

# Challenges faced by High School Learners in English First Additional Language Reading Comprehension in the Soshanguve Township, South Africa



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the challenges faced by Grade 10 learners in English First Additional Language (EFAL) reading comprehension at a high school in Soshanguve Township, South Africa. Using a quantitative approach with a questionnaire survey design, the research aimed to identify specific challenges experienced by learners in comprehending English texts. A sample of a 105 Grade 10 EFAL learners participated in the study. Data was collected through a learner questionnaire using a Likert scale and analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that a significant proportion of learners struggled with various aspects of reading comprehension, including understanding complex sentences, identifying main ideas, dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary, and comprehending cultural references. Challenges were also noted in drawing inferences, interpreting figurative language, and synthesizing information from different parts of a text. The study highlighted the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges, including explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies, vocabulary development, and exposure to diverse texts. The research contributes to the understanding of reading comprehension challenges in the South African EFAL context and provides insight for stakeholders within the education fraternity as to how to develop effective strategies for improving learners' reading comprehension skills.

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a critical skill that enables learners to engage with texts, acquire knowledge, and achieve academic success. However, Grade 10 learners in English First Additional Language (EFAL) classrooms in South African high schools face significant challenges in developing proficient reading comprehension abilities.<sup>1</sup> These challenges stem from a complex interplay of linguistic, socio-economic, and educational factors that shape the learning environment and impact learners' ability to comprehend texts effectively.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tilla Olifant et al., "Investigating Reading Comprehension Strategies Used by Teachers during English First Additional Language Reading Instruction," *Journal for Language Teaching* 54, no. 2 (March 29, 2021): 71–93, <https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v54i2.4>.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth J Pretorius and Nic Spaul, "Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa," *Reading and Writing* 29 (2016): 1449–71.

The legacy of apartheid and ongoing inequalities in South Africa have resulted in an education system where many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds lack access to quality instruction and resources, further exacerbating their reading and comprehension challenges.<sup>3</sup> Factors contributing to these challenges include limited exposure to reading materials, inadequate foundational literacy skills, and the challenges associated with learning a second or additional language.<sup>4</sup> These factors are likely to have a negative impact on the learners' reading comprehension which is the foundation for learning.

According to Kirby, reading comprehension is a process whereby the text is well understood, and it is a prerequisite for meaningful reading.<sup>5</sup> Van der Berg declared that despite various interventions and programs introduced in South African schools, such as the Annual National Assessment (ANA), the situation has not significantly improved.<sup>6</sup> The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) indicated that South African learners were three grades behind in terms of their reading skills. This is a cause for concern since the mastery of the reading skill plays an important role in the learning process.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of reading comprehension extends beyond academics. In today's information-driven society, the ability to comprehend and critically evaluate written information is crucial for making informed decisions, participating in civic life, and succeeding in the workforce.<sup>8</sup> Research consistently demonstrates a strong correlation between reading comprehension and overall academic achievement.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite the well-established significance of reading comprehension, many learners in South Africa continue to face challenges with this critical skill. For example, the PIRLS 2016 revealed that 78% of South African Grade 4 learners did not reach the lowest international benchmark for reading comprehension.<sup>10</sup> This alarming statistic generated the following question which this study sought to answer:

- What reading challenges do Grade 10 learners face in English First Additional Language reading comprehension?

The findings are subsequently presented in this article.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Addressing the reading comprehension challenges faced by Grade 10 learners in South Africa requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique linguistic, socio-economic, and educational context of the country. This includes providing learners with access to diverse and engaging reading materials, implementing effective instructional strategies, and supporting teachers in developing their capacity to teach reading comprehension skills.<sup>11</sup> By understanding the factors that contribute to these challenges and implementing evidence-based interventions, teachers and policymakers can work towards improving reading comprehension outcomes for all learners in South Africa, ultimately promoting equity and quality in education.

