drilling method to teach reading fluency. I give learners a simple paragraph to train them to read with fluency. Once they can read a paragraph, I give them two paragraphs. (P13)

I compile little books with simple interesting stories. I give learners a story per week that they should read to practice fluency. I make copies that they will take home so that they read as homework. Due to financial constraints I

sometimes unable to make copies as I cannot give learners books that we use at school because most learners cannot take good care of books. (P16)

The reading fluency component must be taught like other components of reading. It plays an important role in reading comprehension. Most participants did not seem confident in reporting how they taught reading fluency. Two participants (FG1 P8 and P9) talked about ensuring that learners observed punctuation marks when reading. P13 and P16 indicated that they used simple paragraphs and stories to teach fluency. The question is, will that be sufficient to teach reading fluency?

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that several misunderstandings exist about how phonemic awareness should be developed. Five participants from both groups (FG: P5, P6, P7, P8 and FG2: P15) reported that they used written text for the development of phonemic awareness, which signified a misunderstanding. They reported that they used written texts, such as flashcards and word puzzles, which is inappropriate because phonemic awareness is concerned with the discrimination between sounds in spoken words. Elaborating on the same issue, Tunmer and Hoover (2019: 86) maintain that phonemic awareness focuses on the development of sound awareness, which does not involve written text. Oczkus (2011: 4) explains that phonemic awareness involves the smallest units of sounds in spoken words only and is not about recognising written letters but rather sounds. Buckingham et al. (2013: 202) report that the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics in teaching reading seems to be widely acknowledged among teachers, but many have neither the personal literacy skills nor the requisite professional and practical knowledge to teach them well. The inadequate understanding of phonemic awareness likely leads many teachers to hold the view that phonics instruction promotes phonemic awareness (Chapman et al., 2018).

Research has demonstrated that phonics knowledge is a necessary foundation for learning to read and write and plays an important role from the earliest stages of literacy development (Buckingham et al., 2013; Stuart, Masterson & Dixon, 2000). The findings revealed that most participants from both FGs (FG1: P4, P5, P6, P7, P11 and P12 and FG2: P15 and P17) reported that they used flashcards, pictures and puzzles to teach phonics. The participants' responses did not demonstrate adequate knowledge of the explicit teaching of phonics. The participants' responses revealed that they did not use different modes of teaching to accommodate the different learning styles of learners and to facilitate effective learning. Phonics knowledge is the foundation of reading comprehension (Castles et al., 2018: page?). In African languages like IsiZulu, a strong foundation of the knowledge of sounds should be acquired to enable reading for meaning. Elaborating on the importance of phonics, Buckingham et al. (2013: 202) maintain that when taught properly, phonics provides beginner readers with the skills and knowledge to decode and read familiar and unfamiliar words.

The participants seemed to struggle with teaching reading fluency. Most participants repeatedly stated that reading fluency was difficult to teach if learners failed to recognise words. Reading comprehension is not possible if learners cannot recognise words and read fluently. The DBE (2011 and 2021) maintain that reading fluency is a strong predictor of reading comprehension because it is about word reading automaticity and oral language comprehension. The conceptual

framework for this study (the simple view of reading framework) reveals that reading is the product of decoding and oral language comprehension (Joshi & Aaron, 2000; Nation, 2019). Participants from FG1, P4 and P5 reported that poor letter-sound knowledge is a problem most learners experience and hinders reading fluency and comprehension.

CONCLUSIONS

The study intended to understand the pedagogical content knowledge of teachers in teaching reading in isiZulu. The study's findings will assist in understanding teachers' knowledge levels in teaching reading in isiZulu and in which areas they need support. A language like isiZulu requires learners to know the letter-sound relationship properly to be able to read words with digraphs, trigraphs and quadgraphs. Most learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are not exposed to a literate environment like their peers from affluent areas. In isiZulu, learners cannot predict or recognise words by their structure as in English: they need to read all letter sounds.

The findings further revealed the shortcomings in teachers' pedagogical content knowledge about teaching the components of reading as well as the skills isiZulu-speaking learners should develop. Some components, such as vocabulary and reading fluency, seem to be receiving less attention from the participants. The findings also revealed teachers' overreliance on flashcards to teach all the components of reading, ignoring the use of a multi-sensory approach to accommodate all learners' learning styles.

This study recommends the use of multisensory and multimodal approaches to teaching reading in isiZulu. According to Walsh (2010), multimodal theory involves the simultaneous processing of different modes of text, image, sound and gesture in visual, media or digital text. Using multimodal and multisensory activities will accommodate learners' different learning styles.

Teachers should be supported in teaching phonics in a way that moves away from the memorisation of syllables and rather towards assisting learners to read fluently with comprehension. Unfortunately, the voices of researchers who strongly support the explicit teaching of phonics seem to be silenced by those who believe that the whole language should be the main approach to teaching reading in all languages. According to Castle et al. (2018: 39), there is a substantial discrepancy between the state of research knowledge about learning to read and the state of public understanding. Teachers do not have time to familiarise themselves with new research findings through primary sources like academic journals. Most of them also do not have the scientific expertise to understand these findings and apply them in the classroom. A concerted effort is required to encourage teachers to update their pedagogical content knowledge by acquiring new teaching pedagogies. Instead of criticising one approach, researchers should eliminate the knowledge divide between phonics and whole-language approaches. Just because the whole-language approach is effective in Western languages does not mean it is effective in African languages. It is time for teachers and African researchers to find solutions on how to mitigate the challenges inherent in our languages. The decolonisation of teaching African languages should be prioritised.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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