



Evaluating the Challenges Faced by Grade 4 Teachers in Teaching English First Additional Language Reading Comprehension Skills

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers when teaching reading in English First Additional Language (EFAL). Reading is a fundamental skill crucial for academic success; however, numerous obstacles impede effective instruction. Research reveals statistics that indicate that over 80% of South African Grade 4 learners struggle with basic reading skills, as demonstrated by poor performance in international assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). This research is based on Schema Theory, which suggests that prior knowledge plays a significant role in reading comprehension. An interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach were used for this inquiry. A case study design was utilised. Five purposely nominated grade 4 teachers in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, responded to semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth knowledge about teachers' challenges in teaching reading. Thematically analyzed data indicated that inadequate reading proficiency among learners, decreased teacher and learner motivation, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient training in effective reading strategies contributed to teachers' challenges in teaching reading. The authors recommend a Comprehensive Model for teaching reading that combines traditional practices with targeted interventions to meet the diverse needs of learners. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of thorough teacher training to equip educators with the necessary skills to effectively teach reading in EFAL contexts. The study adds to scholarship by revealing key challenges Grade 4 teachers face in teaching EFAL reading comprehension. The findings inform future research, teacher support, and policy development in multilingual education contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill and cornerstone that underpins a learner's academic success and throughout life. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) revealed that a report on the Foundation Phase learners' reading skills indicated that these learners have poor reading skills.¹ More than 80% compared to just 4% of students in 49 other countries, grade 4 students in South Africa failed the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) test, demonstrating a lack of "basic reading skills"

¹ Department of Basic Education, *Report on the Literacy Crisis in South African Primary Schools* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2010).

in their Home Language (HL).² Furthermore, PIRLS results showed a further decrease in the South African learners' reading abilities due to, among other factors, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, which evaluated the proficiency of 400,000 learners worldwide in 2021, placed South Africa last out of 57 nations evaluated. In 2021, 81% of South African learners were illiterate, up from 78% in 2016. Also, the South and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) indicates that about 30% of South African grade 6 learners were “functionally illiterate in English.”³ This indicates an inability to read English as an Additional Language. According to a media statement in 2023, 81% of South African grade 4's could read for meaning in 2021. The South African Human Rights Commission is deeply concerned about South Africa's reading state.⁴ The report also notes that the South African assessment was conducted a year later than most countries.

Teaching reading entails instruction of the five components of reading. These include fluency, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension.⁵ The panel found compelling evidence that instruction to increase reading fluency is critical to comprehension, future reading success, and ease. Fluency plays a role in helping students become motivated readers. It is the ability to read connected text at varying degrees of complexity accurately, appropriately paced, with logical phrasing and prosodic expression, with little conscious attention to the mechanics of reading. Fluency combines rate, accuracy, automaticity, and oral reading prosody, that is, expression, which facilitates the reader's construction of meaning. Many people in South Africa think that after the foundation phase, learners should automatically be able to read for learning.⁶ Contrary, Kepe et.al., provides so much evidence of poor readership in South African schools, which has become a major challenge.⁷

Fesi and Mncube articulated that one of the primary challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers is the poor level of reading proficiency among their students.⁸ This can be attributed to various factors, including inadequate instruction in the earlier grades, insufficient exposure to the additional language, and lack of support at home. Kazakoff, et.al., additionally agree that difficulties in mastering phonics and demonstrating fluent word recognition skills can pose significant obstacles for students, further compounding teachers' challenges.⁹ Another key challenge is the decrease in teacher and learner motivation, which can stem from the perceived difficulty of the task and the lack of progress observed. The issue of overcrowded classrooms and inadequate training on reading strategies also contributes to the challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers in this context.¹⁰ Some studies indicate that students' motivation plays a significant role in their reading comprehension in the First Additional Language.¹¹ A lack of interest in reading English texts and the perceived irrelevance of the topics can greatly hinder learners' progress. Furthermore, learners' background knowledge or lack thereof can also challenge their understanding of the content.¹²

² Martha Magdalena Cronje, “The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Addressing South Africa’s Reading Crisis in View of Sustainable Development,” *Perspectives in Education* 40, no. 3 (2022): 181–96.

³ Hamsa Venkat and Nic Spaul, “What Do We Know about Primary Teachers’ Mathematical Content Knowledge in South Africa? An Analysis of SACMEQ 2007,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 41 (2015): 121–30.

⁴ South African Human Rights Commission., “Digital Rights and Privacy Protection in the Post-Pandemic Era,” *Annual Report*, 2023.

⁵ National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction: Reports of the Subgroups* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National ..., 2000).

⁶ J. W. Foncha, J. A. Abongdia, and M. H. Kepe, “Challenges Encountered by Teachers in the Teaching of Reading in English First Additional Language (EFAL) Classrooms,” *From Words to Ideas: The Role of Literacy in Enhancing Young Children’s Development. British Council South Africa: Cape Town*, 2018.

