




Exploring Grade 8 English First Additional Language learners' reading comprehension challenges



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Background: Reading is valued as a critical aspect of literacy, but there is a concern about the regression in reading comprehension that remains a global issue. Consequently, most countries around the world are worried about learners' poor reading skills.

Objectives: The study investigated the reading comprehension challenges of Grade 8 English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners.

Method: This qualitative study used a case study design and thematic data analysis to process and analyse the data. The purposively selected sample for the focus group interviews consisted of 16 Grade 8 EFAL learners (eight girls and eight boys) from one secondary school in the Capricorn North District, Koloti Circuit.

Results: Learners experience challenges with pronunciation and limited vocabulary during reading comprehension. The results further indicate that learners experience challenges due to teachers' inability to teach reading comprehension, low parental literacy, and poverty. The data analysis reported that the lack of a school library also contributed to reading comprehension challenges.

Conclusion: The findings revealed that educators contributed towards learners' reading comprehension challenges.

Contribution: This calls for in-service training for educators on how to teach learners with reading comprehension challenges.

Keywords: reading comprehension; learners; EFAL; reading comprehension challenges; reading.

Introduction

English is often used as a global communication language by individuals from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnic groups (Macedo 2019). For this reason, it has come to be regarded as a universal language, and a lack of proficiency in English is frequently regarded as a barrier to accessing employment opportunities and higher education (Daqiq, Akramy & Barati 2024). Among the important skills that English second-language speakers seek to develop is reading. High school learners are expected to read English with understanding to gain admission to tertiary institutions. However, many learners in various countries, including South Africa, continue to struggle with English (Weda & De Villiers 2019) because of difficulties in comprehension. Despite the importance of reading as a fundamental goal of education, Pretorius (2000:99) notes that learners in South Africa struggle to show learning through reading on their own, raising concerns about their academic performance. In other words, by failing to master the essential skill of reading comprehension, learners are at risk of encountering academic challenges, as highlighted by Pretorius and Bohlmann (2002:205). The high number of learners struggling with reading comprehension in South African schools is a concerning issue that requires further research. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) and Klapwijk (2015) found similar results. Additionally, Olifant (2024) indicated that many learners face challenges during the learning-to-read phase in primary school, which contributes to their difficulties.

Comprehension is recognised as a critical aspect of the reading process (Klapwijk 2015). According to Sibanda, Dippenaar and Swart (2024), reading comprehension is fundamental to learning. To acquire information and knowledge from written texts, individuals must be able to read with understanding. A lack of comprehension can lead to challenges in achieving academic success. Research by Klapwijk (2015) and Pretorius and Lephala (2011) consistently highlights the widespread issue of poor reading comprehension among learners in South Africa, which hinders

their ability to respond effectively to language-based questions. The significance of reading comprehension for academic success underscores the necessity of developing this skill from a young age (Klapwijk 2015:1). Despite the Department of Education's initiatives, including the Annual National Assessments (ANAs), reading comprehension remains a challenge even at the secondary school level. Foncha and Sivasubramaniam (2014) note that poor reading comprehension adversely affects teaching and learning processes, as reading is essential for learning.

According to data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), in 2006, 87% of learners in Grade 3 and Grade 4 struggled with reading comprehension. The situation showed a slight improvement in 2011, with 82% facing similar challenges, and further improved in 2016, when 76% still struggled. However, the PIRLS (2021) data presented a concerning reversal, indicating that 81% of learners continued to have comprehension difficulties – a 5% decline from 2016. This persistent issue highlights the ongoing challenges not only at the primary school level but also among high school learners, who need to be capable of reading to learn (Pretorius 2000:35). The declining figures emphasise the urgent need to find solutions to improve reading comprehension levels, especially since most schools in South Africa use English First Additional Language (EFAL) as the medium of instruction. This serves as a strong rationale for further research to explore the factors contributing to these issues.

Despite the efforts of previous studies on reading comprehension, existing research has largely focused on other contexts, and none has been conducted at the selected research site in Moletjie. This leaves a significant gap in our understanding of learners' reading comprehension experiences in rural areas like Moletjie, where this study was carried out. Lem (2020) defines this situation as a geographical gap, which occurs when studies have primarily focused on certain regions, countries, or cultural settings while others remain underrepresented. According to Lem, in many cases, findings from one region may not be generalisable to others, making it necessary to extend research into new locations or cultural contexts.

