

Exploring Reading Comprehension Challenges in the Setswana Home Language Classroom: Learners' and Teachers' Perspectives



Paulinah M. Mahoro ¹ , Mary M. Makgato ¹  & Tilla Olifant ¹ 

¹ Department of Applied Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Learners' poor reading comprehension levels have plunged South Africa into a reading crisis. Despite the government's initiatives to improve learners' reading levels and redress their lack of reading comprehension skills, it is still a serious problem, particularly in rural areas. It is for this reason, that this study investigated the teachers' and learners' perspectives on learners' reading comprehension challenges in the Grade 10 Setswana Home Language classroom in two high schools in the North-West Province of South Africa. Through a qualitative approach informed by a case study design involving semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews, four Grade 10 Setswana home language teachers and 39 Grade 10 learners were selected to participate in this study using purposive sampling. The thematic analysis revealed several key challenges: poor foundational reading skills, lack of Setswana reading materials, negative attitudes towards Setswana, limited reading practice outside of school, and difficulties with complex language features like idioms and proverbs. The teachers emphasized systemic issues such as inadequate primary school preparation, while learners focused on specific linguistic difficulties. The findings highlight a critical need for earlier literacy interventions, increased investment in Setswana reading resources, efforts to promote positive attitudes towards African languages in education, and strategies to engage parents and communities in supporting Setswana literacy development. This research contributes to the broader discourse on language-in-education in multilingual contexts and emphasizes the importance of addressing reading comprehension challenges to improve academic outcomes and support learners' cognitive development and cultural identity.

Correspondence

Tilla Olifant

Email: OlifantFM@tut.ac.za

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INTRODUCTION

Reading for comprehension is one of the most important skills that learners need to constantly improve to participate in the world of written texts as a means of sharing knowledge and participating in dialogues.¹ It is one of the four language skills that learners must develop during their first years of formal education to lay the foundation for higher schooling grades. For example, upon entering high school (Grades 8 to 12),

¹ Nonhlanhla Kunene, "Exploring Grade 12 Rural Learners' Conception of Reading for Comprehension and Their Approach When Reading English Literature in Acornhoek Schools, Mpumalanga Province" (2018).

it is presumed that a learner has already attained a certain level of reading competency because according to Nel, Nel and Hugo, the development of reading skills is achieved in the first years of formal education (Grades R-7).²

The importance of language learning, which includes reading literacy, is highlighted in the language learning area statement which states that all learners should learn their home language and at least one additional official language in their first years of formal education, in order to develop proficiency in their additional language. In this way, the home language is preserved and developed. The DoE also states that language learning in Grades 10-12 includes “all official languages in South Africa, namely Setswana, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi (Sesotho sa Leboa), Sesotho, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga. Non-official languages can also be taught at different levels”.³ In most South African schools, the medium of instruction is English, which is not a home language for many learners. “As a result, many perform poorly academically.”⁴

South Africa faces many challenges in promoting literacy. For example, there are few schools with adequate libraries. On the other side, many homes do not have books written in indigenous languages, which exacerbates the chances for learners to read in their native languages. Some classrooms do not have books, and even those with sets of readers often have them at the wrong level. The low reading levels of learners are one of the factors contributing to poor matriculation results. According to the international standard university students, even those studying “the languages and the arts”, are not proficient readers.⁵

The rationale for this study stems from the persistent literacy crisis in South Africa, where a large proportion of learners struggle to read for meaning in their home languages. According to the “Progress in International Reading Literacy Study” (PIRLS), in South Africa, 78% of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, with even higher percentages for African languages like Setswana.⁶ This crisis has far-reaching implications for learners' academic performance in higher grades, across subjects and their future employment prospects.

As a result, the study aims to identify the specific challenges faced by Grade 10 Setswana Home language learners in two high schools selected in the North-West Province and the strategies used by their teachers to address those challenges. Although many studies have examined the development of early literacy in African languages, there is a dearth of research on reading comprehension skills at the high school level, particularly in Setswana.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of Grade 10 Setswana Home Languages learners and their teachers, by providing a detailed understanding of the challenges and strategies in developing advanced reading skills in Setswana. The purpose of this study is to identify and understand the challenges learners face during reading comprehension, as well as the reading strategies that teachers use when teaching reading comprehension to these learners using the following research question:

1. What challenges affect the reading comprehension of Grade 10 Setswana Home Language learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Comprehension

According to Snow, reading comprehension is a process of extracting and constructing meaning by interacting with written language.⁷ This process involves a combination of decoding, vocabulary

² Mirna Nel, Norma Nel, and Anna Hugo, *Learner Support in a Diverse Classroom: A Guide for Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phase Teachers of Language and Mathematics* (Van Schaik Publishers, 2017). 89

³ Department Of Basic Education (DoE), *Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 Schools* (Pretoria: Department of Education, 2002).

