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Teaching reading in Setswana foundation phase classrooms: How much phonics is too much?

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Background: Teaching reading in African languages has been challenging in the South African context, given the poor performance of South African learners in international literacy assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study PIRLS and, more recently, in the 2025 Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS) by the Department of Basic Education. The continuous poor results are a serious call to action to address the reading crisis in South Africa. We argue that investigating teachers' pedagogical practices can provide insights into how they teach initial reading in African languages.

Objectives: Using the active view of reading as a theoretical lens, the study explores the preparedness of four foundation phase Setswana teachers to teach reading in Setswana in Gauteng.

Method: The study employed a generic qualitative approach, with a case study design. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with a sample of four Setswana foundation phase teachers. The data were analysed thematically to derive the themes.

Results: The data analysis revealed that teachers spent more time teaching phonics and oral language activities in Grades 2 and 3. Less time was spent on teaching language comprehension skills that support reading comprehension.

Conclusion: This finding highlights the problematic nature of overly teaching decoding skills at the expense of language comprehension skills.

Contribution: The contribution of this study is to highlight the awareness of teacher readiness, training and the importance of both word recognition and language comprehension skills for the development of skilled reading.

Keywords: Setswana; foundation phase; reading; phonics; active view of reading.

Introduction

Literacy is important for developing academic skills, which are also necessary for educational success (De Vos et al. 2014). Reading and writing are important skills that learners need to learn at primary school so that they become literate; yet most learners do not acquire these skills during the foundation phase (Spaull & Pretorius 2016). Snow and O'Connor (2017) mention that:

> [*R*]eading is a tool that we all need for learning all subjects and yet we find that most of our children in primary schools cannot read or understand what they are reading. (p. 6)

Ardington, Wills and Kotze (2020) conducted a study on the achievement of beginner readers in Nguni languages. They found that learners who have difficulty with decoding skills and understanding the alphabetic principle by the end of Grade 2 are at a higher risk of struggling with reading comprehension. If learners cannot decode the written word, it is unlikely that they will understand what they are reading (Pretorius 2019).

In his reading model, Stanovich (2009:23) described the 'Matthew effect' and argues that if children do not receive support early in their reading trajectory, they will more likely continue to be poor readers. Conversely, children who are skilled readers will most likely become even better readers. Thus, teachers need to be trained and supported with evidence-based methods that support the development of reading. One such method is the Science of Reading (SoR). This approach highlights the importance of word recognition skills and language comprehension skills in the teaching of reading. This was first outlined by Gough and Tunmer (1986) and has since been visually depicted by Scarborough (2001) as the *Reading Rope*. Other scholars have critiqued this view and further

analysed it to introduce the 'active view of reading' (AVR). However, the premise remains and the two important skills outlined include word recognition and language comprehension skills. We argue that word recognition skills lay the foundation for decoding words and recognising print. However, if children can decode the written word without understanding, this does not lead to skilled reading. Equally, if teachers only teach language comprehension skills, learners do not become skilled readers if they are unable to decode the written word. A study by Arends and Fonseca (2024) examined how Grade 4 learners engaged with a short text that required background knowledge and vocabulary. Their findings indicate that learners struggle to apply inferencing skills, cannot read sentences and paragraphs coherently, and demonstrate limited vocabulary, which significantly affects their comprehension of the text (Khan, Van der Merwe & Koekemoer 2025).

If the skill of reading is not acquired in the first three grades of schooling through systematic instruction, the consequences could be detrimental. The transition in Grade 4 is about reading to learn. Children who cannot read will not make this transition swiftly and are at risk of performing poorly in later grades or even dropping out of school (Xeketwana & Anthonissen 2025). These gaps in the early skills must be addressed as soon as they are discovered. The most recent Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS) shows the results from a survey conducted by the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2025), which assessed 27 838 learners in 710 public schools across all the provinces and in all 11 languages, and measured the percentage of children who reach the critical reading benchmarks by the end of Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3. The findings revealed that only a third of learners in each of these grades could actually read.

The results of the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) by Roux, Van Staden and Tshele (2023) have been widely cited in many studies that relate to literacy in the South African context. Since our first participation in the PIRLS study in 2006, the literacy levels of South African children, particularly in the African languages, have been worsening (Howie et al. 2012; Van Staden & Howie 2014).

Despite the results being somewhat better among Afrikaans and English learners, learner performance was the worst in Setswana. Such results require dedicated attention to improve reading in general, and specifically to understand the reasons for the significant gap between the Sesotho, Sepedi, and Setswana results. These languages are generally clustered linguistically as disjunctive in their orthography (Nhlapo 2021). In a study about learning to read in isiZulu, the findings by Simelane (2022) revealed that learners' ability to decode a text without understanding does not lead to skilled reading. Such findings highlight the need to explore the pedagogical practices of teachers when teaching reading in Setswana. It is against this backdrop that we set out to conduct such a study, and, Furthermore, to understand the challenges of teaching reading in Setswana in multilingual classrooms.

Theoretical framework: The active view of reading

Duke and Cartwright's (2021) AVR model was a theoretical lens that guided us in this study. This model extends the proposed knowledge domains as outlined in Gough and Tunmer's (1986) simple view of reading and Scarborough's (2001) reading rope. The AVR model identifies a broader range of skills required for skilled reading. It acknowledges the intricate intersections between decoding and language comprehension.

It includes the importance of self-regulation skills and the value of cultural knowledge in reading and harnesses the potential for social justice. By embracing AVR, teachers and researchers can better address inequities in reading and promote equity (Barnes, Fields & Cartwright 2023). Figure 1 illustrates the components of the AVR model, which include four domains: Self-Regulation, Word Recognition, Bridging Processes and Language Comprehension.

We argue that these domains provide a comprehensive foundation for reading instruction.