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute new knowledge and inform targeted interventions for Grade 8 EFAL learners facing reading comprehension challenges. This article aims to help bridge the gap by reviewing recent South African research on learners' reading comprehension challenges and gathering information directly from the learners. The study aims to explore the reading comprehension challenges faced by Grade 8 EFAL learners in secondary school in the Capricorn North District, with a specific focus on learners' reading comprehension challenges. By identifying both known and unknown characteristics of learners with reading comprehension difficulties, the study intends to make recommendations for supporting these learners in improving their comprehension skills.

To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are the reading comprehension challenges of Grade 8 EFAL learners?
- How do Grade 8 EFAL learners perceive their past reading comprehension experience?
- What is the Grade 8 EFAL learners' source of reading comprehension challenges?

Literature review

This section focuses on literature related to the concept of reading comprehension, including a global perspective, a South African perspective, learners' understanding, and challenges associated with reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension

Since learners are expected to comprehend complex and intricate materials throughout their education, access to complex texts is crucial. According to Magnusson, Roe and Blikstad-Balas (2018), reading comprehension entails interpreting texts, drawing inferences, and arriving at conclusions. This is in accordance with the view of Bobkina and Stefanova (2016), who describe it as the ability to analyse a text critically. Similarly, understanding involves active thinking that comprises questioning, understanding, evaluation, and decision based on the text, as emphasised by Vaseghi, Gholami and Barjestech (2012). Essentially, effective reading comprehension comes from the interactional process between the reader and the text.

Furthermore, Horowitz's (2014) investigation reveals that reading comprehension is a multifaceted thinking procedure that requires the reader to exhibit intentionality and thoughtfulness during the act of reading. According to Horowitz (2014), this involves the continuous monitoring of words and their associated meanings as the reading experience unfolds.

Reading comprehension is essential to teaching and learning in all areas because learners must read proficiently and critically to understand any subject (Assaly & Smadi 2015). Additionally, Assaly and Smadi (2015) indicated that the role of teachers in teaching, learning, and assessing comprehension is of the utmost importance in the development of comprehension skills in learners. As per their findings (Assaly & Smadi 2015), reading comprehension is a vital cognitive skill that demands a great deal of focus, memory retention, and comprehension processes. It is not just about having a strong vocabulary or good grammar but also developing the ability to effectively identify and understand the type of text being read.

As stated by Pardo (2004, cited in Coetzee, Van Rensburg & Schmulian 2016), reading comprehension is defined as:

[T]he process through which learners apply prior knowledge and experiences when interacting with written text in order to gain meaning and understanding from that text within a particular socio-cultural environment. (p. 307)

Aligned with Pardo and in the scope of this study, reading comprehension entails engaging with the text, making meaning from it, interpreting and analysing it, and subsequently reflecting on it (Coetzee et al. 2016).

In a similar vein, Middleton (2011) explains reading comprehension as the process of creating meaning through the coordination of multiple intricate processes, such as word reading, fluency, word knowledge, and language. In other words, reading comprehension entails comprehending and interpreting information within the text. Reading comprehension is more than just knowing and retaining the meaning of every word in the book; it is also about how learners create and construct the text's meaning (Sari 2017).

Chaka (2015, in Matakane 2018) emphasises that learners' reading comprehension is a major problem, which has led to the implementation of reading interventions in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom at various times.

However, Matakane (2018) mentioned that in certain American schools, learners who use English as their first additional language face difficulties in comprehending texts because of the unfamiliarity of the language. Consequently, teachers are required to address the gaps in their strategies for deriving meaning from texts (Matakane 2018). According to the reports published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), a significant number of elementary school learners in the USA and the Netherlands read below the minimum level necessary for reading comprehension. In 2013, the United Nations (UN) conducted a study which revealed that almost 757 million young people and learners aged 15 and above worldwide lacked the ability to read or write (Oyowe 2022). A significant fraction of the global illiterate population consisted of women (UNESCO 2013).

