

EXPLORING THE PREVALENCE OF READING CHALLENGES AMONG EFAL LEARNERS AND THE STRATEGIES TEACHERS USE TO SUPPORT THEM

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ABSTRACT

Research in South Africa indicates that 81% of learners in Grade 4 struggle to read with comprehension (Department of Basic Education, 2023). The early graders' reading difficulties hinder their ability to read and to learn other subjects. This study explores the reading challenges experienced by SiSwati home language speakers when reading English First Additional language and the strategies teachers employ to mitigate them. This paper presents findings of the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), which was utilised to assess learners' reading proficiency, and the Facilitative Orientation to Reading Teaching (FORT), which was used to assess classroom interactions. Conducted in 2021 at a primary school located in a high-density suburb in Mpumalanga, the research involved four teachers and two classes each of Grades 2 and 3. Results revealed that only four Grade 2 learners met the expected threshold of 30 words correct per minute (WCPM), while only eight learners in Grade 3 surpassed the threshold of 50 WCPM. Most learners fell below these thresholds, highlighting significant literacy challenges. The lack of standardised teaching strategies among teachers is evident. The study recommends a single across-the-curriculum programme as an intervention, as well as improved pre-service training and ongoing support for in-service teachers.

Keywords: reading difficulties; early grades; comprehension; fluency; benchmarks

INTRODUCTION

Poor reading literacy development is at the core of the reading crisis, and learners who struggle to read in their first three years of school face significant difficulties as they progress with their education, as well as in society (Howie et al., 2017; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has implemented numerous intervention strategies such as the Gauteng Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GLMS) in Gauteng, Early Grade Reading Strategy1 (EGRS1) in the North-West province, EGRS 11 in Mpumalanga province, National Education Collaborative Trust (NECT) and Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) in an effort to improve learners' reading outcomes (Motilal & Fleisch, 2020). However, despite

these initiatives, 81% of South African Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning, according to the latest Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results of 2021 (Department of Basic Education, 2023; Spaul & Hoadley, 2018). In light of these results, reading skills acquisition should be prioritised for the first years of primary schooling to foster a culture of reading, which should enable every learner to read fluently and with understanding by the end of Grade 3, in a language that the child already understands orally.

In addition, learners' reading proficiency and the instructional practices of teachers must be investigated to measure their effectiveness and those of the DBE intervention strategies discussed above. Therefore, the author conducted a study upon which this paper is based to explore the prevalence of reading difficulties among selected Grade 2 and 3 learners at a high-density suburban school, as well as teachers' strategies to support these learners. The research setting was a primary school in Nelspruit and involved four teachers, 209 learners, and the school principal. This school is situated in a disadvantaged community and consequently, encounters related challenges, such as a higher pupil-teacher ratio, inadequate infrastructure, and limited resources (Hoadley, 2017). The study intended to complement existing South African studies on the reading crisis in the foundation grade levels of the basic education system. This paper first explores relevant literature on early-grade reading and its associated challenges, followed by an outline of the theoretical framework, as well as the design and methodology. The subsequent findings are then presented and discussed along with their implications for classroom practice and institutional support. Lastly, this paper provides directions for future interventions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the literature review, examining reading as a concept and the prevalence of reading difficulties in early-grade learners. It positions the study within the broader research landscape by exploring contributory factors, types of reading challenges, and presenting both national and international studies on reading challenges to highlight the nature of early grade literacy as not just a national, but also a global crisis. In addition, the review discusses the strategies teachers use to ameliorate these challenges.

2.1 The reading process

Reading is a multifaceted and detailed process that involves closely related sequences, where each performance should be perfected before moving on to the next (Abadzi, 2017). It includes phonemic awareness, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension (DBE, 2011). Despite variance in types of reading problems, most reading researchers and practitioners generally accept phonemic awareness and phonics, word recognition, oral reading fluency, and comprehension as the predominant factors in reading (Nation, 2019).

South African learners still face reading challenges, as revealed in the PIRLS 2021 results, where many failed to locate information in texts or answer memory-related questions correctly (Department of Basic Education, 2023). The PIRLS results tend to emphasise comprehension, which is the output of the reading process, rather than the input elements of reading, which are: fluency, vocabulary, decoding, and language proficiency (Nation, 2019; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Accordingly, this study concentrates on the input elements, such as phonemic awareness, word recognition, and vocabulary, which directly influence oral reading fluency (ORF) and comprehension. Sequentially, ORF is a prerequisite for comprehension as well as an integral skill in learning to read (Spaull & Pretorius, 2016; Department of Basic Education, 2011). An understanding of the reading process and its various components affords a foundation for identifying where reading difficulties arise. In addition, factors contributing to poor reading levels in South Africa emanate from a combination of learner-specific, home, and school-related influences (Spear-Swerling, 2016; Westbrook et al, 2022).

2.2 Learner-related factors

Reading is essentially a cognitive process. It occurs when the visual parts of the brain detect individual features and combine them into letter shapes, which are most clearly recognised at the centre of the eye, whereas visual stimuli are coupled with associated sounds (Ellis & Bloch, 2021). Abadzi (2017) argues that even though learners may be able to recognise print, insufficient practising would hinder reading development, which could result in reading challenges. Reading involves a collection of cognitive and linguistic processes, which include recognising individual words and making inferences about meanings not directly stated in the text. Grabe and Stoller (2013) emphasise that the ability to read requires the reader to extract information from a text and synthesise it with the reader's pre-existing schemas and expectations.

Reading challenges can arise from inadequacies in core reading skills. McArthur and Castles (2017) identify several causes, including difficulties in recognising letters and written words, recognising and producing speech sounds, and accessing memory associated with the meanings of words. These challenges directly impair reading behaviour, although they may have different causes; i.e., similar reading behaviour does not necessarily have the same underlying root cause (McArthur & Castles, 2017). While cognitive factors play a role in learning to read, learners are also affected by the environments in which they grow and learn, which may include the home, the community, and the school environment.

2.3 Home environment

The home environment is crucial to literacy development. Given that children's vocabulary development often begins at home, it influences their listening and reading comprehension significantly (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). For example, the theory of pedagogic discourse by Bernstein (1996) argues that accessibility to education depends on socio-economic status, mediated by the language spoken and its distribution. In addition, limited access to books and other print materials in poorer socio-economic areas, including school environments, hampers literacy development.

