LANGUAGE LEARNING NOTES

Contributions in this section include articles that critically investigate existing sources on aspects of language learning (e.g. the implications of new educational policies), or contributions that offer well-argued and research-based advice to language teachers, or early reports on research in progress.

THE STRUGGLING READER: IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING READING PROBLEMS SUCCESSFULLY AT AN EARLY STAGE

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The standard of reading of learners in the intermediate phase is cause for considerable concern. In this article, the intermediate phase refers to grades 4, 5 and 6 (roughly ages 10 – 12). According to the 2008 Evaluation Assessment Tests for Reading, only 15% of learners in Grade 6 achieved the required literacy level. Clearly, reading achievement is a problem in South Africa. Although approximately 4% of any given population experience neurological reading problems, the focus of this article is on the significant number of learners in the intermediate phase who experience reading problems and the generic causes of reading problems for learners in general. The intent is to alert teachers and parents to the characteristics of a struggling reader so that the problem can be identified and addressed early. Firstly, ways in which learning problems are manifested are described. Secondly, a discussion of various types of reading problems, of which four, namely poor reading comprehension, inadequate reading fluency, a lack of vocabulary and a negative attitude towards reading, are discussed in depth. Strategies for struggling readers are presented and recommendations are made. The conclusion is that learners who experience reading problems can learn to read successfully when given the necessary support.

Keywords
struggling reader; reading problems; intermediate phase; reading development; vocabulary development; reading comprehension; reading fluency; attitude towards reading; reading strategies

INTRODUCTION

Educationalists in South Africa (see Bloch, 2009:58; Ramphele, 2008:174) are concerned about the poor literacy level of our learners and in particular learners in the intermediate phase. Fawcett and Rasinski (2008:159) state that learners do more reading and writing today – on paper and online – than ever before. They are supported by Lewis and Dahbany

(2008:9), who state the following: 'Today's teenagers, sometimes … live in more diverse communities; are fluent in the customs and values of the digital world …'.

The inability of many learners in the intermediate phase to develop effective reading skills is cause for concern. Experts (see Nunes, 1999:123; Townend & Turner, 2000:274) agree that poor reading skills cause poor academic performance and hamper learners' overall development. Struggling readers are forced to make adaptations in various spheres of society in order to survive: 'They develop ways of coping with what they perceive as a deficiency in them' (Nunes, 1999:123).

Lenski (2008:37) argues that literacy development in the intermediate phase is just as important, and requires just as much attention, as that of beginner readers. This led Ramphele (2008:174) to voice her concern about only 15% of all Grade 6 learners in South Africa achieving the required pass rate of 48% in literacy tests in 2008. The report on the National Evaluation Assessment Tests for Reading was based on the results of tests that had been carried out among learners in 7 000 schools country-wide. The assessment standards of the 2000 National Curriculum Statement were used and 50% was taken as the pass rate for Grade 6 learners.

The results of these tests indicate that poor reading ability is a serious problem in South Africa. My concern with reading problems in general sparked the decision to embark on this study. The next section provides a brief outline of this article.

SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this article is to investigate the possible reasons for the poor performance in reading among Grade 6 learners; the most common reading problems; the way in which they manifest; and the strategies that teachers can use to rectify these problems.

Firstly, the terms *reading problem* and *struggling reader* are defined, followed by an overview of what is meant by a *struggling reader*. The possible causes of reading problems are dealt with next, and the ways in which learning problems manifest are described. This is followed by a description of various types of reading problems. Four common reading problems, namely poor reading comprehension; inadequate reading fluency; a lack of vocabulary; and a negative attitude towards reading, are then discussed. Subsequently, reading strategies for struggling readers are presented and a few recommendations are made with the purpose of preparing teachers for identifying struggling readers as early as possible to ensure that they can receive timely assistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE TERM *READING PROBLEM*

Within the framework of this study, the term *reading problem* refers to what Peer and Reid (2001:65) refer to as learners' reading problems that have no bearing on their intellectual ability.

THE TERM *STRUGGLING READER*

Lenski (2008:38) states that *struggling readers* 'can be defined as learners who have experienced difficulty with school-based reading', while Caskey (2008:170) is of the opinion that '*struggling readers* are learners who grapple unsuccessfully with written text'.

Townend and Turner (2000:275) point out that learners who are struggling readers often develop a poor self-image and later on find excuses not to read. Nunes (1999:123) concurs: 'Such learners feel like outsiders in the classroom and among their peers'.