According to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reports of 2016 and 2018 (United Nations 2016, 2018), individuals from families where no-one is literate are more than four times as likely to drop out of school early than those who come from households where at least one person has completed secondary or higher education (Adipat & Chotikapanich 2023). The evidence from the reports suggests that socioeconomic circumstances and the educational levels of parents exert an influence on the education of learners. According to Sachs (2012), the Millennium Development Goals were created to tackle global challenges by focusing on poverty reduction and improving healthcare, education, and other essential human needs in underdeveloped nations. These goals were set to be achieved within a 15-year timeframe, from 2000 to 2015. In 2012, a high-level global sustainability group proposed that governments should implement the SDGs based on its suggestions (Sachs 2012). The SDGs were implemented in 2016 (Hák, Janoušková & Moldan 2016:565). In essence, they aim to bring advantages to all member nations of the UN, regardless of their economic status. Every nation, regardless of its wealth, has an obligation to contribute towards the well-being of future generations (Sachs 2012:2206).

According to Matakane (2018), Malaysian schools often lack a comprehensive approach to teaching reading comprehension skills. Moreover, there is a dearth of instructional material to help EFAL teachers develop these skills in their learners. It is worth noting that the emphasis on grammar in English language teaching has led to a lack of awareness among high school learners about effective strategies for comprehending English reading materials (Eng, Mohamed & Ismail 2016; Matakane 2018:3; Semtin & Manian 2015). The benchmark report on reading comprehension scores in rural Malaysian schools reveals that learners fall below the standard, with 20% of learners classified as 'academic warning' (Eng et al. 2016).

In most South African schools, there is a strong emphasis on teaching comprehension skills based on the assumption that learners already have the necessary ability to understand what they read. Unfortunately, little attention is given to direct instruction on reading comprehension itself.

Klapwijk (2012) argues that South African schools rarely explicitly teach reading strategies, and many teachers lack the knowledge to effectively instruct learners in comprehension. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Education [DoE] 2011) does not clearly outline the reading strategies that teachers should use to enhance learners' reading comprehension in Grade 8. As a result, teachers have a limited understanding of these strategies and view comprehension instruction as a challenge. Consequently, minimal time is allocated to teaching reading comprehension, and there is no standardised approach to this essential skill. These issues prompted the researchers to undertake this study, which aims to identify strategies that can help teachers effectively teach reading comprehension for the benefit of their learners.

Olifant et al. (2020) note that despite comprehensive studies on reading comprehension and the development of theoretical and practical approaches by researchers such as Cekiso (2012, 2017), Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), and Zimmerman and Smit (2014), learners in South Africa continue to struggle with self-directed learning through reading. The PIRLS provides evidence of this issue, showing that learners exhibit inadequate reading comprehension skills and limited critical reading proficiency, as indicated by benchmark success profiles (PIRLS 2006, 2011, 2016). The PIRLS scores demonstrate that South African learners read at a level that is two grades below their global peers. Furthermore, the poor performance of South African Grade 6 learners in the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) reinforces this education crisis. According to SACMEQ (2007), South Africa ranked 10th in reading literacy among 15 participating nations, performing worse than economically disadvantaged countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Swaziland.

Extensive research by Willenberg (2018), Rule and Land (2017), and Spaul (2016, as cited in Olifant et al. 2020) provides considerable evidence that South Africa is

experiencing a reading crisis, primarily because of the low levels of reading competence among its learners. Experts have conducted numerous studies to uncover the key components involved, with the role of instructors being found to be particularly significant. Thus, this study aims to tackle the persistent reading difficulties faced by South African learners and identify the specific challenges related to teachers' instruction of reading strategies.

The decline in reading proficiency among South African learners, as highlighted by the PIRLS results, can be attributed to several factors: ineffective teaching methods at the primary school level (Rule & Land 2017; Van der Merwe & Nel 2012), a lack of emphasis on reading as a cultural activity (McEwan 2013), insufficient availability of reading materials (Spaull 2016), socioeconomic influences (Pretorius & Lephala 2011; Taylor & Yu 2009), and linguistic challenges (Heugh 2009; Jordaan 2011). Furthermore, focusing on the role of teachers, Nel (2011) and Van der Merwe and Nel (2012) attribute teachers' inadequate understanding of reading instruction to insufficient training and support during their university teaching practicums. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) assert that teachers lack immersion in extensive reading practices, resulting in limited comprehension of reading concepts, development, and techniques.