⁴ D Sekepe Matjila and Elizabeth J Pretorius, “Bilingual and Biliterate? An Exploratory Study of Grade 8 Reading Skills in Setswana and English,” *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning= Per Linguam: Tydskrif Vir Taalaanleer* 20, no. 1 (2004): 2.

⁵ Republic of South Africa (RSA) Department of Education, *National Reading Strategy* (Pretoria: Sol Plaatje House Government Printer, 2008). 4-5.

⁶ Sarah J Howie et al., *PIRLS Literacy 2016: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016: South African Children's Reading Literacy Achievement* (Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA), 2017).

⁷ Catherine Snow, *Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension* (Rand Corporation, 2002).

knowledge, fluency, and the ability to make inferences and connections.⁸ For Grade 10 learners, proficient reading comprehension is crucial for academic success across subjects and for developing critical thinking skills. The literacy assessments of learners in South Africa are now well documented, both through systematic reports like the Annual National Assessments (ANAs), and international reports like PIRLS from 2006, 2011, and 2016 and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) report on educational quality in Southern and Eastern Africa.⁹

In South Africa, the government spends approximately 15% expenditure on education, making it the most oversized single-line item in the budget. However, even with the country's generous investment in education, literacy levels "remain a serious challenge in improving quality education and contributing to the country's future growth."¹⁰ According to McBride, eight out of ten children in South Africa struggle to read in their home language, English, or any language.¹¹ PIRLS report indicates that the reading literacy level in primary schools in South Africa has shown little to no significant improvement since the last report in 2011.¹²

Pretorius and Klapwijk note that many learners in South Africa struggle with basic comprehension, often focusing on decoding at the expense of meaning-making.¹³ This challenge is particularly pronounced in African languages, where there may be limited exposure to print and fewer opportunities to develop advanced literacy skills.

The Setswana language

Setswana is an indigenous African language that is part of the Sesotho language group. It is one of South Africa's 12 official languages. In South Africa, Setswana is predominately spoken in the Northern Cape, North-West Province, and the central and southern regions of the Free State Province, particularly Thabane Nchu. It is also spoken in some parts of Namibia and Zimbabwe.¹⁴ According to Claymore, 8% of South Africans, or just over 8 million people speak Setswana, making it the sixth most spoken home language in the country. Among the Sotho languages, Setswana was the first to have a written corpus.¹⁵

According to Lekgoko and Winskel, there is a close correlation between the name and the sound of a letter in Setswana.¹⁶ The Setswana language contains some words that have been adapted from other languages, such as English and Afrikaans (South African Dutch), primarily to replace words in the Setswana language that are not found in the original language. Loan words have been changed in accordance with the Setswana phonology. In the Setswana language, the vowels are seven, namely, a, e, ê, i, o, ô, and u.

Indigenous language reading in South Africa

Spaull, Pretorius and Mohohlwane emphasise that the importance of learning to read in the mother language is widely recognized in linguistic research that reading acquisition in African languages is still insufficiently explored.¹⁷ Although many studies have pointed out the poor comprehension levels among learners reading in indigenous South African languages such as Setswana, there have been limited efforts

⁸ Elizabeth J Pretorius and Mirriam Lephala, "Reading Comprehension in High-Poverty Schools: How Should It Be Taught and How Well Does It Work?," *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning = Per Linguam: Tydskrif Vir Taalaanleer* 27, no. 2 (2011): 1–24.

⁹ Elizabeth J Pretorius and Nanda M Klapwijk, "Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?," *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning = Per Linguam: Tydskrif Vir Taalaanleer* 32, no. 1 (2016): 1–20.

¹⁰ Elizabeth J. Pretorius and Nic Spaull, "Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa," *Reading and Writing* 29, no. 7 (September 22, 2016): 1449–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-016-9645-9>.

¹¹ Sindi-Leigh McBride, "Why Are South African Children Struggling to Read Properly," *Africa Is a Country*, 2019.

