



Bridging the gap of reading challenges amongst Sesotho learners in Grade 4 classroom: A case at Nquthu, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to deepen the understanding of the persistent reading challenges faced by Grade 4 Sesotho learners, particularly within the context of the transition to reading-to-learn in South Africa. Although Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements outline clear expectations for reading instruction, this research highlights a continued gap between policy and classroom practice in Sesotho Home Language classrooms in Nquthu. Using a socio-cultural theoretical framework and classroom observations, the study provides context-rich insights into the specific linguistic and pedagogical obstacles that hinder reading development, such as difficulties in decoding vowel and consonant sounds, limited reading fluency, poor pronunciation and articulation, and inadequate teacher support. The study advances knowledge by showing how these challenges are socially and instructionally constructed within the classroom environment, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on African language literacy acquisition. It also adds to the limited body of empirical research focused specifically on Sesotho literacy in the Intermediate Phase, an area often overshadowed by research on English literacy. Furthermore, the study offers practical contributions by recommending early baseline assessments and collaborative teaching approaches, which can inform teacher development programmes, literacy interventions, and future curriculum adjustments. Overall, this research provides theoretical and practical insights that strengthen the scholarly understanding of literacy teaching in South African indigenous languages.

Keywords: Reading, CAPS, Socio-cultural theory, Grade 4 Sesotho learners, literary text.

INTRODUCTION

A significant proportion of Grade 4 learners in South Africa, particularly those instructed in Sesotho and other African languages, experience persistent difficulties with reading comprehension and fluency.¹ These challenges stem largely from inadequate development of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension skills in the Foundation Phase.² As Spaull observes, by the end of Grade 3, many learners already lack

¹ Joyce Mokobe, Jo Badenhorst, and Luzaan Schlebusch, "Teachers' Voices on the Poor Reading Skills of Setswana-Speaking Foundation Phase Learners," *Reading & Writing-Journal of the Literacy Association of South Africa* 16, no. 1 (2025): 520.

² 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.

sufficient reading fluency and comprehension, indicating that the problem precedes Grade 4.³ This concern is further corroborated by the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which reported that a substantial proportion of South African Grade 4 learners were unable to read for meaning in any language.⁴ These findings highlight a national literacy crisis that particularly affects learners of African languages.

Reading constitutes one of the most essential skills used in everyday life. Phala and Hugo emphasise that reading is a fundamental language skill that learners must acquire early, particularly in the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3).⁵ Reading enables individuals to interpret signs, symbols, billboards, digital content, books and written information required for functional participation in society. Beyond its communicative value, reading facilitates comprehension, meaning-making, and the exchange of ideas.⁶ The importance of literacy aligns with the World Declaration on Education for All, which recognises literacy as a fundamental human right crucial to human development, dignity, and lifelong learning.

In addition, Torgesen argues that the demands of modern society and the labour market require individuals who possess strong reading abilities.⁷ Therefore, teachers are responsible for supporting the acquisition of reading skills until mastery, as these skills by learners enable learners to access knowledge across subjects and cope with academic demands. Failure to develop adequate reading proficiency is associated with negative educational outcomes, including grade repetition, truancy, dropout, limited comprehension, and behavioural difficulties.⁸

Nevertheless, reading, especially reading for comprehension, remains a persistent challenge in many rural South African schools.⁹ Research has shown that language barriers make it difficult for Grade 4 learners to answer comprehension questions that require high levels of linguistic proficiency.¹⁰ Although the Department of Basic Education (2011) has implemented several initiatives to improve literacy outcomes, learners continue to struggle with foundational reading skills.¹¹ This concern is echoed by Manuel's NAPTOSA report, which highlights systemic and contextual factors that obstruct effective reading acquisition in South African schools.¹²

South African schools face multiple structural barriers that impede effective reading instruction. These challenges include overcrowded classrooms, inadequate funding, limited reading materials, text-poor environments, insufficient parental involvement, minimal book access, and inadequate teacher preparation. Such challenges contribute to the larger literacy crisis documented throughout the country. Numerous studies confirm that poor reading outcomes are related to the cumulative effect of these

³ Nic Spaull, "South Africa's Education Crisis: The Quality of Education in South Africa 1994–2011," Centre for Development and Enterprise, October 2013, <https://www.cde.org.za>.

⁴ Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), "South African Preliminary Report, Department of Basic Education" (Pretoria, 2021).

⁵ Thembi A. Phala and Anna Hugo, "Difficulties in Teaching Grade 3 Learners with Reading Problems in Full-Service Schools in South Africa," *African Journal of Disability* 11 (February 10, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v11i0.906>.

⁶ D. R. Reutzel and R. B. Cooter, *Strategies for Reading Assessment and Instruction in an Era of Common Core Standards* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2016).

⁷ J. K. Torgesen, "The Prevention of Reading Difficulties," *Journal of School Psychology*, 2002, 7–26.