Recent studies have focused on the influence of teachers in improving their learners' reading abilities. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) highlight compelling evidence that many teachers are not effectively developing learners' fundamental reading skills, which are crucial for comprehension.

This discussion emphasises the weak reading abilities of primary school learners in South Africa, suggesting that their teachers have not adequately nurtured these essential skills. As a result, learners struggle to read for understanding, leading to poor academic performance. It appears that South African schools may not adequately prioritise the understanding and interpretation of texts or engage learners in critical reading. Several researchers, including Dreyer and Nel (2003), Klapwijk (2011), Zimmerman and Smit (2014), and Zimmerman (2014), have pointed out this oversight.

Despite the extensive research on learners' reading comprehension, there is a gap in knowledge regarding the specific methods used to teach reading comprehension strategies in South African classrooms. To address this deficiency, the present study aims to provide valuable insights into the pedagogy of reading comprehension in high school settings. Specifically, the study investigates and analyses the reading comprehension challenges faced by Grade 8 EFAL learners. Often, reading challenges are mistakenly attributed solely to language proficiency, with the assumption that improving language skills will automatically resolve reading issues (Pretorius & Klapwijk 2016).

English First Additional Language learners' challenges related to reading comprehension

A learner's reading ability can be affected by various challenges. This study will explore the impact of poor working memory, lack of phonemic awareness, decoding difficulties, prior knowledge, and meaning making on reading ability.

Poor working memory

According to Mohammed and Amponsah (2018), working memory is a significant factor contributing to the reading difficulties experienced by learners. Scholars such as Sanford (2015) emphasise that working memory is essential for temporarily holding information in short-term memory while learners engage in cognitive tasks.

Therefore, it is crucial to identify and address working memory deficits in learners who face reading challenges. As noted in the research conducted by Mohammed and Amponsah (2018), Alloway et al. (2009), and Swanson, Kehler and Jerman (2009), learners with these challenges often exhibit low working memory capacities. These findings underscore the importance of taking proactive measures to support learners with memory deficits, as this can greatly enhance their ability to process and retain information effectively.

Improving working memory can significantly impact learners' reading abilities. By identifying and addressing this issue, teachers can assist learners in overcoming their challenges and achieving academic success.

Lack of phonemic awareness

Sanford (2015) and Davenport (2002) highlighted that a lack of awareness of the individual sounds in spoken words and difficulties in decoding letter-sound relationships can impede a learner's reading proficiency and fluency. This is because reading is a technical process that requires the reader to identify each letter and word accurately. Swanson et al. (2009) have also argued that weak phonological memory and processing can lead to poor reading abilities in learners.

Blending individual sounds while reading words and retaining phonological information is important for learning to read, as emphasised by Swanson et al. (2009). Additionally, Torgeson (1998) suggested that learners who struggle with reading at a lower grade level, may have trouble to recognise and read words accurately.

Decoding difficulties

Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) emphasise that decoding, or word recognition, is essential for reading comprehension. They found that readers who struggle with decoding have more difficulty understanding texts than those without such

issues. Engaging in class debates and conversations in English helps learners memorise words, which aids in recognising and understanding them during reading.

Moreover, some learners may face reading challenges because of difficulties with word decoding or oral language comprehension, often linked to a lack of prior knowledge or exposure to new vocabulary. Decoding involves breaking words into syllables and pronouncing them accurately. Therefore, developing decoding skills is crucial for improving reading fluency and comprehension.

Prior knowledge

Utilising prior knowledge effectively is crucial for enhancing reading comprehension. Readers actively connect new texts to their existing knowledge, which encompasses general facts and personal experiences relevant to the subject matter (McNamara 2007). Additionally, possessing strong vocabulary proficiency is essential, as a limited vocabulary can create significant barriers to understanding. Ricketts, Nation and Bishop (2007) highlight that a restricted vocabulary may impede learners' comprehension, especially when texts include unfamiliar words. Chou (2011) found that the breadth of one's language knowledge directly influences reading comprehension. Therefore, individuals with a more extensive vocabulary are better equipped to understand written material than those with a more limited vocabulary.

