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Reading comprehension in Sepedi foundation phase by Khelovedu learners

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Background: This study was prompted by the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results, which highlighted a serious reading crisis in South Africa, with Sepedi identified as the lowest-performing language in reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is vital because it provides the foundation for all subsequent learning, enabling learners to understand and engage meaningfully with content across all subjects.

Objectives: This study examined learners' reading comprehension in Sepedi during the Foundation Phase.

Method: The study employed a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with Grade 3 teachers from three selected primary schools in the Mopani District.

Results: Learners' comprehension of Sepedi texts in the Foundation Phase was generally poor. Learners experienced significant linguistic and phonological challenges, had limited vocabulary, and struggled to recall information and make inferences, indicating that many were unable to read for meaning.

Conclusion: The study found that linguistic factors, especially dialectal variation and limited vocabulary knowledge, play a significant role in learners' reading comprehension challenges in Sepedi during the Foundation Phase.

Contribution: This study emphasises the need for the Department of Basic Education to implement context-sensitive reading interventions, including teacher training and the provision of instructional materials, to improve reading comprehension in Sepedi by addressing dialectal variation, vocabulary development, and phonological decoding.

Keywords: reading comprehension; Khelovedu; Sepedi; dialectal variation; vocabulary development.

Introduction

Reading may be described as the heartbeat of education or the mother of all learning. According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2021), reading is important because it lays the foundation for all learning. It is widely believed that if learners can read for meaning as early as Grade 4, they are more likely to succeed across all subjects. However, reading remains a challenge worldwide, as reflected in successive PIRLS results.

In 2021, PIRLS conducted a study to assess reading ability across approximately 57 education systems worldwide, including countries from different regions such as Brazil, Egypt, Hong Kong, Jordan, Kosovo, Russia, Singapore, and South Africa. According to the results, Singapore was the highest-performing country, with a score of 587, followed by Hong Kong at 573 and Russia at 567. Several other participating countries, including but not limited to Morocco, Kuwait, and Iran, scored below the international average of 500. Although performance varied across countries, a substantial number of participating education systems performed below this benchmark, highlighting significant disparities in reading literacy achievement globally. The results of this study therefore underscore ongoing concerns regarding reading literacy levels in many contexts, rather than suggesting that most countries failed to reach the average. The contextual factors associated with low performance levels are discussed later in this study.

South Africa is no exception when it comes to reading challenges. According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2025), many South African learners struggle to read for meaning, a problem that is especially evident in the Foundation Phase. This concern is confirmed by the

PIRLS 2021, which reported very low levels of performance in learners' ability to understand reading material at the age of 10. South Africa ranked lowest among participating countries, including the six African countries that took part in PIRLS 2021, with learners assessed across the 11 official languages achieving an average score of 288 – well below the international benchmark. Although participation from the African continent was limited, South Africa's performance remains a matter of concern, particularly given the persistently poor reading outcomes observed across multiple assessments.

Notably, Sepedi and Setswana recorded the weakest results. One factor highlighted by PIRLS is the relationship between the language spoken at home and the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), with learners exposed to the LoLT at home generally performing better than those who are not. This finding points to deeper linguistic challenges in African languages such as Sepedi, particularly issues related to dialectal diversity and the limited standardisation and harmonisation of the language. Sepedi has approximately 27 dialects, and the standard variety used in schools does not always correspond with the dialects spoken at home. As a result, learners from diverse dialectal backgrounds may struggle with decoding, vocabulary recognition, and meaning-making when reading standard Sepedi texts.

This study examines Khelovedu-speaking learners whose home dialect differs from standard Sepedi, which is used as the LoLT. Research by Ramothwala et al. (2021), Ramothwala (2024), and Ramothwala, Cekiso and Mandende (2025) highlights linguistic mismatches between Khelovedu and Sepedi at phonological, lexical, and grammatical levels. These differences may affect learners' reading comprehension, including their ability to decode unfamiliar words, develop vocabulary, recall information, and make inferences. Webb, Lepota and Ramagoshi (2004) further note that Sepedi is not commonly spoken in Bolovedu South, meaning that learners have limited exposure to the standard language outside the classroom. Large-scale assessments in South Africa, such as PIRLS, indicate that many learners are unable to read for meaning by Grade 4, suggesting that the problem originates in the Foundation Phase. Understanding learners' difficulties in relation to their home language may assist in facilitating early and cost-effective interventions.

