

Foundation Phase Teachers' Understanding on the Teaching of Reading Comprehension: is There a Solution?

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Bio Data

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was: (a) to explore teachers' attitudes towards teaching of reading comprehension ; (b) to establish the knowledge and attitude of the teachers in facilitating reading comprehension. A sample of three schools each with two grade 3 classes from three primary schools participated in the study. Teachers' individual interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations was used to collect data in this study. The findings of the study revealed that the participating teachers had limited understanding of reading comprehension strategies. They regarded teaching comprehension as challenge and were stressed, confused and frustrated because learners could not read and understand the text and they did not know what comprehension strategies were and how to apply them. Furthermore, responses showed that teachers were uncertain of how to teach reading comprehension and there was little time spent on reading comprehension with no uniform approach amongst teachers on how to teach reading comprehension. Guided practice and time to practice comprehension strategies were absent in classrooms

More efforts are needed for teaching teachers how to teach reading comprehension. The findings of the study have significant implications for the university lecturer, teachers, and other stakeholders who are directly and indirectly involved in education.

Keywords: perception, teaching, learners, reading comprehension, teachers, Foundation Phase

1. Aims:

The main objective of this research was to explore how teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. The study was framed by the following main research question:
How do teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?

2. Focus and purpose of the research:

This study focused on the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners at the General Education and Training (GET) level in South African primary schools. These classes are studying Tshivenda as a home language (Home Language or First Language) in the Foundation Phase. The study sought to examine what teachers understood as reading comprehension and its importance, and which strategies teachers use to teach reading comprehension.

3. Conceptual framework

In this study five main theories were identified about what works in reading comprehension, namely Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Vygotsky's socio-historical theories of cognitive development, Bruner's theory of learning and development, Bandura's theory and Ausubel's cognitive field theory as relevant to the study. This study was based on the belief that reading comprehension can be taught and learnt, and that it cannot just happen (National Reading Panel (NRP), 2000). This implies that teachers must have theoretical knowledge and practice to be able to motivate learners to a level where they can initiate, change and sustain learning in specific contexts to become masters of their own learning.

For Piaget (1967), learning is a process of internal construction. Learners must construct knowledge in their own minds through the guidance of more knowledgeable others.

Vygotsky's (1968) theory has implications for teaching reading comprehension, because in facilitating learning, the teacher must take the cultural context of the learners into consideration as it influences their thinking and actions. Learners can be given problem-solving activities with instructions for the task of reading comprehension.

The implications of Bruner's theory (1973) for teaching reading comprehension is that new concepts should be presented repeatedly, initially at a simple level and overtime at an increasingly difficult level – a concept Bruner referred to as the “spiral ordering of content.”

Ausubel's theory (1963) has implications for teaching reading comprehension because teachers must be aware of the fact that certain minimal levels of intellectual maturity are necessary before various subjects can be taught with a reasonable degree of efficiency and success.

According to Bandura's theory (1977), learners imitate what they see other people do, be it their parents or their teachers. In teaching reading comprehension teachers are seen as good models, as they usually have positive and nurturing relationships with learners.

Zimmerman's (1998) applied social-cognitive model of self-regulated learning informed the study. The five theories and Zimmerman's applied social-cognitive model of self-regulation forms the framework for understanding the teaching of reading comprehension.

4. Research design and methodology

The method of research chosen for this study is predominantly qualitative, using a case study from three schools each school with two Grade 3 classes as a research design. I interviewed individual teachers, held focus group interviews, conducted classroom observations, and performed content analysis.

5. Ethical considerations:

Prior to any data collection process I obtained official permission to perform research and adhered to ethical research principles. This was followed by the application for permission to conduct the research at the schools identified. I went to the schools and sought permission from teachers to conduct my research in their classrooms.

6. The main findings:

The study revealed that teaching reading comprehension is a challenge internationally and nationally. The study revealed the lack of guidelines for the Tshivenda teachers to teach reading, readers, learning support materials, lack of variety of reading materials for the learners. In school A there were no readers at all. Teachers had to rely on photocopies. Guided practice and time to practise comprehension strategies were missing in classrooms. No guidelines written in Tshivenda with Tshivenda examples exist.

Teachers do not have access to the research literature on the teaching of reading comprehension and rely on their own experience. Teachers were not actually teaching reading comprehension strategies. Training teachers to better equip learners for developing and applying reading comprehension strategies.