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process influenced by various internal and external factors. Internal factors, such as cognitive abilities, play a significant role in how learners understand and interpret text. Key cognitive abilities include decoding, fluency, and comprehension monitoring, all crucial for effective reading comprehension.<sup>12</sup> Decoding involves interpreting written

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Spaul, "South Africa's Education Crisis: The Quality of Education in South Africa 1994-2011," *Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1–65.

<sup>4</sup> Pretorius and Spaul, "Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa."

<sup>5</sup> John R Kirby, "Reading Comprehension: Its Nature and Development," *Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development*, no. August (2007): 1–8.

<sup>6</sup> Servaas Van der Berg, "What the Annual National Assessments Can Tell Us about Learning Deficits over the Education System and the School Career," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 5, no. 2 (2015): 28–43.

<sup>7</sup> Progress in International Literacy (PIRLS), "International Report," 2016.

<sup>8</sup> W. Grabe and F.L. Stoller, *Teaching and Researching Reading*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Piper, Stephanie Simmons Zuilkowski, and Abel Mugenda, "Improving Reading Outcomes in Kenya: First-Year Effects of the PRIMR Initiative," *International Journal of Educational Development* 37 (2014): 11–21.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah J Howie et al., "PIRLS Literacy 2016: South African Highlights Report (Grade 4)" (Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA), 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Pretorius and Spaul, "Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa."

<sup>12</sup> Sarita Swanepoel, "The Assessment of the Quality of Science Education Textbooks: Conceptual Framework and Instruments for Analysis" (University of South Africa, 2010).

language, fluency ensures quick and accurate reading, and comprehension monitoring helps verify understanding of the text.

Vocabulary and semantic processing are equally important. Learners need to grasp word meanings and their contextual usage to comprehend texts effectively. The National Reading Panel highlights vocabulary instruction as a strong predictor of reading comprehension.<sup>13</sup> Visualization, or forming mental images from text, also aids comprehension by providing meaning through mental imagery.<sup>14</sup>

Working memory, which involves retaining and updating information, facilitates integrating new information with prior knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, reasoning and inference—the ability to connect ideas and extract further information—are vital for comprehension.<sup>16</sup> Environmental, instructional, and biological factors can also impact comprehension, with challenges often arising from ineffective word recognition methods.<sup>17</sup>

External factors significantly influence reading comprehension as well. The learning environment is crucial, with a calm and controlled setting enhancing comprehension, while a chaotic environment hampers it.<sup>18</sup> Teachers' instructional methods also play a pivotal role; effective strategies like questioning, reading aloud, and group work can improve comprehension, whereas ineffective methods can hinder it.<sup>19</sup>

The availability and quality of learning materials further influence comprehension. Access to diverse reading materials improves comprehension skills, while limited access restricts exposure and hinders development.<sup>20</sup> Societal and cultural factors also affect attitudes toward reading and motivation, with societies that value literacy encouraging better reading habits.<sup>21</sup>

Developing reading comprehension involves various strategies. Reading aloud, either individually or in groups, supports comprehension by fostering engagement with the text.<sup>22</sup> However, research into effective instructional strategies remains limited, with success in improving comprehension being inconsistent.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, it seems that teachers are encouraged to use diverse methods, including skimming, scanning, and questioning, to enhance comprehension.

Despite efforts, low reading proficiency in South African public schools persists, likely due to insufficient research and development in instructional strategies.<sup>24</sup> This highlights the need for more effective teaching methods to support learners in developing reading comprehension skills.

Teachers' perceptions of reading challenges facing learners are important. This is in view of the fact that teachers play an important role in guiding and scaffolding learners during the reading process. To achieve this important goal of diagnosing learners' reading challenges, some studies focused on teachers' perceptions of learners' use of reading strategies as playing a crucial role in shaping their instructional practices and the support they provide to Grade 10 learners in the EFAL context. These perceptions are influenced by various factors, such as teachers' own understanding of reading comprehension, their experiences with learners, and the assessment data available to them.<sup>25</sup> However, it is important to note that these perceptions may not always align with learners' actual abilities and strategies, leading to potential gaps in instruction and support. Several studies have investigated teachers' perceptions of learners' use of reading strategies in the South African context, revealing a focus on

<sup>13</sup> National Reading Panel, "Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Gary Woolley, "Developing Reading Comprehension: Combining Visual and Verbal Cognitive Processes," *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 33, no. 2 (2010): 108–25.