⁸ W.P. Oakes, S.R. Mathur, and K.L. Lane, "Reading Interventions for Students with Challenging Behavior: A Focus on Fluency.," *Behavioural Disorders* 35, no. 2 (2010): 120–39; Mary Wagner and Maryann Davis, "How Are We Preparing Students with Emotional Disturbances for the Transition to Young Adulthood? Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study—2," *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders* 14, no. 2 (2006): 86–98.

⁹ Nanda M Klapwijk, "EMC² = Comprehension: A Reading Strategy Instruction Framework for All Teachers," *South African Journal of Education* 35, no. 1 (February 27, 2015): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.15700/201503062348>; Elizabeth J Pretorius and Mirriam Lephala, "Reading Comprehension in High-Poverty Schools: How Should It Be Taught and How Well Does It Work?," *Per Linguam* 27, no. 2 (April 26, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.5785/27-2-105>.

¹⁰ A. Janse van Rensburg, "Leerlinge Verstaan Nie Wat Hulle Lees.," *Beeld* 2, no. Junie. (2016); I Joubert, *Literacy in the Foundation Phase*, 2nd ed (Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik, 2015); Zelda Elizabeth Van der Merwe and Carisma Nel, "Reading Literacy within a Teacher Preparation Programme: What We Know and What We Should Know," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 2, no. 2 (December 30, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v2i2.16>.

¹¹ Mokobe, Badenhorst, and Schlebusch, "Teachers' Voices on the Poor Reading Skills of Setswana-Speaking Foundation Phase Learners."

¹² B. L. Manuel, "Reading with Comprehension Crisis in South Africa – PIRLS Report," 2023.

systemic issues.¹³ As Foncha and Sivasubramaniam argue, reading difficulties significantly hinder learners' teaching and learning experiences, limiting their academic progress.¹⁴

Although considerable research exists on the reading difficulties of learners in English Home Language and English First Additional Language contexts, limited attention has been given to reading comprehension challenges among Grade 4 learners in African languages, including Sesotho. Although Sesotho is one of the most widely spoken languages in South Africa, studies that specifically examine its reading pedagogy remain scarce. This gap is significant because the transition from learning-to-read (Grades 1–3) to reading-to-learn (Grade 4) places increased cognitive and linguistic demands on learners, particularly those learning in African languages.

Thus, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the reading challenges experienced by Grade 4 Sesotho learners during classroom reading activities in Nquthu. Additionally, it examines the challenges teachers faced in supporting Sesotho learners who encounter barriers to reading. The study also aims to propose potential strategies to mitigate these challenges and improve reading instruction in Sesotho-medium classrooms.

Primary Research Question

- What are the challenges that Grade 4 Sesotho learners at Nquthu face in reading?

Secondary Research Question

- What challenges do Grade 4 teachers face in teaching reading skills to Grade 4 Sesotho learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on reading instruction for young learners has expanded considerably over the past decade; however, much of this scholarship remains uneven in terms of language focus and pedagogical depth. Most studies have concentrated on reading challenges within English First Additional Language (EFAL) contexts, often foregrounding systemic and classroom-level constraints faced by teachers and learners.¹⁵ Although these studies provide valuable insights into EFAL instruction, they inadvertently marginalise African languages such as Sesotho, thereby limiting the transferability of their findings to learners who receive instruction in indigenous languages.

Within the limited body of research on Sesotho-speaking learners, Masowa and Thetso offer an important contribution by examining challenges experienced by teachers and learners at Grade 4 level.¹⁶ However, their study prioritises the process writing approach, with reading positioned only peripherally. This narrow focus constrains the extent to which their findings can inform reading pedagogy directly, particularly given the well-established interdependence between reading and writing. Consequently, their work highlights the need for studies that explicitly foreground reading instruction strategies rather than treating reading as ancillary to writing development.

Vaz's study advances the discussion by focusing explicitly on reading among Grade 4 Sesotho learners, particularly decoding skills, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension.¹⁷ Her emphasis on phonological knowledge and letter–sound correspondence aligns with foundational reading theory. However, her findings reveal persistent learner difficulties in pronouncing single-letter and single-

¹³ Madoda Cekiso, "Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Instruction in Selected Primary Schools in the Eastern Cape," *Reading & Writing* 8, no. 1 (November 17, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v8i1.158>; Maria K. Vaz, "10-Year-Olds Reading for Meaning? A Study of Sesotho Grade 4 Learners' Foundational Reading Skills," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14, no. 1 (November 7, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/SAJCE.v14i1.1573>; Aaron Mpho Masowa and Madira Thetso, "The Challenges Faced by Teachers and Learners in Implementing Process Writing Approach in a Sesotho Grade 4 Classroom," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, March 14, 2025, 317–26, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2025636>.