In the next paragraphs I answer the main research question by addressing each sub -question.

6.1 *How do teachers understand reading comprehension?*

Since the focus of the research study is on reading comprehension, the research sought to gauge the extent to which teachers understood reading comprehension as concept. The teachers were asked to indicate how they understood reading comprehension. While responding to this question, they also touched on what they regarded as important when teaching reading comprehension, which will be addressed in research sub-question2. Data gathered during individual's teachers' interviews (ITI) and focus group interviews (FG) revealed that the participating teachers said they understood the concept of reading comprehension. This clearly emerged as Theme 1, which I presented as **'There are two words which the reader must read and thereafter comprehend'**.

As I mentioned, when teachers were responding to the question they also expressed what they regarded as the importance of teaching reading comprehension to the learners and these emerged as category 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 of Theme 1. There was a general feeling among the teachers that reading comprehension entailed reading with understanding.

Based on their expressions one would expect that they were teaching learners self-regulating learning strategies. However, the findings from the classroom observation revealed that although the participating teachers said they understood what reading comprehension was, there was no correlation between what they said and what they did in 'real life' situations in their classrooms. During my classroom observations, I observed that reading comprehension was taught haphazardly and with little time allocated for this activity. The teachers spent more time in asking questions than in teaching reading comprehension.

During the teachers' individual interviews and focus group interviews, the participants in the case study expressed a common understanding of the concept reading comprehension, yet in the classroom they did not clearly apply their knowledge of reading comprehension and its importance in the lives of the learners. Reading comprehension was not taught in their classrooms in line with what they averred during interviews and focus

group interviews as their practice.

In many instances, my observations indicated that learners were answering the questions on a literal level and could not relate the text to something similar or to their lives. In schools A, B and C it was very difficult for the learners to evaluate the text and explain their critical judgement, and to express different points of view about the text. The teachers declared that they understood reading comprehension during interviews and focus group interviews. However, their understanding was not evident when they were teaching.

The teachers of my case study seemed dissatisfied by the time allocated for reading comprehension. They taught comprehension hurriedly and in such a way that the actual teaching of reading comprehension was lacking.

Concerning the physical environment during my classroom observations, in all three schools the resources available were not enough to enhance reading comprehension for learners, for example, I did not find any evidence of resources such as phonic frieze posters, action pictures, or words in Tshivenda.

In school A, there were not enough readers for the learners. Teachers sometimes used workbooks to replace readers. There was no school library. In the classrooms, there was no variety of reading texts or a reading corner. The only time that learners read, was when the teacher called them to the front to sit and read. They do not have Big Books. Reading took place during the reading session only.

The two classes were very different. In Grade 3A, teacher 1 had pictures and phonic frieze posters on the wall that she had made herself. Because readers were so few, she sometimes made copies from one reader that she had for the learners. In the same school, teacher 2 in Grade 3B seemed to be unconcerned. She relied on the workbooks as readers. This did not give learners an exposure to a variety of reading texts. She had a few pictures, which were not clear.

In school B, there was no school library. However, unlike School A, there were enough readers for the learners so that at least they could share, but there was no variety. Each class had 39 Grade 3 learners. The only time they read was when the teacher called them to the front to sit and read. As in School A, they did not have a reading corner in the classrooms. Just like School A, reading took place during the reading session only. They did not have Big Books. In class A, teacher 5 had English phonic frieze posters on the wall instead.

In school C, there was no school library and no reading corner in the classrooms. The only time that they read was when the teacher called them to the front to sit and read. They had few readers available for the learners. They did have one Big Book that the teachers used on occasion. Just like schools A and B, reading took place during the reading session only. There was no variety of pictures or photos, and no Tshivenda phonic frieze posters on the walls.

In school B, teacher 3 had English posters pasted on the walls, possibly because only the English ones were available to her.

Wessels (2010), emphasise that reading corners and classroom libraries are important for exposing learners to a language-rich environment which can motivate learners and enhance their reading comprehension. During my classroom observations, the classrooms had no evidence of reading corners, a library or a small group reading area at all. What I noticed was that during reading, teachers put a rug in the front, and the whole class sat on it and the lesson proceeded. Learners were only called to sit in front on the rug during reading sessions and that was the only time they could handle readers. There were very few pictures, posters and sentence strips on the walls.