However, many struggling readers who were extremely poor readers before can read successfully today, even though they read slowly. With help, they succeeded in mastering reading skills (Peer & Reid, 2001:95; Townend & Turner, 2000:274; Walker, 2000:6).

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF READING PROBLEMS

There are many reasons for the under performance in reading of learners in the intermediate phase and for only a small number of learners in Grade 6 achieving the required level in the 2008 National Evaluation Assessment Tests for Reading. The reasons that explain why learners in the intermediate phase experience reading problems are discussed in the section that follows.

LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS

Researchers distinguish various causes of reading problems, the most important of which are biological (Taylor, Pearson, Harris & Garcia, 1995); genetic (Townend & Turner, 2001); and behaviour-related (Nunes, 1999). Merchant & Fairbairn (2001:4) state that 'approximately 4% of any population experience reading problems of a neurological nature'. Learners with special learning needs should receive support of a remedial nature; this, however, is not the focus of this article.

LEARNERS FROM DIVERSE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

Lenski (2008:40) argues that there is a variety of reasons why struggling readers experience difficulty with reading. She suggests that some learners 'come from backgrounds not consistent with the school culture'. It is said that, of all the elements which best characterise an individual, language is the most obvious. It is through language that we convey our ideas. Gxilishe (2009) argues that all the accumulated knowledge, value systems, aspirations, beliefs, history and identity find expression through language. Language, he says, constitutes an important piece of a person's multiple identities and provides access to a whole culture, a cultural experience, a way of looking at the world. Ramphele (2009:11) explains that 'current approaches alienate children from their cultural roots. Ultimately, our children pay the price for the constant erosion of African languages'. It is thus important to take the rich African cultural heritage into consideration when plans are drawn up to improve the reading skills of South African learners.

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MULTILINGUALISM

Lenski (2008:41) states that learners who are not proficient in a language find it difficult to read academic texts that are written for the intermediate phase. In South Africa, classes typically consist of learners from diverse backgrounds. According to Ramphele (2009), many learners who are learning to speak either of the two main languages of tuition, i.e. English or Afrikaans, speak one of the other nine official languages in their mother tongue. She goes on to say that, because they struggle to learn the Language of Learning and Teaching, they also struggle to learn how to read. 'How can parents help their children learn when the language of instruction becomes a barrier to communication?' (Ramphele, 2009:11).

READING STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

Cambourne (2001:784) argues that one of the main reasons for the large number of struggling readers in the intermediate phase is that reading strategies are not demonstrated effectively to learners. This argument is supported by Lenski (2008:42). She explains that some teachers mistakenly believe that learners learn to read in the foundation phase and that they read to learn in the intermediate phase. The truth is that learners, as they progress through the grades, encounter more complex texts with higher reading levels. Learners must therefore be provided with the skills and strategies to comprehend these complex texts through explicit instruction.

MOTIVATION TO READ

The lack of motivation to read is one of the most frequent contributors to struggling readers' lack of achievement. This is the view of Taylor *et al*. (1995:26), who explain that learners 'with little motivation to read are often disengaged from learning and avoid reading'. Because unmotivated learners do not spend time reading, their progress tends to be slower than that of other learners who do read. Lenski agrees: 'The act of avoiding reading sets the stage for further reading failure, which can result in learned helplessness. Therefore they lose the motivation to try to read difficult texts' (2008:43).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Ramphele (2009:11) suggests that the reason for the large number of struggling readers in the intermediate phase is that at least half of the learners in the country live below or near the poverty level; some learners live in shelters, in cars, with relatives, or on the street, while others have to miss school to take care of younger siblings. Taylor *et al*. (1995:27) agree that the challenges of poverty can prevent many learners from learning to their full capability.

A CULTURE OF NEGLECT

Currie (2004:2) states that we live in a culture that makes it all too easy for learners in the intermediate phase to define themselves as 'failures and losers who do not fit in well with their families and schools'. He is supported by Lenski (2008:44), who argues that the current structure of schooling does little to nurture struggling readers once they are in the intermediate phase.

THE MANIFESTATION OF READING PROBLEMS

Learners' reading problems manifest in different ways. Townend and Turner (2000:174) state that learners often do not understand what they read, but are not always able to show it. Struggling readers experience certain inconsistencies in their behaviour that they cannot explain. They feel intelligent in some areas but are completely in the dark in others. They often display behaviour-related reading problems such as poor spelling, poor verbal skills, poor reading comprehension, poor reading speed, listening problems, poor handwriting and an inability to make notes.