<sup>15</sup> Marianne Röthlisberger et al., "Executive Functions in 5- to 8-Year Olds: Developmental Changes and Relationship to Academic Achievement," *Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2013): 153–67.

<sup>16</sup> Swanepoel, "The Assessment of the Quality of Science Education Textbooks: Conceptual Framework and Instruments for Analysis."

<sup>17</sup> Emmerentia Landsberg, Deidre Krüger, and Estelle Swart, *Addressing Barriers to Learning: A South African Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Landsberg, Krüger, and Swart, *Addressing Barriers to Learning: A South African Perspective*.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> Pretorius and Klapwijk, "Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?"

<sup>21</sup> Landsberg, Krüger, and Swart, *Addressing Barriers to Learning: A South African Perspective*.

<sup>22</sup> Swanepoel, "The Assessment of the Quality of Science Education Textbooks: Conceptual Framework and Instruments for Analysis."

<sup>23</sup> Chaka Chaka, "An Investigation into the English Reading Comprehension of Grade 10 English First Additional Language Learners at a Senior Secondary School," *Reading & Writing-Journal of the Reading Association of South Africa* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1–7.

<sup>24</sup> Pretorius and Klapwijk, "Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?"

<sup>25</sup> Pretorius and Klapwijk, "Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?"

learners' challenges and deficits. For example, Cekiso found that teachers perceived Grade 10 EFAL learners as lacking basic reading skills, such as decoding and fluency, which hindered their ability to employ higher-order comprehension strategies.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Boakye reported that teachers perceived learners as having limited vocabulary knowledge and poor reading habits, negatively impacting their comprehension.<sup>27</sup> While these perceptions highlight important challenges, they may not fully capture learners' actual abilities and strategies.

In fact, Klapwijk found discrepancies between Grade 10 EFAL teachers' perceptions of learners' reading comprehension strategies and learners' self-reported strategy use.<sup>28</sup> Teachers underestimated learners' use of metacognitive strategies, such as planning and monitoring comprehension, while overestimating their use of lower-level strategies, such as rereading and guessing. These findings underscore the need for more accurate and evidence-based assessments of learners' reading comprehension skills to inform instruction and support.

To address these challenges, researchers have emphasised the importance of formative assessment practices that provide ongoing feedback and support for learners' reading comprehension development. Yapp, De Graaff and Van den Bergh found that the use of formative assessment techniques, such as peer feedback and self-assessment, led to significant improvements in EFAL learners' comprehension performance and metacognitive strategy use.<sup>29</sup> These findings suggest that formative assessment can be a valuable tool for aligning teachers' perceptions with learners' actual abilities and supporting their comprehension development. Moreover, teachers' perceptions of learners' use of reading strategies can also be influenced by their own knowledge and beliefs about reading comprehension. Sibanda found that Grade 10 EFAL teachers' own understanding of reading comprehension and their beliefs about effective instruction shaped their perceptions of learners' strategies and the support they provided.<sup>30</sup> This highlights the need for ongoing professional development and support for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching reading comprehension strategies. For this reason, it appears that teachers' perceptions of learners' use of reading comprehension are influenced by various factors and may not always align with learners' actual abilities or strategy usage, therefore, this issue needs further research.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach informed by a questionnaire survey design, to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by Grade 10 learners in EFAL reading comprehension. The quantitative research approach informed by the questionnaire survey design is pertinent to the setting of this study since it depends on quantifiable, numerical data acquired from a subset of a larger population, therefore enabling the conclusions from this sample to be applied to the larger population.<sup>31</sup>

The questionnaire obtained data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) data analysis programme and provided descriptive quantitative analysis interpretation to present the findings extracted from the questionnaire.

