

Exploring classroom strategies for managing reading difficulties and teachers' awareness of the role of the speech therapist in literacy management



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Background: Effective communication skills are essential for developing literacy skills, and most South African foundation phase learners experience difficulties in mastering literacy skills. The challenges are often intensified by multilingual classrooms and the mismatch between the home language and the language for learning and teaching.

Aim: This study aimed to explore how teachers manage spelling and reading difficulties among foundation phase learners (Grades R-3) and examine their awareness of the role of speech language therapists (SLTs) in managing these difficulties.

Setting: The study was conducted in three schools located within the Pinetown and uMlazi districts of KwaZulu-Natal.

Methods: A qualitative, exploratory research design using purposive sampling was employed, where 17 foundation phase teachers, each with at least 3 years of experience in teaching and currently employed within the districts, participated in the study. Data were collected using a standardised self-administered questionnaire with open-ended questions and analysed using a thematic approach.

Results: Foundation phase teachers in these districts use phonics-based instruction to support reading and spelling skills. Reading and spelling difficulties were managed using various strategies, including differentiated instruction, ability-based grouping and targeted remediation. Results further show that teachers have varying levels of awareness regarding the role of the SLT in supporting literacy development.

Conclusion: There is a need for collaboration among parents, teachers and SLTs for ensuring an equitable foundation phase plan to support language and literacy development in learners, particularly second-language English-speaking learners.

Contribution: This study highlights the need to address the challenges faced by second-language English speakers and to implement strategies that support literacy development in home language and language of learning and teaching to enhance literacy skills.

Keywords: reading; spelling; literacy; learner; teacher; speech-language therapist.

Introduction

Effective communication skills are pivotal to a child's overall development, and they form a critical foundation for literacy development (Morgan et al. 2015; Ramsook, Govender & Jakoet-Salie 2020; Weadman Serry & Snow 2022). There is a strong connection between communication skills and literacy development. Children who develop strong oral language skills tend to manage and succeed in formal classrooms where language demands become increasingly abstract and complex (Amorsen & Miller 2017; Green 2021; Kathard et al. 2022). By leveraging learners' existing language skills, teachers draw from this foundational linguistic background to teach reading and spelling and foster word recognition and comprehension (Green 2021).

South Africa's rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity present both opportunities and significant challenges in teaching and learning (Diko & Celliers 2024; Evans & Cleghorn 2012). Evident from various national and international assessment platforms, such as the Annual National Assessment (ANA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment outcomes, shows that African children are particularly disadvantaged in early literacy acquisition. Many learners lack a strong foundation in their home language and receive

instructions in Grades 1 to 3 predominantly in a language other than their home language (Van Staden, Zimmerman & Harvey 2016).

Reading and spelling in South African school-aged children

The 2021 PIRLS results showed that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language for all African languages. The 2021 Grade 4 learners scored lower than the 2016 PIRLS assessment (Roux, Mabunda & Mthethwa 2023). These results highlighted the discrepancies between the language of instruction and the learner's home language. McLachlan and Essien (2022) further explored the impact of linguistic complexity, which extended beyond literacy, and showed that language barriers in multilingual classrooms affect comprehension and problem-solving skills in subjects such as mathematics, where abstract reasoning heavily relies on the individual's language proficiency.

A notable factor that shapes literacy outcomes in the South African context is that teaching instructions are delivered in a language that is not the learners' home language. Parents' language preferences further complicate this challenge; most South African parents tend to favour English-medium instruction for their children (Van Rhyn 2018). The relationship between home language and the LoLT is a significant policy concern, as emphasised by Mohohlwane et al. (2023). Most African children come from poor socio-economic backgrounds and often start schooling without having the same exposure to a literacy-rich environment as their English-speaking peers. Moreover, in rural South African schools, there is limited exposure to the LoLT outside of the classroom and learners may lack opportunities to engage in the language used for learning and teaching (Schaefer & Kotze 2019; Tlale 2021). The interplay of these factors directly shapes how children experience literacy learning in multilingual classrooms.