¹² Progress in International Literacy (PIRLS), "International Report," 2016, Available online on www.pirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/intl.html.

¹³ Pretorius and Klapwijk, "Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?"

¹⁴ Thabane D Ranamane, "The Contribution of the Missionaries to the Development of Setswana as a Written Language," *South African Journal of African Languages* 32, no. 1 (2012): 27..

¹⁵ E. Claymore, " Know Your Home: Can You Name the 11 Languages of South Africa? ," South Africa. Info and MediaClubSouthAfrica.com, 2014, <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/lifestyle/south-africans-abroad/know-your-home-the-languages-of-south-africa/>.

¹⁶ Olemme Lekgoko and Heather Winskel, "Learning to Read Setswana and English: Cross-Language Transference of Letter Knowledge, Phonological Awareness and Word Reading Skills," *Perspectives in Education* 26, no. 4 (2008): 57–73.

¹⁷ Nicholas Spaull, Elizabeth Pretorius, and Nompumelelo Mohohlwane, "Investigating the Comprehension Iceberg: Developing Empirical Benchmarks for Early-Grade Reading in Agglutinating African Languages," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

made to uncover the underlying factors contributing to this 'comprehension iceberg.' It thus appears that even though many learners use an indigenous South African language as their home language, learners do not use their home language as the language of learning and teaching, and consequently learning challenges, or specifically reading challenges emerge.

Howie *et al.*, assert that South African learners cannot read well enough to succeed in a wide range of subjects.¹⁸ The reports reveal that about half of the learners in English and Afrikaans achieve the lowest international benchmark. Similarly, the PIRLS report shows that 78% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot comprehend what they read. This percentage is significantly higher for learners tested in indigenous languages. Roughly 93% of Grade 4 learners in Sepedi struggled to understand what they were reading, with similar percentages among isiXhosa (88%), Setswana (90%), Tshivenda (89%), Xitsonga (88%), and isiZulu (87%).¹⁹ According to the PIRLS report learners' reading ability in Sepedi, Setswana, and Tshivenda is the lowest. The reports further show that about half of learners achieve the lowest international benchmark in both English and Afrikaans.²⁰ In contrast, 80% of the learners who write the tests in African languages are unable to read effectively for academic purposes.

In a study conducted by Mzila in 2016, the teaching of reading comprehension in Grade 7 in IsiZulu HL was explored. The research findings revealed that teachers showed no understanding of reading comprehension strategies and did not use teaching strategies in their lessons. The findings also revealed that the learners were not ready to be in Grade 7, and most of them were promoted by the DoE, who knew very well that those learners were not ready to be in the current grade.

Reading in Setswana Home Language

Matjila and Pretorius suggested that reading involves cognitive-linguistic skills and is also influenced by social factors, indicating that it is a complex process utilizing various aspects of knowledge that work together simultaneously.²¹ Decoding and comprehension are the primary elements; decoding involves translating written symbols into spoken language, while comprehension relates to the full understanding of the text.

In a study conducted by Matjila and Pretorius, Grade 8 learners were assessed on their reading skills in their home language, Setswana, as well as English in their LoLT. The results revealed that learners' reading levels were low in both languages. Learners were having difficulty with reading in both their home language and English LoLT. The second finding was that learners read slowly in Setswana, which suggests that learners are not getting enough exposure to books to improve their reading skills.²² These findings align with a study by Mophosho, *et al.*, which sought to assess the reading comprehension performance of Grade 5 Setswana-speaking learners in a rural South African province where English is the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). The study revealed that learners had low reading comprehension scores in both English and Setswana, with overall scores falling below 55%.²³

Given the findings outlined above, it is crucial to conduct research on reading challenges that Setswana home language learners experience, as well as how the teachers perceive these challenges that learners experience. This will assist in better understanding the factors contributing to low reading proficiency in both home languages and English as the LoLT, and to develop strategies that can enhance reading skills and overall literacy among learners.

Challenges Affecting Learners' Reading Comprehension

There are several factors that contribute to learners' poor reading comprehension in South Africa. Spaul and Pretorius identified systemic issues such as inadequate teacher training, lack of resources, and limited

¹⁸ S Howie *et al.*, "Changes and Development in Schooling and Classroom Conditions PIRLS 2006-PIRLS 2016 and Its Effect on Student Reading Performance," in *ECER Conference*, 2017.

¹⁹ Progress in International Literacy (PIRLS), "International Report."

