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# Teacher perspectives and practices in teaching English reading comprehension to Grade 2 First Additional Language Learners

## Abstract

English reading comprehension is an educational challenge worldwide, and South Africa is no exception. English as First Additional Language (FAL) is very significant in South Africa. Learners require specialised support by teachers to overcome the language barrier and comprehend what they read in English as their first additional language. This aspect of overcoming the language barrier in EFAL lead to the study which was conducted to investigate the teacher perspectives and practices in teaching English reading comprehension to Grade 2 First Additional Language Learners. This qualitative study was undertaken through the interpretive paradigm and a case study research design was used. The research sites included three independent English schools in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. The data collection strategies included individual semi-structured interviews and classroom observations of the teachers teaching

English reading comprehension. In addition, a reflective journal was kept by the researcher to document the participants' body language during the interviews and observations. The data were analysed by making use of thematic coding. Findings revealed the pre-comprehension strategies, classroom practices, resources used in teaching English reading comprehension and ways to make reading fun that teachers use to teach English reading comprehension to Grade 2 FAL learners. These strategies and practices are discussed in light of the various stages of the reading process – as reflected in a reading comprehension teaching framework. Teachers can use this framework to address the key challenges in teaching FAL learners.

**Keywords:** reading comprehension, teaching framework, scaffolding, teacher perspectives, First Additional Language.

## Introduction

My interest in English reading comprehension took root when I started an individual tutoring practice from home. I taught 15 learners, ranging from Grade 1 to Grade 6, 12 of which spoke English as First Additional Language (FAL). FAL refers to the first additional language learners use after their home language. It is popularly known as a 'second language'. Learners were enrolled in different schools – some attended government schools, but the majority were from independent schools. The majority of these learners were boys. The learners attended my lessons as an extramural activity in the privacy of their homes. I discovered that one of the major hindrances to understanding the text appeared to be a lack of comprehension of what they read.

Even though learners read a particular text with 'so-called fluency', they were neither able to reflect on the essence of the text, nor were they able to answer questions based on the text. Once I assisted the learners with learning support practices such as vocabulary instruction, the activation of background knowledge and analysed the meaning of words in the text, were learners able to make sense of what they have read. The purpose of this article is to investigate teachers' perspectives and practices in teaching English reading comprehension to Grade 2 First Additional Language learners. The research question from which this article stems, looked into the manner in which English reading comprehension is taught to Grade 2 First Additional language learners.

This article aims to address teacher perspectives and practices in teaching English reading comprehension by segmenting the reading process into three different processes. The nature and importance of reading comprehension are defined and weighed against literature. The causes of poor reading comprehension are analysed before looking at the teaching of reading comprehension through the lens of a teaching framework. The discourse is concluded with the pre-comprehension strategies, classroom practice and resources needed in teaching English reading comprehension.

## Reading comprehension

### The essence of reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is the ability readers have to make connections between their understanding of the text and their background knowledge (Ahmadi, Ismail & Abdullah, 2013:238; O'Connor & Jenkins, 2002:1; Palincsar & Brown, 1988:118; Guthrie, Wigfield & Perencevich, 2004:13; Van Kraayenoord, 2010:288). Reading comprehension is a "complex and multifaceted ability" (Van Kraayenoord, 2010:279) that a learner has to master to learn to read and to read to learn effectively. The importance of reading comprehension cannot be overemphasised. There is a linear relationship between reading and reading comprehension, that is, the quality and quantity of reading comprehension are bound to improve as the quality and quantity of reading increase. Reading per se is

of little value if there is no understanding of what has been read (Joubert, Bester, Meyer, Evans & Phatudi, 2015:101). Reading and reading comprehension are skills that only improve with practice. As reading fluency improves, so should reading comprehension (Konza, 2006: 48). Reading is “a message-getting, problem-solving activity, which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practised” (Joubert et al., 2015: 101). Klapwijk (2015: 1) supports the notion that reading comprehension depends on the ability to read effectively from an early age. Having an understanding of what reading comprehension entails, one cannot separate learners’ individual development from their development in reading.