Literacy development and challenges

Literacy is a complex and multifaceted set of skills centred on the understanding and use of written language. It involves the integrated ability to read, write, spell and comprehend text across a range of contexts or subject areas (Ehri 2020; Ehri et al. 2001; UNESCO 2004; Vlieghe 2015). The core components of literacy skills include phonological awareness, which is the awareness of the speech units that represent the written language, linguistic comprehension and higher-level cognitive linguistic interactions (Castles, Rastle & Nation 2018; Smith et al. 2021). These components work together to enhance comprehension and regulate memory and inference generation, a complex task essential for becoming literate.

Developing literacy and language skills is a complex, interconnected process, with oral language competence skills serving as a crucial foundation for learning to read and write. Research shows that reading and linguistic comprehension skills have a reciprocal effect on each other, affecting the

development of vocabulary and related oral language and metalinguistic abilities (Duke & Cartwright 2021; Nation & Snowling 2004). Literacy and language skills are intertwined and affect each other's development over time. Typically, a school-aged child enters formal schooling with relatively well-developed spoken language skills, which include adequate knowledge of semantics, syntax, morphology, pragmatics and phonology in their home language. However, when these foundational skills do not align with the language used for learning and teaching (LoLT), this typical school-aged child encounters significant linguistic and academic challenges that can hinder literacy acquisition (Pretorius & Currin 2010).

This linguistic diversity poses an additional challenge to literacy development as both learners and educators must navigate language barriers (Naidoo, Reddy & Doorsamy 2014). In South Africa, English second-language (EL2) learners face significant challenges in acquiring early literacy skills compared to monolingual (EL1) learners, mainly because of interrelated linguistic, cultural and educational factors (Dreyer 2017; Snyder & Fenner 2021; Venketsamy & Sibanda 2021). Many EL2 learners lack academic English proficiency and often grow up in home environments that do not fully support the development of literacy skills in the LoLT (Howie et al. 2017; Manten et al. 2020; Rohde 2015). Additionally, the age at which EL2 learners receive instruction in English plays an important role in literacy competency (Le Roux et al. 2017).

The foundation phase is critical for literacy development; learners rely on their teachers for guidance, resources and expertise to improve their reading skills (Dagada 2022). Teachers have a fundamental role and responsibility to support various literacy activities, ensuring that all learners in the foundation phase, regardless of their language background, can engage in the educational context (Venketsamy & Sibanda 2021). Teachers are agents of change within the classroom. They play a significant role in literacy development and provide valuable insight into the specific needs of learners (Mavhandu et al. 2025; Venketsamy & Sibanda 2021; Ndou & Omidire 2022). Evidence shows that many teachers, however, feel inadequately prepared to teach reading and implement strategies to support learners who experience reading difficulties (Fesi et al. 2020; Mokobe et al. 2025).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

Findings in a study by Phala and Hugo (2022) that examined the challenges associated with teaching Grade 3 learners with reading problems in full-service schools showed that reading difficulties stem from multiple levels of the school system, as conceptualised through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Macrosystem-level challenges included national policies such as the progression policy, which permits Grade 2 learners to advance to Grade 3 without demonstrating adequate reading competency. Another concern was the shortage of reading material and overcrowded classrooms. At the microsystem, highlighted

challenges included the language of instruction and learning, students' attitudes and abilities in reading, teachers' lack of understanding and awareness of the diverse learning needs and limited parental support. It is evident that the causes of literacy problems are multifaceted and cannot be attributed to a single factor.

A collaborative approach to support literacy development

Globally, there is growing emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration to support literacy development and to address the needs of learners at risk of language and literacy difficulties from an early stage (Ebbels et al. 2019; Gallagher et al. 2020; VanderKaay et al. 2021). This collaborative approach is crucial in the early years of schooling, as it is during this time that foundational literacy skills are developed. Because literacy development is inherently tied to language proficiency, SLTs play a critical role in the development of oral language skills, which underpin the development of reading and writing skills. Their expertise in language development, phonological awareness and language-based learning disorders complements the work of the teacher in the classroom setting (Ebbels et al. 2019).