²⁰ Progress in International Literacy (PIRLS), "International Report."

²¹ Matjila and Pretorius, "Bilingual and Biliterate? An Exploratory Study of Grade 8 Reading Skills in Setswana and English."

²² Matjila and Pretorius, "Bilingual and Biliterate? An Exploratory Study of Grade 8 Reading Skills in Setswana and English."

²³ Lesedi L Sebole, Katijah Khoza-Shangase, and Munyane Mophosho, "The Reading Comprehension of Grade 5 Setswana-Speaking Learners in Rural Schools in South Africa: Does Home Language Matter?," *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning = Per Linguam: Tydskrif Vir Taalaanleer* 35, no. 3 (2019): 59–73.

exposure to print materials in African languages.²⁴ At the learner level, challenges include weak foundational skills, limited vocabulary, and difficulty with higher-order comprehension strategies. Phala and Hugo highlight the impact of socioeconomic factors, noting that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack access to books and other literacy resources at home. This can result in limited exposure to complex texts and fewer opportunities to practice reading skills outside of school.²⁵ Language attitudes also play an essential role in reading comprehension development. Naidoo, Reddy and Dorasamy found that negative attitudes towards African languages as mediums of instruction can demotivate learners and hinder their engagement with texts in these languages.²⁶

Learners' Perspective on Setswana Home Language Reading and Associated Challenges:

Research reveals that Setswana home language learners face multiple challenges in reading.²⁷ A significant issue is the scarcity of engaging, age-appropriate Setswana literature, which negatively impacts reading motivation.²⁸ Learners often struggle with advanced vocabulary and idiomatic expressions not commonly used in everyday speech, creating a gap between conversational and literary Setswana.²⁹ Research by Ketsitlile and Commeyras highlights how the prevalence of English in media and technology affects learners' Setswana reading skills, as they find it difficult to switch between language modes.³⁰ Research has found that many learners perceive their Setswana reading abilities as inferior to their English skills, leading to reduced confidence in Setswana reading tasks. Additionally, Phajane noted that learners often struggle with the orthographic complexity of Setswana, particularly with longer words and less common letter combinations.³¹ Despite these challenges, many learners recognize the importance of maintaining and improving their Setswana reading skills for cultural preservation and personal development.

Setswana Home Language Teachers' Perspectives on Learners' Reading Challenges:

Setswana Home Language Teachers' perspectives reveal several recurring themes regarding learners' reading challenges. Tsholetso found that teachers are concerned about the declining exposure to rich Setswana language environments outside the classroom, which affects learners' vocabulary development and reading fluency.³² Mokibelo reported that teachers observe students struggling with comprehending complex texts, particularly those featuring traditional proverbs, idioms, and cultural references. This difficulty often stems from a gap between learners' everyday language use and the more formal Setswana found in literature.³³ Malimabe highlighted teachers' concerns about the influence of English and code-switching habits on developing strong Setswana reading skills.³⁴ Teachers express frustration with the limited time allocated to Setswana instruction in the curriculum, which they feel is insufficient for developing robust reading abilities. Despite these challenges, many teachers are implementing innovative strategies to enhance learners' engagement with Setswana texts, including incorporating multimedia

²⁴ Nic Spaull and Elizabeth Pretorius, "Still Falling at the First Hurdle: Examining Early Grade Reading in South Africa," *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality: A Study of the Present Situation and Future Possibilities*, 2019, 147–68.

²⁵ Thembi Phala and Anna Johanna Hugo, "Reading Problems in the Intermediate Phase: Grade 4 Teachers' Opinions," *Journal for Language Teaching* 50, no. 2 (2016): 167–83.

²⁶ Usha Naidoo, Karunanidhi Reddy, and Nirmala Dorasamy, "Reading Literacy in Primary Schools in South Africa: Educator Perspectives on Factors Affecting Reading Literacy and Strategies for Improvement," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2014): 155–67.

²⁷ M.J. Letshwene, "Key Generic Curriculum Factors Affecting Grade 12 Learners' Performance. A Multiple Case Study of South African Secondary Schools" (University of Johannesburg, 2019); L. E. Ketsitlile and M. Commeyras, "Exploring and Describing the Effects of Language Policy in the Botswana Education System.," *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 28, no. 1 (2014): 106–21.

²⁸ Eureka Mokibelo, "Implementation of the Language-in-Education Policy and Achieving Education for All Goals in Botswana Primary Schools.," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 4, no. 1 (2016): 157–64.