The DBE (2025) reports that many Foundation Phase learners have weak phonemic awareness and difficulty distinguishing between similar sounds. These challenges are intensified when the home language differs from the LoLT. Limited exposure to standard Sepedi, together with insufficient support for dialectal variation, may contribute to poor reading comprehension. Mother-tongue literacy is essential for cognitive and academic development. Strong literacy skills in the home language support reading comprehension and facilitate the learning of additional languages at a later stage. If learners do not develop comprehension skills in Sepedi during the Foundation Phase, they are likely to experience increasing difficulties when the LoLT changes in later grades. Investigating these issues is therefore essential for improving early literacy and promoting long-term educational success.

Against this background, the study examines the reading comprehension skills of Khelovedu first-language learners in Sepedi during the Foundation Phase, focusing on their ability to understand texts and read for meaning, as well as on the factors contributing to their comprehension challenges. Grounded in Sociocultural Theory, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the reading comprehension level of Khelovedu learners in the Sepedi Foundation Phase classroom? and
- What factors influence Khelovedu learners' reading comprehension in the Sepedi Foundation Phase classroom?

Theoretical framework

This study emphasises the importance of Sociocultural Theory as a framework for analysing how Khelovedu (first language [L1]) learners engage with reading in Sepedi, while acknowledging the significant influence of social context and cultural experiences on literacy development. Developed by Lev Vygotsky in the early 1920s, this theory posits that learning is inherently social and culturally mediated (Vygotsky 1978). According to the theory, Khelovedu L1 learners may encounter challenges because of limited cultural and linguistic connections with Sepedi, their LoLT. As their home dialect differs from Sepedi, their prior knowledge and experiences may not align with the curriculum, causing reading tasks to appear unfamiliar. In line with this theoretical perspective, teachers need to scaffold learners' development to bridge the gap between their current understanding and the expected learning outcomes. Without such support, Khelovedu L1 learners are likely to remain below or unable fully to benefit from learning within their Zone of Proximal Development because of insufficient scaffolding.

In addition to Sociocultural Theory, this study draws on the Simple View of Reading to define successful reading (Gough & Tunmer 1986; Hoover & Gough 1990). This model conceptualises reading comprehension as the product of two core components: word recognition and language comprehension (Hoover & Tunmer 2018). Word recognition involves the accurate and fluent decoding of printed words, whereas language comprehension refers to the understanding of meaning at both sentence and discourse levels (Pretorius & Murray 2019). Within the context of this study, Khelovedu L1 learners' difficulties in reading Sepedi reflect challenges in both decoding unfamiliar linguistic forms and accessing meaning because of limited vocabulary knowledge. Integrating this model with a sociocultural perspective positions reading as both a cognitive and socially mediated process, requiring scaffolded support to develop learners' word recognition and comprehension within meaningful linguistic and cultural contexts.

Literature review

Reading comprehension and the ability to read for meaning: Global and South African perspectives

Reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase is widely recognised as a key outcome of early literacy instruction. Research in the science of reading, together with the Simple View of Reading, highlights that understanding meaning from text depends on both accurate decoding and strong language comprehension. In addition, factors such as background knowledge and reading fluency also contribute to reading comprehension. Studies from countries such as the United States, England, and Australia, where systematic phonics instruction is commonly implemented, demonstrate significant improvements in learners' word recognition. These gains support better reading comprehension, particularly among learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Castles, Rastle & Nation 2018; National Reading Panel 2000; Rose 2006). In these contexts, learners who develop automatic decoding skills are better able to focus on understanding the meaning of texts.

Research from Canada and China further indicates that interactive approaches such as reciprocal teaching improve vocabulary development, oral reading fluency, and higher-order comprehension skills. Reciprocal teaching involves learners taking turns to lead discussions using strategies such as questioning, summarising, clarifying, and predicting. These approaches enable learners actively to construct meaning from texts rather than merely decode words (Palincsar & Brown 1984; Rosenshine & Meister 1994). Overall, these findings suggest that effective early reading instruction promotes learners' ability to read for meaning when decoding and comprehension strategies are integrated.

In contrast, evidence from South Africa reveals consistently low levels of reading comprehension in the early grades. Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2021 found that 81% of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, indicating that most learners leave the Foundation Phase without functional comprehension skills (Oxford University Press 2023; Spaull 2023). These findings are supported by the 2030 Reading Panel (2025), which reported that approximately 80% of Grade 3 learners are unable to read for meaning, suggesting that comprehension difficulties begin early and remain largely unresolved.

