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## Challenges of English as a first additional language: Fourth grade reading teachers' perspectives

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The study reported on here was designed to investigate the challenges faced by teachers when teaching reading in Grade 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) in East London, South Africa. This research study was framed by the socio-constructivist theory of reading. A case study design that corresponds with the constructivist paradigm was used to gather qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted with 12 teachers who were purposively selected from 4 public schools (2 English teachers from each school and 1 natural sciences teacher) to establish the challenges that they encountered in their attempts to encourage Grade 4 EFAL learners to gain proficiency in English. Data presented were taken from a large scale on English reading problems. The data were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis and were arranged and coded into 5 themes. The major findings refer to the poor level of reading of Grade 4 EFAL learners, a decrease in teacher and learner motivation, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate training on reading strategies. Based on the findings of the study and an extensive literature review, the Comprehensive Model for teaching reading is recommended.

**Keywords:** challenges in teaching English; English First Additional Language; Grade 4

### Introduction

As English is spoken widely throughout the world, many people view proficiency in English as contributing towards access to employment opportunities, higher education, traveling widely, and even a better life. English is used all over the world as a means of interaction among people from different backgrounds, cultures and ethnic groups (Macedo, 2019). However, teachers face several challenges in and out of the classroom since learners find it difficult to practice the language due to limited classroom language opportunities (Liziwe & Moodly, 2018). The challenge of limited resources and underqualified teachers is a problem (Dewi, 2015). "Across grades, the likelihood of reading below the basic level was highest for children from nonmajority groups, children from low-income backgrounds, and children who were classified as English-language learners" (Lonigan, Purpura, Wilson, Walker & Clancy-Menchetti, 2013:112). August and Shanahan (2017) state that vocabulary training has been recommended by the National Reading Panel to promote English reading comprehension of primary schools learners. In spite thereof, reading is still problematic in the United States of America. Araújo and Costa (2015) state that parental collaboration with schools in Denmark helped in promoting Grade 4 learners' English reading comprehension.

Caro, Sandoval-Hernández and Lüdtke (2014) state that the relation between home and school marked a great development in English for Fourth Grade learners in Denmark. Indeed, while it has been widely noted in research conducted in Australia, Kalb and Van Ours (2014) add that children who read at home regularly are likely to achieve good scores in literacy when they reach the Fourth Grade. Unfortunately, Mojapelo (2018) highlights that the reading culture in many African countries is poor or simply does not exist. In Rwanda there is a prevalence of oral communication more than reading of stories. Lumadi (2016) posits that some Grade 4 learners are unable to construct even a single correct sentence because of vocabulary limitations since they cannot read with comprehension. Subsequently, in Zimbabwe, 172,698 of the Grade 4 learners who sat for the O level examinations in 2012, only 31,767 (18.4%) passed with at least five subjects. English was one of the three subjects with the lowest scores (Gonda, 2013, cited in Liziwe & Moodly, 2018).

Teaching English reading in primary school is different from secondary school. Teachers who teach reading comprehension in Grade 4 EFAL experience various challenges and constraints. Hence, there is a need to re-evaluate the approaches used to teach English reading (Behroozi & Amoozegar, 2014). The findings reveal that teaching English to EFAL learners in Grade 4 has challenges as the proficiency level achieved by students seem to be far from the actual goals of additional language education since learners are unable to read with comprehension (Akbari, 2015). Consequently, teaching English reading to EFAL learners is a challenging task in developing countries like South Africa. Activities that are done in primary schools should incorporate content and body movements (Schmidt, F, Benzing, Wallman-Jones, Mavilidi, Lubans & Paas, 2019). Teachers need to demonstrate the lesson and learners need to imitate the teacher in the process. However, in overcrowded classrooms teachers find it difficult to interact with learners. A suggestion was that classrooms should foster interaction rather than competition (Jensen, Mejía-Arauz, Grajeda, Toranzo, Encinas & Larsen, 2018). Poor reading challenges have been a concern for most researchers on the teaching of English to first additional language learners in South African primary schools. Entwisle, Alexander and Olson (2019), Spaul, Pretorius and

Mohohlwane (2018) and Taylor, Fleisch and Shindler (2007) submit that challenges that were highlighted in their research studies revealed the poor level of reading in South African schools.