2.4 Poorly resourced schools

Learners in poorly resourced schools typically face severe reading challenges, mainly due to disparities in infrastructure, teacher training, and access to educational resources. South African schools are classified into quintiles based on poverty levels, with Quintiles 1–3 classified as non-fee-paying schools that receive more funding than Quintiles 4 and 5 (Spaull & Hoadley, 2018). Despite financial allocations, schools in lower quintiles often lack essential resources and well-trained teachers (Howie et al., 2017). These disparities can prevent learners in disadvantaged schools from receiving the quality education necessary for literacy development. Language issues are also salient factors.

2.5 Language factors

Language remains a critical issue in South African literacy education. The Department of Basic Education (2011) advocates for home language-based instruction in the Foundation Phase, under the assumption that when children start school, they are fluent in that language. However, PIRLS 2016 and 2021 results indicate that many students in Grade 4 struggle to read for meaning, even in their home languages. The PIRLS 2021 results revealed that many failed to locate information in texts or answer memory questions correctly (Department of Basic Education, 2023). This situation affects literacy acquisition significantly, since home language development impacts additional language learning (Roux et al., 2023; Van Staden & Zimmerman, 2017).

For example, in research involving the use of SiSwati and isiZulu as a medium of instruction (MoI) in selected schools in Mpumalanga, Schaefer and Kotzé (2019) confirm the importance of the first language in learning an additional language. The critical roles played by phonological awareness and letter-sound knowledge for later word-reading abilities are particularly relevant to this paper (Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019). Similarly, Stern, Jukes, Cilliers, Fleisch, Taylor, and Mohohlwane (2023) indicate that knowledge of language structure, phonemic awareness, and competency in decoding letter- and word-reading in the first language can be transferable to the additional language under supportive instructional conditions. Nevertheless, the current DBE policy of home language instruction for three years while learning English as an additional language falls short in promoting successful literacy acquisition (Stern et al., 2023). Notably, reading difficulties are not limited to South Africa but rather are prevalent across many Sub-Saharan African countries.

2.6 Regional patterns in sub-Saharan Africa

Studies from sub-Saharan countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Nigeria, and Zambia, indicate that large numbers of children in these contexts fail to acquire foundational reading skills in the early grades (Piper et al., 2018; RTI International, 2015). Factors such as insufficient teacher training, lack of reading materials, large class sizes, and the use of unfamiliar languages of instruction contribute to the problem (Uwezo, 2016). These findings provide a broader regional lens through which to understand the South African context, since similar systemic issues appear across various low- and middle-income countries in the region. This

matter represents the domain within which the further intention of this study can be reiterated: to identify the various strategies teachers might utilise to offset these literacy challenges.

2.7 Strategies for addressing reading challenges

Various strategies have been proposed to address reading difficulties in South African schools, especially in EFAL. Venketsamy and Sibanda (2021) have explored the methods teachers use to develop early literacy skills in English First Additional language in Gauteng. In that study, teachers faced challenges because they attempted to use strategies such as reading aloud, shared reading, group guided reading, paired reading, and independent reading (Venketsamy & Sibanda, 2021). The teachers often lacked adequate support from more experienced colleagues, as well as access to ongoing teacher development and training. In addition, many teachers seemed unaware of the teaching techniques outlined in the CAPS document, which suggests gaps in teacher development (Venketsamy & Sibanda, 2021). That research is particularly relevant to the focus of this paper.

2.8 Summary

The literature review illustrates how early-grade reading difficulties are influenced by various factors, including the home, school, and language environments (Stern et al., 2023). In addition, the lack of effective teacher training, insufficient resources, and a lack of knowledge on how to teach reading present restrictive barriers. This paper contributes to existing literature by observing classroom practices for teaching reading and identifying actual strategies employed in the school environment. Section 3 below outlines the theoretical framework.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by a variety of learning theories, such as the socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky (1978), specifically, the zone of proximal development (Castagno-Dysart, Matera & Traver, 2019); the modelling and observational learning theory (SCT/SLT) (Bandura, 1971), reading models, and the read to learn theory by Rose and Martin (2012). These theories of learning can assist in explaining the process of learning to read and are essential strategies for addressing reading challenges (Gündoğmuş, 2018). Reading challenges can be improved through instruction and practice in the crucial relationship between letters and sounds, and the manipulation of those sounds. This instruction and practice can be mediated through the application of scaffolding, as outlined below (Vygotsky, 1978).

3.1 Zone of Proximal Development

One of the prominent tenets that underpin the Vygotsky (1978) socio-cultural theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Cole et al., 1978:86). The ZPD involves a less knowledgeable person (a learner) engaging in developmental changes through interaction with a more knowledgeable person, which can be

a mentor or teacher or a more competent peer (McLeod, 2018). Vygotsky believes that a learner cannot reach the desired level by working alone; as the learner moves from their current level of cognition, they traverse the ZPD towards the learning goal (Shabani, 2016). This position underpins the group-guided reading activities highlighted in the CAPS document, wherein the teacher gives individual attention to learners and develops their comprehension skills (Department of Basic Education, 2011). However, despite the highly scripted methodologies in CAPS, the curriculum is not likely to be effective due to teachers' inadequate subject and pedagogical knowledge (Hoadley & Boyd, 2023). Teachers require acute, conceptual knowledge of how to teach to explicitly deliver learning to their learners (Shalem, 2017), highlighting that teachers' training in the teaching of reading is crucial. The SCT/SLT theory by Bandura and Walters (1977) is related to the ZPD.

3.2 Modelling and observational learning theory

The concept within SCT/SLT is that human behaviour can be learnt through experience and the consequences thereof, via conventional operant and classical conditioning theories (Bandura, 1971). However, some learning that occurs through experience can also be a product of observation of other people's behaviour and its consequences (Bandura, 1971). Bandura posits that for a person to learn from observation, they have to recognise and attend to the important features of the modelled behaviour. Modelling is a critical vehicle for acquiring literacy skills, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020). A practical example of this is how shared reading allows teachers to model good reading to learners as they read a text that would otherwise be beyond the learners' ability (DBE, 2011). Parents, teachers, and peers are key models in children's lives, as well as the mentors crucial in the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). These theories have also assisted in developing a practical approach to the teaching and learning of reading, known as Learning to Read: Reading to Learn (RtL).