¹⁴ John Wankah Foncha and Sivakumar Sivasubramaniam, "The Links between Intercultural Communication Competence and Identity Construction in the University of Western Cape (UWC) Community," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, July 1, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n10p376>.

¹⁵ 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 (2021): 1–11.

¹⁶ Masowa and Thetso, "The Challenges Faced by Teachers and Learners in Implementing Process Writing Approach in a Sesotho Grade 4 Classroom."

¹⁷ Vaz, "10-Year-Olds Reading for Meaning? A Study of Sesotho Grade 4 Learners' Foundational Reading Skills."

syllable function words, suggesting that decoding instruction alone may be insufficient if not systematically reinforced within broader instructional frameworks. Masowa reinforces this argument by asserting that decoding deficits fundamentally undermine reading ability, thereby positioning decoding as a necessary but not a standalone condition for reading proficiency.¹⁸

From a theoretical point of view, Oakes et al. provide a comprehensive framework in identifying five essential components of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.¹⁹ Although this model is widely endorsed, its practical application in under-resourced and multilingual classrooms remains problematic. In particular, many studies cite these components without critically examining whether teachers have the pedagogical capacity or contextual support to implement them effectively, particularly in African language contexts.

Torgesen's seminal work on the prevention of reading difficulties offers evidence-based strategies for early intervention and underscores the importance of informed instructional practices.²⁰ However, although his recommendations have influenced reading pedagogy globally, they are often adopted uncritically, without sufficient adaptation to local linguistic and systemic realities. Combrinck and Mtsatse challenge these assumptions by demonstrating that the mere availability of resources such as libraries and digital tools does not automatically translate into improved reading outcomes. Instead, they argue that teacher pedagogical competence is the decisive factor, a claim that exposes a critical gap between policy provision and classroom practice.²¹

Importantly, reading challenges observed at Grade 4 level cannot be viewed in isolation. Phala and Hugo, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, argue that reading difficulties originate much earlier in the schooling trajectory. Their study identifies macro-systemic issues such as the progression policy, which allows learners to advance grades without achieving required reading competencies. At the micro-system level, they highlight overcrowded classrooms, inadequate reading materials, language-of-instruction mismatches, limited parental support, and teachers' insufficient understanding of diverse learning needs. This ecological analysis illustrates that reading failure is cumulative and systemic rather than a sudden Grade 4 phenomenon.²²

Motaung's study further contextualises these challenges by examining teachers' perceptions of the declining use of Sesotho among Grade 4 learners. Her findings suggest that learners are not the primary source of the problem but rather victims of broader sociolinguistic and institutional pressures that devalue African languages in formal schooling.²³ This insight is particularly significant, as it problematises deficit views of learners and redirects attention toward structural and pedagogical shortcomings.

Taken together, the reviewed literature reveals a significant gap in research that specifically interrogates pedagogical approaches to bridging reading challenges among Grade 4 Sesotho learners. While EFAL reading has been extensively studied, African language contexts remain under-researched and under-theorised. Moreover, existing Sesotho-focused studies tend to emphasise challenges and deficits rather than empirically grounded instructional strategies. It is within this gap that the current study is positioned, aiming to contribute contextually responsive knowledge on effective pedagogical approaches that teachers can employ to address reading difficulties among Grade 4 Sesotho learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This qualitative study is grounded within the socio-cultural theory (SCR) of learning by Vygotsky.²⁴ SCR is founded on the notion that meaningful learning is inherently social. It emphasizes the importance of interaction with more knowledgeable others, teachers, parents, or peers as a critical mechanism for

¹⁸ Aaron Mpho Masowa, "Mathata a Bakwang Ke Ho Se Ngole Puo Ya Sesotho Ka Nepo Marangrang a Setjhaba," *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 42, no. sup1 (December 6, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2024.2341705>.

¹⁹ Oakes, Mathur, and Lane, "Reading Interventions for Students with Challenging Behavior: A Focus on Fluency. ."

²⁰ Torgesen, "The Prevention of Reading Difficulties."

²¹ Celeste Combrinck and Nangamso Mtsatse, "Reading on Paper or Reading Digitally? Reflections and Implications of EPIRLS 2016 in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. S2 (December 31, 2019): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39ns2a1771>.

²² Phala and Hugo, "Difficulties in Teaching Grade 3 Learners with Reading Problems in Full-Service Schools in South Africa."

²³ L.P. Motaung, "Teachers' Perceptions of the Decline of the Sesotho Language among Grade 4 Learners in Ekurhuleni South District. " (University of South Africa, 2024).