Walker (2000:6) writes as follows: 'The teacher is dumbfounded because one day learners do something right just to do it incorrectly the next day, and the teacher experiences problems with learners' erratic behaviour patterns'. Peer and Reid (2001:65) are in agreement with Walker, but point out that such erratic behaviour often leads to a negative attitude towards reading, which manifests in emotional responses such as fear of reading, being ashamed of reading, frustration, low self-esteem and embarrassment. Often, learners have a good understanding of a particular aspect but do not have the ability to express it verbally. Their attempts at writing are far from the accepted standard, but often not due to a lack of trying. The result, according to Townend and Turner (2000:174), is that neither their verbal nor their written answers express what they want to say.

The way in which reading problems manifest will be discussed next.

BIOLOGICAL MANIFESTATION

Biological manifestation refers to reading problems of a genetic and neurological nature, and has to do with abnormalities in the human brain (Peer & Reid, 2001:12). With regard to reading problems of a genetic and neurological nature, Peer and Reid (2001:12) state that learners whose parents have a reading problem have a 40% chance of also developing a reading problem. Other researchers (see Brunswick, 1999:7) are in agreement that learners who experience reading problems of a neurological nature struggle with tasks that rely on short-term memory, because they experience obstructions in the left hemisphere during language processing.

MOTOR MANIFESTATION

Motor manifestation refers to inadequate motor skills. Peer and Reid (2001:13–14) state that struggling readers often experience problems with motor skills at an early stage, which often is an early indication of possible reading problems.

OTHER MANIFESTATIONS OF READING PROBLEMS

According to Peer and Reid (2001:15) and supported by Walker (2000:8), reading problems manifest in the following areas:

- Problems with skimming
- Problems with reading comprehension, although the learners know the answers to the questions

- Problems with remembering instructions, although the learners can perform the tasks
- Problems with scanning
- Omission or addition of words
- Reading at a normal speed, but with no or little reading comprehension
- Inability to recognise familiar words
- Omission or re-reading of a line
- Losing the place where they should be reading or having to use a finger to keep the place
- Problems with highlighting the central idea of a paragraph
- Problems with using dictionaries, encyclopaedias and directories

It is not possible to address all the above-mentioned problems in this article. I decided to focus on reading comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary and attitude towards reading because, according to Taylor *et al.* (1995:27), with the necessary support to learners, these variables provide the best option for making a positive difference.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE READING

According to Lewis and Dahbany (2008:18), there are literally hundreds of strategies aimed at improving the reading ability of the struggling reader. Those discussed here have been selected because, according to Fawcett and Rasinski (2008:157), as well as Taylor *et al.* (1995:27) these variables offer the best opportunities for making a difference to learners' reading abilities.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION

The term *reading comprehension* represents a number of sub-skills. Experts (see Alderson, 2000; Fairbairn & Winch, 2000; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000; Stanovich, 2000) are in agreement that struggling readers should have the following skills:

- The ability to summarise the main idea
- The ability to remember important details
- Good word-, phrase- and sentence-recognition skills
- The ability to predict outcomes and follow instructions
- The ability to follow the writer's structuring techniques and meaning
- The ability to draw conclusions

According to Caskey (2008:170), the goal of comprehension strategy instruction is to enable learners to use strategies independently when reading. Comprehension strategies are the conscious steps that readers use to make sense of text. Research reveals a number of effective approaches for improving comprehension instruction, including comprehension strategies. To advance comprehension across all grades, Taylor *et al.* (1995:27) reassert the importance of extensive reading, tapping into prior knowledge and teaching vocabulary. They also state that it is important to note that successful comprehension instruction depends on the thoughtful selection of approaches to fit the context.

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Taylor *et al.* (1995:224) state that reading comprehension is an integral facet of literacy and thus important for struggling readers who often do not comprehend the material that they are expected to read at school. Struggling readers therefore require assistance in the development of comprehension strategies. Caskey (2008:170) and Taylor *et al.* (1995:224) agree that purposeful instruction in the use of comprehension strategies (which have now been included in the new reading strategy policy document) is needed so that readers will know exactly *what* the strategy is, *why* it is important and *how* it can be implemented. They must be taught how to monitor their own progress in reading comprehension and when it is necessary to stop and apply alternative strategies.

According to Baumann, Hooten and White (1999:47), better reading comprehension leads to reading pleasure and is often the beginning of a lifelong love of reading.