Meaning-making

According to Vundla (2020), comprehending written text for meaning and real-world engagement is a fundamental process known as reading for meaning or sense-making. In the realm of education, teachers encounter challenges that impede effective reading comprehension among EFAL learners. In response, teachers seek strategies to improve learners' understanding of texts. Linake and Mokhele (2019) highlight that EFAL learners often struggle with language nuances and text complexities, hindering their ability to interpret and apply information. These difficulties result in insufficient reading skills, affecting academic success and increasing dropout rates. To combat these issues, Rapetsoa and Singh (2017) recommend training EFAL teachers to effectively implement the new curriculum.

Theoretical framework

The study was framed by the constructivism and socio-cultural theories to help understand the reading comprehension difficulties faced by Grade 8 EFAL learners. Constructivism theory, as discussed by Vygotsky (1978) and mentioned by Schmidt, Rotgans and Yew (2019), relates to the question of why learners struggle to understand. It shows that when students do not participate actively in the reading process, learning is more difficult for them. The socio-cultural theory (Tracey & Morrow 2012) looks at how learning experiences can be affected by social interactions and the challenges that come with them. The study found that poor

teaching, not enough resources, and a lack of social support greatly affected students' reading skills. This supports the idea that active learning and social interaction are important for gaining knowledge. Using the constructivism and socio-cultural theories for this study worked well because they jointly focus on how learners learn by actively engaging with information, as Vygotsky (1978) suggested, and highlight the important role of social and cultural interactions in improving reading comprehension competency (Tracey & Morrow 2012). Furthermore, this collaborative use of these theories suited the goal of understanding the reading comprehension difficulties faced by Grade 8 EFAL learners in their educational and social settings.

Research methods and design

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the research questions and the reading comprehension challenges faced by learners. Qualitative research effectively shed light on these challenges as experienced by participants in their natural settings. According to the principles of qualitative research, understanding participants' experiences, including the challenges they encounter, can enhance our understanding of the classroom and reading environment. Olifant, Cekiso and Rautenbach (2019) noted that qualitative research is particularly valuable for gathering culturally specific information, as well as insights into the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of specific populations.

The study employed a case study design. Lichtman (2014) defines a case study as a detailed investigation of a particular case, which is the primary focus of the research. Furthermore, Green and Thorogood (2018) describe it as an in-depth study conducted on a single case that could pertain to a location, an individual, or a policy.

Participants

A sample of 16 Grade 8 EFAL learners (eight girls and eight boys) from a secondary school in the rural Capricorn North District of Limpopo participated in this study. These learners were purposefully selected to address the research questions directly. With the permission of the chosen participants, audio recordings were made during focus group interview sessions, enabling the learners to share their experiences regarding the challenges they faced with reading comprehension in English classrooms. The interviews focused on the specific difficulties encountered during EFAL reading activities. All the learners were from one Grade 8 class. They were interviewed in four groups.

Instrumentation and data analysis

The study used semi-structured focus group interviews with learners as its source of data. Gill et al. (2008) describe semi-structured interviews as consisting of several key questions that not only help define the areas to be explored but also allow the interviewer or interviewee to veer off to pursue particular ideas or responses in greater detail. This data

collection method was considered appropriate for the research question, which aimed to understand the challenges faced by 16 Grade 8 learners during reading comprehension lessons.

Data analysis

Data were gathered using an interview schedule and an audio recording device, and the sessions were then transcribed. The researchers examined the data to gain a general understanding and reflect on its overall meaning. Following this, the data were categorised by grouping sections of text into themes and labelling those themes. Codes were generated and subsequently interconnected. Finally, the themes were presented in the form of a narrative passage. The researchers interpreted the results from the learners' focus group interviews in terms of whether they supported or contradicted one another, thereby creating an opportunity for thematic data analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct research for this study was obtained from the Faculty Committee for Research Ethics in Humanities (FCRE-HUM) at Tshwane University of Technology on 26 April 2024 with the reference number FCRE/APL/STD/2023/09.

Results

As mentioned above, focus group interviews were conducted with 16 Grade 8 EFAL learners to gather their perceptions and experiences regarding reading comprehension challenges and strategies.

The interviews were conducted in English with learners who had been using English as their medium of instruction since Grade 4. The learners could speak English, but when they had trouble understanding certain words during the interviews, the interviewer gave them translations to help them understand. The interviewer, who has a master's degree in language practice, cleaned the raw data by removing unnecessary information and filler words. The cleaned responses clearly demonstrate the challenges learners faced with reading comprehension instruction while maintaining the authenticity of their experiences.

