

TEACHERS' VIEWS REGARDING CHALLENGES AFFECTING THE READING ABILITIES OF GRADE 9 ENGLISH FIRST ADDITIONAL LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS

BLOM E. KONDLA¹, GREGORY ALEXANDER²

Department of Post Graduate Studies in Education, Central University of Technology, South Africa

Abstract

This paper explores teachers' views on the challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 English First Additional (EFAL) learners in South African primary schools. Reading skills play a critical role in education, as they impact all areas of learning. Learners who struggle with reading often face significant academic hurdles, resulting in poor performance in their studies. Grade 9 learners were believed to have faced setbacks during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, as numerous disruptions and absenteeism plagued government schools. Many of these learners, who were in grade R during the pandemic, may not have received the required reading instruction. Underpinned by Socio-Constructivist Theory, specifically Vygotsky's Social Cognitive Theory of Learning, group discussions as a qualitative data-gathering tool were employed to ascertain 8 teachers' views on the challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 learners. Key findings from a thematic analysis reveal that grade 9 EFAL teachers encounter challenges regarding parental involvement, overcrowding, resources, the curriculum, and teacher training and professional development when teaching EFAL. The study recommends inclusive catered strategies to improve the reading abilities of grade 9 EFAL learners. Initiatives to promote parental and teacher involvement in improving learners' reading abilities are encouraged.

Keywords: Reading abilities, Social-constructivist theory, English First Additional Language, Grade 9 learners, Public primary schools

1. Introduction

Reading as a skill promotes a dynamic interaction between the content and the reader (Qasserras, 2023). Interestingly, Liu and Saad (2025) view reading skills as a foundational element of learning across all subjects and as crucial for every learner to master during their school years. Majola, Jordaan, and Powell (2024) highlight that learners who struggle to grasp this vital skill may encounter difficulties throughout their schooling. English reading proficiency, particularly in reading skills, has also been identified in Afghanistan, where the country has encouraged local and foreign direct investment in English-language education (Miri & Hung, 2021). Afghan English language teachers and learners are underrepresented in teaching reading skills and have no access to writing support services. This break in learners' reading skills often leads to teachers being unfairly blamed when they do not do their jobs properly (Miri & Hung, 2021).

Additionally, learners from socioeconomically deprived households in Kenya have lower reading proficiency learning outcomes (Oviaia & Sukma, 2021). Teachers' language use affected students' English reading proficiency, which, in turn, impacted academic achievement in classrooms (Mwakira & Mwangi, 2021). It is noted with alarm that millions of children in low- and middle-income countries are leaving primary grades without achieving the essential competencies required for further learning, especially in reading (Sowa, Jordan, Ralaingita & Piper, 2021). Learners of parents with lower educational levels, occupational statuses, and fewer resources are more likely not to acquire basic reading skills, which may ultimately influence their future learning progression and adult life (Noveanu, Simionescu, Goia, & Biró, 2023).

In relation to the Afghan and Kenyan schooling systems, the teaching of English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) at the Grade 9 level in South African public schools faces several difficulties that reflect broader issues within the education system. A considerable number of learners still lag behind their peers and struggle with reading and writing in English when they enter the Senior Phase (grades 7-9), despite expectations that they will perform well in other subjects where English is used. In many instances, learners become frustrated and drop out of school. A study by Kiss, Ortan, Bandal and Mandrea (2023) found that teachers in Romania tend to associate learners' vulnerability with poor achievement, behavioral disorders, and school dropout. Many learners speak their native languages at home, as in Romania. The transition to English-medium instruction in upper elementary (intermediate phase, grades 4-6) and secondary schools (senior phase, grades 7-9) can be abrupt, especially in rural communities with limited exposure to English. Overcrowded classrooms, a lack of resources, inadequate

EFAL teacher training at university, inappropriate in-service teacher development by the Department of Basic Education, and curricular requirements that assume students know more English than they actually do are common challenges faced by teachers in both countries.