The teaching of English in African schools is still a challenge for current and future governments (Weda & De Villiers, 2019). The new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement recommends that an additive bilingual approach to the teaching of first additional language (FAL), which is English in this study, should be followed in Grades R to 3 (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014). Learners at this stage of development are assumed to have acquired proficiency in reading through the influence of their mother tongue. However, South African primary school learners in Grade 4 are affected by the transition to being taught in English as language of learning and teaching (LoLT). In Grades R to 3 they are taught in their mother tongue and the shift to English causes barriers. Widodo and Dewi (2018) submit that learners at this stage lack fluency in English that leads to English reading difficulties. Most learners in primary schools do not use English in their homes as they communicate in their mother tongue, which (for this study) is isiXhosa. Learners are forced to learn in a language that is not familiar to them (Van der Merwe & Nel, 2014).

Research shows that reading, and particularly reading comprehension, in South African rural schools is problematic (Klapwijk, 2015; Pretorius & Lephala, 2011). Researchers reveal that Grade 4 learners fear to respond to the questions requiring language skills because of the language barriers (Janse van Rensburg, 2016; Joubert, 2015; Van der Merwe & Nel, 2014). Klapwijk (2015:1) posits that reading with understanding relies on the “ability to read effectively from an early age.” However, irrespective of several attempts by the Department of Education (2011), reading is still problematic in primary schools and affects teachers and learners. Foncha and Sivasubramaniam (2014) concur that the inability to read in primary schools is a big problem that affects learners’ teaching and learning.

The decrease in teacher motivation negatively impacts on English reading in primary schools in disadvantaged backgrounds (Sugino, Abe & Ueda, 2017). Sugino et al. (2017) point out that those learners’ behaviour causes a loss of educator prestige. Fiszman (2015) echoes this sentiment and points out that the salary that educators earn in return for their effort is quite low compared to other professions. Several researchers propose that to develop learners’ reading skills, a stimulating relationship between teacher and learners is essential (Kelly, 2017; Ramírez, López & Ferron, 2019). Several changes in the curriculum and the advances in technology are contributing factors. Factors related to learner reading achievement are centered on reading motivation and reading-related

self-perception. Learners with a low sense of efficacy tend to give up more easily – they don’t complete reading tasks, become involved in off-task activities or they avoid the task completely (Fenn, 2018). Pretorius and Spaul (2016) reveal that the lack of attention to reading does not only have detrimental consequences for the development of reading skills but also for improvement in proficiency and comprehension in EFAL learners. Hence, we investigated the challenges faced by teachers when teaching English reading to Grade 4 EFAL learners.

Poorly trained educators and dysfunctional schools also contribute to the problems with English reading. Evidence from literature validates that teachers are the most critical participants in educational reform – predominantly in those that influence what happens in the classroom (Pearce & Wood, 2019). Teachers should rigorously assist Grade 4 learners to be able to read with comprehension (Akbari, 2014; Jafari & Kafipour, 2013; Tabatabaei & Hoseini, 2014). English educators at primary school levels encounter challenges regarding knowledge, skills and strategies to promote the teaching of English reading (Ferris, 2018). Researchers such as Iwai (2016), Korthof and Guda (2016) and Muijselaar, Swart, Steenbeek-Planting, Droop, Verhoeven and De Jong (2017) state that a relationship exists between reading comprehension and reader’s strategies. Researchers should suggest strategies to support educators and motivate learners by instilling a reading culture in FAL learners in primary schools, since reading problems are still prominent.