²⁹ R. Letsholo, "Language Attitudes and Identity Construction in Botswana," in *Language and Social Change in Botswana*, ed. R. Letsholo and T. Matlhwana (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 73–94.

³⁰ Ketsitlile and Commeyras, "Exploring and Describing the Effects of Language Policy in the Botswana Education System."

³¹ Masello Hellen Phajane, "Methods Used for Reading Instruction at Primary Schools in the Bojanala Districts of North West Province." (2012).

³² T. Tsholetso, "Challenges Faced by Teachers in the Teaching of Reading in Selected Primary Schools in Gaborone, Botswana. University of Botswana.," 2013.

³³ Eureka Mokibelo, "Language in Education Policy, Issues and Karl Marx's Views in Education," *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management* 6, no. 4 (2018): 292–98.

³⁴ R. M. Malimabe, "Assessment of Setswana and English Reading Skills of Standard Four Pupils in Botswana Primary Schools," . . . *Marang: Journal of Language and Literature* 26 (2015): 108–21.

resources and culturally relevant materials to close the gap between traditional and modern language use.³⁵ Within the context of the literature review, the reading comprehension challenges in the Setswana home language classroom are highlighted as a range of complex, interrelated issues that impact both learners and teachers. While Setswana remains an integral part of learners' cultural and linguistic identity, factors such as limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and socio-economic barriers compound the difficulties learners face in developing strong reading skills. The gap between conversational and literary Setswana, coupled with the influence of English and limited instructional time, further complicates comprehension for many learners. Teachers' perspectives echo these concerns, yet they also point to a willingness to innovate and adapt teaching strategies to better support learners, underscoring the need for more comprehensive research into reading instruction in Setswana.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

In this study, a qualitative approach was employed, with a case study design to explore the reading comprehension challenges of the Grade 10 Setswana Home Language learners. A qualitative approach was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices. Fullwood et.al., state that a search design is “the logic that relates the data to be collected and the conclusions to be drawn to the initial questions of the study.”³⁶ On the other hand, Yin defines a case study as “a research strategy that can be used to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena in real-life situations.”³⁷ For this reason, the case study design enabled a focused examination of the phenomenon within its real-life context, providing rich, detailed data about the specific experiences of Grade 10 Setswana Home Language learners and their teachers.

Sampling and Sampling Process

Sample population refers to a subset of the study's target population that the researcher intends to study or treat since the full population cannot be studied.³⁸ As such, two high schools from Makapanstad Central Circuit in the North-West province of South Africa were sampled for this study. Acharya *et al.* and Obilor explain a sample population as a sample of the population that is selected to represent a larger population.³⁹ Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide relevant insights in an attempt to address the research questions. Taherdoost defines purposive sampling as a sampling technique in which the researcher chooses only those subjects who in their opinion believe that they will provide necessary data “to assist the researcher in answering the research questions.”⁴⁰ In concurrence with this view, the sample consisted of:

- 4 Grade 10 Setswana Home Language teachers (2 from each school)
- 39 Grade 10 Setswana Home Language learners (19 from one school and 20 from the other)

The teachers were selected based on their experience teaching Setswana at the Grade 10 level, whereas the in-tact Grade 10 Setswana HL learners from each school were selected to serve as samples to represent the reading comprehension challenges experienced within the Grade 10 Setswana HL classes.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with the four Setswana teachers, that is two teachers from each school who have experience and are currently teaching Grade 10 Setswana Home Language. Nieuwenhuis defines an interview as a two-way conversation between a researcher and a

³⁵ Malimabe, “Assessment of Setswana and English Reading Skills of Standard Four Pupils in Botswana Primary Schools.”

³⁶ Roger Fullwood, Jennifer Rowley, and Jacqueline McLean, “Exploring the Factors That Influence Knowledge Sharing between Academics,” *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43, no. 8 (2019): 1051–63.

³⁷ Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

³⁸ Umair Majid, “Research Fundamentals: Study Design, Population, and Sample Size,” *Undergraduate Research in Natural and Clinical Science and Technology Journal* 2 (2018): 1–7.

³⁹ Anita S Acharya et al., “Sampling: Why and How of It,” *Indian Journal of Medical Specialties* 4, no. 2 (2013): 330–33; Ezezi Isaac Obilor, “Convenience and Purposive Sampling Techniques: Are They the Same,” *International Journal of Innovative Social & Science Education Research* 11, no. 1 (2023): 1–7.