Furthermore, extreme poverty in South Africa's Eastern Cape province makes it more difficult for learners to read critically and engage with topic texts, which, in turn, affects their scholastic success. Parsons, Fitzsimons and Schoon (2023) claim that children from impoverished socio-economic situations also endure general linguistic deficiency. These learners have little to no experience or exposure to English (as a second or additional language). It was quite difficult for learners to read and understand written material and to write their own interpretations in proper grammar. In 2020, the Eastern Cape's Comprehensive Systematic Evaluation Provincial Report revealed that the Grade 9 pupils' average score was 35.7% (Govender & Hugo, 2020).

Nevertheless, South Africa's Department of Education (DoE) is making every effort to support and empower educators who teach English as a First Additional Language (EFAL). According to Malahlela and Johnson (2024), the DoE collaborates with the British Council to support primary and secondary school teachers' academic endeavours to improve their command of English. Given that English is the primary language of instruction and exams, research studies such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) highlight the need to improve English language instruction to enhance learner achievement and successful outcomes in EFAL. With 81% of Grade 4 learners unable to read for meaning in any language, South Africa ranks bottom among 57 nations in the 2021 PIRLS findings, announced in May 2023, indicating a crisis in the country's primary education system (Spaul, 2021).

Thus, there is an urgent need to improve English reading skills in FAL. Noting the aforementioned, this study intends to ascertain teachers' views regarding the challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 English First Additional (EFAL) learners in South African primary schools. Grade 9 learners should be able to read fluently and understand complex texts, using reading strategies to support learning in other subjects such as Mathematics, Sciences, and Social Sciences. The ability to read should assist learners in examining information and instructions and in forming meaning on their own, thus aiding academic advancement and meeting curriculum requirements (Acedillo, 2023). Moreover, the reading difficulties that go unaddressed at the Grade 9 level put extra pressure on teachers and the education system in general, as remediation, learning and material support become more complicated and less effective. Selvathurai and Ismail (2024) maintain that material development for the advancement of reading comprehension for second language learners is an important skill for English language learning. Reading comprehension abilities are further cardinal for enhancing critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, vocabulary development, interpreting information, and making informed decisions. In general, these learners encounter challenges in grasping reading material, such as making inferences and locating main ideas, due to a lack of strategies and difficulty maintaining focus. It is on this note that the current research will investigate teachers' views on the challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 English First Additional learners in South African primary schools.

2. Theoretical framework

The study is underpinned by Socio-Constructivist Theory (SCT), drawing in particular on Vygotsky's view that learning is a socially constructed process emanating from social interaction, language, and shared meaning-making (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). This perspective emphasizes that reading comprehension is not merely an individual cognitive skill, but a social practice shaped by dialogue among learners (pupils), teachers, and texts. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development explains how pupils can move from limited to more advanced comprehension when supported through scaffolding, guided reading and collaborative learning activities. In this sense, comprehension develops most effectively when pupils engage with texts alongside more knowledgeable others who model strategies such as questioning, summarising and predicting meaning. In addition, the SCT of Learning pays attention to the interdependencies between individual variables on the one hand, behaviour and the learning environment on the other hand, and the importance of observation, modelling, and self-efficacy in the learning process (Bandura, 1986). In this context, the theory implies that the reading abilities of Grade 9 learners result from both personal capabilities and classroom activities, teacher expectations, and peer relations. By observing positive reading behaviours and providing positive feedback to pupils, they tend to gain confidence and persistence in reading activities. The findings of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2028) study conducted in Romania among 15-year-olds found that teacher-directed instruction lowers participants' reading scores. Learner engagement in reading activities, possibly via constructivist, student-centred teaching approaches, might improve learners' reading abilities (Borş 2024). By connecting these theoretical views to the study, the research acknowledges reading comprehension as a social and cognitive

process, thereby providing an avenue through which classroom interactions and learning environments in the Mangaung Education District of South Africa contribute to the development of learners' reading comprehension skills.

3. Method

The components below cover the research methodology this study followed.

For this study, the qualitative research approach was used for exploring the topic at hand and understanding the realities and complexities in explaining the behaviour and views of participants and identifying the social-cultural norms of a group of people or a specific community at large (Hennink, Bailey & Hutter, 2020), in particular, teachers' views regarding challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 English First Additional learners in South African primary schools.