Ethical clearance for this research was granted by the University of Fort Hare (MOO 041 SFES 01). There are only a few schools in rural areas and learners travel long distances to school. The schools are so congested that teaching and learning are not effective. The challenge of resources and underqualified teachers is a problem. Our study is of significance to curriculum developers, education specialists and English subject advisors, principals of schools, English educators, parents and decision-making bodies in shaping the education system. This may help Grade 4 EFAL learners to instil a culture of reading to enhance reading skills, which will add to the development of critical thinking and observational skills. In conclusion, various studies have been carried out on the challenges experienced with English in primary schools. Not much research has been done about the challenges faced by Grade 4 teachers when teaching English reading comprehension in primary schools in disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, we attempted to fill the gap by examining the challenges that teachers face when teaching English reading in primary schools in disadvantaged areas. This study adds value to the body of knowledge and we make

recommendations on how to address these challenges experienced by teachers.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study was anchored in the constructive theoretical lenses of socio-constructivist theory of reading. The theory mandates that researchers link the study to the knowledge contributed by other researchers (İnci & Yıldız, 2019). The socio-constructivist theory of reading is a social process that takes children's contexts in and outside school into consideration (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Hovious, 2018).

#### Constructivism as an Education Theory

Vygotsky (1978, cited in Schmidt, HG, Rotgans & Yew, 2019) state that constructivism refers to learning as an active process where learners can create new ideas or concepts that are based upon their current or prior knowledge. Vygotsky (1978, cited in Dang, 2018) argues that constructivism as an education theory has implications for teaching reading comprehension in expediting learning; the teachers must take the cultural context of the learners into consideration as it influences their thinking and actions. Learners can be given problem-solving activities with instructions for reading comprehension. Thereafter, the learner should work independently, using his/her background knowledge and skills with guidance from the teacher. The teacher should be there to guide and translate the instructions for the learners.

Teachers should motivate and encourage learner participation to discover the principles on their own, guided by prior and the current knowledge. Barrett and Long (2012) suggest that curriculum should be spirally organised to allow learners to build on prior knowledge. Magro (2018) is of the view that in constructivism people construct their understanding of phenomena by relating with others and objects in the world around them. Kepe, Foncha and Maruma (2017) also argue that constructivism builds critical thinking in learners as they can work alone without the interference of an educator, hence, they need to cultivate a culture of reading in learners.

#### *Challenges influencing reading: South Africa*

South African educators face many challenges in the teaching of English reading in Grade 4. These challenges negatively influence learners' educational progress and competency. These challenges are the following:

##### Teacher competency

Evidence from literature confirms that teachers are the most critical participants in educational reform, predominantly in those that influence what happens in the classroom (Pearce & Wood, 2019). Teachers need to equip themselves with new strategies of teaching reading to meet the learners' academic, linguistics and social needs (Sosa-Provencio,

Sheahan, Fuentes, Muñiz & Prada Vivas, 2019). Teacher training in South Africa is a concern. Reading is crucial for all subjects at school. Teachers in South African schools lack the knowledge of how to teach reading. Competent, qualified educators should use correct methods to teach English reading in an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning (Rosyida & Ghufron, 2018).

##### Parental involvement and socio-economic environment

The bulk of the learners in rural areas come from impoverished backgrounds. Newman (2019) argues that children from poverty-stricken families perform poorly at school. Learners from poor backgrounds show difficulty in English reading since some parents lack the foundation to teach them to read. Echoing the foregoing, Xiang, Hao, Qiu, Zhao and Gu (2018) add that parents lack resources which include financial and physical resources as well as a support system. Hence, the socio-economic status is considered as a cause of poor learner performance in English reading in primary schools (Kainuwa & Yusuf, 2013). In addition, parents should have home libraries to enhance their children's reading skills (Fox, 2018).

##### Big class sizes

Overcrowded classrooms are common in South African schools – especially in rural areas. The DBE (2014) submits that the learner-educator ratio for public schools in South African school is 30:1. This is not the case in many schools in South Africa. Miron, Shank and Davidson (2018) concur that the ratios are not implemented in most of the schools in South Africa. Big classes create chaos, inattentiveness and disruption of lessons (Siperto, 2018). Blunden-Greef (2015:120) adds that for learners to acquire proficiency in reading they “need to practice speech in the classroom which requires added attention.” This causes frustration for teachers, as they cannot be effective in teaching English in such an environment. Khumalo and Mji (2014) report that a school in the Eastern Cape had 165 learners in a Grade 3 class and 140 learners in a Grade 2 class. Overcrowded classrooms and the lack of skilled, trained teachers contribute to learners' failure rate (Wedgwood, 2013, cited in Siperto, 2018).