The first research question sought to explore the challenges learners face during reading comprehension. The insights gathered directly from the learners highlighted the reading comprehension difficulties they encountered and their perceptions of why these challenges persisted.

Theme 1: Learners' reading comprehension challenges

From the responses gathered during the focus group interviews, it was clear that learners faced a variety of challenges related to reading, including a lack of self-confidence, difficulties with public speaking, problems with

audibility, pronunciation issues, and a limited vocabulary. Learners specifically cited the fear of reading aloud in class as a significant challenge. They noted that when they mispronounced words, other learners tended to laugh, which created a negative classroom environment. The following verbatim quotes support the above narrative:

'The teacher is not different from the previous teacher because an activity will be given for a comprehension text, and the teacher marks o[u]r test from the memorandum, meaning we don't get assessed for our thinking.' (Learner 8)

'Reading is never taught in class. We only find it during class activities and examinations. I don't remember our teacher coming to class to teach us comprehension.' (Learner 7)

'I find reading boring because if you spell a word incorrectly, some learners will laugh at you, and that is the reason I don't enjoy reading.' (Learner 14)

'I do experience challenges because some words are difficult to pronounce, and as we go to other grades, we experience words we were never taught of, and mispronunciation.' (Learner 2)

'Some words I don't understand. I cannot say the words correctly, and I am not able to use my own words to answer questions. I just copy what is written in the text.' (Learner 8)

'One of the challenges I experience when reading is that I cannot spell words correctly.' (Learner 13)

'Mispronunciation is also a challenge I experience.' (Learner 16)

The learners' responses reveal that they faced challenges with pronunciation and had a limited vocabulary. They believed that pronunciation was one of their main difficulties. These seem like challenges that are usually experienced by beginner learners. It is clear that these learners lack basic reading comprehension skills. Their teachers should deal with the basic reading comprehension skills the learners did not master in lower grades before moving on to more advanced lessons.

Theme 2: Learners' perception of their past experiences with reading comprehension

The second research question sought to investigate the Grade 8 learners' past experiences with reading comprehension. The learners indicated that the reason they find reading comprehension challenging is the lack of proper explanation. Furthermore, learners indicated that reading comprehension is never taught in class. Their challenges in responding to comprehension questions ultimately affect their marks. These findings show a need for qualified teachers who can teach comprehension so that learners can become proficient readers. The following interview extracts support the above:

'In Grade 7, I was only given a comprehension text for class and home activities, but I was never taught on how to answer questions based on the given text. Lastly, I can say it was confusing.' (Learner 1)

'I would say I was bad, but comparing to now, I have improved. Because during the time when I was in Grade 7, I was practising, not reading. I was not fluent and audible enough, and I am not sure as to whether I am now too.' (Learner 2)

'We were spelling words before reading in Grade 7. In Grade 7, we did not understand bombastic words in terms of reading them, and spelling them was bad.' (Learner 16)

The learners indicated that they were not provided with lessons on reading comprehension strategies in the previous grade. The focus was on the individual words, and the target was pronunciation and spelling.

The third research question sought to investigate the source of Grade 8 learners' reading comprehension challenges.

Theme 3: Sources of learners' reading comprehension challenges

This theme addresses the sources of the specific reading comprehension challenges learners encountered, which may arise from linguistic barriers, insufficient background knowledge, or unfamiliarity with certain text types.

The learners expressed concern about their teachers not allowing them to read a variety of reading materials. They highlighted that repeatedly reading the same stories in class is detrimental, as it leads to memorisation rather than comprehension. Consequently, when these learners encountered comprehension passages on tests, they struggled to perform well. The learners noted that their school lacks a library, which limits their exposure to diverse reading materials, particularly ones aligned with their interests. Learners also shared important insights about the low literacy levels of their parents, which affected their reading comprehension.