Research conducted within African language contexts further underscores the severity of this challenge. Studies involving Sesotho-speaking learners reveal very low levels of oral reading fluency and limited letter–sound knowledge, both of which are strongly associated with poor reading comprehension (Vaz 2024). Similarly, research on early grade reading benchmarks indicates that learners who fail to acquire foundational reading skills, including phonological awareness, letter–sound knowledge, and fluency are at high risk of struggling to comprehend texts as they progress (Qvist 2023). Given the limited large-scale data available on Sepedi, this study seeks to explore the extent to which Foundation Phase learners taught in Sepedi can move beyond surface-level decoding and engage meaningfully with written texts.

Factors contributing to reading comprehension difficulties in the Foundation Phase

Several interconnected factors contribute to reading comprehension difficulties in the Foundation Phase. Central among these are weaknesses in foundational code-related skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading fluency, together with underdeveloped language skills, including vocabulary and listening comprehension. Research consistently demonstrates that deficits in these key areas significantly constrain learners' ability to derive meaning from text, resulting in surface-level or mechanical reading rather than genuine comprehension (Snowling & Hulme 2012; Vaz 2024).

Furthermore, teacher-related challenges may exacerbate these difficulties. Studies indicate that many Foundation Phase teachers contend with large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient pedagogical content knowledge, particularly in relation to teaching reading in African languages (Dagada 2022). For example, large classes may reduce opportunities for individualised and small-group reading instruction, both of which are essential for monitoring learners' comprehension and providing targeted support. In addition, limited orthographic and linguistic knowledge among teachers has been identified as a significant barrier to effective literacy instruction in learners' home languages (Mokobe, Badenhorst & Schlebusch 2025). The shortage of adequately trained Foundation Phase teachers capable of teaching reading in African languages further limits learners' opportunities to develop strong literacy skills in their mother tongue.

Beyond linguistic and teacher-related challenges, contextual factors also play a significant role. Limited access to reading materials in African languages, for instance, restricts learners' exposure to print, vocabulary development, and engagement with texts. Although structured reading programmes, such as those documented by Nkomo (2021), have improved learners' engagement with texts, access to high-quality reading materials remains uneven across many under-resourced South African schools. Broader socio-economic factors, including poverty, limited parental involvement in reading, and print-poor home environments, further reduce learners' opportunities to develop reading comprehension skills, as demonstrated in studies linking low socio-economic status and limited home reading engagement to weaker reading outcomes (Graham & Mtsweni 2025; UNICEF 2023).

Against this background, this study seeks to examine the factors contributing to reading comprehension difficulties among Foundation Phase learners learning to read in Sepedi.

In doing so, the study addresses a contextual and language-specific gap in the literature by moving beyond assessments that merely document low reading comprehension levels to provide insight into why learners struggle to read for meaning in Sepedi. Given that existing research often focuses predominantly on isiZulu and isiXhosa, this study contributes much-needed language-specific evidence to inform early literacy teaching and support in Sepedi-medium classrooms.

Research methods and design

This study employed a qualitative research approach within a case study design. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of learners' reading comprehension in Sepedi, including the factors contributing to their reading difficulties. Qualitative research is appropriate when the objective is to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon within its real-life context (Creswell 2014).

The study was conducted as a case study in the Mopani District, Limpopo province. A case study design was considered suitable because it enabled the researchers to explore reading comprehension within a specific linguistic context in which Sepedi serves as the LoLT. Three public primary schools were purposively selected from the Bolovedu South region of the Greater Tzaneen Municipality. The selection was informed by documented underperformance in Sepedi reading at secondary-school level within the same district and region (Greater Tzaneen Municipality 2016; Ramothwala et al. 2021; Ramothwala 2024). Although the selected primary schools were not included in the performance analyses, they function as feeder schools to the underperforming high schools and were therefore considered to need early intervention to address the literacy challenges observed at secondary-school level.

The schools were in the Bolovedu South region and were easily accessible to the researchers. The purpose of the study was not to generalise the findings but rather to provide context-specific insights applicable to similar multilingual settings. The study involved three Grade 3 Sepedi teachers – one from each school. This sample size was considered appropriate because qualitative case studies prioritise depth over breadth, thereby enabling a rich and detailed exploration of teachers' experiences, learners' reading-for-meaning abilities, and the contextual factors contributing to their difficulties within a bounded case.