²⁴ L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (MIT Press, 1962).

cognitive development. Through these interactions, learners can scaffold their understanding, negotiate meaning, and gradually internalize knowledge and skills. This process highlights the role of collaboration, dialogue, and shared experiences in shaping learning outcomes.²⁵ Concurring with this statement are Nithideechaiwarachok and Chano, who argue that interacting with others is essential for learning, with the assistance or guidance of peers who can manage problems linked to the learning process.²⁶ This approach posits that learning is not a passive process but an active construction of knowledge, whereby individuals develop their own mental or cognitive frameworks.²⁷ Through this process, learners interpret and make sense of their experiences in particular situations, thereby generating unique understandings that reflect both personal perspectives and contextual influences. Furthermore, Vygotsky, as cited in Hovious, argues that the SCR is a social process that considers children's circumstances both inside and outside of the classroom.²⁸ This social process affects how children learn. Mishra supports this statement. He asserts that learning is an active process rather than passively acquiring knowledge.²⁹ Therefore, in this process, learners are welcome to become active and involved in the knowledge construction process.³⁰

Therefore, the SCR was deemed relevant to this study as it puts language and culture at the centre of learning,³¹ and the centre of this study is about bridging the gap of reading challenge amongst Grade 4 Sesotho learners. Furthermore, this approach will allow the researcher to relate his findings to the contributions of other researchers³² and identify whether the barriers that Grade 4 Sesotho learners at Nquthu faced during reading were due to barriers inside or outside the classroom setting, as well as which strategies the teachers used to curb these barriers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design that allowed for an in-depth exploration of the reading challenges experienced by Grade 4 Sesotho learners at Nquthu. Qualitative research is appropriate to investigate social and educational phenomena that require understanding the experiences and classroom practices of participants within their natural contexts.³³

Study Population and Sample

The study focused on Grade 4 Sesotho learners in one primary school at Nquthu, uMzinyathi District, KwaZulu-Natal. Purposive sampling was used to select six Grade 4 learners (four girls and two boys) from a multigrade classroom. These learners had Sesotho as their Home Language and Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in the Foundation Phase. The sample was part of a larger group of learners participating in a community engagement project conducted by lecturers from the University of South Africa, in the Department of African Language, Sesotho Section.

²⁵ Lev Semenovich Vygotsky and Michael Cole, *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Harvard University Press, 1978).

²⁶ Bussayarat Nithideechaiwarachok, Jiraporn Chano, and Chin Cheng Wu, "Socio-Cultural and Social Constructivist Theories and Its Application in EFL Classroom for Thai Pre-Service Teachers: A Review for Further Research," *International Journal of Language Education* 8, no. 3 (October 6, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.26858/ijole.v8i3.66499>.

²⁷ P Mishra, "The Impact of Learning and Development on Employee Retention in Organizations," *International Journal of Scientific Research in Engineering and Management (IJSREM)*, June, 7. <https://doi.org/10.55041/IJSREM22576>, 2023.

²⁸ Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, vol. 86 (Harvard University Press, 1978); Amanda Hovious, "Toward a Socio-Contextual Understanding of Transliteration," *Reference Services Review* 46, no. 2 (August 21, 2018): 178–88, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-02-2018-0016>.

²⁹ Mishra, "The Impact of Learning and Development on Employee Retention in Organizations."

³⁰ Nithideechaiwarachok, Chano, and Cheng Wu, "Socio-Cultural and Social Constructivist Theories and Its Application in EFL Classroom for Thai Pre-Service Teachers: A Review for Further Research"; Motaung, "Teachers' Perceptions of the Decline of the Sesotho Language among Grade 4 Learners in Ekurhuleni South District."

³¹ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

³² Sibel İnci and Sevilay Yıldız, "Perceptions of English Teachers in Turkey and Germany," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 7, no. 2 (February 2019): 436–49, <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2019.070216>.

³³ Sarah E. Truman, "Undisciplined: Research-Creation and What It May Offer (Traditional) Qualitative Research Methods," *Qualitative Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (January 2023): 95–104, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004221098380>.

Data Collection

Data was collected over six months through classroom observations, note-taking, and the use of an analytical rubric. Learners read paragraphs from the Department of Basic Education Sesotho Grade 4 textbook, and their reading fluency, pronunciation, articulation, and comprehension were recorded. Field notes were used to document the teacher's reading instruction practices and the support offered to learners experiencing reading difficulties. The CAPS document for Sesotho Home Language guided the evaluation of the instructional process.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data was analysed thematically. Observation notes and rubric scores were reviewed to identify recurring patterns relating to learner reading difficulties and teacher instructional challenges. Themes were generated inductively to reflect the aims and objectives of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Human Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of South Africa via the Community Engagement Committee in the Department of African Language. The school granted permission to conduct the study through a signed memorandum of understanding between the university and the school. The identities of the learners were protected by anonymity and confidentiality, and only data relevant to the study objectives were collected and reported.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The study was conducted to identify the challenges faced by Grade 4 Sesotho learners during reading lessons at one of the primary schools in Nquthu as part of a community engagement project, as requested by the teacher. Codes were used, for example, SPG (Sesotho participant Grade 4) to identify the participants.