⁴⁰ Hamed Taherdoost, “Sampling Methods in Research Methodology; How to Choose a Sampling Technique for Research,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Management (IJARM)* 5 (2016).

participant.⁴¹ The researcher asks the participant questions to gather data and learn more about the participant's views, beliefs, ideas, opinions and behaviours. Aligned with this, the interviews used in this study allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives on learners' reading comprehension challenges. The semi-structured format provided flexibility to probe further on key issues while ensuring consistency across interviews.

The researcher facilitated a total of six focus group interviews, with three from each school, involving 39 Grade 10 Setswana Home Language learners. In School 1, 19 of the 20 sampled learners participated, as one did not return their consent form, while in School 2, all 20 learners took part. In School 1, the focus groups consisted of five participants in the first group, six in the second, and eight in the third. In School 2, the groups were made up of five participants in the first, six in the second, and nine in the third.

Both semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews took place on the school premises after school, at times prearranged with the participants and were captured using a voice recorder.

Data Analysis Process

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from both the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The process followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke which are as follows: 1) Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; 2) Generating initial codes; 3) Searching for themes; 4) Reviewing and refining themes; 5) Defining and naming themes and 6) Producing the report.⁴² This data analysis approach allowed for the identification of key patterns and themes across the dataset, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Ethical Clearance Process

Ethical approval with number REC Ref #: REC/2022/02/009 for this study was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the Tshwane University of Technology. Permission was also granted by the North-West Department of Education and the principals of the participating schools. Informed consent was completed by all adult participants, while assent forms and parental consent were secured for learners under the age of 18. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time was emphasized.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with learners revealed several key themes related to reading comprehension challenges and teaching strategies in Grade 10 Setswana Home Language classes.

Theme 1: Poor Foundational Skills

A recurring theme across both teacher and learner interviews was the inadequate foundational reading skills that many Grade 10 learners possess. Teachers expressed frustration with learners' inability to read fluently or comprehend grade-level texts.

One teacher stated:

"They cannot read Setswana, most of them. They cannot write, they can't answer questions, they just don't have a good foundation. I don't know what happens in primary school because they must know how to read when they get here." (Teacher 1, School 1)

This sentiment was echoed by another teacher:

"Reading comprehension among learners is very poor. The problem is that they don't have a foundational background in Setswana because other teachers who teach Setswana did not do Setswana at a higher level; they teach Setswana with experience. That's why Grade 10 learners

⁴¹ J. Nieuwenhuis, "Qualitative Research Designs and Data Gathering Techniques," in *First Steps in Research*, ed. J.G. Maree (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2007), 70–97.

⁴² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

have a problem with answering comprehension tests and even interpreting questions." (Teacher 2, School 2)

Learners also acknowledged their struggles, with one noting:

"Setswana is difficult, ya so other languages like isiSwati because it is my culture." (Learner, School 1, Focus Group 1)

Theme 2: Lack of Reading Materials and Resources

Both teachers and learners highlighted the scarcity of Setswana reading materials as a significant challenge. This lack of resources limits learners' exposure to different texts and hinders their ability to practice reading outside of class.

A teacher explained:

"I don't think they get enough time to read different books because, in most cases, our schools don't have libraries where learners can access books easily, so this becomes a challenge for learners to be able to read and comprehend what they have read." (Teacher 1, School 2)

Learners confirmed this issue:

"At school only because at home there are no Setswana books; it's English and Afrikaans." (Learner, School 2, Focus Group 3).

Theme 3: Negative Attitudes Towards Setswana

Many learners expressed a preference for English over Setswana, viewing the latter as less important or useful. This attitude affects their motivation to engage with Setswana texts and develop their reading skills.

A learner stated:

"No, Setswana is not spoken in town. They use English, so yeah, it's a waste of time to learn Setswana." (Learner, School 2, Focus Group 3)

Teachers also noted this attitude:

"They don't love Setswana, some of them, not all of them." (Teacher 2, School 2)

Theme 4: Limited Reading Practice

Both teachers and learners reported that reading is often limited to classroom activities, with little independent reading occurring outside of school.