The study was conducted with grade 9 EFAL teachers at two public primary schools in one educational district of the Free State province of South Africa. In these two public schools, teachers continue to face challenges in teaching and improving grade 9 learners' reading abilities.

Sampling is the process of selecting which individuals to include in a study (Allen, 2017). The researchers (authors) used purposive sampling because the selected schools and teacher participants were attached to two public primary schools in one educational district of the Free State province. A total of 8 EFAL teachers, attached to two public primary schools (4 per school), were identified to participate in this study.

Adler, Salanterä and Zumstein-Shaha (2019) view the focus group as a qualitative data-gathering technique that enables the collection of in-depth data and provides more detail on the phenomenon under study. A focus group discussion (FGD) involves gathering information through. An interview was conducted with a group of participants (Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). For this paper, the authors and the identified teacher participants engaged in a free-flowing discussion focusing on various issues raised by the teacher participants from the two public primary schools. Semi-structured focus group interviews increased reliability and scope for comparability (Harding & Whitehead, 2016), as questions focused on teacher participants' views on challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 EFAL learners in South African public primary schools.

Data analysis involves assembling and organizing data collected from participants and deriving meaning from it to reduce the large volume of data by selecting only what is relevant to the study. This involves formulating themes to classify the data (Muhammed & Kabir, 2016). For this study, the authors used thematic analysis. In general, five themes have been identified for qualitative data analysis.

This study received ethical approval from the ethics committee and the Free State Department of Education, South Africa. The ethical clearance number for this study is [CUT/HREIC 01/23/01]. Teacher participants' consent was obtained, and the necessary information about the study was provided. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable, without consequences. Teacher participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used instead of real names to protect their identities and those of their schools. The participants' pseudonyms were TSA 1-4 and TSB 5-8. All participants provided their consent to participate. This study was executed in an ethical valid manner. According to Kember and Leung (2008), validity is established when a data gathering tool measures what it intends to measure- all the aspects included in the focus group are essential and eliminate undesirable aspects of a particular construct domain (Taherdoost, 2016).

4. Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to ascertain teachers' views on the challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 English First Additional (EFAL) learners in South African primary schools. In line with the aforementioned aim, the following five themes will now be discussed: parental involvement, overcrowded classes, resources, curriculum changes, and teacher training and professional development.

4.1 Theme 1: Parental Involvement

Many scholars concur that a strong, positive relationship between homes and schools is essential to learners' growth and education (Edwards & Alldred, 1999; Richardson, 2009; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). It can be difficult to get the individualized attention required from teachers in crowded classrooms. At-home positive reinforcement can significantly reduce stress and increase self-esteem. Parents' involvement in education weakens the support that learners require, creating gaps that should be filled by them (Wong & Rashid, 2022). For learners to improve their reading abilities, parental involvement is crucial. To prevent problems in school, parents should encourage their children to read at home (Maphumulo, 2010). Parents are crucial in helping their children practice reading (Hugo, 2010). In this regard, TSB8 lamented the following: *"The role of the parents cannot be over-emphasized.*

We are keeping parents in the loop by providing regular updates on academic progress. The role parents play in learning FAL is incredibly important," the statement stated. According to another teacher participant, when parents take an active role in their children's education, it inspires them to achieve. *"The role of the parents cannot be over-emphasized; we are keeping parents in the loop by providing regular updates on academic progress,"* stated another co-researcher (TSA4).

Certain teacher participants (TSA1, TSB6 and TSB8) hold the view that learning should extend beyond school hours. *"Parents must ensure their learners complete homework before bedtime and foster a home environment that promotes reading"* (TSB6). They also noted that it is easier to cultivate a reading culture among learners when parents also embrace it. According to Abdushukurova (2024), reading comprehension develops through ongoing interactions between learners, important adults, and educational resources rather than in a vacuum at school. Learners with little parental involvement are often not exposed to out-of-class reading activities, which impairs their ability to infer meaning from texts. Promoting reading at home and engaging in conversations about school material improves comprehension (Xiao et al., 2025; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016).