The researcher used an observation tool and note-taking to measure the proficiency of the learners while they were reading text from their Sesotho DBE book in a Grade 4 classroom and strategies employed by the teacher to teach reading, as well as assisting learners who experience barriers to reading during the observed lesson. To strengthen the validity of the study, the researcher also used a voice recorder to record the reading of learners while observing the lesson. The researcher then organised the reading challenges into specific themes, which were analysed, interpreted, and discussed as follows.

Theme 1: Difficulty in recognising Vowels and Consonants

SPG 1 is summarised as follows:

The learner was unable to read the first letter of the word due to difficulty in recognising vowels and consonants. SPG 1 was given the following sentence to read,

"Qetellong Nomsa a fihla yaba re ya tshireletsong ya diphoofolo".

During the reading, the researcher observed that the learner exhibited physical symptoms, such as shivering and touching his mouth and head. This behaviour clearly indicated that the learner faced significant challenges, as he could not even identify the first letter of the first word, 'Q'. The results of this study are consistent with previous research that has investigated letter-sound variables in African languages. Similar patterns have been observed in studies focusing on languages from both the Sotho and Nguni clusters, reinforcing the broader evidence base that highlights the challenges learners face in developing phonological awareness and reading fluency within these linguistic contexts.³⁴ This means that SGP 1 lacks phonemic awareness.

According to Carruth and Bustos, phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sound-phonemes in spoken words.³⁵ The SPG 1 could not utter the letter 'Q' nor identify the letter; as a result, could not produce the sound of that letter, which eventually led to difficulty

³⁴ Vaz, "10-Year-Olds Reading for Meaning? A Study of Sesotho Grade 4 Learners' Foundational Reading Skills."

³⁵ L. Carruth and D. Bustos, *Phonemic Awareness: It's All in the Sounds of Language*. (Texas Association for Literacy Education Yearbook., 2019).

in reading the whole word. This is in line with the findings of Ardington et al. (2021), who argue that many learners do not master this basic skill by the end of Grade 3.

Hence, this study contends that the level of phonemic awareness a child possesses at the point of school entry is broadly recognized as the most critical determinant of subsequent reading achievement. Phonemic awareness serves as the cornerstone of literacy development, and its absence substantially increases the probability that a learner will struggle with decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Inadequate phonemic awareness not only impedes the acquisition of reading skills but also increases the risk of long-term academic difficulties and failure. Therefore, it was expected that SPG 1, as a Grade 4 learner, should be able to read printed letters, as he or she was supposed to be taught how sounds in words work in the previous phase. Therefore, these findings align with Singh's assertion that the inadequate reading abilities of learners in South African primary schools have been a topic of concern among researchers.³⁶

Theme 2: Challenge in Pronunciation and Articulation of words

SPG 2 & 3 are summarised as follows:

The lack of reading ability and anxiety limits the learners' understanding of the word. The teacher gave each learner a paragraph to read from their DBE book. During the process, the learners found it difficult to pronounce words and articulate them correctly, such as kapotene, hae, and Dingani.

The results of this study corroborate the findings of Fesi and Mncube, who reported that reading aloud in front of classmates can generate significant anxiety for learners with limited reading proficiency.³⁷ Such practices not only increase stress levels of learners but may also discourage participation and hinder the development of reading confidence and comprehension. In situations like this, teachers should mould reading by employing a group-guided strategy. This is in line with Paige (2011), who argues that during reading aloud, teachers should read the text aloud with learners to model reading, which could help with difficult words.

Theme 3: Challenge in reading Fluency

Fluency teaching is essential to reading development in helping learners become successful readers.³⁸ Fluency is the capacity to read accurately, quickly, and with prosody.³⁹ This view is supported by Vaz that reading fluency encompasses several interrelated components, including accuracy in recognising and pronouncing written words, the speed or rate at which text is read, and the ability to read with appropriate expression while maintaining comprehension.⁴⁰ The observation of SPG 4, 5 and 6 indicates that these learners struggled with reading fluency.

Learners were used to shared reading from Grade R-3. The researcher used an independent reading strategy to identify fluency in reading. The SPG 4, 5 and 6 were unable to read fluently. The scrutiny of errors made by learners during the reading fluency task showed that learners committed reading errors on short function words such as *e*, *a*, *le* and *ho*, as well as on content words. This suggests that the learners could not comprehend what they were reading.

The findings agree with those of Oakes et al. and Vaz, which highlight that fluency in basic reading skills allows attention to focus on constructing meaning from the text.⁴¹

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to bridge the gap in reading challenges faced by Grade 4 Sesotho learners. The findings revealed that learners have serious challenges in reading, and that teachers lack strategies in supporting

³⁶ Parlo Singh, "Performativity and Pedagogising Knowledge: Globalising Educational Policy Formation, Dissemination and Enactment," *Journal of Education Policy* 30, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 363–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2014.961968>.