⁷ Mzukisi Howard Kepe, John Wankah Foncha, and Mamalatswa W Maruma, “Towards Overcoming Poor Readership and Building Reading Culture of in Schools,” *Gender and Behaviour* 15, no. 2 (2017): 8790–97.

⁸ Liziwe Fesi and Vusumzi Mncube, “Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers’ Perspectives,” *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (August 31, 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n3a1849>.

⁹ Elizabeth R Kazakoff, Paul Macaruso, and Pam Hook, “Efficacy of a Blended Learning Approach to Elementary School Reading Instruction for Students Who Are English Learners,” *Educational Technology Research and Development* 66, no. 2 (2018): 429–49.

¹⁰ Fesi and Mncube, “Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers’ Perspectives.”

¹¹ Pei Chia Chua and Nur Ainil Sulaiman, “Reading Comprehension Problems in English Among Malaysian Primary Year 4 ESL Pupils,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 10, no. 2 (June 18, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v10-i2/10101>.

¹² Chua and Sulaiman, “Reading Comprehension Problems in English Among Malaysian Primary Year 4 ESL Pupils.”

The reading process is also a source of difficulties, with learners struggling to comprehend the meaning and nuances of the text. Grade 4 teachers face various challenges in teaching reading as a First Additional Language, including poor student proficiency, decreasing motivation, and inadequate resources and training. A multifaceted approach involving targeted interventions, interactive teaching strategies, and comprehensive teacher training is essential to overcome these challenges. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure that students develop the necessary reading skills to succeed academically and beyond.¹³ This paper therefore, investigates the challenges faced by grade 4 teachers in teaching English First Additional Language (EFAL). This enquiry is guided by the following research questions:-

- What are the challenges faced by grade 4 teachers in teaching English texts to the EFAL?
- How can grade 4 EFAL learners' reading proficiency skills be developed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grade 4 educators face significant challenges when teaching reading as a First Additional Language. The existing literature highlights several factors that significantly affect reading comprehension in the context of learning a First Additional Language. Key issues include learners' lack of motivation and interest when engaging with English texts and insufficient background knowledge. Additionally, learners often face challenges during the reading process itself, making it difficult for them to grasp the meaning and nuances of the text.¹⁴

A study conducted by Herrera examined the challenges of English as a First Additional Language in South African schools.¹⁵ The study found that a decrease in both teacher and learner motivation, as well as overcrowded classrooms and inadequate training on reading strategies, contributed to the difficulties faced by Grade 4 teachers.

Motlhaka researched reading interventions for struggling readers in upper elementary grades, highlighting the specific challenges that teachers face at these levels.¹⁶ Their findings indicate that targeted and intensive interventions are essential to meet the diverse needs of students and enhance reading outcomes.¹⁷

Many teachers lack specific training in EFAL instruction, which leads to difficulties in employing effective reading strategies.¹⁸ Additionally, resources and insufficient access to teaching materials, such as books tailored to various reading levels, hinder effective instruction.¹⁹ Furthermore, the diverse needs of learners, including a wide spectrum of language proficiency and learning styles, complicate lesson planning and personalized instruction.²⁰ Ndlovu purports that socioeconomic factors

¹³ Leylanie Adao et al., "Teachers' Challenges, Capabilities, and Needs in Teaching Learners with Reading Difficulties," *Journal of Science and Education (JSE)* 3, no. 3 (March 20, 2023): 221–31, <https://doi.org/10.56003/jse.v3i3.173>; Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives"; Chua and Sulaiman, "Reading Comprehension Problems in English Among Malaysian Primary Year 4 ESL Pupils."

¹⁴ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives"; Adao et al., "Teachers' Challenges, Capabilities, and Needs in Teaching Learners with Reading Difficulties"; Chua and Sulaiman, "Reading Comprehension Problems in English Among Malaysian Primary Year 4 ESL Pupils."

¹⁵ Monika K Herrera, *Dual Language Education, English as a New Language Support, Transitional Bilingual Education and Monolingual Classroom Education: A Comparison of Academic Achievement among Third Graders* (Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2020).

¹⁶ Hlavsio Motlhaka, "From 'Black' to 'Kaleidoscope': Institutional Curriculum and Linguistic Reforms at a Historically Black University," in *Language and Institutional Identity in the Post-Apartheid South African Higher Education: Perspectives on Policy and Practice* (Springer, 2022), 53–72.

¹⁷ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives."

¹⁸ Mzuyanda Percival Mavuso, N N Mkosi, and K B Olawumi, "Using Ubuntu Values in Integrating African Indigenous Knowledge into Teaching and Learning: A Review of Literature," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 22, no. 5 (2023): 140–59.

¹⁹ Sabelo Mlungisi Khumalo, Makhosazana Edith Shoba, and Simon Bhukumuzi Khoza, "Individual Dynamics for Effective Implementation of Mainstream English Curriculum at a School for the Deaf," *International Journal of Research in Business & Social Science* 12, no. 2 (2023).