4.2 Theme 2: Overcrowded classes

According to Marais (2016) and Gonzalez (2017), classrooms with too many learners restrict teachers' movement. Overcrowded classrooms create significant challenges, especially for novice teachers, making it hard to carry out classroom activities, follow the curriculum, assess learners effectively, and develop their reading abilities. Due to the substantial workloads they face, teachers often see a decline in student success. can lead to stress-related health issues and frequent absenteeism among teachers (Gonzalez, 2017). TSA3 highlighted that *"Overcrowded classrooms hinder the reading comprehension abilities of Grade 9 learners and beyond. In these crowded environments, teachers find it hard to provide the necessary individual attention, timely feedback, and tailored instruction, all of which are crucial for fostering reading comprehension skills."*

An overcrowded classroom (large class size) is an environment in which the number of learners exceeds the teacher-student ratio set by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa (Motshekga, 2012). TSB5 mentioned, *"They have classrooms that are overcrowded at their schools, which makes the teaching of reading challenging."* In support of the latter, TSA1 expressed the following: *"I believe the learners are crammed in the classroom. I have 48 learners, and the space is small. I can't even move around. I prefer to walk among the learners so that I can check on the reading activities I issued them"*.

Teachers feel that overcrowded classrooms hinder their ability to teach English reading effectively. Consequently, learners who already face reading challenges often fall behind, as the focus shifts from deep understanding to merely covering the curriculum. Research unequivocally indicates that overcrowding negatively impacts teaching and learning, especially in literacy-related subjects. Large class sizes obstruct meaningful student participation and limit interactive teaching strategies such as guided reading and group discussions (Panhwar & Bell, 2023; Phala & Hugo, 2022).

4.3 Theme 3: Resources

The resources available at a school, such as physical infrastructure, learning materials, and skilled staff, play a vital role in delivering quality education and supporting improvements in learners' reading abilities (Day, Van Veen & Walraven, 1997).

LSB 3: *"Learners often have to share textbooks with their classmates, which makes it tough for them to study independently and really limits their chances to improve their reading skills. The scarcity of books in indigenous languages (EFAL) poses a significant challenge for me in grasping concepts presented in English, which isn't my first language"* Inadequate, whether it's due to poor facilities or a lack of textbooks and technology, it disrupts the learning process. It hampers teachers' effectiveness (Li et al, 2025). This point is supported by TSA 1: *"There is no computer lab and no photocopiers available to make copies of reading articles for the learners."*

A lack of resources and infrastructure can significantly undermine the successful execution of educational policies (Li et al, 2025). Lumadi (2016) emphasizes that having resources alone doesn't guarantee the development of strong reading skills in learners. It's essential for teachers to actively promote reading in class and assign additional writing tasks.

Some teacher participants (TSA4 & TSB7) noted that there are insufficient resources to enhance EFAL teaching and learning in their schools. The absence of audiovisual aids, textbooks, novels, and a photocopier highlights the need for appropriate resources. A successful outcome in South Africa relies on a blend of various factors (Molteno, 2017).

4.4 Theme 4: Curriculum changes

De Vos, Gandras, and Debener (2014) stated that education in South Africa has long been influenced by political factors, which have also led to repeated changes in the language curriculum. Reading as a skill involves more than

the ability to listen, speak, read, and write. In my opinion, TSA1 indicated: *"It is important for learners to have knowledge, skills and the ability to comprehend the written texts of the curriculum to actively participate in classroom activities and outside of the school. "This is in accordance with Pretorius (2015) that reading development is more than just teaching learners to read and write. They need to comprehend what they read and write. In this regards TB5 added "For learners to learn to speak, read and write, I think it starts with pre-reading skills, long before the learner comes to school through active engagement at home and in Grade 9 through listening to short stories" TSA 6 added another view on the latter issue, "The low socio-economic status of many families, unemployment and poverty contribute to inadequate reading skills; as a result, learners reading technique skills development is delayed."*

It was evident that co-researchers understood that learner exposure to pre-literacy skills is another literacy approach at home. In the senior phase (grades 7-9), teachers felt that the pre-literacy skills approach plays a crucial role in developing learners' literacy skills (Omare, 2021).