##### Availability of resources

South African schools, especially in rural areas, lack resources. This contributes to the difficulty of improving reading in schools. Learners should have access to proper reading materials that enhance development of good skills required (Rosyida & Ghufron, 2018). We believe that Grade 4 teachers usually use traditional learning materials such as chalkboards and wall charts, which do not improve

the teaching of English reading (Román, Delgado, Ubilluz & Bedón, 2019). Most schools in disadvantaged backgrounds do not have modern technology, which may assist in improving reading problems (Dawson & Shand, 2019). Spaul and Hoadley (2017) reveal that South African learners still lack improvement in reading in Grade 4, which results in learners having difficulty to read with comprehension. One solution to this problem could be the inclusion of training on the development of teaching materials in teacher education programmes. This will help teachers to adapt existing materials to address the learners' needs or construct new materials with existing facilities (McGrath, 2013). Researchers such as Iwai (2016), Korthof and Guda (2016) and Muijselaar et al. (2017) state that a relationship exists between reading comprehension and readers' reading strategies. Researchers should suggest strategies to support educators and motivate learners by instilling a reading culture in FAL learners in primary schools, since reading problems are still prominent.

#### Reading Strategies

The literature on reading strategies shows that teaching strategies is one of the most effective means of helping students to overcome reading problems (McNamara, 2017).

#### *Reading aloud*

Paige (2011) states that in reading aloud, teachers should read the text aloud with the learners to model reading, which could help with difficult words. Reading aloud in front of peers can provoke anxiety among learners who struggle with reading.

#### *Silent reading*

Sustained silent reading (SSR) is a form of school-based leisure reading where learners read silently in a selected time period every day in school. Stevens, Walker and Vaughn (2017) states that SSR does not enhance reading fluency.

#### *Cognitive reading strategy*

Cognitive strategies are direct language learning strategies that can help students to consciously process meaning in the target language (Kasimi, 2012). Readers activate their background knowledge and apply this to aid them in understanding what they are reading. Cognitive reading strategies enable learners to comprehend a text in order to decode language units and to construct a coherent mental representation of the text. This representation can be retrieved by learners for diverse determinations after reading is completed. Learners will be able to recall information from the text, answer questions and apply the knowledge obtained from the text. Learners can integrate the text information that they are reading with information from background knowledge. In line with the above view, Zarra-

Nezhad, Shooshtari and Vahdat (2015) add that cognitive strategies are related to learners' understanding of texts by making predictions, translating, summarising, and guessing meaning from context, and relating their reading to their background knowledge.

#### *Metacognitive reading strategy*

Li (2010) argues that literature on metacognitive awareness of reading strategies indicates the need to increase understanding of readers' metacognitive knowledge about reading strategies so that individuals develop into active and constructively responsive readers. Zhang and Seepho (2013) reveal that metacognitive reading strategies are the strategies that are employed by readers in order to improve their awareness and control over reading comprehension and to evaluate it. O'Malley and Chamot (1990, cited in Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2015) submit that the term metacognition has been used to refer to knowledge about cognition or the regulation of cognition. Hurd and Lewis (2008:72) state that metacognitive strategies are "indirect strategies used to monitor the self when engaged in an activity such as reading." Ellis (2015) asserts that in high proficiency levels learners tend to use a range of metacognitive strategies to enhance their proficiency. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies have been indicated to contribute to helping learners face their challenges in comprehending a text. The use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies indicates a positive relationship to the learners' reading comprehension performance (Naeini & Rezaei, 2015).

#### **Methodology**

The aim of the study was to elucidate the challenges experienced by educators when teaching Grade 4 EFAL learners. In the study we used a qualitative research approach embedded in a constructivist paradigm and a case study research design. Merriam and Grenier (2019) state that the qualitative research approach permits holistic research of the problem at hand, taking a few variables into consideration. In this study we used interviews and observations with 12 teachers in four schools in East London (Buffalo city district) in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants as we attempted to gain an in-depth understanding of what reading challenges Grade 4 educators perceive when teaching reading to Grade 4 EFAL learners. The participants in this research were three educators from each school – two language teachers and one natural science teachers. The choice of interviewing language teachers was because they taught reading. In many South African schools, English becomes the LoLT in all subject areas from Grade 4 (DBE, 2014). The content teachers were interviewed to establish what

challenges they encountered in their endeavours to encourage proficiency in English among Grade 4 EFAL learners.

#### Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted to gain in-depth information about the issue at hand. All necessary steps were taken to ensure that the participants understood the research requirements and that the key principles of informed participant consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw, anonymity and avoidance of harm were upheld (Cosgrove, 2018). Five themes emerged from the data collected through the interviews and observations.

#### Primary Research Question

The primary research question in this study was: What challenges affect the teaching of reading skills in Grade 4?

#### Secondary Research Question

The secondary research question in this study was: How do teachers address the challenges encountered?

#### Results

The study was conducted to investigate the challenges faced by teachers when teaching English reading to Grade 4 EFAL learners in East London. Codes were used, for example, EP1 (English participant 1), NSP2 (natural science participant 2). We used an observation schedule to observe the teachers while teaching English reading in Grade 4. To strengthen the validity of the study, we also observed lesson presentation and classroom management, recording the natural occurrences while the teachers interacted with the learners in a classroom scenario. We arranged the responses provided by the participants under specific themes, which were analysed, interpreted and are discussed as follows:

Theme 1	Description of obsolete facilities and inadequate infrastructure
Theme 2	Description of overcrowded classrooms
Theme 3	Description of poor reading challenges
Theme 4	Description of teacher/learner demotivation
Theme 5	Description of parental involvement

#### Obsolete Facilities and Inadequate Infrastructure

The participants conveyed that the inclusion of appropriate teaching materials could increase the quality of education. Teachers are forced to use the traditional ways of teaching since no resources are available. This inhibits the improvement of reading in schools.

EP1 summarised the issue as follows:

*Lack of resources such as reading material limits the learners' understanding of English. I gave*

*learners extra homework. Most of them do not do it because readers are limited. Tell me who is at fault here, the learners, teachers, parents or the system?*

NSP1 responded:

*We have the computer room which was full of computers, but it was vandalised, and the computers were stolen. There is no security in our school. We had a library that is nothing else but a white elephant. This is a challenge, community is not working hand in hand with the school. There is no reading material, no books.*

The findings agree with those of Román et al. (2019) who found that Grade 4 teachers usually used the traditional learning materials, viz. chalkboards and wall charts. This is in line with Dawson and Shand (2019) who add that most schools in disadvantaged backgrounds do not have modern technology, which may assist in improving reading problems in primary schools. The findings agree with those of researchers such as Iwai (2016), Korthof and Guda (2016) and Muijselaar et al. (2017) who confirm that a relationship exists between reading comprehension and readers' reading strategies. One school integrated e-learning as computers are used extensively in that school. The teacher used an overhead projector when teaching. Learners were actively involved interacting with each other by sharing their stories. Learners were engaged by doing e-reading on the computers.

#### Overcrowded Classrooms

Almost all the participants expressed negative teaching experiences concerning the size of classes. Teachers felt that they failed to optimise their potential in teaching English reading due to the big classes. Overcrowded classrooms create more challenges for management control, planning and assessment (Atkins, 2018). Conversely, small classrooms are not disruptive, learners are attentive, and they finish the tasks on time. It is easy for teachers to use a variety of reading strategies to afford quality education (Powers, Bierman & The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2013).

EP2 responded as follows: *"A big classroom is a problem. You cannot exercise discipline. I am unable to implement other strategies except chorus reading, which is not effective."*

During the observations we noticed that the classes were big and lacking furniture. Ventilation in some classes was limited. There were no fans. One cannot expect to enforce discipline in such situations. The findings are in line with Siperto (2018) who highlights that big classrooms create chaos, inattentiveness and disruption of lessons.

#### Poor Reading Challenges

Poor reading by EFAL learners in South African primary schools have been a concern for most researchers (Singh, 2015). No simple strategy exists to remedy the situation, however, working together

may kindle meaningful change (Maddock & Maroun, 2018).