Furthermore, Table 1 illustrates the various constructs taught in reading instruction and how the AVR model encompasses most of these constructs.

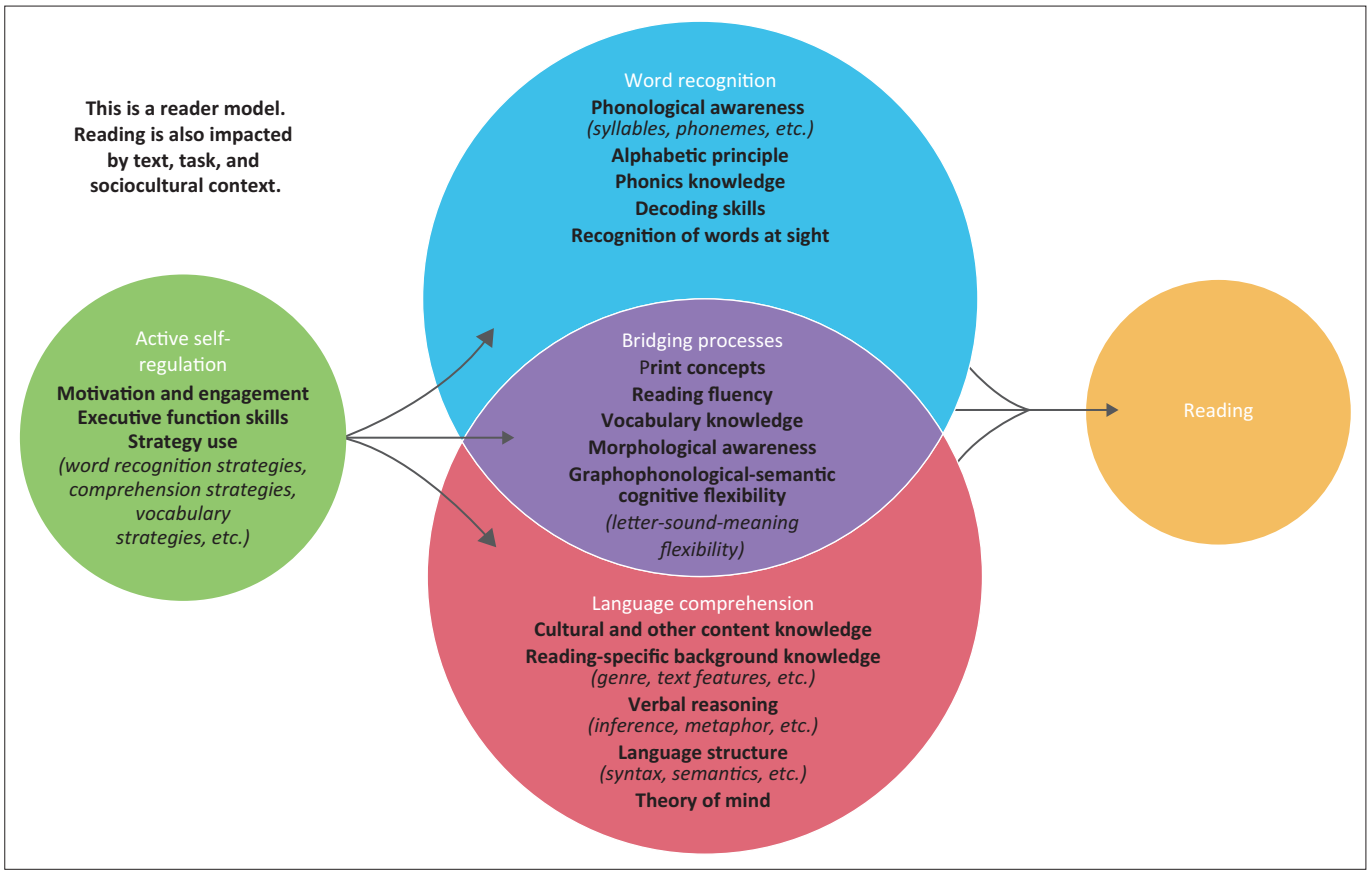
Literature review: The training of African language teachers in response to the reading crisis

To date, little research has been done on reading in African languages. Pretorius (2019) argues that:

> [*T*]he teaching of reading has historical ties with Western countries because English, French, and Portuguese are the main colonial languages and Africa has tended to look to reading research from the North and West. (p. 63)

Such colonial techniques may unknowingly be adopted in developing countries, by promoting instructional methods that may be suitable for teaching English but without considering their repercussions in the African languages. One method that could support the teaching of reading in the higher grades of the foundation phase is the role of morphological awareness. Thus, we are cognisant that morphology is not ideal in initial reading because children must be able to decode. We are of the view that some methods that are rooted in a synthetic phonics approach are evidence-based and support the development of reading comprehension in alphabetic languages such as Setswana.

More recently, the Sesotho and isiZulu Reading Project (SIRP) has made strides in developing seven modules that focus on the teaching of reading in Sesotho and isiZulu. The first phase of the SIRP included the writing of the modules, which began between 2019 and 2023. At the outset, the SIRP set out to ascertain the content that relates to teaching reading in these two languages at these participating universities and to



Source: Duke, N.K. & Cartwright, K.B., 2021, 'The science of reading progresses: Communicating advances beyond the simple view of reading', *Reading Research Quarterly* 56(S1), 25–44. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.411

FIGURE 1: The active view of a reading model.

develop modules that will address the gaps in the methodology content that is taught to students who are being trained to teach reading in these respective languages. A key finding showed that although most universities were teaching reading, some of the content could be strengthened with evidence-based approaches to initial reading instruction, such as the 'Science of Reading'. Members of the Centre for African Languages Teaching at University of Johannesburg (CALT@UJ), in collaboration with lecturers from 12 participating universities that offer Sesotho and isiZulu in the B.Ed. programmes, wrote the modules which are available in English, Sesotho and isiZulu. The modules cover a range of topics that include essential linguistic concepts for teaching reading, oral language proficiency, vocabulary building, motivation in reading, decoding in reading, alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, phonics, morphological awareness, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, children's literature, and emergent literacy. Furthermore, accessibility of these modules in English enables the potential versioning of the modules into other African languages.