Speech-language therapists (SLT) significantly contribute to both prevention and early identification of children at risk for reading difficulties by applying their knowledge of typical and atypical language development trajectories. Through classroom observations, assessments and consultations, SLTs can identify learners whose underlying language difficulties place them at risk of developing reading and spelling challenges (Ebbels et al. 2019; Kathard et al. 2011; Ndou & Omidire 2022; Wium & Louw 2015). This early identification is crucial as undiagnosed language difficulties in the foundational years often persist and later manifest as a literacy barrier throughout schooling. Furthermore, SLTs can complement the pedagogical role of the teacher by co-designing language-rich classroom environments and modelling evidence-based strategies that can facilitate oral language growth and emergent literacy skills. This collaboration can help ensure that instructional practices respond effectively to learners' diverse language and literacy needs.

The significance of this study is in its focus on exploring the strategies and methods employed by teachers in the foundation phase (Grades R-3) to address reading and spelling difficulties, as well as their awareness of the role of SLTs in supporting foundational literacy development. Insight into how teachers approach, manage reading and spelling difficulties, and their collaborative practices with SLTs, is critical for addressing the gaps in effective literacy management. Furthermore, by highlighting instructional practices and existing teacher-SLT collaboration platforms, the study aims to inform an improved intervention strategy for identifying, supporting and managing reading and spelling difficulties. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the

strategies that teachers use to manage reading and spelling difficulties and to identify the challenges and barriers that teachers face in managing these difficulties. Furthermore, this study explored teachers' knowledge of the SLT's role in supporting learners with reading and spelling difficulties, and determined potential areas for collaboration between teachers and SLTs to support learners with reading and spelling difficulties.

Research methods and design

Research design

This study used an exploratory qualitative design to explore how teachers manage learners with reading and spelling difficulties within the classroom setting and further investigate their awareness of the SLT's role in managing these difficulties among the foundation phase learners (Grade R-3).

Study population and sampling strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit foundation phase mainstream teachers within the uMlazi and Pinetown districts who held a diploma or degree (or an equivalent qualification) and had a minimum of 3 years of experience teaching in the foundation phase. A sample size of 15–20 teachers was considered from three mainstream schools. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative studies should have a sample size between 5 and 25 participants. Teachers were selected using the recruitment inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Data collection technique

Data were collected using a standardised self-administered questionnaire with open-ended questions, which included sections on socio-demographic information, teachers' approach to managing reading and spelling difficulties in the classroom, and their awareness of the role of the SLT in literacy management. This questionnaire was piloted with two teachers, and questionnaire refinement allowed the elimination of repetitive questions and the incorporation of phrases to clarify the questions asked. The researchers distributed the corrected questionnaire and consent form to the participating teachers at their schools.

Data analysis

Responses to the open-ended questions were analysed using a thematic approach, a flexible method in qualitative research that identifies, analyses and reports themes present in the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). The six-phase framework for thematic analysis was used. Each researcher independently familiarised themselves with the data and generated initial themes, which were then grouped according to emerging patterns aligned with the study objectives. The researchers then collaboratively reviewed and refined the themes to develop the final themes. This process minimised the influence of a single perspective, and the collaborative review

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants ($N = 17$).

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Age group (years)*		
26–35	7	43.8
36–45	6	37.5
≥ 46	3	18.8
Home language		
isiZulu	5	29.4
English	12	70.6
Years of teaching (years)*		
> 10	9	56.3
≤ 10	7	43.7
Qualification of participants		
Diploma	3	17.6
Degree	14	82.4
Grades taught in the foundation phase		
R	2	11.8
1	6	35.3
2	4	23.5
3	4	23.5
1&3	1	5.9

*, missing value on the characteristics.

served as a trustworthiness check, ensuring that the final themes were well supported and not distinctive to one researcher's interpretation.