The lack of newspapers and magazines may be due to teachers' lack of knowledge of the importance of a print-rich environment to enhance reading. There are currently no magazines and newspapers in Tshivenda. However, teachers can make action pictures by cutting out pictures, pasting them on the walls and writing in Tshivenda under each picture. The same applies to phonic frieze posters. Grade 3 learners should be exposed to different kinds of text such as comics, magazines and newspapers. Learners in the schools in my case study were missing these opportunities.

6.2 *What do teachers regard as important when teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?*

An important point that came to the fore was that teachers' responses to sub-question 2 came as an elaboration of

Theme 1. Category 1.1 of Theme 1, states that learners should read and understand, and be able to apply the information in their daily lives. Important as it may be, the teachers seemed to be concerned that there were learners in their classrooms who could not read and understand a text provided to them. Therefore, it is important that learners should be taught to read and construct meaning from the text. The participating teachers of my case study also emphasised the importance of teaching reading comprehension to enable the learners to read any text and know how to interpret it and to see the relevance of the story they read to their own lives.

My understanding is that the aim of reading is to read the words on the pages, to understand them and to be able to make meaning of the sentences in the text, as well as to comprehend the meaning of the whole text and apply and relate the information when needed.

However, from my classroom observation checklist, I did not find the teachers explaining the purpose of reading the text in Tshivenda, teaching learners how to apply the content in other situations and how to answer questions appropriately. The teachers indicated that teaching reading comprehension was important so that the learners could gain deeper knowledge about the written words. This idea emerged in Theme 1, category 1.4.

6.3 Which strategies do teachers use to teach reading comprehension?

This sub-question revealed whether what teachers said during the interviews and focus group discussions was put into practice. While answering this research question, the teachers also used this opportunity to discuss and express their challenges and confusion that I thought should be noted and will be discussed.

The classroom observation checklist was composed of six components. The objective of the observation sessions was to determine whether what teachers said about the teaching of reading comprehension was actually taking place. I present a brief description of the components of the classroom observations checklist and key aspects that I analysed from these data sources. This included a supportive classroom climate, the pre-reading, during-reading and after-reading phases, modelling of strategies and teacher practice of comprehension strategies. In my understanding, if the participating teachers had the knowledge base, they would have taught the learners how to read with understanding.

However, the teachers of my case study showed that they did not have a theoretical knowledge of comprehension strategies. The findings of this study show that learners could not read and understand the text. In order to maintain and continually increase learners' ability to comprehend the text, the teaching of comprehension strategies becomes foundational.

I learned that participating teachers of the research study expressed different views when asked about which strategies they used in teaching reading comprehension during the individual interviews and focus group interviews. Learners should learn to use these strategies before, during and after reading the text in order to self-regulate their own learning. Pre-reading activities are essential to prevent learners from "barking at print" (Wessels, 2010). This implies that teachers must teach learners the importance of pre-reading activities and their use for enhancing reading comprehension.

During the classroom observations, the teachers asked learners during the pre-reading phase to predict what would happen in the story. In all three schools, the teachers asked learners to preview the text and talk amongst themselves, make predictions. However, the most commonly used strategy was to discuss the illustrations. What I did not observe was teachers linking the predictions made during the pre-reading phase with the content.

During the interviews and focus group interviews in all three schools, it was apparent that during the pre-reading phase teachers asked learners to preview the text, talk amongst themselves and make predictions. However, during my classroom observations I did not find any evidence of teachers telling learners why they should preview the text before they started with the actual reading of the text.

6.3.5 Modelling the correct use of this strategy

During classroom observations, I did not find any evidence that the teachers were modelling the correct use of this strategy. It is therefore necessary that teachers be competent, since they are required to model and practice a given strategy and to give learners an opportunity to apply the strategy on their own (Pressley, 2002). With regard to the after-reading phase of the text, in all three schools the teachers asked learners to read aloud and to retell what they had read. Sometimes the teachers reminded learners to concentrate on major events or to summarise.

However, I did not find any evidence of teachers' asking learners to read sections of the text fluently that

substantiated answers to questions they had made based on prior knowledge and to confirm or disprove predictions they had made based on prior knowledge. The absence of this may be owing to the lack of teachers' theoretical knowledge of the use of reading comprehension strategies and the importance of prior knowledge for reading comprehension.