The sample of the study was drawn from the Grade 10 English First Additional Language at a high school in one of the Soshanguve Townships. The research participants consisted of 105 EFAL learners. The criteria for learner participants were as follows: (a) enrolled in Grade 10 at the selected high school, (b) studying EFAL as a subject, and (c) willing to participate in the study.

<sup>26</sup> Madoda Cekiso, "Reading Comprehension and Strategy Awareness of Grade 11 English Second Language Learners," *Reading & Writing-Journal of the Reading Association of South Africa* 3, no. 1 (2012): 1–8.

<sup>27</sup> Naomi A Boakye, "Extensive Reading in a Tertiary Reading Programme: Students' Accounts of Affective and Cognitive Benefits," *Reading & Writing* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1–9.

<sup>28</sup> Nanda M Klapwijk, "EMC2= Comprehension: A Reading Strategy Instruction Framework for All Teachers," *South African Journal of Education* 35, no. 1 (2015): 1–10.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Yapp, Rick de Graaff, and Huub van den Bergh, "Effects of Reading Strategy Instruction in English as a Second Language on Students' Academic Reading Comprehension," *Language Teaching Research* 27, no. 6 (November 11, 2023): 1456–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820985236>.

<sup>30</sup> Jabulani Sibanda, "Investigating the English Vocabulary Needs, Exposure, and Knowledge of IsiXhosa Speaking Learners for Transition from Learning to Read in the Foundation Phase to Reading to Learn in the Intermediate Phase: A Case Study" (Rhodes University, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> K. Maree, *First Steps in Research* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2016).

A learner questionnaire to explore Grade 10 reading comprehension challenges was used to collect data for this study. The questionnaire, which was administered to 105 English FAL learners consisted of closed-ended questions on a Likert scale. Respondents were able to consistently indicate their challenges on a range of reading comprehension-related topics. With its range of response options, which went from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” the Likert scale allowed for more nuanced feedback that considered a variety of viewpoints of learners’ reading comprehension challenges.

**Data Analysis**

The learner questionnaire data was analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages to summarise reading comprehension challenges. Descriptive statistics were justified for summarising learner challenges. These statistical data were displayed visually using tables to reflect the information collected about the learners’ critical reading competence.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations included obtaining ethical clearance from the institution of study, as well as the Department of Basic Education, informed consent was obtained from the learners’ parents and caregivers, the learners themselves, and the participating teachers. Participants were fully informed; pseudonyms were used to help ensure their anonymity and all data was treated confidentially and securely stored.

**PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

Table 1 below offers a detailed breakdown of learners' responses to 15 statements related to reading comprehension challenges. The findings are analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to depict the reading comprehension challenges experienced by learners. The use of a Likert scale-based questionnaire survey enabled the easy quantification and statistical analysis of responses, allowing researchers to identify patterns and trends in learners' reading comprehension challenges.

**Table 1: EFAL learners’ reading comprehension challenges**

ITEM	STRONGLY AGREE		AGREE		DISAGREE		STRONGLY DISAGREE	
	1		2		3		4	
	N=105		N=105		N=105		N=105	
	N	%	n	%	N	%	n	%
1. I find it challenging to understand complex sentences in English texts.	2	1.9	50	47.6	38	36.2	15	14.3
2. Identifying the main idea of a passage is sometimes difficult for me.	11	10.5	45	42.9	33	31.4	16	15.2
3. Vocabulary in English texts poses a challenge to my comprehension.	13	12.4	33	31.4	45	42.9	14	13.3
4. Understanding cultural references in English texts is a challenge for me.	14	13.3	32	30.5	48	45.7	11	10.5
5. I face challenges with drawing inferences from the information provided in texts.	10	9.5	34	32.4	45	42.9	16	15.2
6. Unfamiliar English words often hinder my understanding.	23	21.9	37	35.2	36	34.3	9	8.6
7. I find it challenging to relate the content of English texts to my own experiences.	8	7.6	33	31.4	50	47.6	14	13.3