Ethical considerations

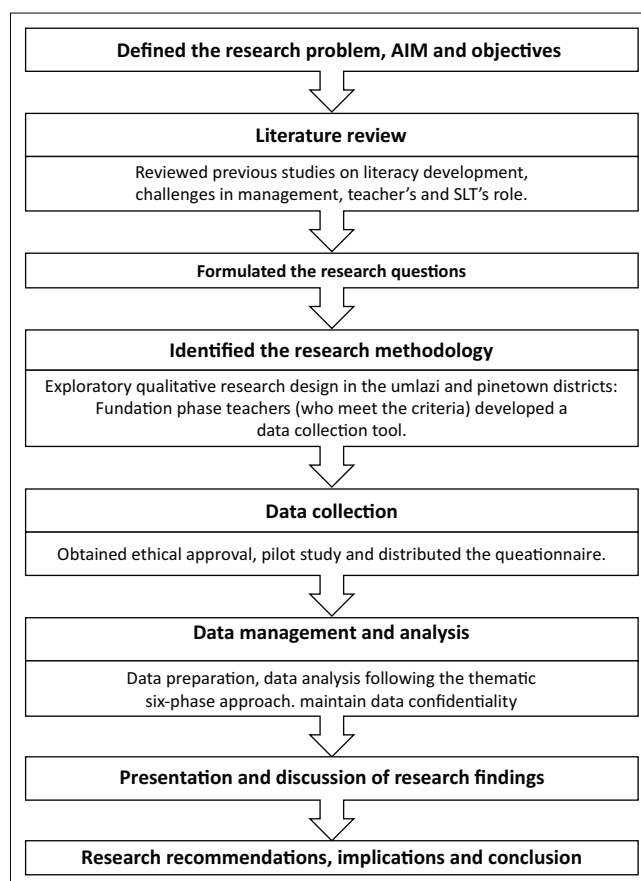
An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and ethics consent was received on 24 June 2024. The protocol reference number is HSSREC/00007011/2024. Permission was sought at two levels: firstly, from the uMlazi district of the Department of Education and secondly, from the school gatekeeper through the principals. Participation was voluntary, and all participants signed informed consent forms. To ensure anonymity, personal identifying information was not collected during data collection. Figure 1 is a schematic diagram that outlines the stages followed in the study.

Research findings

In this study, data were collected from 17 female teachers who participated as shown in Table 1, their ages ranged from 28 to 60 years. The majority held a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree, and three participants had a diploma. Most participants used English as their home language, and five teachers' home language was isiZulu. The years of experience in the teaching profession ranged from 3 to 31 years, and they had taught in various grades but were currently teaching the foundation phase.

Research findings and discussion

Three themes were identified after analysing the data. The first theme described classroom strategies that teachers used to manage reading and spelling difficulties in the foundation phase. The second theme highlighted the challenges teachers encounter when addressing these difficulties. Lastly, the third theme focused on teachers' awareness of the role of SLTs and potential areas for collaboration.



SLT's, speech-language therapists.

FIGURE 1: Schematic flow diagram.

Theme 1: Classroom strategies used by teachers to manage reading and spelling difficulties

Teachers described a range of methods and strategies that they implement to teach reading, spelling and comprehension in the foundation phase. Most teachers reported relying predominantly on phonics-based instruction and using letter-sound association activities to develop learners' literacy skills:

'Phonics sounds are taught daily in the foundation phase. Learners are encouraged to unite to write their sentences. The use of a dictionary is taught as well, and sight words are flashed.' (33-year-old, Grade 1, English, 11 years exp [BEd])

Teachers engage learners in phonological awareness tasks, including segmenting words into individual sounds, blending phonemes, identifying rhyming patterns and manipulating sounds to form new words:

'I teach learners how to sound words phonetically as well as the use pictures for understanding and prompt learners with questions.' (43-year-old, Grade 1, English, 10 years exp [BEd])

Teachers reported that they employ various strategies to facilitate reading, spelling and comprehension skills in the classroom. They frequently used flashcards, group reading activities, sentence construction exercises, repetitions, daily morning drills and homework tasks to reinforce reading and spelling:

'I use Flashcards, phonics, and big books for the entire class, sight words are flashed.' (33-year-old, Grade 1, English, 11 years exp [BEd])

To support comprehension, teachers incorporated guided comprehension practices, listening activities and visual stimuli:

'Listening comprehensions are done before written comprehension. The learners are given a sequence of instructions to see if they can follow instructions. Written comprehensions are read to learners.' (40-year-old, English, 9 years exp [BEd])

'Use pictures to assist with knowledge and comprehension of what the passage/story is about.' (40-year-old, Grade 1, English, 18 years exp [Dipl])

Data collected showed that teachers used a range of methods to evaluate learners' progress in reading and spelling. They conduct continuous assessments that include frequent spelling tests, reading comprehension activities and both individual and group assessments. Teachers reported that they systematically monitored learners' performance through observations and recorded progress using tools such as record sheets and mark books. The evaluation was performed daily or weekly using a combination of oral and written tasks:

'On a class list with specific headings for each spelling/skill/reader.' (40-year-old, Grade 1, English, 18 years exp [Dipl])

'In the foundation phase, we have weekly spelling test.' (43-year-old, Grade 1, English, 10 years exp [BEd])

Learners with reading and/or spelling difficulties were identified through classroom observations, the use of informal and formal assessments and analysis of learners' performance in classroom tasks:

'I observe learners in the classroom and learners who cannot recognise letters of the alphabet.' (Age unknown, Grade, R, isiZulu, 10 years exp, [BEd])

To manage and support these learners, teachers implemented targeted remediation, grouping based on learners' needs, and differentiated instruction:

'Learners are grouped together, and the concept is re-taught, and more one-on-one time is given.' (40-year-old, Grade 1, English, 18 years exp [Dipl])

'Differentiated instruction, small group intervention, provide different tasks & regular feedback.' (28-year-old, Grade 3, English, 3 years exp [BEd])

Additionally, support for learners was provided outside of regular class hours, where they utilised supplementary resources and were encouraged to engage in peer-assisted learning. Furthermore, they reinforced learning through regular practice, assigned homework and encouraged parental involvement to extend support beyond the classroom environment:

'We use lunch times and after school to provide individual assistance.' (40-year-old, Grade 2, isiZulu, 5 years exp [BEd])

'Assist learners during breaks or any spare time.' (29-year-old, Grade 2, English, 7 years exp [BEd])

Strategies used to manage reading and spelling difficulties

This study's findings show that the instructional approaches used are consistent with the findings of previous studies (Hugo 2021; Mtshali & Mashiya 2022; Pretorius & Klapwijk 2016; Venketsamy & Sibanda 2021), which have highlighted the effectiveness of phonics in the South African context, where systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondence forms a cornerstone of literacy development. There is value in systemic, explicit phonics instruction, as documented in the literature. Ehri, Johnston & Thompson (2011) emphasised that structured phonics instruction supports learners' ability to decode unfamiliar words and build spelling accuracy. Supporting this, Connelly et al. (2001) found that children who were instructed in phonics produced more contextually appropriate errors that retained more correct letters in their spelling than those who were not instructed in phonics. However, research by Fesi et al. (2020) identified inconsistencies in the application of phonics methods in South Africa, with some teachers demonstrating limited proficiency in implementing phonics-based strategies effectively. This inconsistency highlights a training gap and underscores the need for targeted professional development to strengthen teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, ensuring consistent, evidence-based literacy instruction is delivered across diverse learning contexts and classrooms (Schaffler, Nel & Booysen 2019).

Research, however, recommends that phonics be embedded in a balanced literacy framework that also facilitates comprehension strategies (Hugo 2021; Riddle 2015; Venketsamy & Sibanda 2021). This understanding, therefore, shows that the effectiveness of phonics-based instruction depends on the integration of other reading strategies. Research has shown that vocabulary knowledge is critical when supporting comprehension. Snowling, Hulme and Nation (2020) argue that learners require not only familiarity with the words they are taught but also a depth of knowledge, which encompasses not only how well the words are understood but also how flexibly they can be applied in different contexts. A rich vocabulary base facilitates the activation of background knowledge and the construction of meaning during reading tasks, both of which are essential for comprehension. Learners with under-developed language structures, particularly those whose LoLT differs from their home language, may struggle to integrate meaning during reading tasks, which can prevent them from drawing inferences, connecting ideas and fully engaging in academic text. Additionally, limited background knowledge further impedes reading success. This difficulty happens when learners are unable to connect information to prior knowledge or activate relevant semantic networks during reading (Zhang, Morshedi & Jiang 2024).

The use of flashcards and sight word drills has been supported by literature for rapid vocabulary development

(Stoffelsma 2019). Most teachers utilise this method to expose learners to a broader vocabulary base. According to Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), there is an increasing consensus that specialised knowledge is necessary for teaching literacy skills, and a need remains for more focused capacity-building and teacher development programmes aligned with CAPS (Maharajh, Nkosi & Mkhize 2016).