³⁷ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives."

³⁸ L. S. Fuchs et al., "Oral Reading Fluency as an Indicator of Reading Competence: A Theoretical, Empirical, and Historical Analysis," *Scientific Studies of Reading* 5 (2001): 239-256.

³⁹ D. Chard, S. Vaughn, and B. Tyler, "A Synthesis of Research on Effective Interventions for Building Reading Fluency with Elementary Students with Learning Disabilities," *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 35(5), 2002, 386–406.

⁴⁰ Vaz, "10-Year-Olds Reading for Meaning? A Study of Sesotho Grade 4 Learners' Foundational Reading Skills."

⁴¹ Oakes, Mathur, and Lane, "Reading Interventions for Students with Challenging Behavior: A Focus on Fluency."; Vaz, "10-Year-Olds Reading for Meaning? A Study of Sesotho Grade 4 Learners' Foundational Reading Skills."

learners experiencing barriers to reading. The observation was made in March, and the second one was made in July, which marks the second term in a school calendar. The CAPS document suggests the reading approach that a teacher should use when teaching reading in a two-week cycle. The approach has three stages that the teacher must use: pre-reading, during reading and after reading. Each stage has fine details that the teacher must take into consideration. Each of these stages plays a critical role in teaching learners how to read for meaning. Based on the baseline assessment and reading tasks completed during formal and informal assessments, the teacher could have identified the problems learners faced in reading and developed an individual support plan, as the policy on school-based support teams (SBST) indicates.

The first research question sought to find out the challenges that Grade 4 Sesotho learners at Nquthu face in reading. The results showed that learners have difficulty in recognising vowels and consonants, pronunciation and articulation of words, as well as challenges in reading fluency. The identified challenges suggest that learners have not yet fully developed these reading skills, resulting in reading without proper comprehension.

Underachievement in this fundamental and constrained literacy skill, which, according to Durgunoglu and Öney, can typically be mastered by the end of Grade 1 in home language, may be attributed to several interrelated factors.⁴² These include:

- the use of ineffective instructional approaches and teachers' limited pedagogical content knowledge.
- the slow progression of instruction, as the skill continues to be taught up to Grade 3 in accordance with CAPS guidelines.
- insufficient availability of appropriate teaching and learning materials to facilitate the acquisition and retention of the skill.
- and limited opportunities for extended reading practice, both in school and at home, which are necessary for consolidation.

Challenges faced by learners during reading activity

The study aimed to identify one of the challenges that emerged: difficulty in distinguishing between vowels and consonants. It was found that this challenge inhibits the learner from reading, leading to no reading at all. As observed, these learners could have been identified by the teacher during the baseline assessment conducted at the beginning of the term to determine their reading levels. This social interaction of a learner with a teacher could have yielded a positive result, because after this identification, the teacher could have developed the independent support plan that he or she will use to support the learner.

Another challenge identified was the pronunciation and articulation of words. This could be the problem that emanates from the strategy used by the teacher in the previous grade (s). From Grade R to Grade 3, learners were used to shared and group guided reading, and teachers did not emphasise phonics to help learners during reading. It was during this period that teachers could have used modelling, to help learners to pronounce and articulate words correctly. The mispronounced words were *kapotene* (captain), *hae* (home), and *Dingani* (name of a person). According to Masowa, when words are not pronounced well, they distort the meaning, and this misleads the listener.⁴³

Teaching learners how to pronounce and articulate words correctly is a collaborative learning process, in which learners are guided and supported by the more knowledgeable other (in this case, the teachers) to learn more difficult words. This is consistent with the studies of some scholars, who argue that the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) allows the learner to acquire a range of abilities that learners can accomplish with the help of an experienced person.⁴⁴ In this case, the teacher should have

⁴² A.Y. Durgunoglu and B. Öney, "A Cross Linguistic Comparison of Phonological Awareness and Word Recognition," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11, (1999): 281–99.

⁴³ Masowa, "Mathata a Bakwang Ke Ho Se Ngole Puo Ya Sesotho Ka Nepo Marangrang a Setjhaba."

⁴⁴ R Sibanda, "Mother Tongue Education in Multilingual Township: Possibilities for Recognising Lok'shin Lingua in South Africa," *Reading & Writing* 10, no. 1 (2019): 1-10.; S. Sibanda and R. Venketsam, "Exploring Strategies Teachers Use to Develop Literacy Skills among English FAL Learners in the Foundation Phase.," *Perspective in Education*, 39, no. 2 (2021): 253-266.

emphasised phonics more to help the learner decode letters, which will aid him or her to read by using repeated reading.