Strategies to improve reading fluency

According to Fawcett and Rasinski (2008:156), reading fluency refers to the *ability* of readers to read quickly, effortlessly and efficiently with appropriate, meaningful expression or prosody. Alderson (2000:59) states that learners experience three types of problems with regard to reading fluency. In the first instance, many learners read too slowly. Secondly, some learners cannot adjust their reading speed according to circumstances. According to Ekwall and Shanker (1993:159-163), this is a problem that can be easily overcome by pointing out to learners that, if they vary their reading pace, time would be saved and reading comprehension might improve. Thirdly, some readers read so fast that they show no comprehension of what they have read. Alderson (2000:60) and Taylor *et al.* (1995:190) emphasise that phonological skills are important, because these skills enable struggling readers to decode letters and words swiftly, which determines their reading fluency.

Fawcett and Rasinski (2008:161-164) suggest a number of explicit strategies to improve reading fluency:

INDEPENDENT READING

Learners of all ages need opportunities to read for their own purposes as well as for school-assigned purposes. Ekwall and Shanker (1993:160) argue that time set aside for independent reading, such as a compulsory reading period every day, has been shown to increase struggling readers' test scores in reading.

TEACHER MODELLING

According to Alderson (2000:61) and supported by Fawcett and Rasinski (2008:161), teacher modelling allow learners to gain an internal sense of fluency. For example, when assigning a section of a textbook to be read for homework, the teacher can read the first paragraph using the appropriate expression and pace. The teacher can then ask learners if they noted times when the reading slowed down or sped up, and ask what the teacher was attempting to convey. The conversation can conclude with instructions to the learners to apply the same strategies to the reading exercise at home.

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ASSISTED READING

Assisted reading involves learners reading a text while simultaneously hearing it read to them by fluent readers. Alderson (2000:2) points out that the integration of seeing a text while simultaneously listening to it can have a positive impact on learners' ability to recognise the words accurately and fluently.

COACHING

Taylor *et al.* (1995:190) suggest that explicit fluency coaching includes providing individual feedback to learners regarding their reading. This can be done as classroom assignments or as answers to essay questions that are read out loud. Teachers should point out places where learners need to do practice more, to read with greater emphasis, or to slow down or speed up (Fawcett & Rasinski 2008:164).

Strategies to improve vocabulary

Research dating back almost a century has established that vocabulary is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension (Bromley, 2007:528). Vocabulary is important for reading and for school achievement. Unfortunately, word learning is an area often regarded as difficult to teach and tedious to learn. According to Richek and McTague (2008:190), estimates indicate that learners, on average, learn 2 000 to 3 000 words per year. These words are learned both through exposure to language during adolescence and through direct instruction. Fearn and Farnan (2008: 209) state that, when approached in the correct way, vocabulary instruction can be enjoyable.

PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

In the next section, I shall be referring to Tier 1 words (common words such as *reading* and *writing*), Tier II words (educated but non-technical words such as *instruction* and *integration*) and Tier III words (technical vocabulary such as *onomatopoeia* and *igneous*). Richek and McTague (2008:189–208) recommend that teachers consider the following principles to guide vocabulary instruction:

- A vocabulary programme needs to include several facets of word learning. This includes more exposure to written texts (in reading or listening mode) as it can foster the learning of new Tier II words. In addition, content-area teachers need to focus on direct instruction of selected words. To facilitate learning in chemistry, learners need to be taught the vocabulary of chemistry.
- Direct instruction works best if the number of words is controlled and learners practice them extensively. Teachers should limit the number of words they teach, as struggling readers find it difficult to learn new words.
- To learn words most effectively, struggling readers need to be actively engaged in formulating definitions and reading words out loud.

In the next section, several strategies that Richek and McTague (2008:202) have used successfully with struggling readers are discussed.

BRAIN POWER WORDS

In this strategy, learners are asked to preview different sections of a text (for example the history of our country) and to identify words that are difficult, but seem essential to understanding the subject – learners must identify unknown words that seem important in unlocking the meaning of the text. After choosing the words, learners go back to the text and try to establish their meaning by using contextual clues.

WORD EXPERT CARDS

In this strategy, each learner in a class takes responsibility for learning a few words, and then teaching them to their peers. Word expert cards are suitable for any novel or unit of study that involves many technical words; thus, it is excellent for teaching Tier III words. The procedure also gives hands-on experience in using references.

FIND THAT WORD

One way for learners to review words is to observe them in their context, and to use them. This strategy is aimed at learners in the intermediate phase. Learners are asked to record words they are studying when they encounter them in reading and speech. This enables learners to see the words in different contexts and thus deepens their vocabulary knowledge. Learners are given a list of target words and are asked to look for them. When learners see or hear a word, they are asked to write down the sentence in which the word appears.