The comment by EP3 summarises the issue:

*The transition to Grade 4 is a challenge. Learners were used to being taught in their mother tongue from Grade R-3. I use reading aloud and shared reading strategies but I'm not sure how to teach strategies as I have never been taught reading. Learners are not reading fluently. The time allocated for reading is too little.*

The findings are in agreement with those of Behroozi and Amoozegar (2014) who highlight the need to re-evaluate the approaches used to teach English reading. During the interviews and observations it became clear that there was a need for teachers to advance their knowledge on how to implement reading strategies. This is in line with the findings by Ferris (2018) who state that English teachers at primary school level encounter challenges regarding knowledge, skills and strategies to promote the teaching of English reading.

NSP1 stated as follows: *“Our learners are unable to read and their attitudes towards English will not take them anywhere. They used to be taught in their mother tongue, now what I do in natural science, I teach them in Xhosa.”*

Another participant (EP4) addresses the issue from a different point of view. His short comment states that the use of various strategies enhanced reading skills.

*I check difficult words in the text and explain to the learners after letting them predict what is in the text. I get a chance to establish prior knowledge. I model reading to my learners and allow them to follow after me while I am reading the text, I ask questions after I have explained the text or extract to them. Learners join the club to instil a culture of reading. Learners must finish one book in 2 weeks' time, come with a summary in the classroom and it is read aloud with questions and answers involved. We always allow learners from Grade 4 to make use of the library to get books that are age appropriate to read them in the library.*

Some teachers refute these views as we established that some learners were able to read with comprehension with the use of a variety of strategies and interacting with others by sharing the stories they have read. The above views are in agreement with Magro (2018) who submits that in constructivism people construct their understanding of phenomena by relating with others and objects in the world around them. Learners joined the reading club and shared the stories in the classroom. This is in line with Dang (2018) who submits that teachers' and learners' interaction is important as the teachers and the learners should participate in the activity.

#### Teacher/Learner Demotivation

Demotivation can be external and internal and is caused by different factors. Teachers' boring and monotonous voices cause negative attitudes and the

development of hatred of English in learners (Baba Khouya, 2018). A lack of self-confidence can also reduce motivation. Teaching methods, materials and teacher competency, teachers' personality and commitment can be the main source of demotivation (Ghaith, 2019).

EP3 stated: *“Teaching is no longer fun. We are keeping a bunch of learners who are unable to read. I just move with the ones who are interested. The money is too little for what we endure in the classrooms.”*

The above view is in agreement with Fiszman (2015) who submits that the salary that teachers earn in return for their efforts is quite low compared to other professions.

NSP2 responded:

*There are learners who are unable to read and who are even unable to write. They write something you will not be able to understand. Some learners mix English with their mother tongue when answering the question after they have read the extract. I do not bother myself if the answer is correct.*

This is in line with Sugino et al. (2017) who reveal that the decrease in teacher motivation negatively impacts on English reading in primary schools in disadvantaged backgrounds and that the learners' behaviour cause the loss of educator prestige.

#### Parental Involvement

EP2 responded: *“Parents do not involve themselves in their children's education. They do not help them with any homework. They are illiterate – even siblings are unable to read.”*

Kainuwa and Yusuf (2013) submit that socio-economic status is considered as the cause of learners' poor performance in English reading in primary school.

#### Discussion of Findings

The aim of the study was to investigate the challenges that teachers encountered when teaching reading to Grade 4 EFAL learners. The major themes that emerged were over-crowded classrooms, inadequate facilities and inadequate infrastructure, demotivation of teachers, poor reading and a lack of parental involvement. These challenges inhibit the progress of promoting English reading to Grade 4 EFAL learners. The findings of this study confirm that English remains a problem at Grade 4 level. Grades R to 3 learners were used to being taught in their mother tongue. The transition to English as LoLT in Grade 4 is a major challenge since learners are unable to read and write in English at Grade 4 level. Some teachers found it difficult to even teach in English.

The natural science teachers said that they were not concerned with the language that the learners used and some of them even use isiXhosa when teaching. The findings confirm that most teachers complain about big classes that inhibit the development of reading strategies in the classroom.