Evaluation methods used to monitor progress

A range of national and international assessments has been used in South Africa to evaluate literacy performance across grades, although some have been discontinued. As presented by Govender and Hugo (2020), these include Systemic Evaluation (SE), ANA, Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), the Southern and East Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) and the PIRLS. These assessments are introduced at various times and points with the intention of monitoring and improving literacy development, informing educational policy and enhancing learner outcomes. However, the effectiveness of some has been compromised by inconsistencies in its implementation, limited validity and insufficient alignment with the linguistic and curricular context of South African classrooms (Spaull 2013).

Despite these limitations, literacy assessment remains a critical component of the educational system. Literacy assessment tools provide data that the education department can use to monitor learner progress, inform instructional planning and evaluate the effectiveness of national policies. Importantly, they serve as a valuable resource for identifying learners needing targeted intervention and support (Pretorius & Spaull 2016). Beyond the system-level monitoring, these assessments can showcase the instructional efforts of teachers. When assessments are properly designed, they can accurately reflect the impact of classroom-based strategies, highlight areas of teacher success and draw attention to pedagogical challenges that require systemic support. In this way, assessment outcomes can be crucial in supporting teachers, ensuring accountability, while advocating for professional development and resource allocation where needed.

Theme 2: Challenges and barriers encountered by teachers when managing reading and spelling in the foundation phase

This theme explored challenges and barriers that teachers experience when managing reading and spelling in the foundation phase. Three challenges emerged from the data, highlighting language differences, poor phonological awareness skills and the lack of exposure prior to Grade R formal schooling. Findings also revealed a barrier related to the learner's motivation, whereby boys were reported to be unwilling to work on these skills.

Most teachers found that the language difference was a factor affecting learners' ability to learn how to read and spell. Learners were reported to struggle with learning reading and

spelling skills because of the difference between their home language and the language used for learning and teaching:

'It is difficult for learners as English is not their first language, they understand the subject better if it is taught in their home language.' Age unknown, Grade, R, isiZulu, 10 years exp [BEd])

The discrepancy between the home language and the language of teaching and learning affected how learners appreciate their subjects. Learners were reported to enjoy and understand isiZulu because it was taught in their home language:

'Learners enjoy isiZulu subject because it's their home language.' (33-year-old, Grade 1, English, 11 years exp [BEd])

The study's findings also showed that a lack of exposure to literacy before starting formal schooling and outside of the school environment contributed to children's reading and spelling difficulties:

'They have no prior English language skills, and some have not attended grade R.' (40-year-old, Grade 1, English, 18 years exp [Dipl])

Notably, teachers observed that most learners begin or are enrolled in school with under-developed phonological awareness skills, which hinder their ability to acquire foundational literacy skills:

'Learners' lack foundation, because they were not previously exposed to books/reading at home, resulting in learning gaps because the children lack understanding.' (28-year-old, Grade 3, English, 3 years exp [BEd])

The home environment was reported as not supporting the development of these skills:

'Most learners do not get enough practice outside of school, at home in the language used at school.' (37-year-old, Grade R, English, 3 years exp [BEd])

Learners were reported by teachers to have difficulties mastering phonological awareness skills, which are important for reading and spelling development. Learners struggled with identifying letters, reported having poor letter-sound memory and decoding skills and had difficulty breaking down words into syllables:

'The learners' letter-sound relationship-memory is poor, as a result, they are unable to spell sight words.' (28-year-old, Grade 3, English, 3 years exp [BEd])

'Learners write letters backwards, unable to identify sounds and cannot blend syllables, learners cannot break down words.' (53-year-old, Grade 3, English, 3 years exp [BEd])

Language of learning and teaching

This study found that the language of instruction affects teaching and the acquisition of reading and spelling skills in the foundation phase. Most learners who are EL2 experienced difficulties acquiring the skills necessary to learn to read and spell because they did not understand the instructions in the language of learning and teaching. Language barriers remain a

significant challenge in the acquisition of literacy skills. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of literature that highlights the mismatch between learners' home language and LoLT (Dreyer 2017; Naidoo et al. 2014; Snyder & Fenner 2021; Venketsamy & Sibanda 2021). The use of English as a medium of instruction in the classroom has been shown to impede comprehension among foundation phase learners in a multilingual township school in South Africa (Sibanda & Tshela 2025). However, this challenge is not unique only in the South African context. Linguistic discordance is a widespread concern across many African countries in sub-Saharan Africa and is increasingly recognised as a global issue (Alkateb-Chami 2024). Teachers often struggle to manage classroom discourse, provide meaningful feedback and implement interactive teaching strategies because of the linguistic disconnect that exists between themselves and their learners.