3.3 Learn to Read: Reading to Learn Approach

RtL is a teaching and learning methodology for literacy development (Rose, 2005) that highlights the importance of developing proficiency in reading as a prerequisite for developing writing skills. For learners to understand a text, they need to identify the genre and text field. RtL also considers the importance of activating existing knowledge and creating new schemas where necessary, and takes place across a six-stage cycle, as illustrated in Figure 1 below (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Steinke, 2014:14):

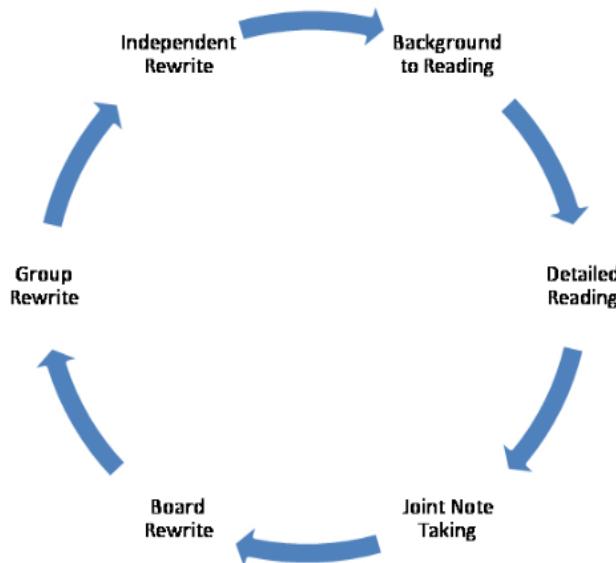


Figure 1: The RtL six-stage cycle

Figure 1 illustrates the six stages of RtL in which learners are guided to write suitable genres by the continued and parallel explicit teaching of reading; this method can assist struggling learners in obtaining new levels of literacy (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Steinke, 2014). Rose (2015 or 2005?) developed RtL, originally based on the genre approach, by adding three additional reading components that teach students how to write in context and use three stages. RtL views reading as an intricately scaffolded process that can be used at any educational level, including the foundation phase. Because it was originally designed for marginalised Aboriginal communities in Australia, RtL is particularly applicable to learners and students from disadvantaged communities in South Africa (Rose & Martin, 2012).

In sum, learning theories like ZPD and SCT/SLT can assist in guiding reading instruction, especially for struggling learners. It emphasises the RtL approach and teacher training as key tools in addressing common reading difficulties, along with its focus on scaffolding and guided learning, and its benefits for disadvantaged students. The abovementioned theories provide a strong framework for investigating reading problems and developing strategies to assist struggling readers by helping identify learning deficits (ZPD), exploring effective teaching methods (SCT/SLT), and testing practical, structured approaches (RtL). By studying how teachers employ these strategies, researchers might be able to design better interventions for teaching reading. Section 4 contains a discussion of the research methodology and design of the study.

4. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to data collection by using a parallel-convergent mixed-methods design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2012; Sileyew, 2019). Such a design provides the researcher with a more in-depth view of how classroom practice

is either or both informed and affected by the participating teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and underlying theories. Whereas quantitative data can provide the 'what' and 'how often', qualitative data can give an insight into the 'how' and the 'why', thus increasing reliability and validity through triangulation (Pardede, 2018).

The study was conducted in Nelspruit, Mpumalanga Province, at a primary school selected for its proximity to the researcher's residence and situated in an economically disadvantaged residential area. The school is designated Quintile 3 and non-fee paying as it serves a predominantly low-income community, making it a suitable environment in which to explore the prevalence of reading challenges among the learners. The school has 1,201 enrolled learners from Grades R to Grade 7. Quintiles 4 and 5 are fee-paying schools located in more privileged areas and, for that reason, receive less funding (Spaull & Hoadley, 2018). The participants were Grade 2 and 3 learners, four teachers, and the school principal. As part of a diagnostic exercise, 209 learners were initially assessed using the EGRA oral reading fluency and comprehension subtest. A sample of 12 learners, six from each grade, was purposively selected from this group with teacher input, representing four learners who performed below average, four average, and four above average. The sample reduction enabled more focused, in-depth analysis within the scope of the study, as these learners were selected to undergo a further battery of EGRA sub-tests. In addition, not all 209 learners were selected for further assessments due to time constraints with data collection and classroom access.

5. DATA INSTRUMENTS & COLLECTION

The following instruments arose from the initial research questions and were selected for use in the study:

- The EGRA fluency and comprehension subtests
- Questionnaires for the principal and teachers
- Semi-structured interviews
- Classroom observations
- Video recordings of classroom lessons using the FORT to capture practice

Before data collection commenced, the study received ethical clearance from the Faculty of Education at the University of Mpumalanga. Thereafter, the researcher sought and was granted consent by the Mpumalanga Department of Basic Education on the condition that the researcher submit the research findings to the relevant department to implement corrective measures as they saw fit. The principals, teachers, learner participants, and parents also granted consent. The participants remained anonymous, and all information collected was treated confidentially.

Data collection involved administering EGRA subtests to selected learners, distributing questionnaires, conducting interviews with teachers, and observing classroom reading activities between June and December 2020. The researchers administered the EGRA oral reading fluency and comprehension subtests as a diagnostic assessment on the participating Grade 2 and 3 learners. In addition, teacher questionnaires and structured interviews were also employed to

generate data on the nature of reading difficulties encountered, the factors contributing to such difficulties, and the strategies teachers employ to address the challenges. Lastly, classroom interaction and instruction were observed during EFAL lessons; the classroom interactions were recorded and analysed using FORT. FORT is a classroom observation tool designed to capture how teachers' pedagogic content knowledge can influence literacy acquisition (Steinke & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2019). Classroom observations were conducted twice a week for at least 30 minutes in each classroom, excluding school holidays and COVID-induced closures. A total of two lessons were observed per teacher.

The EGRA consists of a research-based set of independent subtasks, which examine some of the basic skills required for reading acquisition, and was developed by USAID in 2006, through the Education Data for Design Making (Dubeck & Gove, 2015). The video-recorded classroom lessons were captured via FORT and consisted of two lessons per participating teacher of a minimum of 30 minutes. The unit of measurement was 10 minutes.

5.1 Data Analysis

The EGRA comprehension assessments were allocated scores based on the number of words read correctly per minute for the reading passage section and the number of correct responses to five comprehension questions. The results were then entered into an *Excel* spreadsheet and analysed using descriptive statistics, which show the minimum, maximum, and mean values, including percentiles. The EGRA subtests were then conducted with the 12 closely tracked learners to determine the types of individual reading challenges the learners were encountering.