Currently, SIRP is in the second phase of the project, which is about the training of lecturers on how to incorporate the modules into their existing B.Ed. programmes. This process is facilitated by Class Act, a non-governmental organisation, and CALT@UJ. The mentoring session takes place virtually and in-person to enable robust discussion and practical demonstrations that lecturers can use when teaching student teachers.

Teaching reading in the early grades

Reading comprehension is a complex ability that requires learners to develop competence in several reading skills, which include decoding, phonological awareness, oral language development, fluency, reasoning, working memory, background knowledge and sentence construction (Barnes et al. 2023; Resnick & Snow 2008). These reading skills are not unique to English but also need to be developed to achieve reading comprehension in African languages, as in the case of teaching reading in Setswana. Lee and Wheldall (2024) believed that despite the contradiction around the popular belief that reading may be learned by recollection or exposure, the scientific consensus is clear about the alphabetic principle, which is essential for developing reading competency. Furthermore, a study by Rayner et al. (2001) highlights that word recognition is a product of mastering the alphabetic principle, which is the mapping of graphemes to phonemes. It is a valuable tool and a fundamental notion (Lee & Wheldall 2024). Their significant research showed that phonemic awareness and grapheme-phoneme knowledge combine to generate this concept, making it the foundation of teaching reading. If learners are not explicitly taught the alphabetic principle, they will struggle with decoding and word recognition skills. This will impede their reading progress and may sentence them to a lifetime of literacy challenges.

Reading comprehension is not merely a passive reception of information; rather, it demands critical thinking, active

TABLE 1: Skills and processes emphasised in views of reading over time.

Views of reading			
Construct included	**Simple view of reading**	**Reading rope**	**Active view of reading**
Decoding	✓	✓	✓
Word recognition	✓	✓	✓
Phonics knowledge	✓	✓	✓
Phonological awareness	✓	✓	✓
Sight recognition	-	✓	✓
Alphabetic principle	-	-	✓
Language comprehension	✓	✓	✓
Background knowledge	-	✓	✓
Vocabulary	-	✓	✓
Language structures (e.g. syntax, semantics)	-	✓	✓
Verbal reasoning (inference, metaphor, etc.)	-	✓	✓
Literacy knowledge (i.e. concepts of print)	-	✓	✓
Reading fluency	-	✓	✓
Morphological awareness	-	-	✓
Graphophonological–semantic cognitive flexibility	-	-	✓
Motivation and engagement	-	-	✓
Executive functions	-	-	✓
Self-regulated strategy use	-	-	✓
Theory of mind (i.e. social understanding)	-	-	✓

Source: Adapted from Barnes, Z.T., Fields, R.S. & Cartwright, K.B., 2023, 'A special educator's guide to the science of reading', *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth* 68(4), 310–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2023.2243847

engagement, and cognitive proficiency. Wolters et al. (2017) argue that reading involves the seamless integration of critical reading skills, cognitive processes, and mental strategies. A skilled reader must effortlessly switch between reading skills to construe meaning from complex texts. Moreover, reading is an active and interactive process where the reader engages with the text to construct meaning (Pretorius 2019).

Therefore, teachers must prioritise instruction that cultivates critical thinking and the development of reading cognitive skills. Reading is a process of meaning formation that combines visual, semantic, conceptual, and linguistic information (Resnick & Snow 2008).

Another important construct of teaching reading is teaching language comprehension skills, which is a complex, sociocultural process involving the dynamic interaction of the reader, text, and task features (Kuzolin 2014). It demands integrating multiple language and cognitive processes, including word reading proficiency, working memory, inference creation, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary, and prior knowledge. Prior knowledge plays a vital role in text comprehension, significantly influencing one's ability to understand and interpret written language (McCarthy & McNamara 2021).

Effective comprehension requires inference making, an area where even proficient word readers may struggle.

Learners who struggle to comprehend a text often face significant challenges despite possessing age-appropriate word-reading skills (Oakhill, Cain & Elbro 2019). Furthermore, language knowledge and grammatical awareness are critical components of reading comprehension, with deficiencies hindering learners' understanding of various texts.

Vocabulary acquisition and its development are vital for language development and long-term success (Wawire & Zuilkowski 2021). Effective vocabulary instruction requires a strategic approach that focuses on the explicit teaching of words, parts of words and application by listening, reading, speaking and writing. Successful language learning hinges on learners' ability to use language effectively, making vocabulary instruction crucial. Teachers must employ engaging strategies to expand learners' vocabulary.

The science of reading is about an evidence-based approach to teaching reading. The principles of decoding and language comprehension have been proven to be crucial in initial reading instruction (Hoover & Tunmer 2018). Learners who lack strong language skills will struggle to grasp, process, and retain knowledge effectively. We argue that without a solid foundation in these skills, other approaches, such as Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTbBE), would simply not be feasible. Proficiency in speaking two or more African languages does not translate to the ability to decode written text or encode spoken language. The science of reading equips children with the foundational knowledge of decoding and language comprehension skills to be able to read in any language that they are taught.