Although this information is available, many teachers in South Africa are unaware of the different strategies. Most of the teachers were not trained or did not read and understand the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS) document for grade 9 EFAL. Teachers were poorly trained in implementing the curriculum and were also plagued by a lack of appropriate resources, especially CAPS documents (Maharajh, Nkosi & Mkhize, 2016). An inclusive teaching and learning environment that is observant of diversity can sustain regular reading through the facilitation of interactive reading activities and resources, which could inadvertently improve the desired reading abilities and comprehension for EFAL learners (Gergelyová & Vančo, 2021).

4.5 Theme 5: Teacher training and professional development

Professional development is recognized as a key component of policies aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools (Abou Assali, 2025). Maswanganye (2010) and Mhlongo (2012) indicate that many skill gaps among teachers stem from insufficient training support. TSB7 lamented on the latter aspect by stating the following: *"A need exists for the in-service training of EFAL teachers at the foundation phase, and the extension of this training in the senior phase (grades 7-9). Proper training to teach reading in EFAL is crucial for developing learners' reading abilities"*

The ongoing issues related to professional development opportunities remain a significant concern (Hugo & Masalesa, 2021), particularly given that the Department of Education does not provide in-service training or reading workshops for language teachers at any level. The Department of Education has recently implemented several major changes, but these adjustments have not been accompanied by sufficient teacher training. TSB6 echoed this, stating, *"Last year, officials from the department visited the school to observe the reading instruction in grade nine." These officials came from the province during the second quarter, requesting to review my lesson plans, learners' workbooks, and to evaluate the overall teaching process."*

All teacher participants further indicated that the curriculum advisor appeared to be neither supportive nor adequately knowledgeable in certain content areas. TSA1 stated, *"We are no longer sure what they were doing because, instead of teaching learners, they had to concentrate more on paperwork."*

The ongoing challenges regarding professional development opportunities remain a pressing issue (Hugo & Masalesa, 2021). The Department of Education seemingly doesn't facilitate in-service training or reading workshops for language teachers at any level. As a result, many schools find themselves hiring unqualified teachers who often depend on self-created programmes and methods for reading instruction. Understanding learners' literacy achievement levels is crucial for government policy and educational practices (Noveanu, et al., 2023).

5. Limitations

The study was conducted in two schools of one educational district of the Free State province, South Africa. Eight grade 9 EFAL teachers (Four per school) from two public primary schools were selected to participate in this study. The focus was on teachers' views regarding challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 EFAL learners in the educational district. The findings could not be generalized to other schools.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that schools implement structured programmes that promote parental engagement in learners' reading activities, including workshops and regular communication between teachers and parents. Teachers should be supported through professional development initiatives focused on interactive, learner-centred reading strategies suitable for large classes. In addition, education authorities should prioritize policies to reduce classroom overcrowding, as this would enhance meaningful learner participation and

improve reading outcomes for all grade 9 learners. Ultimately, appropriate teaching initiatives are required to improve learners' reading abilities. These strategy-embedded teaching interventions are typically vocabulary- and concept-oriented. Special consideration should be given to medium size groups (6-15 learners) and older elementary learners when developing reading interventions (Cho, Kim, & Jeong, 2021)-this translates into kindergarten to grades 5 to 6 in the USA and Reception year (Age 5-6) through Grade 6 or 7 (Age 11-13) in South Africa.

7. Concluding reflections

The main aim of this study was to report on teachers' views regarding challenges affecting the reading abilities of grade 9 English First Additional (EFAL) learners in South African primary schools. The role of various stakeholders in supporting the development and improvement of learners' reading skills cannot be discounted. To mitigate the various challenges associated with EFAL, all teachers require greater exposure to development activities to teach English effectively and respond appropriately. Guided by socio-constructivist theory, the study underscores the importance of viewing reading as a socially mediated practice and calls for systemic interventions that support collaboration between public primary schools, families and education authorities to improve the reading abilities of grade 9 learners in South Africa.

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