The global dominance of English in education has significant implications for language policies across Africa. The transition from English to the mother tongue presents practical challenges that policymakers and teachers cannot overlook (Sibanda & Tshela 2025). While the pedagogical benefits of mother tongue in the early years are well established, there is, however, a need for a balanced and phased approach. An approach that combines the cognitive and academic advantages of early literacy in the mother tongue with a structured and well-supported transition to English as a LoLT. Achieving this will require not only political will but also public awareness, investments in curriculum development and the training of teachers to enable them to deliver instructions in multiple languages. Equally important, parents need to be educated on supporting this transition at home by creating a language-rich environment that exposes the learner to the LoLT.

Home environment and exposure to learning opportunities

Limited exposure to reading prior to formal schooling can impact the development of essential pre-reading skills (Schaefer & Kotze 2019; Tlale 2021). The literature consistently highlights the critical role of both schools and the home environment in developing literacy skills. Rao et al. (2017) and Silinskas et al. (2021) emphasise that schools alone cannot bear the sole responsibility for building fundamental literacy skills. Instead, parental support is essential in creating an emotionally supportive environment that complements school-based efforts to help learners acquire reading skills. This sentiment is echoed by Malo (2024), who argues that while schools are responsible for developing children's reading and spelling skills, parents and the home learning environments they create may be equally important in their development. Therefore, a collaborative approach that integrates schools' initiatives with strong parental engagement and early literacy exposure is needed to improve literacy outcomes.

Research has shown the importance of home environment and parent involvement in reinforcing literacy outside school hours (Naidoo et al. 2014). The acquisition of literacy skills does not occur in isolation, meaning only at school but it is

also influenced by the extent to which children are exposed to language-rich interactions in their home environment. The success of parental involvement is contingent upon access to literacy resources and their understanding of how to support literacy development at home. However, socio-demographic factors further limit parental involvement. In this study, the findings indicated that teachers view parents' involvement as valuable support, yet recognise that socio-economic factors may hinder the capacity of some parents to actively support literacy at home.

Similar to previous findings, phonological awareness skills form foundational components of literacy development and play a crucial role in supporting the learner's ability to decode words (Castles et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2021). Evidently, when these skills are under-developed, particularly in the learner's home language, and are not aligned with the LoLT, learners are likely to encounter significant challenges that can impede their literacy acquisition (Pretorius & Currin 2010).

Theme 3: Teachers' awareness of the speech-language therapist role and potential areas of collaboration

This theme explores teachers' awareness of the role of SLTs and identifies potential areas for collaboration in supporting learners with reading and spelling difficulties.

The findings showed that teachers are generally aware of the SLT's role in school and described SLTs as a profession responsible for providing individualised support to learners, particularly in areas such as articulation, pronunciation and speech clarity:

'They provide support and care to learners with communication difficulties.' (31-year-old, Grade 1, English, 6 years exp [BEd])

'Speech therapy boosts learners' ability to identify, recall and retrieve sounds to link them with written language.' (43-year-old, Grade 1, English, 10 years exp [BEd])

The teachers reported that SLTs occasionally visited the classroom and requested to see individual learners, but often did not provide feedback on the learners' progress:

'I am not sure because SLTs come, but they do not report on the learner's progress or explain their role.' (40-year-old, Grade 2, isiZulu, 5 years exp [BEd])

Differentiated instruction was identified as a strategy where both the teacher and the SLT could tailor resources and learning activities to meet the needs of learners with these difficulties:

'They can be great help and give these learners individual attention that they need.' (40-year-old, Grade 2, isiZulu, 5 years exp [BEd])

Awareness of the speech-language therapist's role and collaboration in managing reading and spelling difficulties

In this study, teachers recognised that SLTs enhance learners' confidence in their communication abilities. However, teachers' understanding of the SLT's role did not extend to

how SLTs can collaborate with them to support the development of literacy skills in children. Neither did it mention the broader role that SLT can play in supporting language development, skills that underpin reading and writing. Despite the teacher's limited interaction with the SLT, they identified potential areas for collaboration, particularly in tailoring resources and designing learning activities for learners with these difficulties.