Importance of parental involvement in the early grades

Parental involvement in the early grades is important for a child's literacy development. Children whose parents are involved in their reading activities demonstrate significantly stronger vocabulary development and better reading fluency (Pateres, Revalde & Opingo 2026). The home learning environment (HLE) is critical for improving learners' literacy and social skills (Lehrl et al. 2020). The HLE is determined by learner engagement, educators' methods, and parental involvement in the teaching and learning process, as well as what occurs in the home environment (Lehrl et al. 2020). Early home-school learning environments have an impact on learners' reading proficiency from the foundation phase (Lehrl et al. 2020). Parents' involvement in their children's education requires collaboration between the teachers and the parents. Motshusi, Ngobeni and Sepeng (2024) argue that parental involvement in relation to supporting reading in the early grades enables parents to understand curriculum expectations and how to support learners throughout their academic journey. Parents who are involved in their children's learning contribute to enhancing their self-esteem and confidence.

Translation tools used in Progress in International Reading Literacy Study for texts in the African languages

According to Mthimkhulu, Roux and Mihai (2024), the evaluation tools used in PIRLS feature narrative informative material that is prepared in English so that participating

nations can translate the instruments to their native languages. The translation of PIRLS instruments into African languages is consistent with the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) and the 1997 DBE (Mthimkhulu et al. 2024), because the learners were assessed in their home language. Although it is not the focus of this study, it is worth mentioning that the translation of texts from English to an African language should be thorough and consider the linguistic features of the African language. Translating assessment tools from English to an African language should consider, for instance, that some words cannot be translated into indigenous South African languages, threatening the test's validity and equivalence and making the test biased (Alharbi 2017; Peña 2007).

Research methods and design

This study employed a generic qualitative case study design to explore foundation phase teachers' pedagogical practices of teaching reading in Setswana. Qualitative methods were chosen because they enable researchers to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2018).

Setting and participants

Data were collected from four purposefully selected foundation phase Setswana teachers across four primary schools in Gauteng. This sampling is indicative of the types of schools where Setswana is usually taught in the foundation phase. Table 2 provides an overview of the study participants and the location of the participants.

Data collection

Data collection took place in October and November of 2024 using semi-structured individual interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for participants to share their experiences of teaching early grade reading in Setswana, while enabling the researchers to ask follow-up questions if necessary (Braun & Clarke 2022). Classroom observations were the second data collection method used to analyse the methods used by the teachers when teaching reading in Setswana. This data collection method allowed the first author to capture interactions and behaviours of educators and learners in their natural environment where teaching and learning occur (Chand 2025).

Data analysis – Classroom observations

Before observing the teachers in their classrooms, the first author designed a classroom observation tool aimed at understanding how the teachers communicate and teach reading in Setswana. It was clear from the observations that the teachers code-switched Setswana with Sesotho when communicating with learners. There is a significant body of literature (Corcoll 2013; Kuzyk et al. 2020; Mabule 2015; Mokgwathi & Webb 2013) that has shown that code-switching may have temporary benefits of helping children understand concepts in each language; however, it does not yield long-term understanding of the development of the target language. Oral language fluency has been shown in the literature to be an important precursor for literacy development (Roth, Speece & Cooper 2002; Simelane 2022). Children need to be able to communicate effectively in the language of instruction to enhance their reading and writing development. Therefore, teachers need to model good oral language and avoid code-switching practices in the classroom. Similarly, it was also evident that the teachers were not adequately able to support learners who struggled and had difficulty in maintaining active and sustained involvement during teaching and learning episodes. Figure 2 is an example of the classroom observation sheet from the study, including some field notes from the first author's observation.

Data analysis – Interview data

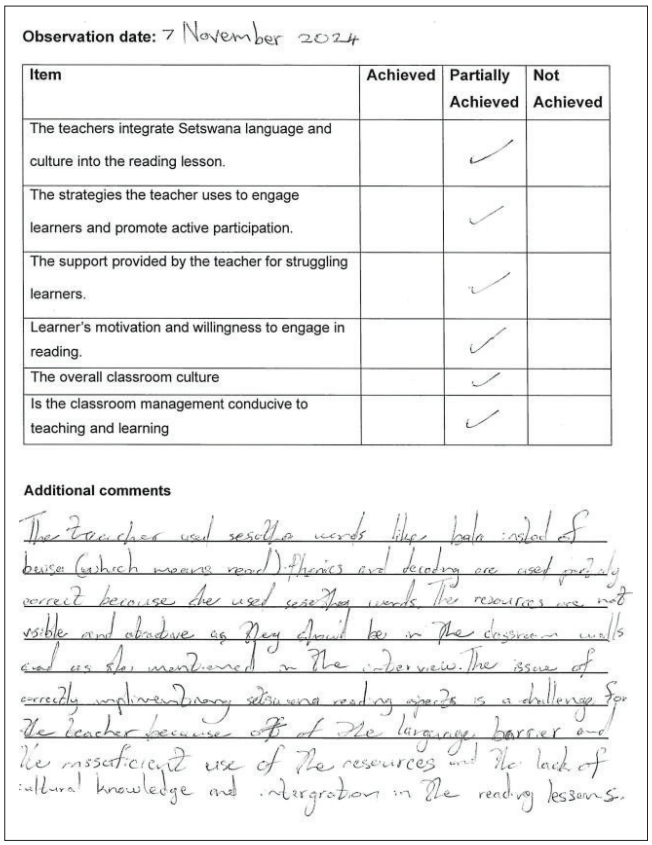
To analyse the data, the first author followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis process to analyse the interview data. The process entails familiarising oneself with the data by listening to the interview recordings and transcribing the data verbatim. The transcripts are then coded to analyse the participants' responses. Following this, the codes are sorted and grouped to create provisional categories by analysing the patterns that emanate from these codes. A further analysis of the provisional categories is conducted by identifying patterns in these categories. The thematising of these categories leads to the generation of themes. Table 3 is an example of an excerpt from the interview transcript that includes the codes that were generated.