²⁰ Ranson Sifiso Gwala and Pfano Mashau, "Equality, Diversity, and Access in Digitalized Teaching in Higher Education," in *Accessibility of Digital Higher Education in the Global South* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2024), 105–31.

contribute to these challenges, as learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may have limited exposure to English outside of the classroom, which can impact their reading development.²¹

Many Grade 4 EFAL learners exhibit low levels of reading proficiency, which complicates the teaching process. This lack of proficiency is often attributed to insufficient foundational skills in earlier grades, leading to difficulties in comprehension and text engagement.²² Teachers frequently work in overcrowded classrooms, making providing individualized attention to students. This environment can hinder effective teaching and limit opportunities for interactive learning experiences.²³

Many teachers report feeling underprepared to teach reading strategies effectively. Insufficient professional development and training in reading instruction can lead to ineffective teaching practices and a lack of confidence among educators.²⁴ (Ferris, 2018; There is often a decrease in teacher and learner motivation, which can stem from the abovementioned challenges. When teachers feel overwhelmed or unsupported, it can negatively impact their enthusiasm for teaching and their ability to inspire students.²⁵ To enhance the reading proficiency skills of Grade 4 EFAL learners, several strategies can be implemented:

Motlhaka's research on reading interventions for struggling readers in the upper elementary grades highlighted the unique challenges faced by teachers in these grades.²⁶ Their findings suggest that targeted, intensive interventions are necessary to address the diverse needs of learners and improve reading outcomes.²⁷ Incorporating interactive and engaging reading activities can help foster a love for reading among learners. Activities that involve movement and collaboration may enhance engagement and comprehension.²⁸ Teachers should adopt differentiated instructional strategies catering to various classroom learning styles. Teachers can better support diverse learners by recognizing individual student needs and adapting lessons accordingly.²⁹ Encouraging parental involvement in their children's education can significantly impact reading development. When parents engage with their children's learning at home, it reinforces the skills taught in school and promotes a supportive learning environment.³⁰

Continuous professional development for teachers is crucial. Educating educators on effective reading strategies and classroom management techniques can empower them to improve their teaching practices and better support their students' learning.³¹ Several authors have explored these challenges, providing insights that both support and expand upon the findings mentioned above.

Pretorius and Spaull argue that neglecting reading instruction has long-term detrimental effects on learners' language proficiency and comprehension skills, highlighting the urgency of addressing these challenges in educational policy and practice.³² Pearce and Wood assert that teachers play a crucial role in educational reform, indicating that enhancing teacher training and support systems is essential for improving literacy outcomes among Grade 4 learners.³³

²¹ Sibonokuhle Ndlovu, *Professionalisation of Students with Disabilities Into the Teaching Profession in South African Higher Education: Affordances and Challenges*, vol. 17 (Brill, 2024).

²² Morteza Akbari et al., "How Does Identity Theory Contribute to the Continuance Use of E-Learning: The Mediating Role of Inertia and Moderating Role of Computer Self-Efficacy," *Education and Information Technologies* 28, no. 6 (2023): 6321–45; Mohammad Behroozi and Azadeh Amoozegar, "Challenges to English Language Teachers of Secondary Schools in Iran," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 136 (2014): 203–7.

²³ Kjell Fenn, *Engage: Motivational Strategies for a Dynamic Classroom* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018); 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 (2016): 1449–71.

²⁴ J. Pearce and J. Wood, "The Role of Teacher Training in Improving Reading Comprehension among Grade 4 Learners.," *Journal of Language Teaching* 8, no. 1 (2019): 135.

²⁵ Akbari et al., "How Does Identity Theory Contribute to the Continuance Use of E-Learning: The Mediating Role of Inertia and Moderating Role of Computer Self-Efficacy."

²⁶ Motlhaka, "From 'Black' to 'Kaleidoscope': Institutional Curriculum and Linguistic Reforms at a Historically Black University."

²⁷ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives."

²⁸ Shelly J Schmidt, "Embracing and Harnessing the Intimate Connection between Emotion and Cognition to Help Students Learn," *Journal of Food Science Education* 18, no. 4 (2019): 87–96.

²⁹ Caitlin Hegwood, *Developing Human Values in Adulthood* (Regent University, 2023).

³⁰ Hegwood, *Developing Human Values in Adulthood*.

³¹ Pearce and Wood, "The Role of Teacher Training in Improving Reading Comprehension among Grade 4 Learners."

³² Pretorius and Spaull, "Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa."

³³ Pearce and Wood, "The Role of Teacher Training in Improving Reading Comprehension among Grade 4 Learners."