8. Comprehending English poetry is sometimes difficult for me.	14	13.3	38	36.2	39	37.1	14	13.3
9. Understanding the author's tone and mood in English texts is challenging.	16	15.2	43	41.0	31	29.5	15	14.3
10. I face challenges with interpreting and analysing figurative language in texts.	14	13.3	47	44.8	32	30.5	12	11.4
11. Recognising the author's purpose in English texts is a challenge for me.	12	11.4	32	30.5	48	45.7	13	12.4
12. I find it difficult to synthesise information from different parts of a text.	15	14.3	34	32.4	41	39.0	15	14.3
13. Understanding the context of historical or cultural references in texts is challenging.	19	18.1	33	31.4	43	41.0	10	9.5
14. Complex sentence structures in English texts sometimes confuse me.	18	17.1	43	41.0	30	28.6	14	13.3
15. I find it challenging to stay engaged when reading lengthy passages.	14	13.3	30	28.6	43	41.0	18	17.1

**Key:**  $N$  = total number of learners;  $n$  = subtotal number of learners % = subtotal as percentage of total

Table 1 provides insights into the challenges experienced by learners in comprehending English texts. The table presents a detailed breakdown of various aspects of reading comprehension challenges and the extent to which learners agree or disagree with each statement.

One of the most striking findings from the data is that a significant proportion of learners, ranging from 28.6% to 47.6%, agreed with the majority of the statements related to reading comprehension challenges. This suggests that a considerable number of Grade 10 learners in the study experienced difficulty understanding complex sentences, identifying main ideas, dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary, and comprehending cultural references in English texts.

Looking at the first statement, "I find it challenging to understand complex sentences in English texts," 50 out of 105 learners (47.6%) agree with the statement. This highlights the need for targeted interventions to help learners navigate complex sentence structures. It could be argued that the education system may not be adequately preparing learners to tackle such sentences or that the curriculum may not provide sufficient exposure to complex language.

Moving on to the second statement, "Identifying the main idea of a passage is sometimes difficult for me," 45 out of 105 learners (42.9%) agreed. This suggests that a significant portion of learners face challenges with extracting the central theme or main point from a text. It can be argued that this challenge may stem from a lack of explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies or limited practice in identifying key information.

Interestingly, the data for the third statement, "Vocabulary in English texts poses a challenge to my comprehension," shows a relatively even split between learners who agreed (33 out of 105, 31.4%) and those who disagreed (45 out of 105, 42.9%). This suggests that while vocabulary is a significant challenge for some learners, others may have developed strategies to tackle unfamiliar words or have a stronger vocabulary foundation. It could be argued that the disagreement rate indicates that some learners have benefited from effective vocabulary instruction or have acquired language skills through exposure to English outside the classroom.

The fourth statement, "Understanding cultural references in English texts is a challenge for me," reveals a high percentage of learners who disagreed (48 out of 105, 45.7%) compared to those who agreed (32 out of 105, 30.5%). This could suggest that the cultural references encountered in the texts may be

more familiar to the learners or that they have developed the ability to infer meaning from context. However, it can also be argued that the texts used in the study may not have included a wide range of cultural references, limiting the learners' exposure to diverse cultural content.

When it comes to drawing inferences, as addressed in the fifth statement, "I face challenges with drawing inferences from the information provided in texts," 34 out of 105 learners (32.4%) agreed. This indicates that a significant portion of learners find it difficult to make connections, draw conclusions, or read between the lines. It can be argued that this challenge may be attributed to a lack of critical thinking skills or insufficient practice in analysing texts beyond the literal level.