The other challenge learners faced was reading with fluency. According to Pikulski and Chard, reading fluency is widely regarded as the critical link between decoding and comprehension.⁴⁵ In its absence, readers tend to focus their cognitive effort on decoding individual words rather than understanding their meaning.⁴⁶ As observed, the SPG 4, 5, and 6 were able to decode words with wrong pronunciation, which then led to no comprehension of what they were reading. These findings are supported by Paige, who argued that students with an inadequate inventory of words recognised automatically are unlikely to become fluent readers, and dysfluent readers are unlikely to comprehend what they read, as in the case of SPG 4, 5 and 6.⁴⁷

From this observation, it was clear that the teacher needed to advance her knowledge of how to use scaffolding as an approach to help learners who experience challenges in reading fluency, such as SPG 4, 5 and 6. This is in line with the findings of Pikulski and Chard, that in this way, learners will have the ability to make inferences and formulate critical and personal responses, which will boost the comprehension skills of the learners.⁴⁸

Challenges faced by teacher in teaching reading and possible strategies to teach reading

This section discusses challenges that teachers encounter in teaching reading. Teachers are on the delivery side and are responsible for the implementation of CAPS.⁴⁹ It is crucial not only to identify challenges but also to suggest possible strategies that can help teachers teach reading effectively. The teaching of reading involves several steps as stipulated in the CAPS document.⁵⁰ This means that in each step, as learners engage, teachers are required to support them through peers, scaffolding and the Point Act Tell Say (PATs) approach. Masowa and Thetso argue that, with full teacher support, learners learn how to write different texts and strive to produce their own texts.⁵¹ This suggests that, when learners are fully supported by the teacher, they will master reading and will be able to read for comprehension.

This led to the second research question that this article aims to answer: "What are the challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers in teaching reading skills to Grade 4 Sesotho learners?" The findings confirm that the teacher has experienced various challenges in teaching reading to Grade 4 Sesotho learners. The first challenge identified in this study is the pedagogical approach the teacher used. It was observed that the teacher employed a traditional method of teaching reading. At first, the teacher asked learners to take out their DBE book and allocate a paragraph for learners to read. The first step of reading, which is pre-reading, was not followed as stipulated in the CAPS document. This step requires the teacher to do the following,

- Activating prior knowledge
- Looking at the source, author, and publication date.
- Reading the first and last paragraphs of a section.
- Making predictions.

During this step, the teacher would have created a conducive environment for learning to take place. The learners would have actively participated in the task given. This is what Vygotsky refers to as social interaction. According to Motaung, social interaction plays an important role in child cognitive development.⁵² Allowing learners to make predictions about what they see would have activated their thinking, and that would make it easier to activate the prior knowledge that learners already possess on

⁴⁵ I. Pikulski and D. Chard, *Fluency: Bridge between Decoding and Reading Comprehension*, vol. 58 (Reading Teacher, 2005).

⁴⁶ Linnea C. Ehri, "Learning to Read Words: Theory, Findings, and Issues," *Scientific Studies of Reading* 9, no. 2 (April 19, 2005): 167–88, https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532799xssr0902_4.

⁴⁷ D.D. Paige, "Reading Fluency: A Brief History, the Importance of Supporting Processes and the Role of Assessment, Viewed n.D," 2020.

⁴⁸ Pikulski and Chard, *Fluency: Bridge between Decoding and Reading Comprehension*.

⁴⁹ Masowa and Thetso, "The Challenges Faced by Teachers and Learners in Implementing Process Writing Approach in a Sesotho Grade 4 Classroom."

⁵⁰ Department of Basic Education, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): History Grades 10–12* (Pretoria: DBE, 2011).

⁵¹ Masowa and Thetso, "The Challenges Faced by Teachers and Learners in Implementing Process Writing Approach in a Sesotho Grade 4 Classroom."

⁵² Motaung, "Teachers' Perceptions of the Decline of the Sesotho Language among Grade 4 Learners in Ekurhuleni South District."

the matter. To actively implement this stage, the teacher can use the PATS approach. To help SPG 4 to pronounce the word *kapotane* (captain), the teacher will point at the picture of a captain, act out the word captain, tell the meaning using pictures and say the word *kapotene* in a sentence. This will make learning easier as they learn differently. The traditional method of teaching employed by the teacher demonstrated insufficient pedagogical approaches. This is in line with Fesi and Mncube, who highlight that teachers need robust training to implement reading strategies.⁵³

Another challenge identified was a multigrade classroom setting. In multigrade teaching, it is essential for teachers to adequately prepare the learning environment. They must ensure that time is allocated appropriately for the students' learning process. The students are then given assessment tasks that match their academic competence.⁵⁴ It was observed that the class is divided into two: Grade 4 on one side and Grade 5 on the other side. As a result, the teacher needed to have a well-planned lesson so that the other grades would not disturb her during the lesson. To overcome this challenge, the teacher can use the unique skills and talents and the advanced skills of other learners to help other classmates.⁵⁵ In doing so, the teacher acknowledges that some learners are intellectually superior compared to others. Therefore, in this case, the teacher will allow them to be facilitators and little experts to their other classmates. This is in line with what the ZPD of Vygotsky is saying. ZPD is based on the notion that people with fewer skills can learn more from those with more advanced skills through emulating their behaviour.⁵⁶ This means that learners such as SPG 4, 5 and 6 could learn the reading skills from their peers to master the pronunciation, while the teacher is busy with SPG 1 in mastering the vowels and consonants by using decoding and flashcards, as well as the vowel and consonant chart provided in the recommendations.