With regard to modelling strategies, the data revealed limited evidence of teacher modelling strategies. This may be a contributing factor to the low level of reading comprehension among the learners. NRP (2000) emphasises that it is important for teachers to model good behaviour of reading and most importantly to model the strategies before reading. This is to ensure that learners could use strategies during their independent reading and when they experience problems, such as talking about the illustrations and the heading when previewing the text.

From my findings, the participating teachers did not seem to be aware of comprehension strategies, because they did not explain the strategy and their use in comprehending the text to the learners. Learners should be assisted and guided by a role model, which in this context is the teacher. There was no evidence of teachers' encouraging learners to talk and use strategies. There was no evidence at all of teachers modelling during the teaching of comprehension strategies.

Reasons for the absence of modelling may be teachers' lack of theoretical knowledge about the concept of teaching learners' comprehension strategies as well as not being given opportunities to observe an expert teaching reading comprehension in Tshivenda. This implies that teachers must not turn the reading comprehension lesson into a show where learners sit and watch them modelling the strategies. Strategies need to be taught and practised by the learners in the actual time allocated for reading the text. The teaching of reading comprehension was indeed a challenge, as expressed by the teachers during the focus group interviews.

The findings of this study revealed that the participating teachers lacked knowledge of the concept of self-regulated learning as described by Zimmerman (1998) in Chapter 3 and exhibited in my conceptual framework. None of the six teachers who participated in the study indicated any process or plans for supporting the learners, for example, they did not indicate if they planned the reading comprehension lesson as well as how they taught learners reading comprehension strategies. They did not indicate any skill they taught the learners that would enable them to control their own learning. They did not seem to realise that learners could self-regulate their learning through acquiring specific strategies.

From this and similar responses, the teachers indicated that time for reading should be increased since reading comprehension was a challenge to them. This shows that they were concerned and worried about those learners who could not read and understand the text.

Participating teachers agreed that learners could not read and understand the text. During interviews and focus group interviews, they also highlighted their challenges, concerns and frustrations.

From these and similar responses, it became clear that the lack of theoretical knowledge and practice seems to result in teachers' developing a negative attitude towards their learners. The fact that teachers are aware that there were learners in their classrooms who could not read and understand the text created stress and frustrations. This was indicated during the focus group interviews, and my findings from the classroom observations confirmed this.

6.4 *What strategies can teachers use to improve reading comprehension?*

In all three schools, I failed to find evidence about the teachers' teaching or discussions of strategies with the learners. They do not seem to be aware of the strategies. These teachers did not plan the reading comprehension lesson. In essence, it was not clear if they knew what they should do when planning reading comprehension and their roles in teaching learners to read the text with understanding.

The conceptual framework shows teachers the steps they can use in order to improve the teaching of reading comprehension. It is a matter of urgency to equip them with skills and knowledge to enable them to do their job well. As depicted from the conceptual framework teachers must be aware of the reading comprehension challenge, plan strategically the reading comprehension lessons, teach reading comprehension strategies, be able to self-monitor, self-evaluate their own teaching and judge themselves if they have the capabilities to teach or not. Where there are gaps they should seek for assistance before they start again from phase 1.

It takes time for them to gain considerable experience and to establish their own image among colleagues in school before they could feel confident enough to teach reading comprehension in schools. Knowing reading comprehension strategies is not sufficient; what is important is to know how and when to use the particular

strategies to assist learners to construct meaning from the written text. It may be a good idea to implement the strategies in stages, starting with explanation, modelling and application of the strategies. It is therefore important for the teachers to follow the steps as shown in conceptual framework to understand that the process of teaching reading comprehension is a cyclic process.

7. The extent to which policies address the teaching of reading comprehension

During the interviews and focus group discussions, the participating teachers complained about issues such as the lack of teachers' guides for teaching reading comprehension in the Tshivenda language. Heugh (2005) supports the idea that the DoE should provide the teaching guides in Tshivenda when stating that while a teachers' handbook for teaching reading in English has been developed and widely distributed across South African schools, the DoE has still not published a single handbook for teaching reading in any other African language. The absence of Tshivenda guidelines for the teachers may be a contributory factor to the low level of teaching reading comprehension in schools.