Various authors highlight the need for systemic changes to enhance educational practices and improve learner outcomes. Tackling the issues faced by Grade 4 teachers in teaching EAL requires a comprehensive approach. This includes improving teacher training, enhancing classroom environments, and fostering strong partnerships with parents. By implementing these strategies, we can achieve better reading proficiency among learners. Njoli emphasize the need for reevaluating teaching approaches, suggesting that current methods do not align with the needs of Grade 4 EFAL learners, thereby reinforcing the call for improved pedagogical strategies.³⁴

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper was underpinned by the Schema theory, which emphasizes the mental connections learners make between pieces of information and can be a very powerful component of the learning process.³⁵ In conjunction with other theories, schema theory is about knowledge, how knowledge is represented, and how the presentation facilitates the use of the knowledge in particular ways. According to schema theory, all knowledge is packed into units called schemata. Therefore, EFAL teachers use schemata to make sense of the text, and the printed work evokes the reader's experiences and past and potential relationships. The authors use this theory because Schema does not seek to explain the acquisition of only certain types of knowledge, such as behaviors or attitudes. Rather, instructional strategies based on it can be applied to any teaching situation. The ability of the theory to explain how numerous different types of knowledge are learned and suggest appropriate instructional strategies.

Further, the research paper is grounded in the theoretical framework of Schema theory, which emphasizes the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension. According to Rumelhart, readers' prior knowledge and experiences, or schemas, play a crucial role in their ability to understand and make meaning from text. In teaching reading in a First Additional Language, this theory suggests that learners' lack of familiarity with the language and cultural references can significantly hinder their comprehension, posing challenges for teachers in effectively supporting their student's reading development.³⁶

METHODOLOGY

This section provides a discussion of the research methodology adopted in this paper. The research methodology is a systematic way to solve a problem.³⁷ It is the science of studying how research is carried out. It is the study of methods by which knowledge is gained. It aims to give a word plan for the research. Opoku states that research methods are procedures and schemes used in research.³⁸

Research Paradigm

The paradigm is based on the idea that knowledge is derived from empirical evidence. Paley states that the underlying research paradigms are positivity, post-positivity, interpretive, transformative, and pragmatic.³⁹ Therefore, the researcher focused on interpretivism as the basis of the methodology. Interpretivism is a sociological research method that analyzes actions or events based on the beliefs, norms, and values of the society in which they occur. Interpretivism posits that reality is subjective, varied, and shaped by social context. This means we can only understand someone's reality through their personal experiences, which may differ from another person's perspective due to unique historical or social factors. Jacobsen posits that interpretivism in qualitative research offers several advantages.⁴⁰

³⁴ Zikhona Njoli, "Enhancing Implementation of Strategies to Employ English as LoLT in Intermediate Phase Buffalo City Classrooms," 2023.

³⁵ Frederic Charles Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

³⁶ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives."

³⁷ Samar Rahi, "Research Design and Methods: A Systematic Review of Research Paradigms, Sampling Issues and Instruments Development," *International Journal of Economics & Management Sciences* 6, no. 2 (2017): 1–5.

³⁸ Alex Opoku, Vian Ahmed, and Julius Akotia, "Choosing an Appropriate Research Methodology and Method," in *Research Methodology in the Built Environment* (Routledge, 2016), 32–49.

³⁹ John Paley, "Metaphysics and Research Education in Nursing," *Complexity and Values in Nurse Education*, 2022, 96–121.

⁴⁰ Lucas Jasper Jacobsen and Kira Elena Weber, "The Promises and Pitfalls of ChatGPT as a Feedback Provider in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study of Prompt Engineering and the Quality of AI-Driven Feedback," 2023.

Firstly, it acknowledges that human knowledge is contextual and rooted in language, allowing researchers to understand phenomena through the meanings participants ascribe to them.

Research Approach

A qualitative approach was utilised in the study. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to explore, interpret, and describe the important views of the participants. Bailey defines qualitative research as a broad umbrella term for various techniques.⁴¹ Qualitative researchers rigorously examine participants in their native environments to determine whether socioeconomic and cultural concerns affect their experiences and behaviors where they live. Thus, this approach enabled the authors to engage with the participants in their settings to understand the challenges teachers face in teaching reading to grade 4 learners.

Research Design

To achieve a focused examination of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing effective reading skills, a case study design was adopted. McMillan and Schumacher define research design as a process for conducting the study, including when, from whom, and under what conditions the data will be obtained.⁴² Lichtman also defined a case study as a research design that involves a detailed examination of a particular case.⁴³ It aims to provide detailed and specific explanations of situations rather than making generalized findings. The main purpose of a research design is to ascertain a specific plan to generate realistic evidence to explore the research questions and to provide results that are judged to be credible.

Participant Selection

The population for this study was grade 4 English First Additional Language teachers in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. Purposive sampling, which involves selecting sample members for a specific purpose, was used in this study. This method represents a phenomenon, group, incident, location, or type based on key criteria.⁴⁴ A critical aspect of purposive sampling is the criterion used for selection.⁴⁵ A sample is a smaller group selected from a larger population. Sampling refers to choosing this group for data collection in research. Using a sample, researchers can make observations and conclusions for the larger population. Thus, teaching experience in EFAL, the school's geographic setting, and the teachers' linguistic backgrounds were among the factors considered for selection. All participants taught in rural schools and their native language is isiXhosa. They had more than 10 years' experience in teaching EFAL in grade 4. Five teachers participated in this study.

Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to collect data. The aim of using these kinds of instruments was to understand the world through the participants' perspectives and to obtain rich descriptive data. Lisa posits that a semi-structured interview is a type of interview in which the interviewer asks only a few predetermined questions, while the rest are not planned.⁴⁶ While the interviews enabled the authors to gather knowledge about the challenges faced by teachers, observations provided evidence of how reading is conducted in the classrooms. Also, observations give consistent evidence about the phenomenon under inquiry without relying on the information uttered by the participants only. Data were collected over a period of two weeks. Interviews were audiotaped with the participants' consent and conducted during the first week, with one daily interview. Observations

⁴¹ Caroline Bailey, *A Guide to Qualitative Field Research* (Sage Publications, 2017).

⁴² James H. McMillan and Sally Schumacher, *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry* (Pearson, 2010).

⁴³ Marilyn Lichtman, *Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences* (SAGE Publications, 2024).

⁴⁴ Sharan B Merriam and Robin S Grenier, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* (John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

⁴⁵ J. Pietersen and K. Maree, "Surveys and the Use of Questionnaires," in *First Steps in Research*, ed. K. Maree (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2023).

⁴⁶ Melissa DeJonckheere and Lisa M Vaughn, "Semistructured Interviewing in Primary Care Research: A Balance of Relationship and Rigour," *Family Medicine and Community Health* 7, no. 2 (2019): e000057.

were conducted during the second week. Diaries were used to record all the activities done while teaching reading.

Pilot Study

A pilot study is a small-scale trial run of all the aspects planned for the main research.⁴⁷ This pilot study aimed to determine whether the research instruments were clear and could not create misunderstandings. It was conducted like the main study, allowing the researcher to identify and address any issues.⁴⁸ The pilot study was done in three schools to determine the feasibility of the research instruments. A pilot test is essential in any research to ensure its validity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is evaluating data using analytical and logical reasoning to examine each component of the data provided. Data analysis breaks data into smaller manageable themes, patterns, trends, and relationships.⁴⁹ Marie views data analysis as a process involving the preparation of the data, conducting various analyses, moving deeper into understanding the data, representing it, and lastly, making an interpretation of its larger meaning. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data.⁵⁰ Thematic analysis recognizes, analyzes, and interprets data from interviews, observations, and documental sources.⁵¹ The researcher used the interviews and observations in the study; therefore, themes that emanated from the categorization of data from both instruments were developed, highlighting the multifaceted issues Grade 4 teachers face in effectively teaching reading to EFAL learners.

Ethical Issues

The authors ensured that ethical issues were adhered to by first obtaining the Ethical Clearance Certificate from the University. Participants signed informed consent forms, which informed them about their rights to participate in the study and granted them freedom to quit participation should they wish to do so. Anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The foremost objective of this paper was to investigate the challenges faced by grade 4 EFAL teachers in teaching reading. Another objective was to determine how grade 4 EFAL learners' reading proficiency skills can be developed. Themes that were identified from the first objective were: learners' low reading proficiency skills and teachers' insufficient training in the implementation of effective reading skills. The themes that emerged from the latter were: promoting phonics and phonological awareness skills and the creation of a conducive classroom environment.

Objective 1: To investigate the challenges faced by grade 4 EFAL teachers in teaching reading.

Theme 1: Learners' low reading proficiency skills

One of the major findings in this study was that learners' low reading proficiency was a major factor contributing to teachers' challenges in teaching reading. Some participants revealed that grade 4 learners are unable to read texts.

Teaching reading to grade 4 learners is very difficult because they struggle to decode words. They find it difficult to read English words because, throughout their foundation phase, years were taught in Isi Xhosa (Participant 3).

⁴⁷ McMillan and Schumacher, *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry*.

⁴⁸ Stephanie J Mitchell et al., "Conducting Studies with Fathers: Challenges and Opportunities," *Applied Development Science* 11, no. 4 (2007): 239–44.

⁴⁹ Ijeoma Azodo et al., "Opportunities and Challenges Surrounding the Use of Data from Wearable Sensor Devices in Health Care: Qualitative Interview Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 10 (2020): e19542.

⁵⁰ Marie Bezuidenhout, "Qualitative Data Collection," in *Research Matters*, ed. corner' Davis Franzel du Plooy-Celliers and Rose-Marie Bezuidenhout (Cape Town, SA: Juta, 2014), 173–94.

⁵¹ Md Kausar Alam, "A Systematic Qualitative Case Study: Questions, Data Collection, NVivo Analysis and Saturation," *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 16, no. 1 (2021): 1–31.