The sixth statement, "Unfamiliar English words often hinder my understanding," stands out with the highest percentage of learners (23 out of 105, 21.9%) strongly agreeing. This underscores the crucial role of vocabulary in reading comprehension. It can be argued that limited vocabulary knowledge can significantly impede learners' ability to understand and engage with texts and that the education system may not be providing adequate support in vocabulary development.

Moving on to the seventh statement, "I find it challenging to relate the content of English texts to my own experiences," a higher percentage of learners disagreed (50 out of 105, 47.6%). This could indicate that the texts used in the study may be relatable to the learners' lives or that they have developed the ability to make connections between the text and their personal experiences. However, it can also be argued that the learners' agreement with this statement (33 out of 105, 31.4%) suggests that some texts may not be culturally relevant or may not reflect the learners' diverse backgrounds.

The eighth statement, "Comprehending English poetry is sometimes difficult for me," shows a relatively even distribution of responses, with 38 out of 105 learners (36.2%) agreeing and 39 out of 105 learners (37.1%) disagreeing. This suggests that poetry comprehension may be a challenge for some learners, possibly due to the use of figurative language, symbolism, or unconventional sentence structures. It can be argued that the curriculum may not provide sufficient exposure to poetry or may not equip learners with the necessary tools to analyse and interpret poetic language.

The ninth statement, "Understanding the author's tone and mood in English texts is challenging," reveals that 43 out of 105 learners (41.0%) agreed. This highlights the difficulty learners face in interpreting the emotional undertones and attitudes conveyed by the author. It can be argued that this challenge may be due to limited exposure to diverse texts or a lack of explicit instruction in analysing tone and mood.

The tenth statement, "I face challenges with interpreting and analysing figurative language in texts," shows that 47 out of 105 learners (44.8%) agreed. Figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, and personification, can be challenging for learners to decode and interpret. It can be argued that this difficulty may stem from a lack of familiarity with figurative devices or insufficient practice in analysing their meanings.

Moving on to the eleventh statement, "Recognising the author's purpose in English texts is a challenge for me," a higher percentage of learners disagreed (48 out of 105, 45.7%). This suggests that learners may have developed the ability to identify the author's intent or that the texts used in the study had clear and discernible purposes. However, it can also be argued that the agreement rate (32 out of 105, 30.5%) indicates that some learners still face challenges with this skill and may benefit from explicit instruction in analysing authorial purposes.

The twelfth statement, "I find it difficult to synthesise information from different parts of a text," reveals that 34 out of 105 learners (32.4%) agreed. Synthesising information requires learners to integrate and connect ideas from various sections of a text, which can be a complex skill. It can be argued that this difficulty may be attributed to poor reading strategies or limited practice in synthesising information.

The thirteenth statement, "Understanding the context of historical or cultural references in texts is challenging," shows that 33 out of 105 learners (31.4%) agreed. Historical or cultural references may be unfamiliar to learners, especially if they are not part of their own cultural background or if they have limited exposure to diverse texts. It can be argued that the curriculum may not provide sufficient opportunities for learners to engage with texts that include a wide range of historical and cultural references.

The fourteenth statement, "Complex sentence structures in English texts sometimes confuse me," reveals that 43 out of 105 learners (41.0%) agreed. This reinforces the idea that complex sentence

structures pose a significant hurdle for learners, as also evident in the responses to the first statement. It can be argued that the education system may not be adequately preparing learners to navigate complex language or that the curriculum may not provide sufficient practice in understanding and constructing complex sentences.

Finally, the fifteenth statement, “I find it challenging to stay engaged when reading lengthy passages,” shows that 43 out of 105 learners (41.0%) disagreed. This suggests that a significant portion of learners may have developed strategies to maintain focus and engagement while reading longer texts or that the texts used in the study were engaging enough to hold their attention. However, it can also be argued that the rate of agreement (30 out of 105, 28.6%) indicates that some learners face challenges with sustaining attention during extended reading tasks and may benefit from strategies to enhance engagement.