The participating teachers of my case study may not understand the content of the guidelines as it is written in English which is not their home language of the teachers. Having to read the guidelines that are written in English may create problems. It is therefore imperative that the DoE provide guidelines of teaching reading comprehension in Tshivenda.

All six teachers from schools A, B and C confirmed that the guidelines for teaching reading in early grades had been provided, but only in English. They indicated that there was a need to develop a textbook of teaching reading comprehension in African languages and especially in Tshivenda, since teachers currently had to rely on the English version. The Limpopo department of education should provide Tshivenda teachers handbook for teaching reading comprehension.

7.1 Lack of trained teachers to teach reading comprehension

Teacher training has a strong influence on practice. Teachers are the key role players in teaching learners to read and comprehend the text because they spent most of their time with the learners. When any components have to be taught to learners, teacher training is essential, as teachers are the implementers of a curriculum.

Throughout the interviews and focus group discussions teachers indicated that teaching reading comprehension was a challenge and that they needed more information to teach learners to read and understand. Teacher training should focus more on the aspects of reading comprehension and strengthen their content focus in the literacy module in order to involve the teaching of reading comprehension so that students' teachers should have benefitted by the time they complete their programme. Long and Zimmerman (2008) confirmed this, when they say "South Africa is still behind in introducing appropriate reading skills and [*comprehension*] strategies in different grades when compared with other countries." Interactive self-regulatory learning is best for achieving the good results that we all hope for and for avoiding the mistakes of the past.

7.2 Unavailability of books and readers

My research findings revealed that there were not enough readers in schools. The teachers taught reading from a chalkboard and few readers were available in the classes. The lack of a variety of reading texts and readers may be a contributory factor in low reading comprehension.

Teachers 1 and 2 of school A indicated during the interviews that they did not have enough readers for the learners and that they relied on a photocopier. There is a great difference between what happens on the ground and what the literature says. While the curriculum emphasises teaching reading comprehension, there are still schools with no readers for the learners. The DoE still does not provide books and readers for the learners.

During my classroom observations there were few readers for the learners. In School A there were no readers for the learners at all as the teachers rely on the photocopier machine to produce reading materials. The absence of readers forced the teachers to use the workbooks as readers. The workbook cannot replace the reader because it is for the learners and cannot be used as a reader. This situation may discourage the teachers, causing them to feel demotivated and consequently give less time to reading comprehension. There was no evidence of graded level books to use during guided reading. This was not the case in the schools of my case study, for example, school A did not have readers for the learners yet the teacher continued teaching. On the other hand, learners may develop a low morale about reading because there is no variety of books available to encourage them to read; learners may not develop a love for reading and their reading vocabulary may not develop. Most importantly, this situation could hamper the development of comprehension among learners. This situation may

fail to support both teachers and learners and ultimately learners would not reach their full potential. In addition, books written in African languages are scarce so learners do not have the opportunity to read in their home language.

7.3. *Contradiction between theory and practice of teaching reading comprehension*

During the individual interviews and focus group discussions, the teachers indicated that they understood reading comprehension and they regarded it as important to the learners in schools and in their daily lives. The classroom observations, however, indicate that the teachers were not clear about how to teach reading comprehension and which strategies to use when teaching. According to the data from all the instruments, the teachers hardly indicated any strategy, for example, teacher 3 from School B said that she told learners to make a summary. This is an indication that participating teachers of my case study seem not aware that reading comprehension strategies must be taught for the learners to understand the text.

8. Conclusion

Teachers have a pivotal role in helping learners to acquire these skills and preparing them for independent learning.

As indicated by teachers in theme 3 as they highlighted the challenges. This may be true of reading comprehension. Hodge (2009:1) states: When you are teaching an elementary student [learner] how to read, it can be tough to get them to really follow through and understand what they are reading. They might be able to read the material, but then they might not be able to tell you what they were reading about. Part of the challenge of being an elementary school teacher is trying to get students to really understand what is being read. Capacity building for teachers is therefore needed, with appropriate guidelines on how to teach reading comprehension. It is clear that comprehension is a problem-solving process. That is why it is critical for teachers to have a substantial knowledge of the strategies and how best to teach and help learners to acquire and use strategies appropriately. Indeed, teachers need to respond to the individual learners' needs and provide various reading experiences to foster their ability to use strategies correctly and progress to self-regulatory learning.

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