The issue of low reading proficiency among Grade 4 learners is a significant concern across various educational contexts. Research indicates that many students struggle to achieve adequate reading skills due to multiple interrelated factors, including inadequate instructional practices in earlier grades and limited exposure to additional languages.

Teaching English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) to Grade 4 learners in South Africa faces numerous challenges, particularly concerning reading proficiency. The assessment revealed that 81% of South African Grade 4 pupils cannot read for meaning, indicating a regression to literacy levels last seen in 2011.⁵² Research indicates that only 19% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa can read for meaning, highlighting a significant literacy crisis.⁵³ This poor reading proficiency is a critical challenge for teachers striving to improve literacy outcomes.

Some participants articulated that the influence of the learners' primary languages is another serious concern because they are used to speaking in their home language.

Learners struggle to read English because they are not even proficient in reading in Isixhosa, their home language. It becomes more difficult to read English. They even struggle pronouncing single words like "father, mother, girl". It becomes more difficult when they must read sentences (Participant 1).

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveals that approximately **67%** of fourth-grade learners read below proficiency. This alarming statistic underscores systemic deficiencies in the education system, prompting calls for significant reforms to address these challenges. In South Africa, studies have shown that only **40%** of Grade 4 learners in certain areas are considered "Able to Read for Meaning," which contrasts with national averages where less than **19%** demonstrate this ability.

One primary factor contributing to low reading proficiency is the quality of instruction received in earlier grades. Research by Fesi and Mncube emphasizes that many learners enter Grade 4 without foundational reading skills, largely due to insufficient training and support provided by educators in earlier schooling years.⁵⁴ Similarly, Klapwijk highlights that many teachers lack effective reading instruction strategies, which hampers learners' ability to develop essential literacy skills.⁵⁵ Another critical factor is the limited exposure to additional languages. Phajane and Moipone argue that students not exposed to diverse linguistic environments may struggle with reading proficiency, as language acquisition is closely tied to literacy development.⁵⁶ This lack of exposure can lead to decreased motivation and engagement with reading tasks, further exacerbating the problem.

The classroom environment plays a crucial role in shaping reading proficiency. Overcrowded classrooms and inadequate resources are significant barriers that hinder effective teaching practices. Research shows that overcrowded classrooms reduce the individual attention students receive, which negatively affects their learning outcomes.

Some of the responses from participants regarding overcrowded classrooms were:

We have many students, making it impossible to arrange them into groups. The classroom setup doesn't allow for the reading strategies we use. Comfortable seating and lighting encourage autonomy, reduce disruptions, and enhance reading, resulting in better concentration. (Participation 5)

⁵² N Mather, "Small Steps to Understanding the Big Reading Crisis: An Analysis of 1 South African Teacher's Approach to Developing Her Grade 4 Learners' Reading Skills," in *EDULEARN24 Proceedings* (Iated, 2024), 1088–94.

⁵³ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives."

⁵⁴ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives."

⁵⁵ Nanda M Klapwijk, "EMC2= Comprehension: A Reading Strategy Instruction Framework for All Teachers," *South African Journal of Education* 35, no. 1 (2015): 1–10.

⁵⁶ Masello Hellen Phajane and Lenyai Ellen Moipone, "Reading and Writing Instructions in the Foundation Phase Classrooms," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, July 1, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n10p363>.

Additionally, a lack of appropriate student engagement and motivation for students to develop their reading skills. Other participants raised concerns about motivating learners.

It's important to encourage students after they have answered or attempted to respond, even if they are still struggling. Providing positive reinforcement, such as saying, "Good attempt, Well done, Keep it up", can greatly boost a child's morale and confidence. Additionally, giving tokens or rewards to those who excel in reading can also promote motivation.

Addressing the issue of low reading proficiency among Grade 4 learners requires a multifaceted approach. Educational reforms should focus on improving teacher training programs to equip educators with effective literacy instruction strategies. Furthermore, increasing access to diverse reading materials and creating supportive classroom environments can enhance student engagement and motivation. In conclusion, the low reading proficiency levels observed among Grade 4 learners reflect broader systemic issues within the education sector. By understanding the underlying factors contributing to these challenges, stakeholders can implement targeted interventions to improve student literacy outcomes.

Theme 2: Teachers' insufficient training in the implementation of effective reading strategies

Another major challenge is overcrowded classrooms and insufficient training in effective reading strategies, which can compound educators' difficulties. Research indicates that teachers and students may experience decreased motivation due to the task difficulty of visible progress. The studies reviewed highlight that overcrowded classrooms and insufficient training in effective reading strategies significantly contribute to the challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers. Many EFAL teachers lack effective reading instruction strategies. Studies indicate that educators who are not well-trained struggle to apply effective teaching methods, which negatively impacts student learning outcomes.⁵⁷ There is a clear need for targeted professional development, as many teachers lack the skills to promote reading comprehension effectively.