Furthermore, the researcher administered questionnaires and conducted interviews for further exploration of the strategies teachers use to address the reading challenges of their learners. The data collected this way were classified into individual categories, codes were developed manually using alphabetic letters, and the researchers wrote notes, explored the data, and coded the data thematically. This process involved classifying data, writing memos, and concept mapping. Such analyses indicated relationships among concepts in a graphic way to discover patterns such as frequencies, magnitudes, causes, and consequences. The data were then stored in clearly labelled and colour-coded files. Some of the responses were assessed using the Likert-type scale, which is a rating scale used to measure attitudes and opinions, tabulated and categorised by type (Likert, 1932).

The data obtained through classroom lesson observations were analysed using the FORT. The FORT consists of two main parts: Part A focuses on reading teaching, and Part B examines the dynamics of classroom interaction between teachers and learners. Initially, the data were coded for frequency of activity occurrence using a tick system, thereby facilitating a quantitative analysis. The data were then quantified through numerical counting, recorded on *Excel* spreadsheets, and calculated for average scores, which were subsequently presented as graphs. This process facilitated comprehensive insight into classroom practice, as well as how many times a certain event took place. The results represent the average frequency of activity over 10 minutes.

Ultimately, the quantitative data obtained from the range of EGRA testing was combined with the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The combination was essential for drawing comparison, if any, between the learners' performance and the teachers' beliefs, theories of teaching and learning, and their practical strategies. By comparing the preceding results with those of the classroom observations analysed by FORT, the researcher sought to discover correspondence (triangulation) between what teachers said they did and what they actually did in the classroom. The study employed the FORT for triangulation to corroborate the above-mentioned agreement between the teachers' responses and their actions (Steinke & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2019). The study followed all ethical guidelines, including adherence to the Personal Protection of Private Information Act, or POPIA.

5.2 Limitations

The scope of the study was limited to a single school in Nelspruit, which might affect the generalisability of the findings. In addition, the small sample size restricts the application of the results, and the cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal relationships. Ultimately, the data extracted were compared to and combined with data obtained from previous studies at the foundation phase level to corroborate the findings of this study with those of the existing literature. Section 6 provides a discussion of the findings.

6. FINDINGS

The main research objectives in this study were the identification and prevalence of reading difficulties among early grade learners and the strategies teachers employ to offset these difficulties. The findings are presented in the framework of the individual research instruments, beginning with the EGRA reading assessments for Grades 2 and 3, along with the subtasks, followed by the data collected from the questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, which were analysed using FORT.

6.1 Grade 2 oral reading fluency and comprehension results

Table 1 below shows the results from the EGRA oral reading fluency and comprehension tests for the participating Grade 2 classes, identified as 2A and 2B. Grade 2 learners are expected to read 30WCPM for English FAL in the second term (Wills et al., 2022).

Table 1: Grade 2 EGRA oral reading fluency and comprehension test results

Description	No. in 2A	No. in 2B
Learners reading above threshold	1	3
Learners reading below threshold	48	38
Highest score for fluency	53	59
Lowest score for fluency	3WCPM	3WCPM
Percentage of tests discontinued		64%
Learners unable to read for meaning		98%
Highest score for comprehension recorded	5/5	5/5
Average score for comprehension	0.2/5	0.2/5

The results for the comprehension test were unsatisfactory, as the majority of learners could not respond to the set questions. The results for Grade 3 oral reading fluency and comprehension are presented below.

6.2 Grade 3 oral reading fluency and comprehension results

Table 2 below shows the results obtained from the EGRA oral reading fluency and comprehension tests for Grade 3 classes, identified as Grades 3A and 3B. Grade 3 learners are expected to read 50WCPM for English FAL in the second term (Wills et al., 2022).

Table 2: Grade 3 EGRA oral reading fluency and comprehension test results

Description	No. in 3A	No. in 3B
Learners reading above threshold	7	1
Learners reading below threshold	45	56
Highest score for fluency	94WCPM	61WCPM
Lowest score for fluency	3WCPM	1WCPM
Percentage of tests discontinued		46%
Learners unable to read for meaning		92%
Highest score for comprehension	5/5	5/5
Average score for comprehension	0.2/5	0.2/5

The results for the comprehension test were subpar, which aligns with a study by Spaull, Moholwane, and Pretorius (2018) that highlights the need to shift research studies from focusing on the poor comprehension results, which is merely ‘the tip of the iceberg’. The reason for this is that most learners have not yet mastered the basic skill for reading successfully, which is decoding letters (Spaull, Moholwane & Pretorius, 2020). However, decoding should be mastered to allow automaticity and an increase in speed, which are known to produce fluency and comprehension competence (Spaull, Moholwane & Pretorius, 2018). Wherever the reading rate

is below the minimum threshold of 30 WCPM, learners are reading too slowly to allow comprehension (Wills et al, 2022).

The benchmarks pertain to English fluency, set in some developing countries where English is predominantly a second language, as is the case in South Africa. However, the threshold hypothesis by Wang et al. (2019) argues that reaching fluency benchmarks may only be possible once fluency thresholds have been attained. In this study, most learners failed to reach the expected threshold and, thus, would be unable to achieve the expected benchmark. These are necessary standards for freeing up the working memory to allow comprehension. Notably, accuracy develops once words start being recognised accurately and the brain quickly processes continuous text without conscious attention (Mutema & Pretorius, 2024).