Miron et al. (2018) are of the opinion that the ratios are not implemented in most of the schools in South Africa. Consequently, the DBE (2014) submitted that the learner-teacher ratio for public schools in South African schools was 30:1. Due to the large numbers in the classrooms, most teachers use chorus reading. This is in line with Rosyida and Ghufon (2018) who highlight that learners should have access to proper reading materials and appropriate infrastructure that enhance development of good reading skills. The findings show that the poor level of reading is caused by the parents' impoverished backgrounds, that is in line with Kainuwa and Yusuf (2013) who submit that socio-economic status is considered as the cause of learners' poor performance in English reading in primary schools. Our study also revealed that some teachers encountered challenges with parental involvement. The findings show that parental guidance is lacking as most learners are not supervised when doing homework.

The findings of the study agree with Newman (2019) who highlights that children from poverty-stricken families perform poorly at school. The findings of the study confirm that teachers are frustrated and demotivated. The data from the interviews and observations corroborated what Ghaith (2019) proposes; that teaching methods, materials and teacher competency, teachers' personality and commitment can be the main source of demotivation. The results from the observations and interviews are in line with Entwisle et al. (2019), Spaul et al. (2018) and Taylor et al. (2007) who highlight that their research studies revealed the poor level of reading in South African schools in Grade 4. The findings of this study also reveal that the teachers have limited reading materials in schools, and that this negatively impacted on reading habits and learners' ability to read with comprehension. This is in line with findings by Widodo and Dewi (2018) who submit that the lack of learners' fluency in English leads to difficulties in English reading.

**Conclusion**

The aim of our study was to investigate the challenges faced by teachers teaching English

reading to Grade 4 EFAL learners in disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus of this study was to assist Grade 4 learners to improve their abilities to use printed media as resource for learning to enhance reading with comprehension. We concluded that reading with comprehension was still a problem for Grade 4 learners who were taught in their second or even third language. Based on the findings and discussion, the results of this research are as follows: (1) Teachers need robust training in order to implement reading strategies. A strategy is the way in which the reader approaches the text. (2) The use of reading aloud could improve the learners' reading achievement.

A lack of proficiency in vocabulary and comprehension techniques coupled with limited background knowledge further exacerbate learners' ability to interact appropriately with texts. Responses to comprehension deficits have routinely been reactive rather than proactive, indicating the need for a paradigm shift targeted at identifying more preventative measures of reducing deficits in reading comprehension. Exposing learners to reading strategies will equip them for success when faced with any reading and writing tasks. Learners will be able to feel more prepared to engage in more rigorous reading tasks as self-efficacy and interest in reading will be enhanced.

**Recommendations**

- Teachers should be provided with a more effective teacher-training programme on reading strategies to prepare them for the realities in teaching English reading in Grade 4.
- Based on the recommended model for reading strategies developed in this study, action research that embraces the recommended model would be appropriate to eradicate reading problems.
- Collaborative inquiry into teachers' needs should be explored to identify and develop best practices for teachers and best professional alliances in a 21st century learning environment.
- Also, with regard to social media and digital content, more qualitative studies are needed to determine the specific needs of teachers and learners in order to create reading models that enhance reading comprehension. For further recommendations, see Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Recommended comprehensive model of teaching reading (adapted from Fesi, 2018:258)

Challenges faced by teachers when teaching Grade 4 English first additional language learners in East London (Buffalo City district)	Comprehensive model of teaching reading for implementation of strategies to promote reading
Most teachers complained of a lack of reading materials or readers that make the Grade 4 learners lag behind in reading. Xiang et al. (2018) state that parents lack resources which included financial and physical resources, as well as support systems.	Teachers can bring magazines and newspapers to school. Improvise by cutting pieces of paper and using computers or free hand to write stories for reading lessons. Read the stories, make summaries for your learners, and place these in the reading corner or classroom. Teachers should be encouraged to use digital learning to enhance reading comprehension.

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### Authors' Contributions

FL conducted the interviews, analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. VM contributed to the conclusion. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

### Notes

- i. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- ii. DATES: Received: 12 March 2019; Revised: 3 July 2020; Accepted: 28 July 2020; Published: 31 August 2021.

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