The following interview extracts support the information above:

'Reading in class is boring in class because we only read stories from our textbooks, and we are not given a chance to find newspaper articles, and there is no library at the school. We should read the same stories every term.' (Learner 5)

'Poverty contributes as I cannot afford to buy books so that I can read for pleasure. My parents are not employed; they only depend on the old age grant.' (Learner 2)

'I have observed that learners whose parents are educated have better chances of being exposed to the English language. In my case, I speak and read English books only at school. My parents are not educated and therefore cannot assist me with reading.' (Learner 14)

The authors are of the view that the absence of libraries in schools diminishes learners' interest in reading. Libraries provide access to a diverse range of reading materials, allowing learners to practise reading at their own pace. Exposure to various types of texts enriches their learning experience.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore the reading comprehension challenges faced by Grade 8 EFAL learners in the Capricorn North District. The findings revealed that these learners encountered various challenges that hindered their ability to

excel in EFAL reading in the classroom. Issues such as pronunciation difficulties and limited vocabulary significantly impacted their reading comprehension skills.

These findings align with research conducted by Souriyavongsa et al. (2013), which indicated that vocabulary limitations impede reading ability, creating obstacles for learners. Similarly, Fatiloro (2015) noted that infrequently used words often present challenges in terms of spelling and pronunciation. Therefore, it is crucial for learners to focus on improving both vocabulary and pronunciation skills to enhance their reading comprehension.

Additionally, the study found that learners attributed their comprehension difficulties to a lack of proper instruction. Many learners indicated that reading comprehension is seldom taught in class. This highlights that the challenge of responding to comprehension-related questions often lies with the teachers. The findings resonate with research by Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), which revealed that teachers often lack familiarity with extensive reading concepts. Furthermore, Van der Merwe and Nel (2012) pointed out that inadequate reading instruction is a result of insufficient teacher training.

Moreover, the study corroborates the findings of Beck and Condy (2017), which showed that teachers are either reluctant to teach reading comprehension or simply do not know how to do so effectively. Klapwijk (2015) emphasised that teachers often neglect reading comprehension instruction because of their lack of understanding of how to teach these skills, highlighting the need for educators skilled in teaching comprehension.

In summary, the findings showed that Grade 8 EFAL students struggle with pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and feeling unsure when reading out loud. A key finding was that reading comprehension was seldom taught directly in classrooms, and teachers often did not have the competency to teach these strategies well. The study found important environmental issues, such as the lack of school libraries and resources, making it difficult to get books. Furthermore, some parents have poor reading comprehension competency, which limits learners' ability to get help at home. These problems were made worse by a lack of proper preparation in earlier grades, where basic reading skills were not taught well, resulting in these learners experiencing reading challenges in Grade 8.

The research had some important limitations. It only included 16 students from one rural school, used only focus group interviews, and did not include teachers' views or classroom observations.

Recommendations

The socio-cultural environment includes various stakeholders – learners, teachers, the DoE, and parents – all of whom are essential to supporting learners' academic success. Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations should be considered:

- All stakeholders should aid learners in developing vocabulary and pronunciation skills. The DoE should create targeted language programmes, teachers should integrate phonics and vocabulary exercises into the curriculum, and learners should practise these skills independently to overcome academic challenges.
- Schools, especially ones in rural areas, need to establish and promote libraries to provide diverse reading materials and encourage a reading culture. Learners should also be motivated to visit local community libraries.
- Providing textbooks at the start of each year is crucial for effective teaching across subjects.
- Workshops should be organised for teacher training. These should focus on reading instruction and comprehension strategies, particularly for newly appointed teachers. Heads of EFAL departments should conduct classroom observations and assessments to identify common challenges, leading to a curriculum that employs a learner-centred approach.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate and address the challenges faced by Grade 8 learners in reading comprehension. The findings emphasised the various difficulties that contribute to these learners' struggles with comprehension, highlighting the importance of improving reading proficiency within a socio-cultural context.

Effective reading skills are essential in South Africa, particularly because many learners struggle to read for meaning. Some insights gathered from the learners' perspectives indirectly point to the role of teachers in these challenges, as some teachers lack the necessary skills to effectively teach comprehension strategies in the classroom.

Overall, the study's findings offer valuable contributions that could help address reading comprehension challenges for learners worldwide.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

A.M., as the primary author of the manuscript, was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, and original drafting of the article. Co-authors F.M.O. and M.P.C., who formed the supervision team for this research, contributed by critically reviewing and editing the document.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study, and its findings, are available within the article.

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