6.3 Teachers' questionnaires and semi-structured interviews

The teachers' questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews sought to illuminate the underlying factors contributing to learners' substandard reading performance, as well as to gain insight into the intervention strategies implemented by the teachers. After analysing and coding by classifying widespread issues, the researchers extracted themes from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (See Appendices A and B). Prominent collated and thematically analysed themes include identifying reading difficulties, types of reading difficulties learners encounter, causes of these reading difficulties, and strategies these teachers use to address reading challenges. Responding to the question on how teachers identify reading difficulties in semi-structured interviews led to a discussion on the types of reading difficulties learners encounter. Three out of four teachers mentioned that they assessed the learners' decoding, fluency, and comprehension for signs of reading difficulties. The teachers mentioned that learners found it difficult to apply letter-sound knowledge to sound out words or pronounce them correctly, which is consistent with what Tamor (2017) refers to as implications of word decoding and phonics difficulties. Although T2 had the EGRA tests, which he had obtained from a workshop he had attended, he was not aware of how to use the tests. T1 and T3 responded to the questions about how they assessed reading proficiency:

I let them read in groups, then individually. [T1]

I check their individual reading and reading of phonics. [T3]

Three out of four teachers responded that the types of reading difficulties learners face included phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and fluency. In addition, during interviews, two of the participating teachers highlighted fluency and comprehension as key challenges, while one mentioned fluency only. Learners could not link written letters to sounds and had spelling difficulties (Lumadi, 2016). Transcribed comments by T1, T2 and T3 on this issue are provided below:

They cannot comprehend the text (Do not read to learn). [T1]

Lack of concentration, learners not familiar with language and no parental assistance.

[T2]

Learners can't read because of phonics; they can't differentiate the sounds but not all learners. [T4]

The findings from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews indicate that several factors contribute to the participating learners' EFAL reading difficulties. These factors include the home environment, such as the socio-economic background, parental involvement in learners' literacy development, the school environment, and teacher-related matters, such as not knowing how to teach basic reading skills to learners from disadvantaged communities. Several participating teachers openly described how parental involvement ranged from limited to non-existent and explained how they struggled to teach reading, as seen below:

The parents of these learners work very hard and when they get home are too tired to assist with reading homework, some of them can't even read themselves so how can help.

[T3]

I am still busy teaching them SiSwati Home Language, which they are struggling with, so that I can move to EFAL. [T2]

The participating teachers did not have a specific strategy for dealing with reading challenges, although many learners encountered reading difficulties. Each participating teacher used a different intervention method, which could be a contributory factor to learners' poor performance in reading. For example, Zimmerman and Smit (2014) similarly highlight that while decoding is emphasised, teachers tend to teach decoding without a systematic and effective plan, assuming that comprehension would automatically follow. Ideally, decoding should be mastered by the end of Grade 1 to allow automaticity and an increase in speed in Grades 2 and 3, which are known to give rise to fluency and comprehension competence (Spaull, Moholwane & Pretorius, 2018).

6.4 Classroom observations and FORT data findings

The study utilised FORT to analyse the video recording used during classroom observations (See Appendix C, D, and E). The classroom observations address Question 5, which investigated teachers' approaches to addressing reading difficulties. The classroom observations analysed using the FORT instrument not only recorded what content was taught in the classroom but also the most often used methods of teaching. The FORT data revealed that while most teachers said that they relied on the phonics approach to address reading challenges, effectively, no recorded attempt was made to employ any intervention strategies, as teachers depended on communalised teaching methods, which involved chorusing with little attention paid to individual learners' needs (Hoadley, 2018). Teaching methods were similar to the traditional methods involving expository style, with teacher talk and strong pacing dominating most of the classes. Pacing refers to how fast or slowly those topics should be covered, and is usually determined by the annual teaching plans (Bertram, Mthiyane & Naidoo, 2021). Weaker learners were commonly not accommodated, and no relaxing of boundaries was overtly observed during class visits; indeed, in one of the classes, a teacher appeared to ignore learners who gave incorrect answers, selecting

another learner to answer the question posed. Figure 2 below illustrates an example of teacher-to-learner interaction:

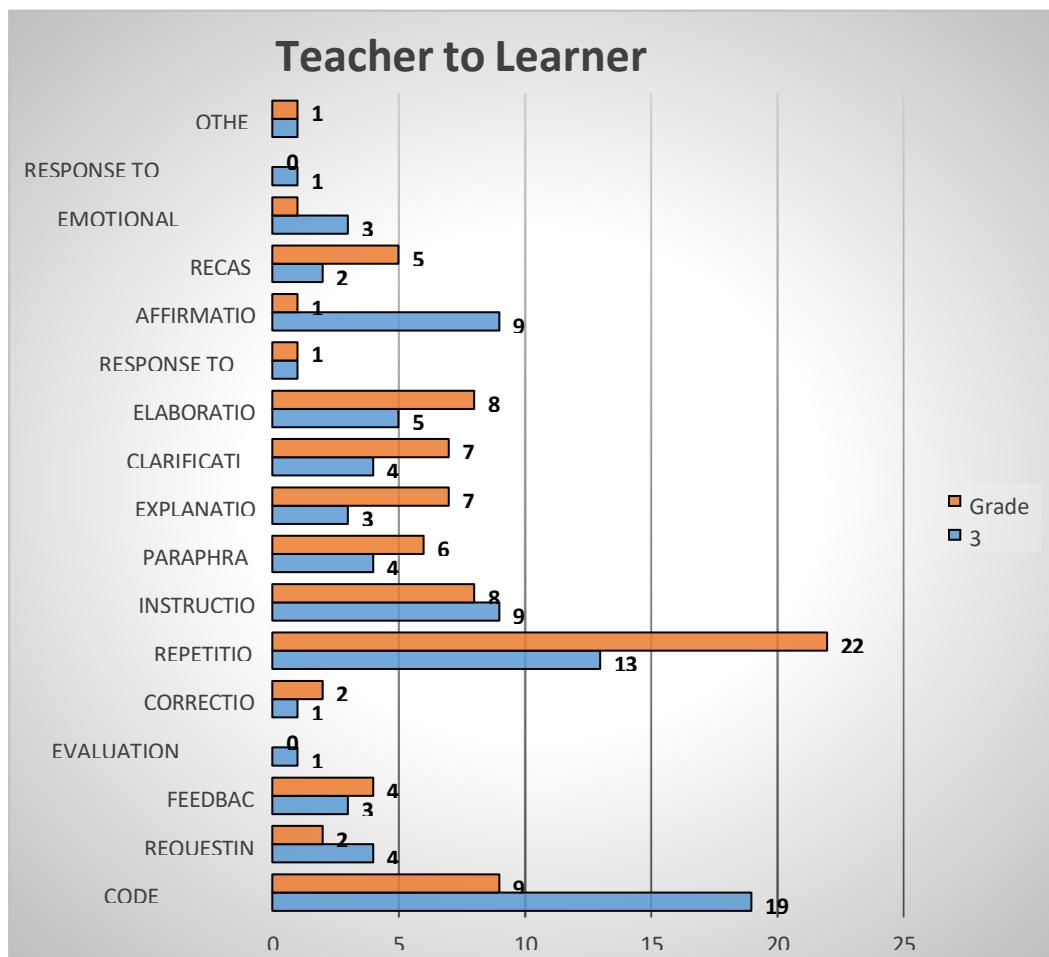


Figure 2: Teacher-to-learner interaction

Figure 2 indicates a high incidence of teacher talk in the classrooms. The teachers who participated in this study found it difficult to elicit learner participation, especially when it came to individual reading. During the interviews, T4 indicated that learners were not familiar with the English language, which caused poor participation in class. The strong pacing and sequence created a teacher-based classroom environment, which entails the teacher exercising explicit control (Naidoo, 2019). Requesting was mostly used to instruct learners to take out their books or to read after the teacher, which happened at the initial stages of the lessons. Despite little feedback, teachers repeated the learners' responses as a form of feedback and affirmation, and used non-verbal feedback, such as head nodding. The evaluation questions, like open-ended questions, require learners to make connections in the text and process information at a deeper level (Pretorius, 2014). However, teachers in this study did use such questions, indicated by both teachers' high usage of closed-ended questions and the poor scores recorded for comprehension in the EGRA subtest.

The study observed very limited learner-to-teacher interaction, which adversely impacts learner performance, since participation is an integral part of teaching and learning, which aligns with Gardner (2019). Figure 3 below illustrates data pertaining to learner-teacher interaction, specifically focusing on FORT.

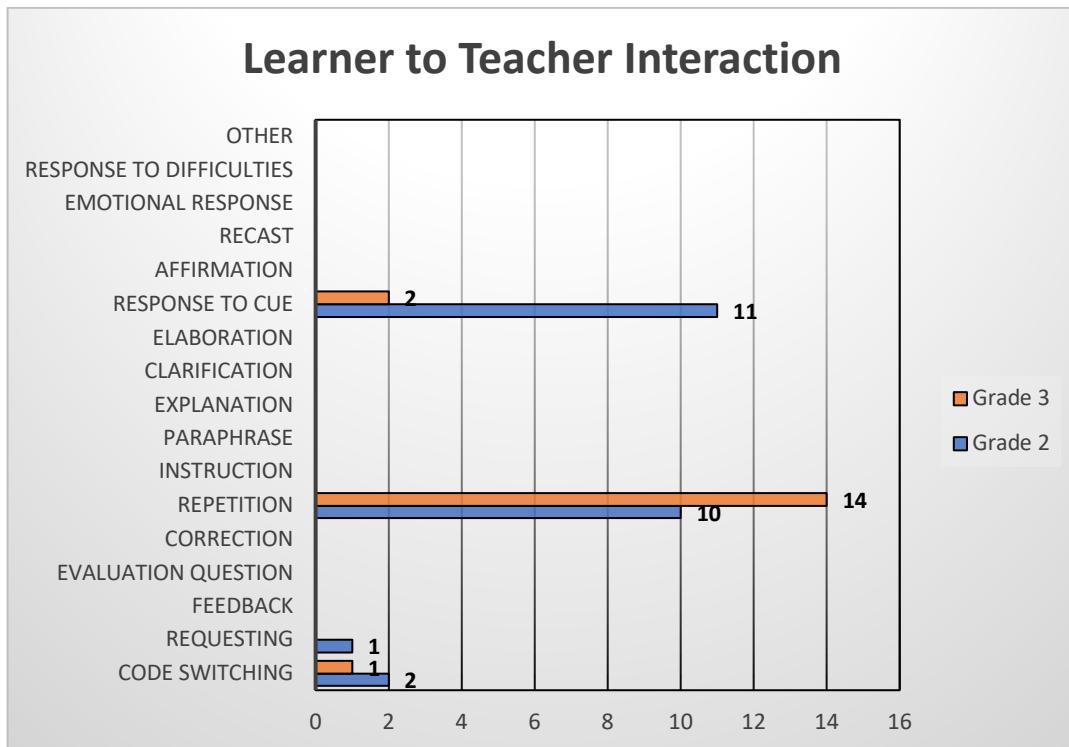


Figure 3: Learner-to-teacher interaction

Figure 3 above indicates minimal learner-to-teacher verbal communication. Out of the 16 categories, Grade 2 did not utilise 12 categories of the dialogue aspect. The graph indicates that the learners only utilised four sub-categories: response to cue, repetition, requesting, and code-switching. The Grade 2 learners' response to the cue was an average of 11, which was the highest compared to the other categories. This outcome might point to limited teacher engagement with the content because the teachers controlled the class tightly (Steinke & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2021). In addition, the researcher observed that most Grade 2 learners were barely engaged during the lesson. The graph demonstrates a lack of learner participation, which could be due to strong pacing, whereby the teacher leads the class and controls the classroom interaction, or the learners do not understand the lesson; the latter was more likely the case. The lack of learner participation and agency is restrictive and suggests that teachers still rely heavily on traditional teaching styles that promote rote learning and repetition, as observed in Pretorius (2019).

Although the FORT is a relatively broad instrument, the researcher used the unabridged instrument. However, some of the FORT categories, such as inferential comprehension, non-word reading, oral reading fluency, silent reading, writing punctuation, and spelling, scored zero. The silent reading sub-category is not included in this study because the CAPS-specified reading activities in the Foundation Phase do not include it (DBE, 2011). The rest of the sub-categories

had zero scores, which could be due to the teachers' teaching styles. However, due to the small sample size, these sub-categories could have been covered in unobserved lessons. Teachers might not have understood that reading instruction could be integrated with various language aspects, including spelling and writing (Khosa, 2022). Inferential questions are used to assist learners' understanding of the meaning of complex text, and explicit teaching of comprehension strategies enables learners to respond to both literal and inferential questions (Oyowe, 2022; Khosa, 2022). The absence of a score for inferential comprehension might indicate that the learners were not reading for meaning or were not explicitly taught the comprehension strategy. Under FORT Part A, the researcher observed that oral discourse dominated the classes, leaving very little to no time for writing and individual reading, as also observed by Hoadley (2018) in her research into early literacy in the South African classroom.