Data collection

Data were collected through classroom observations and retrospective semi-structured interviews with three teachers. Classroom observations enabled the researchers to assess learners' actual reading practices in Sepedi, with particular attention given to reading fluency, decoding, and comprehension. These observations provided direct insight into the ways in which learners engaged with classroom reading activities. The observations were conducted during the third term of the school year, when learners were expected to have received adequate exposure to reading instruction and practice. One classroom observation session was conducted for each teacher, resulting in a total of three observation sessions. Each session lasted approximately 30–40 min., in line with the standard duration of a class period.

The observations were guided by a semi-structured protocol developed by the researchers and informed by the principles of Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). The focus was on learners' reading behaviours, particularly their ability to read fluently and construct meaning from texts. The protocol included indicators such as reading fluency, responses to comprehension prompts, and engagement with the text. Attention was also given to the supportive strategies employed by teachers to facilitate reading, including prompting learners to make predictions, providing contextual clues, and explaining unfamiliar vocabulary. Field notes were recorded to document learners' reading performance and the instructional support observed during the sessions. Reading comprehension was operationalised through observable indicators, including learners' ability to answer questions based on the text, demonstrate understanding through verbal responses, and engage in tasks such as summarising and interpreting texts. Following the observations, retrospective interviews were conducted with the teachers to gather their perceptions of learners' reading comprehension and the challenges encountered during reading instruction.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers first read and re-read the interview transcripts and observation notes to familiarise themselves with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on patterns related to learners' reading comprehension and the factors influencing it. Examples of codes included difficulties with word recognition, limited vocabulary, decoding challenges, and reliance on teacher support.

These codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories based on shared characteristics, from which key themes were developed and refined. For instance, codes relating to vocabulary and word recognition were consolidated into themes such as reading comprehension challenges and linguistic and phonological issues. The final themes were reviewed to ensure alignment with the research questions and consistency across the dataset.

This process resulted in four main themes: reading comprehension challenges; linguistic and phonological issues in Sepedi reading; limited vocabulary; and linguistic mismatch between the home language and the LoLT. To enhance credibility, the findings were shared with the participating teachers for member checking (Birt et al. 2016).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty Committee for Research Ethics – Humanities of the Tshwane University of Technology (No. FCRE/APL/STD/2020/08).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the university, and permission to conduct the research was granted by the relevant education authorities. All participants received information leaflets outlining the study's purpose, the data collection methods, and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained from the teachers, while parental or guardian consent was secured for learners' participation in the data collection process. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved using pseudonyms (T1, T2 and T3), and all data were securely stored and made accessible only to the researchers.

Results

Data analysis identified four main themes: reading comprehension challenges; linguistic and phonological issues in Sepedi reading; limited vocabulary as a contributing factor to reading difficulties; and a linguistic mismatch between the home language and LoLT. The findings are first presented from the classroom observations, followed by the teacher interviews, with the themes highlighted within the interview data.

Classroom observations

Classroom observations revealed that two of the participating schools had overcrowded classrooms, which limited teachers' ability to provide individualised attention, particularly to struggling learners. Instructional resources were also limited. For example, learners relied primarily on workbooks containing prescribed reading passages, while access to libraries was either unavailable or restricted in both quality and quantity. These contextual factors appeared to influence both the pace and the nature of reading instruction.

The teaching of reading was largely teacher-centred and characterised by traditional shared-reading practices. During these lessons, the teacher led the reading while learners followed the text; however, only a portion of the class actively participated at any given time, with approximately half of the learners appearing disengaged. Instruction often reflected a 'teaching by testing' approach, in which teachers focused primarily on identifying and correcting reading errors, with limited scaffolding to support decoding, fluency, or comprehension. There was little evidence of group work, differentiated instruction, or targeted support for learners experiencing reading difficulties.

Learners were mainly engaged in reading aloud from workbook passages, including, for example, a story about a father and his son going to the shops. However, many learners struggled with decoding, phonological awareness, and reading fluency, often reading word by word with little expression and limited attention to punctuation. Comprehension was generally weak, particularly at the inferential level, and learners experienced difficulty explaining the meanings of words, especially where differences existed between Khelovedu and standard Sepedi vocabulary (e.g. *legogwa* vs *phathe*). Overall learner engagement was low, with many appearing disengaged and lacking confidence or enthusiasm. Teachers also tended to focus on a small group of more fluent readers, while providing minimal differentiated support to the rest of the class.