A teacher observed:

"If we don't read with them, they don't read. They don't take their language seriously; instead, they are into social media. There they use the English language mostly, so if you don't engage them in this reading, they don't at all." (Teacher 2, School 1)

A learner confirmed:

"I only read at school; at home, I read when I have homework." (Learner, School 2, Focus Group 1)

Theme 5: Challenges with Setswana reading comprehension

Learners identified particular aspects of Setswana that they find challenging, including idioms, proverbs, and complex vocabulary.

One learner explained:

"Pronunciation of words, and understanding. There are some words in Setswana that you don't understand because at home, we don't speak the same Setswana we find at school." (Learner, School 1, Focus Group 2)

Another added:

"For me, mostly, it is with reading comprehension because they would have diane (proverbs) and le maele (idioms), and we don't know them." (Learner, School 2, Focus Group 1)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study reveal a complex interplay of factors manifesting as the reading comprehension challenges of Grade 10 Setswana Home Language learners. The challenges identified align with previous research on literacy development in South African schools, particularly for African languages. The persistent issue of inadequate foundational skills among Grade 10 learners reflects the findings of Spaul and Pretorius, who highlighted the cumulative nature of reading difficulties.⁴³ Early reading problems compound over time and are evident in the struggles reported by both teachers and learners. This suggests a critical need for intervention at earlier grades to prevent the perpetuation of reading challenges in high school, and in the context of this study, specifically Setswana Home Language reading in the Grade 10 classroom. The scarcity of Setswana reading materials, both at school and at home, emerges as a significant barrier to developing effective reading comprehension. This aligns with Cekiso *et al.*'s findings on the impact of limited access to books on reading attitudes and performance.⁴⁴ The lack of a school library in one of the study schools further exacerbates this issue, highlighting the need for increased investment in literacy resources, particularly in African languages. The preference for English over Setswana reported by many learners reflects broader societal attitudes towards African languages in education. This finding resonates with Naidoo, Reddy, and Dorasamy's research on the challenges of using African languages as mediums of instruction.⁴⁵ The perception of Setswana as less valuable or useful than English undermines learners' motivation to engage with Setswana texts, creating a significant barrier to improving Setswana's Home Language reading comprehension.

The reported lack of independent reading outside of school hours is concerning, as extensive reading is crucial for developing fluency and comprehension skills.⁴⁶ The reliance on teacher-led reading in class, while necessary given learners' struggles, may not be sufficient to develop the independent reading skills required for academic success in Grade 10 and beyond. Learners' difficulties with idioms, proverbs, and complex vocabulary highlight the need for explicit instruction in these areas. This aligns with Pretorius and Klapwijk's emphasis on the importance of teaching specific comprehension strategies and expanding learners' vocabulary knowledge.⁴⁷ The individual teacher interviews and learner focus groups reveal both similarities and differences in perspectives on Setswana reading comprehension challenges. Both groups consistently highlight poor foundational skills, a lack of reading materials, and limited reading practice as significant issues. This alignment suggests systemic problems in early language education and resource allocation, as noted by Spaul and Pretorius and Cekiso *et al.*⁴⁸ However, differences emerge in how these challenges are framed and understood. Teachers tend to focus on broader systemic issues, such as inadequate primary school preparation, while learners emphasize specific linguistic challenges like idioms and proverbs. This disparity likely stems from their different roles and experiences within the education system.

Additionally, while teachers report on learners' negative attitudes towards Setswana, some learners openly express these attitudes themselves, possibly due to social desirability bias in teacher interviews or increased comfort among peers, as discussed by Naidoo, Reddy, and Dorasamy.⁴⁹ Teachers also provide more detailed analyses of problems and potential solutions, reflecting their professional training and broader educational perspective, aligning with Matjila and Pretorius's emphasis on the importance of teachers' deep understanding of reading processes.⁵⁰ The differences in responses underscore the value of gathering data from multiple stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue, as

⁴³ Spaul and Pretorius, "Still Falling at the First Hurdle: Examining Early Grade Reading in South Africa."

⁴⁴ Madoda Cekiso et al., "Factors Affecting Grade 6 Learners' Reading Performance in a Rural School in Maluti, South Africa," *Reading & Writing-Journal of the Reading Association of South Africa* 13, no. 1 (2022): 327.

⁴⁵ Naidoo, Reddy, and Dorasamy, "Reading Literacy in Primary Schools in South Africa: Educator Perspectives on Factors Affecting Reading Literacy and Strategies for Improvement."

⁴⁶ Kushmeeta Chettri and S K Rout, "Reading Habits-An Overview," *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 14, no. 6 (2013): 13-17.