The findings provide insight into the prevalence of reading difficulties in English among the participating learners. For example, in activating prior and presenting new knowledge, very low scores were observed. Considering the critical role of these skills in comprehension, the low scores for both these categories could be detrimental to teaching reading, as learners may face challenges in understanding new knowledge without prior knowledge to build on. Regarding comprehension, Grade 2 presented higher scores for closed questions than Grade 3. Closed questions require learners to respond to questions from memory without deeper comprehension, as these kinds of questions do not challenge the learner to interact intensively with the text (Pretorius, 2014). The absence of scores for fluency is correlated to the absence of individual reading, particularly reading out and silent reading, and ultimately inferential comprehension. This performance correlates with the outcome of the EGRA reading and comprehension subtests conducted earlier. Ultimately, choral responses were also higher in Grade 2 than in Grade 3, which may indicate surface learning in Grade 2. Repeating chorus responses by learners may result in memorising the words without knowing the letters that make up the word (Abadzi, 2014).

The qualitative and quantitative data from the classroom observations and the FORT provided valuable context for the data collected through interviews and questionnaires. Results from part A of the FORT, which consists of PCK and reading teaching, as well as management, revealed that teachers mostly used closed questions during comprehension, group reading, and choral responses. There are also indications that discourse markers and prompts are the most used sub-categories. Part B of the FORT entails classroom interaction, revealing that classes are mostly dominated by teacher talk with limited learner agency (Hoadley, 2017). Section 7 provides a discussion on the findings.

7. DISCUSSION

This discussion examines the findings presented above in relation to the literature review. It is centred around two main themes emerging from the data, namely the challenges learners encounter and the teaching practices observed in the Grade 2 and 3 classrooms, which highlight the disparity between policy intentions and the reality of the classroom in the teaching of reading.

7.1 Reading challenges

First, the findings from the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) in this study underscore the substantial reading challenges learners encounter in the foundation phase. Most learners struggled to read with comprehension, which could indicate a lack of basic literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness and phonics, vocabulary, and fluency, all of which are key components of the reading process (Nation, 2019; DBE, 2011). The EGRA assessments revealed that 98% of Grade 2 learners and 92% of Grade 3 learners in this study fell below the benchmarks of 30WCPM and 50WCPM, respectively. Only four learners in Grade 2 and eight learners in Grade 3 read above or at the expected rate.

These findings reflect trends observed in other studies. For example, Draper and Spaull (2015) reported that 41% of the rural Grade 5 EFAL learners were non-readers. Similarly, a study by Khosa (2022) revealed that many Grade 1 learners could not read for meaning. This situation implies that if these learners do not receive specialised, individual attention, they face the possibility of academic failure and either drop out of school or become one of those learners who lag without ever catching up (Spaull, 2013). These reading challenges are directly linked to reading subskills, such as decoding, vocabulary, and fluency, which have been identified as essential for comprehension (Nation, 2019; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). The findings additionally indicate a mismatch between what is necessary for learners to develop reading proficiency and current instructional practices.

7.2 Teaching of reading

Second, the findings show no significant difference in the teaching of reading between the reading proficiency of participating learners in Grade 2 and Grade 3, suggesting that foundational reading skills are not being effectively taught or reinforced. Both Grades' performance is below their expected benchmarks, which supports earlier findings by Pretorius (2014) and Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), who highlight the deficit in teaching basic literacy skills in South African classrooms. The findings also correlate with the Read to Learn (RtL) approach, which emphasises the importance of scaffolded instruction (Rose, 2005). In addition, the classroom observations revealed the high occurrence of choral responses, group reading aloud, closed questions, prompts, discourse markers, teacher talk, and very little learner participation. The FORT findings in this study imply that learning gains were less substantial than anticipated due to communalised teaching, which limits individual learner engagement and impedes the development of independent reading skills (Hoadley, 2018).

These practices might also indicate that learners do not have adequate time to learn due to fast pacing and sequencing, and deficiencies in the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018; Hoadley, 2018). Similar findings by Khosa (2022) reveal a disconnect between teachers' understanding of literacy development in the early grades and classroom instructional activities. For example, oral discourse and teacher-talk dominate classes, leaving very little to no time for learners to practise individual reading or writing (Dube, 2023).

7.3 Reading practices and attitudes

Furthermore, an important feature of the literature review was foregrounding the importance of teachers' reading practices and attitudes as key factors in learners' literacy development. The teachers participating in the study discussed in this paper were skilled readers, yet had not been adequately trained to teach learners in disadvantaged schools, another finding corroborated by previous research (Hoadley, 2017; Pretorius & Spaull, 2016; Rule & Land, 2017). While it is well understood that teachers who are readers and perceive reading as an enjoyable exercise are more likely to encourage learners to read than those who do not enjoy reading (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016); conversely, teachers' reading practices and perception of reading can also contribute to reading difficulties among learners (Rimensberger, 2014).

7.4 EGRA and FORT results

Lastly, the EGRA results and FORT observations also support the literature review findings. For example, factors such as limited learner engagement in reading activities and inadequate teacher preparedness for teaching multilingual learners (as observed in this study) contribute to a lack of effective reading skills in the early grades. The reality of the literacy crisis reinforces the need for targeted professional development, especially pertaining to teaching the input elements of reading, such as decoding, fluency, and phonemic awareness (Spaull and Pretorius, 2016).

8. CONCLUSION

This paper presents the prevalence of reading difficulties in the Foundation Phase and the strategies used by teachers in teaching reading. The study indicated a high prevalence of learners experiencing reading difficulties in English FAL in the Foundation Phase. Reading assessments (EGRA) revealed that most learners read either below the benchmark or were completely unable to read for meaning. Learners encountered reading difficulties in skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Several factors contribute to these reading difficulties, such as home environment, school environment, and individual learner issues. The participating teachers employed various methods to support the learners, such as the phonics approach and one-on-one methods; no standardised effective intervention, such as the PSRIP or RtL, was applied to assist learners in developing better reading skills. Classroom observations indicated that communal pedagogy was still the main focus; there were high incidences of teacher-talk, which meant that learners had limited time to interact with the target language (Dube, 2023). Despite progress in providing CAPS-aligned workbooks, issues like very slow instructional pacing resulting in teachers' ineffective use of time in the classroom remained, meaning that learners learn less than expected during the allocated time (Hoadley & Boyd, 2023). Thus, teachers should be equipped with the skills required to teach reading at an early age (Mohammed & Ampsonah, 2018). These skills include the stages of reading development, phonology, morphology (word structure), how they are formed, and their relationships with other words (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). Effective and sustainable reading intervention programmes, such as the RtL approach by Rose (2015), are also necessary. Unless

these matters receive attention, learners will continue to struggle with reading, thereby affecting their overall learning experience, as reading is a critical skill in learning.