Once all the data had been coded, we could begin to understand the prevailing ideas and create conceptual categories of meaning. This required creation of preliminary coding categories – this is the next step in thematic reflexive analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), which describes the development process of categorising qualitative data. The codes are then compared with other codes and grouped into provisional categories of similar meaning. An inclusion rule is useful here – an inclusion rule is a statement that describes the characteristics of the provisional categories and how the units of meaning fit together. All data are clustered similarly, and if there are no similar codes, a new category is formed.

TABLE 2: Overview of the participants.

Participant	Number of years teaching	Type of teaching qualification	Highest teaching qualification	School setting
Participant 1	9	B.Ed. Foundation Phase degree	B.Ed. Foundation Phase degree	Urban township
Participant 2	3	B.Ed. Foundation Phase degree	B.Ed. Foundation Phase degree	Urban township
Participant 3	14	Diploma in Education	Advanced Certificate in Education	Urban township
Participant 4	10	B.Ed. Foundation Phase degree	B.Ed. Foundation Phase degree	Urban township

B.Ed, Bachelor of Education.



Observation date: 7 November 2024

Item	Achieved	Partially Achieved	Not Achieved
The teachers integrate Setswana language and culture into the reading lesson.		✓	
The strategies the teacher uses to engage learners and promote active participation.		✓	
The support provided by the teacher for struggling learners.		✓	
Learner's motivation and willingness to engage in reading.		✓	
The overall classroom culture		✓	
Is the classroom management conducive to teaching and learning		✓	

Additional comments

The teacher used sesotho words like bala instead of bewa (which means read) phonics and decoding are used partially correct because the used sesotho words. The resources are not visible and attractive as they should be in the classroom walls and as she mentioned in the interview. The issue of correctly implementing setswana reading aspects is a challenge for the teacher because of of the language barrier and the insufficient use of the resources and the lack of cultural knowledge and intergration in the reading lessons.

FIGURE 2: An example of the classroom observation sheet from the study.

This way of working allows the researcher to continuously refine, change, merge and create new categories (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). Figure 3 is an example of a category with the corresponding codes.

Rule of inclusion: The codes discuss the challenges teachers face when teaching reading in Setswana, including the complexity of the language, phonemic awareness challenges and learner struggles with understanding Setswana.

The provisional categories were further analysed and synthesised into final categories. This process entails looking for patterns and similarities in the provisional categories. In doing so, we extracted the salient points from the provisional categories. For instance, to generate the first theme, the first author looked at the patterns between provisional categories 1 and 6. This approach was utilised to analyse the patterns for the remaining provisional categories to generate the themes and is elaborated on in Figure 4.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg. The ethical clearance number is SEM 1-2024- 002.

Results

The general finding from the classroom observations showed that teachers teach reading but have limited knowledge of developing learners' reading comprehension. The data analysis process generated three themes that encapsulated the teachers' experiences with teaching reading in Setswana in foundation phase classrooms. The themes are presented and discussed in the sections that follow.

TABLE 3: An example of an interview transcript with codes.

Line	Interview transcript participant 1	Code
L1	N: *Age Mem lekae*? [How are you, Ma'am?] *Ke etsa*	
L2	research *Mam ka reading in Setswana and ee, no ke ya*	
L3	*leboga mem for go mpha nako ya gago*. [I am doing a	
L4	study about reading in Setswana. Thank you for giving me	
L5	your time.] Can you describe your teaching experience,	
L6	qualifications and duration of teaching Setswana in the	
L7	Foundation Phase? *[Clearing throat]*	
L8	P1: Uhm, Sir, in my teaching experience in Setswana,	Complexity of the Setswana language.
L9	Setswana is a very complex language.	
L10	Most of the learners don't understand it. Most of the learners	Learners struggle with understanding Setswana.
L11	mix it with Sesotho and Sepedi.	
L12	When you teach phonics in Setswana, giving examples, most	Learners mix Setswana with Sepedi and Sesotho.
L13	of the learners understand and they can differentiate it from	
L14	other languages.	
L15	I have been teaching Grade R for 10 years in Setswana. So, I	Teachers must give good examples of Setswana words when teaching phonics.
L16	am very proud that teaching is my mother tongue or home	The teacher feels competent because of the years of teaching experience.
L17	language	

Discussion

Theme 1: The challenges of teaching reading in Setswana

The teacher's response shows the qualifications and experience to teach reading in Setswana. However, the extract also implies that the teacher's confidence is because Setswana is the learners' home language. The response may also overlook challenges that may arise when teaching reading in a familiar language, as complexities arise. The other important issue is that the teacher might be underestimating the trials that come with teaching reading in Setswana. This is evident in the response:

> 'Ok, I have 3 years of teaching experience; I have a degree in foundation phase, and then my teaching experience is not so bad because our learners' home language is Setswana only.' (Teacher 2, Female, Lines 281–284)

Another participant acknowledged the complexity of the language to learners as they often mix it with Sesotho and Sepedi. This shows two languages interfering with Setswana in the process of teaching and learning. The response from the teacher shows a real challenge as learners confuse Sepedi and Sesotho for Setswana, as one of the participants described:

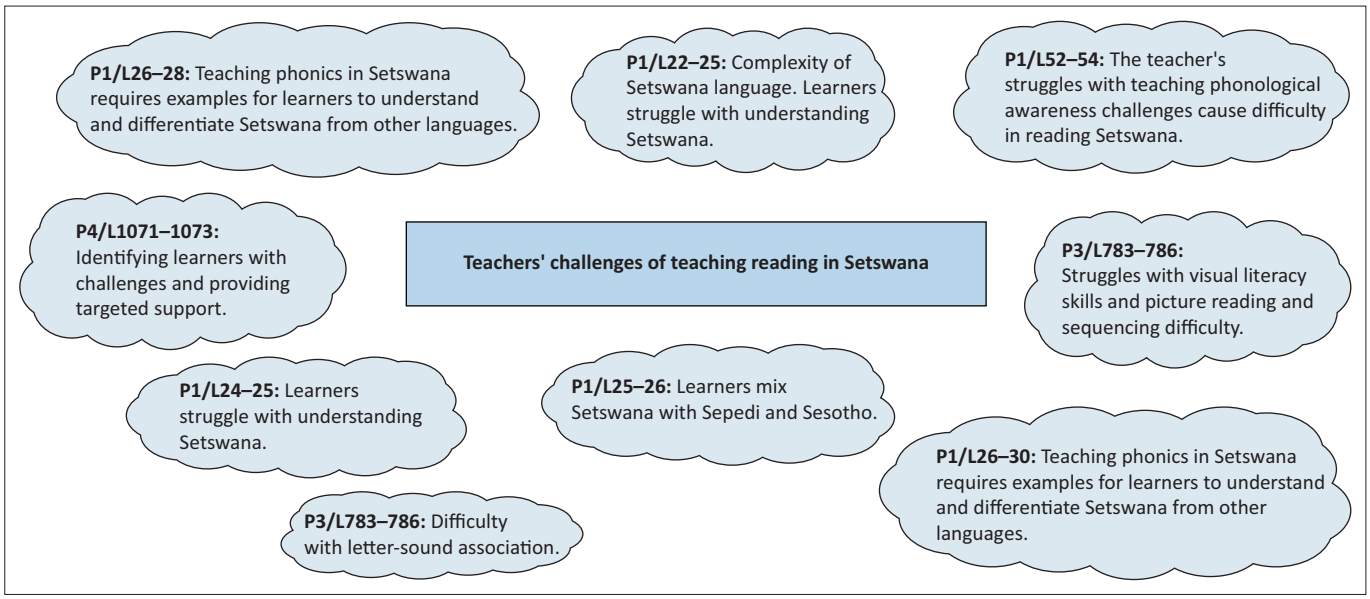


FIGURE 3: The process of generating provisional categories.

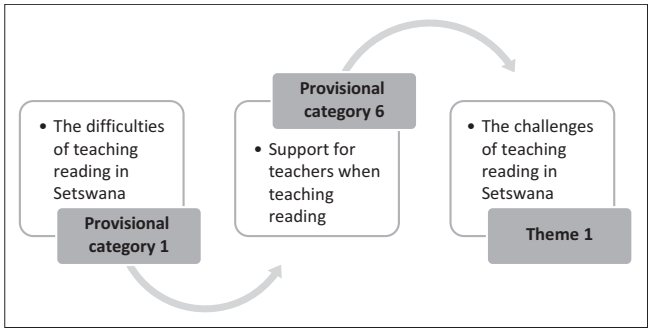


FIGURE 4: The process of generating themes.

> 'You know, uhm, in my teaching experience of Setswana is that Setswana is a very complex language and most of the learners don't understand it. Most of the learners mix it with Sesotho and Sepedi.' (Teacher 1, Female, Lines 23–27)

Although the responsibility of teaching children is the teacher's responsibility, the participants mentioned that the lack of parental involvement presents a challenge, which shows that reading is done only at school. The response below shows that learners should also practise reading at home so that their reading skills improve. Learning at home is important. Such a response from the participant shows how a lack of parental involvement affects the process of teaching reading in Setswana:

> 'There are many challenges when teaching. Ee [*Yes*], the home language is Setswana. You know, parental involvement *ha e bonagale* [*it's not visible*]. Most of the parents are not participating and are not helping their kids at home. You know, they only read at school, when we are trying to help him and teach her how to read. They only see reading at school; they only practise reading at school, and they are only taught reading in class. So, no parental involvement.' (Teacher 4, Female, Lines 1009–1012)

Oral language proficiency in the language (as also reflected in this model) is important because teachers mentioned that children who are Setswana home language speakers will speak Setswana and have better oral language skills, which is a precursor for initial reading. In the following extract, the teacher alludes to the importance of oral language proficiency in the home language. This is evident from the responses:

> 'You know, in my teaching experience in Setswana, is that some of the learners don't speak Setswana at home and they don't understand it. That is why you'll find that they will mix it with Sesotho or Sepedi when they speak.' (Teacher 1, Female, Lines 22–26)

> '*Dichallenge tse di nnang teng* [*Challenges that are normally experienced*] ok The challenge that I have is that most of the learners at home I don't think they speak pure Setswana. When you teach them in pure Setswana real Setswana they do not understand they struggle because they don't use the language at home. At home they use languages such as Sesotho, isiZulu and some Setswana. They can make one sentence in the classroom. They need to construct a sentence in Setswana without mixing it with other languages. That's the problem and another challenge is that some of learners who learn in Setswana are Tswana others are Zulus, Tsonga. Then it's a challenge for them to understand those phonics. Once they understand the phonics they can blend and it will it become easy for them to read and they will they just flow.' (Teacher 4, Female, Lines 1192–1199)

Another area of concern that was mentioned by the teachers is the lack of Setswana books that are written in standardised Setswana language and the lack of proper translation from English (Sebolela 2009). The teachers mentioned that the lack of materials in the form of books affects teachers' pedagogical content knowledge because they lack the material to teach reading in Setswana. The lack of material shows that teachers lack the content knowledge to translate English into Setswana. The other issue is that a lack of quality material has an impact on learners' reading development in future academic achievement. It shows that teachers need access to quality Setswana books:

> 'Most books that are written are not pure Setswana. I wish this research could help in finding people who are good in Setswana

to help in translating English to Setswana.' (Teacher 1, Female, Lines 247–250)

Theme 2: The teaching of word recognition skills in the early grades

Literacy development is important in the foundation phase because it enables literacy development and academic achievement (Pretorius 2019). One of the important components of initial reading instruction is the teaching of literacy development, because the skills are important for early readers (Wawire & Zuilkowski 2021). Reading with understanding is a challenging task that involves word decoding and word recognition (Wawire & Zuilkowski 2021), which is taught when learners learn the relationship between the letter sound and how words are represented in written form as they read words (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2000).

Teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) is a crucial aspect of how they teach reading in Setswana (Shulman 1987). Teachers must have adequate PCK to teach reading effectively and efficiently, which involves integrating subject-specific content and pedagogical knowledge. This is crucial in the foundation phase, where learners are developing foundational skills that will impact their future academic success (Phajane & Mokhele 2013). If learners do not develop reading skills during this phase, they will struggle to catch up, even with remedial instruction (Phajane & Mokhele 2013). Resnick and Snow (2008) argue that good teaching practices lead to long-term success in a child's reading trajectory. Cain et al. (2025) argue that teachers' skills in teaching reading depend on the competence of teachers and the quality of teaching material, and learners' outcomes. The statement above shows that teachers lack methodological skills, knowledge, and training.

Teachers must have strong pedagogical knowledge that equips them to teach reading concepts. Early grade reading requires a sound knowledge of how to introduce concepts such as phonological and phonemic awareness (Khan & Khan 2021; Resnick & Snow 2008). In the African languages, teachers must help learners to distinguish the sounds they learn in English and those they learn in an African language (Ngema 2023; Simelane 2022). They can only teach these phonemes if they have that awareness. Essentially, in the early stages of teaching children how to read, we are teaching decoding (segmenting words into sounds) and encoding skills (blending sounds to form words). In the African languages, it is in this process that children learn that sentences are made up of words, words are made up of syllables, and these syllables are made up of phonemes. An issue of concern is the amount of time that is spent teaching initial sounds in the upper grades of the foundation phase. If children do not develop phonological and phonemic awareness in Grade R and Grade 1, then they are already falling behind in their reading trajectory. The participants in this study expressed this as a serious challenge that they struggle with when teaching reading:

'Yes, there are a lot of challenges. Most challenges are that most of the learners don't recognise single sounds. When you do not recognise single sounds in Grade 3, then reading in Setswana is going to be very difficult to blend; for example, [*b*] and [*a*] is the syllable [*ba*], so if you can't identify single sounds, it's going to be difficult to read in Setswana.' (Teacher 1, Female, Lines 52–58)

'Yes, *Meneer* [*Sir*], there are lots of challenges, phonemic challenges are phonemic awareness whereby the learner cannot say the letter, cannot sound the letter, or blend the letter sound coordination.' (Teacher 3, Female, Lines 770–773)

'I mean, now when you draw a word, you will use phonemic awareness, like when you use the word *letlhabaphefo* [*a window*]. He or she must know all the sounds in the word; we have l/e/t/l/h/a/b/a/p/h/e/f/o. When you mix them, they say he or she must trace the letters on the sand or write them.' (Teacher 4, Female, Lines 1103–1108)

The transparent nature of the African languages should make it easier to read and write in them. However, this has not been the case and highlights the need to re-examine how we are teaching children how to read.

The phonemes in the African languages are consistent with the grapheme that represents each phoneme (Simelane 2022). This differs vastly from the English language, which is opaque in nature and often includes different graphemes that can represent a particular sound (Vaz 2024). With such an orthography, we need to reconsider some of the teaching practices that are not optimal for teaching reading in the African languages.

There is an argument that even the simple view of reading (SVR), science of reading (SoR) and AVR were frameworks developed in the West and might not be optimal in the teaching of African languages.

One such practice is the inconsistent ways in which children are taught how to blend sounds to form syllables and to decode syllables into sounds. Such an understanding may be taken for granted because it can be assumed that all teachers know how to do this. We are of the view that once a phoneme has been introduced, such as a digraph sound (*sh, tlh, ph, tsh*), these sounds must be blended and segmented as a unit in a word because each syllable in a word consists of a consonant and a vowel. The excerpt below shows how the teacher applies the sequence, which should start by segmenting a word, reading single sounds of the word, and blending the word, not the mixed-up sequence mentioned by the teacher:

'Firstly, when teaching Setswana firstly I teach single sounds. After learners understand single sounds, I introduce blending and segmenting and my strategies in teaching reading in Setswana are, firstly, I make sure that they understand single sounds, which are alphabetical letters.' (Teacher 1, Female, Lines 65–70)

The literature supports the statement above to say teachers need to use evidence-based methods that are informed by the

SoR (Hoover & Tunmer 2018). Such methods are also applicable for teaching decoding skills when teaching initial reading in the African languages because the languages are also alphabetic. We are of the view that the role of morphology in the teaching of reading in the African languages can support learners' language comprehension and linguistic skills in the language. According to Van der Merwe (2022), skilled early grade teachers have knowledge about the subject; they are strategic, adaptive and reflective in how they execute their teaching. We found that teachers' PCK about teaching reading was superficial and limited to mostly teaching letter-sound knowledge. This is an important initial part of teaching reading, but it was explicitly articulated in a manner that demonstrates its importance in the reading trajectory (Mokobe, Badenhorst & Schlebusch 2025). Furthermore, participants alluded to the challenges that arise when children are not learning in their home language. Some of these challenges include a lack of basic awareness of the sounds in Setswana:

> 'You start with the letter b, and now they must be able to write those letters. They practise by writing in their air, they practise how to write on their laps, writing on their table, on their back, practising the letter sounds.' (Teacher 4, Female, Lines 1030–1035)

> 'Yes, there are a lot of challenges. Most challenges are that most of the learners don't recognise single sounds. When you do not recognise single sounds in Setswana is going to be very difficult to blend, for example, [*b*] and [*a*] is ba. So, if you can't identify single sounds, it's going to be difficult to read in Setswana.' (Teacher 1, Female, Lines 52–54)

> 'If a child cannot read, a child cannot do other subjects like confidently.' (Teacher 4, Female, Lines 1272–1273)