Theme 1: Reading comprehension difficulties

Classroom observations showed that learners demonstrated limited reading comprehension. Many struggled to infer meaning from texts and often relied on reading answers directly from the textbook rather than recalling information from memory. Although some learners were able to remember explicit details, their responses frequently lacked depth and logical sequencing. Higher-order comprehension skills such as predicting, inferring, and summarising were particularly weak, indicating superficial engagement with texts, as reflected in the following responses:

> 'Their level of comprehension is very low. They struggle with syntax and contextual understanding, which hampers their grasp of the meaning of texts.' (T1)

> 'Their level of fluency and comprehension is very low, but they show emerging decoding skills and their comprehension levels are still developing. They have a tendency to pause and re-read, which impacts overall comprehension.' (T2)

> 'While learners can recall explicit information from texts, deeper understanding, such as predicting, inferring, or summarising, is limited.' (T3)

The findings indicate that learners experience considerable difficulty in constructing meaning from written texts. Although they are able to recall explicit details, their limited ability to organise ideas and apply higher-order comprehension strategies, such as predicting, inferring, and summarising, suggests that their engagement with texts remains largely superficial. Frequent pausing, re-reading, and reliance on textbook answers reflect emerging decoding skills but also reveal a lack of strategies for independent comprehension. Overall, these patterns suggest that learners struggle to engage in deeper meaning-making processes, which are essential for the development of critical and autonomous reading skills.

Theme 2: Linguistic and phonological challenges in reading in Sepedi

During the classroom observations, learners experienced a range of linguistic and phonological challenges. They struggled to blend sounds smoothly, distinguish between similar phonemes, and pronounce certain Sepedi word forms and sound combinations. Teachers confirmed that learners encounter these difficulties as reflected in the following excerpts:

> 'Learners struggle to differentiate between short and long vowels.' (T1)
>
> 'Learners find it difficult to pronounce Sepedi words since it is not their home language. For example, *e tla*, *e dha*, *maatla*, *maadha*.' (T2)
>
> 'They struggle with phonological awareness, such as distinguishing similar phonemes. Learners can recognise common phonemes but have difficulty with less frequent sounds in familiar words, such as the distinction between /d/ and /t/, /k/, and /g/. They also find it hard to identify Sepedi consonant clusters like /tl/, /hl/, /kg/, and /ŋ/.' (T3)

The findings indicate that learners experience persistent phonological and linguistic challenges that hinder their reading development in Sepedi. Difficulties with blending sounds, distinguishing between similar phonemes, and pronouncing complex word forms suggest that learners have not yet fully developed the phonological skills required for fluent reading. These challenges increase the cognitive effort required for decoding, which may slow reading pace and reduce the mental resources available for text comprehension, ultimately impairing overall reading comprehension.

Theme 3: Limited vocabulary as a factor contributing to reading difficulties

Observations and teacher interviews indicated that learners had a limited Sepedi vocabulary, which restricted their ability to derive meaning from texts. Learners frequently struggled to explain the meanings of words they encountered in reading passages and, in some cases, provided equivalent terms in Khelovedu rather than in Sepedi.

Teachers confirmed that limited vocabulary knowledge hindered learners' comprehension, particularly when texts required inference or interpretation beyond literal meaning, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

> 'Most learners struggle with vocabulary. Their vocabulary in Sepedi is not well developed, and this affects comprehension of the texts.' (T1)
>
> 'Since Sepedi is not their first language, most learners have a limited Sepedi vocabulary, which impacts their understanding.' (T2)
>
> 'Learners struggle to answer questions that are related to vocabulary because they have a limited vocabulary. Sometimes they do not know what some words in Sepedi mean, even though they know them in Khelovedu. For example, if you ask them what *legoga* is, they don't know, but they know it as *phathe*, which is the same thing but different vocabulary.' (T3)

The findings indicate that learners' limited Sepedi vocabulary constitutes a significant barrier to effective reading comprehension. Their reliance on Khelovedu equivalents for unfamiliar words reflects restricted lexical knowledge, which constrains their ability to extract meaning from texts. Consequently, learners struggle to understand new words and concepts, thereby slowing their overall reading development and limiting meaningful engagement with reading tasks. These observations underscore the importance of supporting vocabulary development in the Foundation Phase classroom.