The study has provided insight into the specific challenges faced by Grade 10 learners in English First Additional Language reading comprehension. The data highlighted the need for targeted interventions to address challenges related to complex sentence structures, vocabulary, inferencing, figurative language, and synthesising information.

## DISCUSSION

The quantitative questionnaire results provide insight into the challenges faced by Grade 10 learners in English First Additional Language (EFAL) reading comprehension. Notably, 47.6% of learners struggle with complex sentence structures, aligning with Swanepoel’s finding that sentence structure is crucial for comprehension.<sup>32</sup> Pretorius and Klapwijk suggest that this indicates a systemic inadequacy in preparing learners to navigate difficult language structures.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, 42.9% of learners occasionally struggle to identify the main idea of a text, consistent with Cekiso’s findings that Grade 10 EFAL learners often lack fundamental reading skills.<sup>34</sup> Boakye attributes this challenge to insufficient instruction in reading comprehension strategies.<sup>35</sup>

The survey has revealed a division among learners regarding vocabulary challenges, with 31.4% agreeing and 42.9% disagreeing that vocabulary hinders their comprehension. This finding partially supports Pretorius and Spaull’s emphasis on the importance of vocabulary knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, 45.7% of learners disagreed that they struggled with cultural references in English texts, contradicting research by Makalela that highlights the difficulty of cultural allusions.<sup>37</sup> Sibanda and Baxen suggest this may indicate that learners have developed contextual deduction skills or that the study materials were culturally relevant.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, 34% of learners reported difficulty inferring meaning from texts, which aligns with Klapwijk’s findings of a gap between teachers’ perceptions and learners’ actual higher-order comprehension skills.<sup>39</sup> Yapp *et al.* attributes this challenge to a lack of critical thinking skills or experience in analysing texts beyond the literal level.<sup>40</sup>

Regarding unfamiliar words, 21.9% of learners strongly agreed that unfamiliar vocabulary frequently impedes comprehension, underscoring the importance of vocabulary knowledge as emphasised by Nation.<sup>41</sup> The findings suggest that poor vocabulary knowledge can significantly hinder learners’ understanding of texts. Additionally, 47.6% of learners disagreed that they struggled to relate the content of English texts to their own experiences, a surprising result given the literature on the

<sup>32</sup> Swanepoel, “The Assessment of the Quality of Science Education Textbooks: Conceptual Framework and Instruments for Analysis.”

<sup>33</sup> Pretorius and Klapwijk, “Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?”

<sup>34</sup> Cekiso, “Reading Comprehension and Strategy Awareness of Grade 11 English Second Language Learners.”

<sup>35</sup> Boakye, “Extensive Reading in a Tertiary Reading Programme: Students’ Accounts of Affective and Cognitive Benefits.”

<sup>36</sup> Pretorius and Spaull, “Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa.”

<sup>37</sup> Leketi Makalela, “Moving out of Linguistic Boxes: The Effects of Translanguaging Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms,” *Language and Education* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 200–217, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994524>.

<sup>38</sup> Jabulani Sibanda and Jean Baxen, “Determining ESL Learners’ Vocabulary Needs from a Textbook Corpus: Challenges and Prospects,” *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 34, no. 1 (2016): 57–70.

<sup>39</sup> Klapwijk, “EMC2= Comprehension: A Reading Strategy Instruction Framework for All Teachers.”

<sup>40</sup> Yapp, de Graaff, and van den Bergh, “Effects of Reading Strategy Instruction in English as a Second Language on Students’ Academic Reading Comprehension.”

<sup>41</sup> Ian S P Nation, *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, vol. 10 (Cambridge university press Cambridge, 2001).

importance of culturally relevant materials.<sup>42</sup> This may indicate that the texts used were relatable to the learners' lives, or that they have developed the ability to connect texts to their own experiences.