Insufficient training in effective reading strategies can significantly contribute to difficulties in understanding texts. Reading comprehension involves various cognitive processes, such as decoding, vocabulary knowledge, critical thinking, and connecting ideas. Without adequate instruction and practice in these areas, readers may struggle to understand and interpret texts fully. Research shows that educators lacking proper training face challenges in implementing effective teaching methods, adversely affecting student learning outcomes. Thus, targeted professional development is essential for equipping teachers with the skills to enhance reading comprehension. Students can significantly improve their reading ability and understand text with proper training in effective reading strategies.

Objective 2: To determine how grade 4 EFAL learners' reading proficiency skills can be developed

Theme 1: Promoting phonics and phonological awareness skills

Some participants articulated that promoting phonics and phonological skills is a significant predictor of developing learners' reading proficiency skills. One of the participants had this to say:

Usage of visual aids, pictures and diagrams, individual introductions of phonic concepts, games, and activities promoting phonological awareness, word sorting, rhyming of word families, segmentation of words, and blending of words. (Participant 3)

The educational approach known as phonics places a strong emphasis on the correspondence between phonemes, or sounds, and graphemes, or groups of letters.⁵⁸ It is predicated on the knowledge that letters or letter combinations represent the sounds that make up English. By translating written language into spoken language, phonics instruction aids learners in decoding words. This method gives

⁵⁷ Pearce and Wood, "The Role of Teacher Training in Improving Reading Comprehension among Grade 4 Learners."

⁵⁸ Joseph Ojur, "Phonics Programmes and Early Literacy Development among Preschool Children" (Kampala International University, 2023).

learners the ability to learn new words so they can read on their own.⁵⁹ Additionally, as learners learn how sounds are represented in written language, their comprehension of phonics aids in their spelling.

Phonics improves reading skills by teaching the connections between letters and their corresponding sounds, allowing readers to decode unfamiliar words by sounding them out, which builds fluency and confidence in reading new words, especially when faced with complex words; essentially, it provides a systematic approach to understanding how words are formed and pronounced based on their letter patterns. (Participant 4)

Children who participate in phonics activities for reading fluency can identify words and pronunciations more quickly and readily, increasing their confidence and reading comprehension.⁶⁰ Those taught phonics early on can better comprehend spelling patterns and rules. They learn to break words into their component sounds and use the right letter to represent each sound; this way, their vocabulary will grow, and spelling will be more accurate.

Phonics not only assists in decoding words but also helps students understand the context of their reading. When students can confidently recognize words, they can concentrate more on comprehension instead of struggling with word recognition. Phonics plays a crucial role in teaching reading effectively. Phonics instruction lays the groundwork for reading fluency and comprehension by emphasizing the relationship between sounds and letters.⁶¹ This approach can significantly enhance students' reading abilities with understanding and enjoyment. It's important to distinguish phonological awareness from phonics. While phonological awareness is primarily an auditory skill focused on sounds, phonics involves the relationship between those sounds and their corresponding letters in written language. Developing strong phonological awareness skills during early childhood is associated with improved reading and writing outcomes later.⁶²

The responses from the teachers indicated a need for clear instructions when providing working activities to address the challenge of poor reading skills. Additionally, the teachers suggested that having trained educators and access to portable resources would motivate students to work in a healthy environment. The research also points to a motivation decline among teachers and learners. This decrease in motivation can stem from the perceived difficulty of the task and a lack of noticeable progress. Another major challenge is overcrowded classrooms and insufficient training in effective reading strategies, which can compound educators' difficulties.

Participants also echoed that phonics instruction can be facilitated through such activities as collaborative learning, demonstrating reading, and facilitating group talks, and the participant's response below confirmed this claim:

Collaborative learning, demonstrating reading, facilitating group talks, and reading competitions can be of great value. (Participant 3)

The participants strongly believed that collaborative learning and demonstration reading assist in developing learners' proficiency skills. In an ideal scenario, all learners should be able to read, as both learners and teachers come together to develop and collaborate. However, the lack of resources, whether human or material, hinders progress and comprehension development.

Theme 2: Creation of a conducive classroom environment

Overcrowded classrooms with high student-to-teacher ratios impede effective instruction. The reviewed studies show that these overcrowded environments, combined with insufficient teacher training in reading strategies, significantly contribute to the challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers. This comprehensive review highlights the obstacles educators encounter as they strive to teach reading as a

⁵⁹ Julia Dhiginina Lamek, "Teachers' Experiences in Using Phonics Methods in Teaching English Reading to Junior Primary Phase in Ohangwena Region" (University of Namibia, 2023).

⁶⁰ Atika Salman Faris, "The Effectiveness of Phonics Approach in Teaching Reading," *IJECA (International Journal of Education and Curriculum Application)* 1, no. 1 (2023): 11–15.

⁶¹ Isabel Beck, Margret McKeown, and Linda Kucan, *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* (Guilford Press, 2020).

⁶² Sebastian P Suggate, "A Meta-Analysis of the Long-Term Effects of Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, and Reading Comprehension Interventions," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 49, no. 1 (2016): 77–96.