Another challenge revealed was the lack of support for learners experiencing barriers to reading. For learners to master a certain skill, they must be taught and supported throughout. According to Masowa and Thetso, teachers are expected to scaffold the learners during the writing process. They further argue that the lack of intervention during the writing process leads to frustrations and incomplete work by learners.⁵⁷ It was observed that the teacher did not intervene during the reading process. Taking into consideration that this was not a reading for assessment task, the teacher was expected to model reading to help learners experiencing barriers to reading achieve reading skills. The SPG 1 was unable to decode the word *Qetellong* (at the end). Hence, the use of flashcards in this case would be of good use by the teacher. For further support, the teacher could develop an individual support plan in which she uses scaffolding and backgrading to teach SPG 1 phonics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There should be a Professional Learning Community (PLC) within the school where Foundation Phase teachers work closely with Intermediate Phase teachers to remedy the situation. This kind of collaboration will help teachers to share skills and strategies that will allow them to support learners with barriers to reading and enhance the reading skills of learners.

Institutions of higher learning, in the faculty or colleges of education, should prepare student teachers with the pedagogical skills of teaching in a multigrade classroom setting. The Department of Basic Education should also conduct in-service training to enhance the pedagogical skills of teachers for a multigrade classroom setting. Learners should be encouraged to read more often to improve their reading skills. This will help improve fluency and vocabulary building.

Teachers could use WhatsApp groups, Google Classroom, and Microsoft (OneNote) to provide extra support to learners who are struggling. This strategy will also improve parents' involvement as they will be able to partake in their children's education when they are at home.

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

⁵⁴ G.B. Naparan and V.G. Alinsug, "Classroom Strategies of Multigrade Teachers," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 2021.

⁵⁵ Naparan and Alinsug, "Classroom Strategies of Multigrade Teachers."

⁵⁶ Jiayu Zhou, "A Critical Discussion of Vygotsky and Bruner's Theory and Their Contribution to Understanding of the Way Students Learn," *Review of Educational Theory* 3, no. 4 (2020): 82–87.

⁵⁷ Masowa and Thetso, "The Challenges Faced by Teachers and Learners in Implementing Process Writing Approach in a Sesotho Grade 4 Classroom."

Teachers can use backgrading to teach vowels, consonants, and phonics during extra classes to support learners with word recognition problems. This will work nicely with individual learners whom the teacher could have identified earlier during the baseline assessment.

Teachers are encouraged to use the materials developed by the Sesotho and isiZulu Reading Programme (SIRP) to enhance their reading pedagogy and are encouraged to read more of the published articles on the topic.⁵⁸

Table 1: Recommendation of reading chart containing vowels, consonants, words.

Vowels	Single Consonants	Double Consonants	Triple Consonants	Fourplex Consonants	Word/verb
A	B				bolo
E	D				danone
I	F				fatuku
O	H	hl, hw,			hlotsa
U	J	Jw			jwang
	K	kg, kw, kh			kgaba
	L	ll, lw			lla
	M	mp, mm	Mph		mpona
	N	ng, ny, nk, nw, nt	ntl, nkg, nts, nth, ntj, nqh	ntsh, ntjh, ntlh	ngwana
	P	Ph			pholo
	Q	Qh			qhaqha
	R	Rw			rwala
	S	sh, sw			sheba
	T	th, ts, tl	tjh, tsh, tlh, tlw		tlhapi
	U				udu
	V				vene
	W				watjhe
	Y				
	Z				zoka

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate the challenges that Grade 4 Sesotho learners encounter when reading. The focus of the study was to assist Grade 4 learners in improving their ability to read with comprehension and develop strategies that teachers can employ to enhance and support learners who experience barriers to reading. The researcher concluded that reading with comprehension is still a challenge for Grade 4 Sesotho learners who progressed to Grade 4 without phonemic awareness, phonics, and acceptable vocabulary. Based on the findings and discussion, this study concludes that teachers in Grade 4 need proper training on teaching reading and how they should support learners who experience challenges in reading. Therefore, the study concludes that improving reading outcomes among Grade 4 Sesotho learners requires a coordinated effort involving teachers, parents, policymakers, and communities. Strengthening mother-tongue instruction and ensuring consistent support can lay a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

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⁵⁸ They can access them through this link: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1yodFPm3rZxTJILmQUsIbNHkesqRLWc>.

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