SENTENCE STARTERS

In this strategy designed by Fearn and Farnan (2008:217), learners are presented with incomplete sentences that contain target words. Learners are asked to complete them. Examples of sentence starters are:

> *If I were the president of South Africa, …………………………*
> *I cannot understand why Bafana Bafana ………………………*

CONNECT TWO

This activity, developed by Blachowicz and Lee (1991), is excellent for reviewing words because it challenges learners to deepen and refine concepts by forming connections between words. In the activity, two lists of words are written on a blackboard or overhead projector. Learners are asked to make a connection between a word in the first list and a word in the second list. Most learning takes place when they have to explain the reason for the connection they made.

Strategies to improve attitude towards reading

Le Cordeur (2004:36) argues that a reading culture must be cultivated in schools and at home, as struggling readers seldom have a positive attitude towards reading. Hugo (2001:138) states that the cognitive (the intellect) as well as the affective (the emotions) is involved when one reads. The functioning of one's cognitive domain is strongly influenced by the affective domain. If learners have no desire to read, she argues, no intervention would have any effect

on their reading ability. Therefore, the cultivation of a lifelong interest in reading should be high on the hierarchy of reading instruction.

Researchers such as Burns, Roe and Ross (1999) mention interest, attitude and self-image as the three most distinguishable affective aspects of the reading process. Affection entails feelings, emotions, appreciation and values, which all form part of the affective domain. These aspects often determine how committed learners are to reading. Learners with a positive attitude towards reading will spend more time on the reading activity. A negative attitude towards reading usually develops in a home where the parents do not read, for a variety of reasons, while a positive attitude towards reading is cultivated in a home where reading matter is freely available. These parents read themselves and also read to their children.

Taylor *et al.* (1995:74) suggest that teachers who give learners the opportunity to read for pleasure, who grab every opportunity to expose learners to reading and who do everything in their power to make reading as enjoyable as possible could cultivate a positive attitude towards reading in learners. However, motivating learners to read presents opportunities such as that of cultivating a desire to read and a lifelong love for reading.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings drawn from the literature review, I should like to make the following recommendations with regard to the teaching of struggling readers:

- In terms of the National Reading Strategy (NRS), the current reading period is compulsory and a requirement of the NRS. Therefore it should be fully utilised, with appropriate activities for struggling readers. Because struggling readers do not spend time reading, their progress tends to be slower than that of their peers. The current structure of schooling should do more to nurture struggling readers once they are in the intermediate phase

- Struggling readers require purposeful instruction in the use of comprehension strategies (Caskey 2008:170)

- Every teacher can incorporate reading fluency instruction into classroom teaching and should be motivated to do so (Fawcett & Rasinski, 2008:167)

- Vocabulary, often regarded as difficult to teach, is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension and school achievement and should therefore get more attention in the intermediate phase (Richek & McTague, 2008:190)

- The cultivation of a lifelong interest in reading should be high on the hierarchy of reading instruction (Hugo, 2001:138).

CONCLUSION

Given the recurrent patterns of the poor standard of reading of our learners in the intermediate phase, there is, according to Albright and Luke (2008:9), an urgent need to explore and recover alternative models of literacy education. This article has focused on learners who struggle with reading problems. A broad overview of reading problems, the possible causes and the manifestation thereof as well as types of reading problems and strategies to improve reading were reviewed and discussed.

Official tests for Grade 6 implemented by the Department of Education in 2008 confirm the poor performance in reading and writing. The results showed that the literacy average was 48%, but for reading and writing with comprehension it was only 39%. One can therefore conclude that most Grade 6 learners struggle with certain aspects of reading. The literature review conducted in this study examined four of these aspects: reading comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary and attitude towards reading. Our conclusion corresponds with the tests of the department.

There are a multitude of strategies for improving the reading of struggling readers. It is up to the teacher to determine which idea, strategy or approach meets the needs of learners (Lewis & Dahbany, 2008:18). It has been established from the literature review that good reading comprehension; adequate reading fluency; a good vocabulary; and a positive attitude towards reading are essential for successful reading. Struggling readers must therefore be empowered with strategies that will assist them to successfully address reading problems such as those discussed in this article.

What this article hoped to accomplish is to make teachers and parents aware of the characteristics of struggling readers. The article concludes that struggling readers in the intermediate phase can overcome their reading problems. If their problems are identified early and they receive the necessary assistance, learners who experience reading problems can learn to read successfully.

Clearly, teaching reading to struggling readers means additional work for teachers, but if we want learners to learn the content, we have to help them read that content (Fawcett & Rasinski:167). It will be time well invested.

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