Theme 4: Linguistic mismatch between home language and language of learning and teaching

During classroom observations, learners struggled with decoding and reading fluency, which teachers attributed to dialectal differences between their home language, Khelovedu, and the LoLT, namely standard Sepedi. As Khelovedu is primarily an oral dialect that differs lexically and structurally from Sepedi, learners often read more slowly and had to exert additional effort merely to understand written text, as reflected in following responses:

> 'Learners can read with moderate to low fluency because the Khelovedu language is an oral dialect and differs from standard Sepedi, which they learn at school and is also used as LoLT. Compared to learners who speak standard Sepedi at home, Khelovedu learners read more slowly and struggle to decode words.' (T1)
>
> 'Learners find it difficult to pronounce Sepedi words since it is not their home language. For example, *e tla*, *e dha*, *maatla*, *maadha*.' (T2)
>
> 'Some learners can read fluently, but most experience difficulties because their home language is Khelovedu, yet they are being subjected to learn in Sepedi. So that alone comes with difficulties.' (T3)

The findings indicate that the mismatch between learners' home language, Khelovedu, and the LoLT, standard Sepedi, contributes significantly to reading difficulties. Learners are required to expend additional cognitive effort in decoding words and navigating structural and lexical differences, which slows reading fluency and reduces the mental resources available for comprehension. This increased cognitive demand affects not only reading pace, but also learners' ability to focus on meaning, thereby making text comprehension more difficult. The observations suggest that Khelovedu-speaking learners consistently experience greater difficulty in accessing and comprehending written texts than peers who are more familiar with standard Sepedi.

Discussion

The study found that learners demonstrate low reading proficiency. This is concerning because limited fluency restricts learners' ability to read grade-level texts independently, thereby potentially widening existing learning gaps. The study further found that learners experienced significant linguistic and phonological challenges. The observed difficulties, together with slow reading, frequent pausing, and low fluency suggest that learners have not yet mastered automatic word recognition. This finding aligns with broader evidence indicating that foundational code-related skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, together with language-related skills, including vocabulary, morphosyntax, and listening comprehension jointly predict reading success. Deficits in these areas are recognised as reliable indicators of risk for dyslexia and comprehension difficulties (Snowling & Hulme 2012).

These challenges imply that learners may struggle to access curriculum content across subjects, as reading is a foundational skill for learning in the Intermediate Phase. Furthermore, the findings point to a need for systematic instruction in phonological awareness, decoding, and fluency development in Sepedi. Without targeted intervention, learners may continue to experience reading difficulties in later grades, with negative consequences for both academic performance and learner confidence.

Regarding comprehension, the study found that most learners were unable to recall key information from texts immediately after reading. This is concerning because difficulties in recalling information indicate weak comprehension, which may prevent learners from engaging effectively with longer and more complex texts across the curriculum. The study also found that learners possessed limited vocabulary in Sepedi, which negatively affected comprehension. This finding highlights the close relationship between prior vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. Research consistently demonstrates a strong link between learners' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. According to Stahl and Nagy (2006), vocabulary knowledge is essential for comprehension because learners need to understand word meanings in order to derive meaning from text. Limited vocabulary places an additional cognitive load on learners, thereby reducing their ability to comprehend texts effectively (Perfetti 2007).

Within African language contexts, insufficient vocabulary knowledge has been identified as a major factor contributing to poor reading comprehension in the Intermediate Phase (Pretorius & Lephalala 2011). The relationship between prior vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension was similarly identified by Molwantoa, Olifant and Cekiso (2025).

The findings of this study may be explained through Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Consistent with Vygotsky's view that learning is socially and culturally mediated, the mismatch between learners' home language and Sepedi as the LoLT means that learners' prior linguistic and cultural experiences do not align with the curriculum, thereby increasing the cognitive demands associated with reading. This misalignment restricts access to meaningful mediation because the linguistic tools required to engage with texts are neither familiar nor sufficiently supported.