The literature identifies multiple factors that may explain teachers' limited awareness of the SLT's role within the school context. One common reason is that SLTs are primarily perceived as health professionals employed within the health sector (Wium & Louw 2013). The limited presence of SLTs in mainstream schools also contributes to this lack of awareness. Furthermore, the divergent nature of SLT and teacher training pathways does not structure opportunities for interdisciplinary learning (Dockrell & Lindsay 2001; Kathard et al. 2011; Wilson, McNeill & Gillon 2017). According to Wium and Louw (2013), SLTs can collaborate with teachers in multiple ways, including identifying literacy problems, screening and assessing children at risk, providing intervention, monitoring outcomes and supporting effective literacy practices within the classroom. Furthermore, SLTs play a vital role in assisting parents and advocating for systematic practices that strengthen literacy development (Ebbels et al. 2019; Snow 2020).

This study's findings highlight a clear gap in collaboration between teachers and SLTs. Only two teachers reported having previously worked with an SLT, and both described this collaboration as limited. The lack of structured follow-up contributes to the perception that SLTs are not integral collaborators in supporting literacy development within the classroom context. There is a clear need to move from the pull-out model towards a more integrated service delivery approach. Adopt a model that combines direct, classroom-based support and intervention strategies embedded within daily teaching practices (Snowling et al. 2020). Such an approach would help teachers to apply evidence-based language and literacy strategies more consistently.

This finding aligns with the evidence showing that collaboration between these professions in South Africa remains constrained by human resource shortages and training pathways (Giacovazzi et al. 2021). Limited opportunities for interprofessional education at the undergraduate level further restrict teachers' and SLTs' capacity and confidence to engage in effective interprofessional practice. McLean, Snow and Serry (2021) argues that the difference in professional knowledge bases and epistemological perspectives between teachers and SLTs can create misunderstandings about how to collaboratively support language and literacy development.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations. All participants were females, which may have introduced a gender-related bias into the responses. Using a self-administered open-ended questionnaire resulted in relatively brief responses;

more nuanced responses would have been possible through an interview. Future research should purposefully include male teachers and specific strategic positions, such as the Foundation Phase Head of Department and principals, to strengthen the representativeness of the findings and deepen insight into diverse perspectives on managing literacy in the Foundation Phase classroom.

Implications

This study highlights the need to address the challenges faced by EL2 learners because of language instruction in South African schools. Therefore, a collaborative approach involving teachers, parents and SLTs is essential to holistically support learners' speech, language and literacy development. Embedding interprofessional education opportunities within the undergraduate teacher and SLT training programmes can ensure adequate interdisciplinary support.

Furthermore, this study highlights the lack of parental involvement in early literacy development outside of the school setting. There is a need to strengthen parental involvement in early literacy development beyond the classroom environment. Through joint training sessions, teachers and SLTs can equip parents to support literacy skills at home through school-led initiatives and help parents bridge the gap created by limited exposure to the LoLT.

Ultimately, the availability of SLTs in schools remains limited, particularly in resource-constrained settings. There is a need to increase the availability of SLTs in mainstream schools and to establish collaborative practices that support foundational literacy development and early identification.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that language barriers remain a significant challenge affecting learners' literacy skills acquisition in the foundation phase. Learners with underdeveloped language structures, particularly those whose LoLT is different from their home language, may struggle to integrate meaning during reading tasks, preventing them from drawing inferences, connecting ideas and fully engaging with the academic text. The current literacy crisis in South Africa necessitates a collaborative approach to improve educational outcomes. Language competency is a prerequisite for all learning outcomes, and under-developed language skills directly undermine learners' academic performance. Facilitating collaboration between the teachers and SLTs is crucial in this context, as a strong partnership can support the development of learners' speech, language, communication and literacy, ultimately enhancing their educational success.

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Competing interests

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

CRedit authorship contribution

Kaydee Pillay: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Nontokozo L. Mbatha: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Supervision, 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 data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Kaydee Pillay, upon reasonable request.

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