First Additional Language effectively. Many teachers do not receive adequate training in effective reading strategies, which further hampers their teaching efforts.

Comfortable seating and lighting encourage being able to read at length without a dictionary or other outside help, choosing one's reading materials, and generally being self-sufficient; then, we better get our students used to being on their own. Free discussions and sharing of impaired reading, imitations, better focus, and concentration increased self-confidence. (Participant 2)

Participants indicated that overcrowded classrooms negatively impact reading comprehension because they hinder teachers from providing individual attention to students. The large class size may prevent individual attention, which is critical for addressing diverse reading needs in grade 4 learners. Overcrowding reduces space for group activities, reading corners, or quiet areas, which are essential for creating a conducive reading environment. Also, monitoring or tracking each learner's progress is difficult, becoming challenging, and struggling readers may go unnoticed. This can result in lower motivation, diminished academic performance, and reduced test scores.

Overcrowded environments can severely limit the effectiveness of teaching strategies, making it challenging to implement group work or individualized attention. We are also unable to arrange students into groups and this further exacerbates this problem, as collaborative learning strategies are often stifled in such conditions. (Participant 1)

Therefore, it is essential to consider appropriate student-to-teacher ratios and maintain classroom space as mandated by the Department of Education. Train teachers in strategies to maintain a calm and focused learning environment. A conducive classroom is a foundational element for teaching reading effectively in Grade 4, as it nurtures the focus, confidence, and collaboration essential for comprehension and skill development. Additionally, reviewing the admission policy can help ensure an optimal number of students who can effectively understand what they read.

Overcrowded classrooms continue to pose a significant challenge to effective teaching. New teachers often struggle to manage large groups, which limits their ability to provide individualized support to each student.⁶³ Similarly, Mzimane and Mantlana purport that the major causes of low levels of reading in Grade 4 EFAL learners include a decrease in teacher and learner motivation, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate training on reading strategies.⁶⁴ Additionally, the shortage of resources, such as books and teaching materials, complicates the instructional process.⁶⁵ These challenges present considerable obstacles to teaching reading effectively in Grade 4. However, with creative strategies and support, these issues can be addressed. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers must collaborate to ensure that every learner receives the attention and resources necessary to develop strong reading skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A comprehensive approach is required to address these challenges, involving targeted interventions, enhanced teacher support, and a focus on improving the reading process. The research paper has thoroughly examined the key issues and proposed potential solutions, contributing to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers and the strategies needed to overcome them. Another important finding is that the reading program's structure can benefit from the 5 constructs that make up implementation fidelity, which can profoundly affect teachers' ability to be effective reading development facilitators. After discussing the study findings, the study makes the following recommendations. Grade 4 EFAL teachers must make use of the learners' prior linguistic knowledge to teach in the target language. The English-only rule needs to be applied sparingly, considering that most learners in rural areas, like the learners under study, are hardly exposed to English outside of the

⁶³ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives."

⁶⁴ Nosisi Charity Mzimane and Christabel Dudu Mantlana, "Reading Strategies in the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3): Case Studies of Two Schools in the Libode District, South Africa," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 16, no. 1-3 (March 4, 2017): 106-13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09751122.2017.1311636>.

⁶⁵ Charles Hodges et al., "The Difference between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning," *Educause Review* 27, no. 1 (2020): 1-9.

classroom environment. Besides, there is a need to avail many reading books that are age-appropriate so that the learners can have more reading exercises and be exposed to different subjects, which will broaden their vocabulary base as well. Also, teachers should have reading lessons, even if it means having ‘extra reading classes’, which can be informally supervised by the learners’ guardians at home. Parental involvement is mostly supported in developing the future of learners concerning reading with understanding. Lastly, Grade 4 EFAL teachers should not neglect teaching pronunciation, as this exercise helps learners realize the overlaps between their HL and the LoTL when reading any given text.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to investigate the challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers in teaching reading in EFAL and to propose ways by which learners’ reading comprehension skills can be developed. Thematic analysis of data revealed that learners’ low reading proficiency skills and teachers’ insufficient training in the implementation of effective reading skills were the major challenges that contributed to the teachers’ challenges. Also, the promotion of phonics and phonological awareness skills and the creation of a conducive classroom environment emerged as factors that could contribute to the development of the learners’ reading comprehension skills.

The concluding thoughts of this paper emphasize the urgent need to enhance both teacher training and learner support in teaching reading in English First Additional Language (EFAL) at the Grade 4 level. It is crucial to tackle the issues of low learner reading proficiency and limited teacher preparedness to improve reading outcomes. Emphasis should be placed on equipping teachers with effective reading strategies, including phonics and phonological awareness instruction. Additionally, creating a supportive and resource-rich classroom environment can significantly enhance learners’ reading comprehension. A holistic approach to addressing these areas is essential for improving reading outcomes and fostering a culture of literacy in the intermediate phase.

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