> 'Setswana is a very complex language. Most of the learners don't understand it. Most of the learners mix it with Sesotho and Sepedi, but when you teach the phonics in Setswana, giving examples, most of the learners understand.' (Teacher 1, Female, Lines 24–29)

Furthermore, reading is essential for all language skills, especially writing, as writing relies on reading (Stahl & Garc 2015). Meaningful writing requires the capacity to read and reading and writing are mutually beneficial and crucial for societal and economic growth (Phajane & Mokhele 2013). Therefore, teachers need to teach and develop learners' phonemic awareness skills because it is important for reading skills in the foundation phase. The simple view of reading states that reading with understanding is the outcome of decoding linguistic comprehension, as decoding is the way learners obtain understanding of how words are represented in print (Wawire & Zuilkowski 2021). The teachers' responses show why learners are struggling to read in Setswana: because they cannot recognise single sounds in words. The process of understanding the meaning and pronunciation of words, with spoken language that learners hear from their environment, is a complex process across languages. Perfetti (2010) highlights that the interaction between vocabulary, comprehension, and reading comprehension is important for reading. If learners are struggling with language comprehension skills, they will not be able to understand the words they read.

Theme 3: The absence of reading comprehension skills when teaching reading and the role of professional development

A significant body of literature presents findings on the low reading levels of South African learners (Cekiso et al. 2022; Mahlangu & Mtshali 2024; Pretorius & Klapwijk 2016; Simelane 2022; Spaull & Pretorius 2022; Van Staden & Howie 2014; Vaz 2024). The overarching finding is about children who cannot decode the written word, or children who can decode but do not understand the words they are saying. It is against this premise that we argue for the explicit teaching of reading comprehension and decoding skills in the early grades. Dehaene (2020) argues that reading is not a natural process. Our brains cannot acquire reading in the manner we acquire language through social interaction. This aligns with our assertion that reading constructs must be taught explicitly. If teachers focus on explicitly teaching some constructs and perceive other constructs, such as vocabulary knowledge and comprehension, to be natural constructs that learners acquire through social interaction, it creates gaps in knowledge and leaves room for learners to 'guess' as opposed to developing an understanding of what they are reading.

Our findings also highlight some misconceptions about what constitutes understanding when reading. Some of the participants perceived that the ability to write and answer questions about a text somehow leads to or demonstrates the understanding of the text. One of the participants mentioned that writing is key to reading with understanding, in the form of answering questions or writing sentences about the story. The following excerpts also show that the participants in this study were unable to intervene with meaningful feedback when learners struggled to understand a text or respond to a question. We can only conclude that if they are unable to articulate this, then it might be consistent with what occurs in a teaching episode:

> 'Aah, for me it's their home language, it makes it easy when I teach them because they understand. Even my explanations become easy for them because sometimes I make examples, and they also make their examples because they understand, as it is their language, which is their home language.' (Teacher 2, Female, Lines 298–304)

> 'The strategy that I use, Meneer [*Sir*], is that I say that when we read, we read to understand, not just to pass. I was reading a story to the learners. When I finished reading the story, I said, I walked around pretending it's fine, I wanted to find out if the learners gained an understanding and that the child will remember what he/she understands tomorrow when I ask him/her what was happening in the story I was reading?' (Teacher 3, Female, Lines 584–594)

> 'Tell me the book you have been reading, tell me what it is about? He doesn't understand anything. So that's the challenge that we face, that they are just doing reading without understanding.' (Teacher 3, Female, Lines 673–676)

> 'And then they must read for understanding. Because we teach reading. Our learners, as I said, the learners read not for understanding, they just read. When they don't comprehend, they just read. So, you must teach the learner to read for understanding.' (Teacher 3, Female, Lines 924–928)

> 'They understand they don't know the story. They must enjoy the story. They can act out the story. Let them write so that they can understand what they are reading.' (Teacher 4, Female, Lines 1376–1379)

In addition, the DBE, in collaboration with the National Education Trust (NECT), has launched several professional development programmes implemented nationally to improve the teaching of reading, such as the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP), which provides support for teaching various reading components. It is still not evident in the literature how the results of this kind of professional development continue to improve teachers' practices over a longer period. Teachers' competence in teaching certain reading components may influence how and which concepts they prefer to teach. Although the participants in this study have benefited from such training programmes, it is often not evident how the learnings from such professional development initiatives continue after the training is completed. In most cases, teachers will implement the learning for a short while and revert to their usual teaching methods.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study's qualitative design emphasised participants' perspectives and experiences, which limited an extensive study of the pedagogical practices that teachers use when teaching reading. Teachers' accounts of effectiveness were based on their experiences rather than on quantitative measures derived from testing. Additionally, the study's localisation to the Gauteng province restricts the generalisability of the findings to other provinces in South Africa that have more Setswana speakers, such as the North-West province and the Northern Cape. It would be interesting to assess if different dialects of the language affect the reading instruction. Future research should focus on implementing a systematic phonics programme that is completed by the end of Grade 2. A larger sample of Setswana teachers across different provinces can improve the generalisability of the findings.

Conclusion

The teaching of reading in South Africa remains a crisis that needs to be addressed urgently. The findings in this study highlighted that more attention is spent on teaching word recognition skills even in the upper grades of the foundation phase. While we advocate for the teaching of word recognition skills as an initial approach to early reading instruction, it is equally important for teachers to teach language comprehension skills in tandem with word recognition skills. Without doing so, children will still be struggling with the basic phonics in a language. Teachers require additional training to teach phonics systematically and swiftly in Grades 1 and 2. Some of the participants attributed this challenge to the complexities of teaching in multilingual classrooms, particularly if the learner does not speak the language of instruction.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Neo Kgoadi: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Mosa N. Khasu: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Both 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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The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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