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Tsitsi Belinda Dube is a literacy specialist with over 20 years of teaching and school leadership experience. She is presently the Programme Coordinator of the Asifundze Literacy and Numeracy Programme at Penreach NGO in Mpumalanga, working in partnership with the Department of Education, the University of Mpumalanga and various stakeholders. Her expertise includes teacher development, literacy interventions, stakeholder engagement and programme coordination and management. She holds a Master of Education in Early Childhood Education degree from the University of Mpumalanga.

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Kellie Steinke holds a background in Linguistics and Applied Language Studies and has also published in the emerging field of historical pragmatics. She completed her PhD in Education at North-West University, where she investigated the transition from decoding to comprehension in Grades 3 and 4, with a particular focus on early-grade reading development. She has over twenty years of experience teaching academic literacy to previously disadvantaged and multilingual students at tertiary level and is currently a lecturer and researcher at the University of Mpumalanga. Her current research interests include the integration of AI into literacy teaching and learning, as well as the use of storytelling and indigenous knowledge systems within contemporary literacy approaches.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Teacher's interview

1. How many learners in your class struggle with reading?
2. What kind of reading difficulties do they experience?
3. How do you identify struggling readers?
4. What steps do you take when you meet a learner with reading difficulties?
5. Have you received any specialised training to address reading difficulties?
6. What resources are available to you to reduce reading difficulties?
7. Does your school have a library/ do you have class library or reading corner?
8. Are learners free to take reading books home?

Appendix B: Questionnaire for teachers

The study aims to investigate the prevalence of reading difficulties among Grade 2 and three (3) learners. Please answer the questions below. Your responses are greatly appreciated.

A: Tick in the relevant box.

1. Principal's age 21–30 31–40 41–50 51–60 60+

2. Gender Male Female

3. Current grade taught:

4. Qualification:

National Diploma/Higher Diploma	Bachelor's Degree/Postgraduate/Advanced Diploma	Honours Degree/Equivalent	Master's Degree	Doctoral Degree

5. Years of teaching experience:

Years	0–5	6–10	10+

6. What is your Home Language?

SiSwati	
Sesotho	
IsiZulu	
IsiNdebele	
IsiXhosa	
Xitsonga	
Venda	
Sepedi	
SeTswana	
Afrikaans	
English	

Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
-------	--------------------------

7. What is your Language of teaching?

SiSwati	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sesotho	<input type="checkbox"/>
IsiZulu	<input type="checkbox"/>
IsiNdebele	<input type="checkbox"/>
IsiXhosa	<input type="checkbox"/>
Xitsonga	<input type="checkbox"/>
Venda	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sepedi	<input type="checkbox"/>
SeTswana	<input type="checkbox"/>
Afrikaans	<input type="checkbox"/>
English	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. How many learners experience reading difficulties in your class?

.....

9. Of the learners with reading difficulties, what type of reading difficulties do they experience? (Tick the relevant column)

Phonemic Awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>
Phonics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vocabulary	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fluency	<input type="checkbox"/>
All of the above	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. How do you identify reading difficulties in your learners? (Tick the relevant column)

Fluency (less than 45–60 wpm)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Decoding	<input type="checkbox"/>

Poor Comprehension	
All of the above	

11. In your opinion, what causes reading difficulties in your classroom?

Lack of reading materials
Learner readiness at Grade 1
Lack of parental assistance
Ineffective reading teaching styles
Absence of reading culture
Inadequate instructional time
Other (Specify)

.....

12. What is your intervention strategy for learners with reading difficulties in your classroom?

.....

13. Do you experience problems when teaching reading to your class? (Tick the relevant box)

Yes	
No	

14. If you answered yes above, describe the problems.

.....

15. Do you intentionally teach reading or learners just learn to read as they practise it.

Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never

16. What methods do you usually use to teach English Reading?

.....

17. Apart from the prescribed English reader, what other reading materials do you use to encourage reading?

.....

18. Which teaching approach do you usually use to teach reading?

whole language approach	
phonics approach	
meaning-centred approach	
explain further	

19. Do you think that reading difficulties adversely affect learner performance?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

20. If yes, explain how?

.....

21. What is your individual intervention plan for learners who have RDs?

.....

22. What is the role of parents in a learner's reading ability?

.....

23. Do parents help learners read outside of school? (Tick in the relevant column)

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>				

24. Does home background and behaviour affect reading ability? (Tick in the relevant Column)

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>				

25. Do you think intervention strategies can improve learners' reading ability at FP?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>

No	
----	--

26. Do you receive any support from the Department of Education to improve teaching of reading?

Yes	
No	

27. What kind of support have you received in the last 24 months?

.....

28. In your experience, what activities can help to develop reading skills in learners?

.....

Appendix C: The Facilitative Orientation to Reading Teaching – Parts A and B

PCK and Reading Teaching

Time	Activity & Type of Material Used	Participant Organization	Reading Teaching	Activating & Creating Knowledge
Choral (Whole Class) Response				
Same Group Response	Class	Group	Individual	Modality
Different Group Response				
Same Individual Response				
Different Individual Response				
Spelling			Focus on Integrated Skills	Silent Reading
Punctuation				Reading Out Loud
Grammar				
Vocabulary				
Writing				
Individual Silent Reading				
Group Silent Reading				
Individual Reading Out Loud				
Shared Reading Out Loud				
Group Reading Out Loud				
Oral Fluency				
Non-word reading				
Familiar Word Recognition				
Phonemic Awareness				
Referential Comprehension				
Inferential Comprehension				
Open Question - Extended				
Open Question - Restricted				
Closed Question				
Existing				
New				

Management

Management			Organization of Information		
Procedure	Discipline	Pacing	Sequencing	Prompt	Discourse Marker

Teacher-to-Learner and Learner-to-Teacher Interaction

Language	Dialogue	
LoLT	Code-switching	
	Requesting	
	Feedback	
	Evaluation Questions	
	Correction	
	Repetition	
	Instruction	
	Paraphrase	
	Explanation	
	Clarification	
	Elaboration	
	Response to Cue	
	Affirmation	
	Recast	
	Emotional Response	
	Responds to Difficulties	
	Other	