⁴⁷ Pretorius and Klapwijk, "Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?"

⁴⁸ Spaul and Pretorius, "Still Falling at the First Hurdle: Examining Early Grade Reading in South Africa"; Cekiso et al., "Factors Affecting Grade 6 Learners' Reading Performance in a Rural School in Maluti, South Africa."

⁴⁹ Naidoo, Reddy, and Dorasamy, "Reading Literacy in Primary Schools in South Africa: Educator Perspectives on Factors Affecting Reading Literacy and Strategies for Improvement."

⁵⁰ Matjila and Pretorius, "Bilingual and Biliterate? An Exploratory Study of Grade 8 Reading Skills in Setswana and English."

recommended by Phala and Hugo.⁵¹ This multi-perspective approach provides a more nuanced view of the challenges facing Setswana reading comprehension and potential pathways for improvement.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The study's findings have several important implications for policy, practice, and future research. The dearth of reading material in Setswana is a significant barrier that needs to be addressed at both school and policy levels. Increased investment in the development and distribution of high-quality, engaging Setswana texts is crucial. This aligns with Van Staden and Bosker's findings on the importance of access to diverse reading materials for literacy development.⁵²

Efforts are needed to promote positive attitudes towards Setswana and other African languages among learners, parents, and the broader community. This could include awareness campaigns about the cognitive and cultural benefits of multilingualism and the importance of mother-tongue education. Naidoo, Reddy, and Dorasamy's study emphasises how language attitudes affect learning outcomes.⁵³

Given the limited reading practice outside of school, there is a need to engage parents and communities in supporting Setswana's literacy development. This could involve parent education programs and community reading initiatives, as suggested by Phala and Hugo's research on the impact of home environments on reading skills.⁵⁴

The persistent foundational skills gaps among Grade 10 learners highlight the need for more effective early literacy interventions. This could include targeted support programs in earlier grades and better transition strategies between primary and high school. Spaull and Pretorius's work emphasizes the critical nature of early reading development for long-term academic success.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

This study has provided learner and teacher insights into the challenges affecting reading comprehension among Grade 10 Setswana Home Language learners. The findings reveal several Setswana Home Language reading challenges including poor foundational skills, lack of resources, negative language attitudes, and limited reading practice. The study highlights the urgent need for a multi-faceted approach to improving Setswana's reading comprehension at the high school level. This approach should include curriculum enhancements, increased access to Setswana reading materials, and efforts to promote positive attitudes towards African languages in education. While focused on Setswana, many of the findings are likely applicable to other African languages in the education system in South Africa. As such, this research contributes to the broader conversation about language use in education policies and practices in multilingual contexts. Addressing the reading comprehension challenges identified in this study is crucial not only for improving academic outcomes in Setswana Home Language classes but also for supporting learners' overall cognitive development and cultural identity. By strengthening Setswana reading comprehension, we can empower learners to engage more deeply with their linguistic and cultural heritage while also developing the critical thinking skills necessary for success in an increasingly complex world.

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⁵¹ Thembi A Phala and Anna Hugo, "Difficulties in Teaching Grade 3 Learners with Reading Problems in Full-Service Schools in South Africa," *African Journal of Disability (Online)* 11 (2022): 1–9.

⁵² Surette Van Staden and Roel Bosker, "Factors That Affect South African Reading Literacy Achievement: Evidence from PrePIRLS 2011," *South African Journal of Education* 34, no. 3 (2014): 1–9.

⁵³ Naidoo, Reddy, and Dorasamy, "Reading Literacy in Primary Schools in South Africa: Educator Perspectives on Factors Affecting Reading Literacy and Strategies for Improvement."

⁵⁴ Phala and Hugo, "Reading Problems in the Intermediate Phase: Grade 4 Teachers' Opinions."

⁵⁵ Spaull and Pretorius, "Still Falling at the First Hurdle: Examining Early Grade Reading in South Africa."

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Paulinah M. Mahoro is a student, Department of Applied Languages, Tshwane University of Technology, South Campus, Pretoria, Gauteng Province, South Africa.

Mary M. Makgato is a Lecturer, Department of Applied Languages, Tshwane University of Technology, North Campus, Pretoria, Gauteng Province, South Africa.

Tilla Olifant is a Lecturer, Department of Applied Languages, Tshwane University of Technology, South Campus, Pretoria, Gauteng Province, South Africa.