In terms of poetry comprehension, 36.2% of respondents agreed and 37.1% disagreed on the difficulty of understanding English poetry. This division suggests, as Küçüköğlü observes, that some learners may struggle with metaphorical language and unconventional sentence structures.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, 41% of learners found it difficult to grasp the author's tone and mood, supporting Sibanda's emphasis on the role of teachers in developing learners' abilities to interpret authorial intent.<sup>44</sup> Lastly, 44.8% of learners reported difficulty understanding figurative language, highlighting the need for explicit instruction in interpreting non-literal language.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, 34% of learners faced challenges in synthesizing information from different parts of a text, reinforcing Pretorius and Klapwijk's call for teaching higher-order comprehension skills in EFAL.<sup>46</sup>

These findings emphasise the need for targeted interventions, including explicit instruction in comprehension skills, vocabulary development, and the reading of diverse materials, emphasising the importance of addressing individual differences in learners' reading comprehension abilities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To guide future actions and interventions in EFAL education, the following recommendations are proposed:

**Cultural Bridge Reading Circles:** Establish reading circles that will unite learners from different cultural backgrounds, utilising texts that represent a variety of South African experiences. This approach seeks to enhance cross-cultural understanding and discussions in reading comprehension exercises by incorporating multiple diverse perspectives.

**Comprehension Strategy Modeling Program:** Empower teachers with methodical reading comprehension instruction training; to be able to explicitly demonstrate comprehension strategies, including, among others, think-aloud and text critiquing. This teacher empowerment approach will facilitate professional literacy instruction development and improve teachers' capacity to effectively guide students in reading comprehension.

**Reading Mentorship Programs:** Pair struggling readers with proficient peers to deliver tailored assistance and consistent feedback, that will foster a supportive learning environment and promote reading skill development via peer learning.

**Progressive Text Complexity System:** Develop a systematic approach that will gradually, yet incrementally increase text complexity, through the establishment of benchmarks for vocabulary and sentence structure advancement, as well as monitor and facilitate learners' development in reading comprehension.

The above-outlined targeted recommendations will assist in seeking and establishing a basis for enhancing EFAL reading comprehension outcomes, by reducing the challenges faced by high school learners in English First Additional Language Reading Comprehension, while on the other hand, promoting an inclusive and culturally responsive classroom learning environment.

## CONCLUSION

The study sought to answer the research question: What reading challenges do Grade 10 learners face in English First Additional Language reading comprehension; by setting out to investigate the English First Additional Language reading comprehension challenges for Grade 10 learners. The results underlined important challenges in grasping complicated phrases, spotting major concepts, handling foreign vocabulary, and deciphering cultural references. Learners also battled with synthesising material from

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<sup>42</sup> Jacob Marriote Ngwaru, "Promoting Children's Sustainable Access to Early Schooling in Africa: Reflections on the Roles of Parents in Their Children's Early Childhood Care and Education," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 2014, no. 146 (2014): 61–76.

<sup>43</sup> Hülya Küçüköğlü, "Improving Reading Skills through Effective Reading Strategies," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 70 (2013): 709–14.

<sup>44</sup> Sibanda, "Investigating the English Vocabulary Needs, Exposure, and Knowledge of IsiXhosa Speaking Learners for Transition from Learning to Read in the Foundation Phase to Reading to Learn in the Intermediate Phase: A Case Study."

<sup>45</sup> Woolley, "Developing Reading Comprehension: Combining Visual and Verbal Cognitive Processes."

<sup>46</sup> Pretorius and Klapwijk, "Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?"

several sections of a text, deciphering metaphorical language, and making inferences. Emphasising the importance of focused treatments to solve particular reading comprehension difficulties, these findings give teachers and legislators insightful analysis. According to the study, enhancing EFAL reading comprehension calls for a combined strategy comprising explicit teaching in reading skills, vocabulary development, and exposure to varied texts. Moreover, the results highlight the requirement of differentiated education and the significance of addressing personal variations in learners' competency. By spotting these particular difficulties, the study adds to the corpus of knowledge on EFAL reading comprehension in the South African setting and offers a basis for creating workable plans to improve learners' general academic performance and reading ability.

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