The comprehension difficulties observed in this study suggest that many learners were operating below the level required to read Sepedi texts independently, and that teacher scaffolding was either insufficient or inadequately targeted. Vocabulary recognition difficulties further point to a lack of mediated learning opportunities in which teachers or more knowledgeable peers provide linguistic support to bridge Khelovedu and Sepedi. The relationship between prior vocabulary knowledge and comprehension underscores the critical role of social and linguistic context in literacy development, as learners rely on familiar language forms as cognitive tools for meaning-making. Targeted scaffolding strategies, such as code-switching, explicit vocabulary instruction, and guided reading that connects new material to learners' existing linguistic repertoires, could assist learners in progressing through their Zone of Proximal Development and support culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices that facilitate movement from assisted to independent reading.

The teachers' insights in this study align with both national and international literacy findings. One teacher explained that learners struggle because 'their home language is Khelovedu, yet they must learn and read in Sepedi'. Another teacher observed that learners read with 'low fluency because Khelovedu is an oral dialect and differs from Standard Sepedi in many ways'. These observations correspond with PIRLS findings, which reported that South African learners achieved an average score of 288 across the 11 official languages. This score was substantially below the international average, with Sepedi identified as one of the weakest-performing languages. PIRLS also revealed a strong relationship between the language spoken at home and the LoLT, with learners whose home language matched the LoLT performing better in reading than those whose home language differed. One teacher supported this finding by noting that Khelovedu learners read more slowly than learners whose home language aligns with standard Sepedi.

In addition, the teachers' responses suggest that learners' low fluency and comprehension difficulties may stem from the linguistic gap between their home dialect and standard Sepedi – a concern similarly raised in the literature. Ramothwala et al. (2021) and Ramothwala (2024) document phonological and structural mismatches between Khelovedu and Sepedi, which may hinder learners' ability to decode fluently and read for meaning. This supports the argument that learners from dialectal backgrounds, such as Balovedu, are less likely to achieve high reading outcomes when instruction is delivered in a linguistically different standard language. The DBE (2025) further reports that many learners in the Foundation Phase struggle with phonemic awareness and distinguishing between similar sounds, and that these challenges are intensified when the home language differs from the LoLT. Research further demonstrates that reading difficulties increase when the LoLT differs from learners' home languages, thereby providing additional evidence that dialectal learners face further barriers to achieving high levels of reading proficiency (Meiklejohn 2021; PIRLS 2023). Both the teachers' perspectives and the cited literature therefore indicate that dialect–LoLT mismatches significantly affect learners' reading abilities, particularly with regard to fluency and comprehension.

The findings highlight an urgent need for literacy strategies that are sensitive to dialectal differences and systematically

implemented. These strategies should be reinforced through ongoing teacher training to address the persistent reading challenges experienced in the Foundation Phase effectively.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to evaluate learners' reading comprehension in Sepedi, with particular focus on their ability to derive meaning from texts and the factors contributing to their difficulties. The findings revealed that learners' comprehension of Sepedi texts in the Foundation Phase was generally poor. Learners experienced significant linguistic and phonological challenges, possessed limited vocabulary, and struggled to recall information and make inferences, indicating that many were unable to read for meaning.

The study concludes that linguistic factors, particularly dialectal variation and limited vocabulary knowledge, play a major role in learners' reading comprehension difficulties in Sepedi during the Foundation Phase. These findings align with concerns raised by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (2021), which reported that most South African learners are unable to read for meaning by Grade 4. The findings further confirm that Sepedi remains one of the lowest-performing languages in South Africa in relation to reading proficiency. This may partly be attributed to the many dialects associated with the language, which are not formally recognised within standard Sepedi. This situation is a matter of concern for both parents and educational authorities.

The issue is particularly troubling because Sepedi is used as the LoLT in more than 50 schools in Bolovedu South, where most learners speak Khelovedu – a dialect of Sepedi. When learners are unable to read for meaning, their ability to acquire knowledge and skills across the curriculum is severely constrained, given that reading forms the foundation of all academic learning. Although the findings of this study cannot be generalised beyond the specific research context, they nevertheless provide important insights into the reading challenges experienced by learners studying in Sepedi. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the reading crisis and support the development of targeted, context-sensitive strategies aimed at improving reading fluency and comprehension in Sepedi.

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Competing interests

The authors, Tsebo Ramothwala; Phethani P. Mudau and Itani P. Mandende, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Tsebo Ramothwala: Investigation, Writing – original draft. Phethani P. Mudau: Formal analysis. Itani P. Mandende: Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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

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