Literature on the teaching of English reading comprehension (Department of Education, 1997) make a clear distinction between the policies and the theoretical insights and approaches which need to be in place to support the teaching of English reading comprehension to Grade 2 FAL learners. Joubert et al., (2019:323) refer to the additive approach to multilingualism. “This approach implies that all learners should learn their home language and at least one additional official language” (Joubert et al., 2019: 323). Furthermore, the additive approach to multilingualism which stems from the language-in-education policy of the Department of Education, states that “...since some learners in the class do not speak English as their home language, teachers must be aware of the content, concepts and skills of English as First or Second Additional Language” (Joubert et al., 2019: 323). The Annual National Assessment (ANA) is a South African assessment tool that allows all Grade 3, Grade 6 and Grade 9 learners to write literacy and numeracy tests, which are “moderated independently” (Department of Basic Education, 2014). The international equivalent assessment for reading achievement is Progress in International Reading Literacy Skills (PIRLS). Although the PIRLS assessment only starts in Grade 4 in the United States of America, the ANA and PIRLS agree that the foundation to reading comprehension must be laid before a learner reaches Grade 4 (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012:15; Nel & Adam, 2014:52). Nel and Adam (2014: 52) state that “reading is not simply an additional tool that students need at university [or school]; it constitutes the very process whereby learning occurs”. Furthermore,

...more than any other skill, the ability to read is fundamental to successfully navigating the school curriculum. Moreover, it is central to shaping each individual’s trajectory through life, his or her economic wellbeing, and the ability to actively and fully participate in broader society. (Mullis et al., 2012: 11)

The results of PIRLS reading achievement assessment indicates that reading comprehension is a worldwide education challenge. Mullis et al., (2012:27) indicate that countries all across the world are continuously implementing strategies to improve and sustain reading comprehension development in the foundation phase, however, not all countries are successful in this attempt. This is of great concern, knowing that a learner’s education in the Foundation Phase directly affects his or her education in the later years. South Africa faces a high drop-out rate in schools – “of the number of learners enrolled in Grade 2, only half make it to Grade 12” (Modisaotile, 2012: 1). In the words of Long and Zimmerman (2009: 11) –

[I]f one considers the poor levels of reading literacy development displayed by South African learners in the PIRLS (2016) assessment, it is of absolute necessity to consider potential reasons for this in order to assist in the development of targeted interventions aimed at addressing the improvement of learners' reading literacy (including reading comprehension) at all levels of the education system. (Long and Zimmerman, 2009: 11)

## Causes of poor reading comprehension

The causes of poor reading comprehension cannot be separated from the role that poor vocabulary development plays. "Vocabulary development plays a critical role in young children's learning to read and, as a result, their overall success in school" (Lannone-Campbell, Wasik, 2012:321). Additionally, the role that teachers play such as not including culturally relevant texts and not teaching comprehension strategies explicitly, also has an influence on learners' comprehension gaining abilities. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) support the notion of ensuring learners are included in reading comprehension instruction based on culturally relevant texts. Further reasons for the poor levels of reading literacy development, more specifically reading comprehension, could be identified by looking at the child in totality (De Witt, 2000: 45). In part, it could be the result of physical barriers to reading, such as dyslexia, vision impairments and diseases of the eyes, but it could also be the result of psychosocial factors. When looking at the emotional development of the learner, reading anxiety cannot be ruled out as a contributing factor, since "anxiety can be found in all aspects of linguistic development" (Ghonsooly & Loghmani, 2012: 334). All learners and teachers should be made aware of the reality of reading anxiety. Two possible sources of potential anxiety in FAL learners are identified as unfamiliar texts and writing systems, and unfamiliar cultural material. Other factors that can also cause anxiety in FAL learners on a more personal level include the level of "competitiveness, learner beliefs, teacher's comments on the learner's performance and fear of negative evaluation" (Ghonsooly & Loghmani, 2012: 334).

Affective, cognitive and contextual factors relating to the learner can also contribute to poor reading comprehension. Learners' emotional states have an implication on how well and quickly they are able to acquire English as FAL. "Negative emotions and attitudes" (Phatudi, 2014: 41), which learners may experience regarding the learning of English as FAL, may act as a barrier preventing learners from acquiring the target language. Phatudi (2014: 41) stresses that "a learner's mental or intellectual ability plays a role in language learning". Furthermore, a learner who is believed to be intelligent, is not always the learner who acquires the language the fastest (Phatudi, 2014: 41). Cole (2018) states that intelligence is earned by reading a lot. Intelligence cannot be taken for granted, it comes by practising the skill of reading on a regular basis. The "comprehensibility of learning material" (Phatudi, 2014: 42) determines how much of what learners have been exposed to, has been a benefit in assisting with their comprehension of the learning material. The level at which the learning material is presented to learners is also very important to ensure the effective comprehension of the learning material (Phatudi, 2014: 42).

## Teaching reading comprehension

Lazar (1990: 206) proposes that “the text should be sufficiently challenging without being so difficult as to be demotivating...[It] should be within the student’s grasp, in terms of their linguistic, intellectual, and emotional capacities”. Good instruction is the most powerful means of developing proficient perceivers and preventing reading comprehension problems. Narrowly defined, comprehension instruction promotes the ability to learn from text. More broadly, comprehension instruction gives learners access to culturally important domains of knowledge and provides a means of pursuing affective and intellectual goals (Snow, 2002, 30). These domains of knowledge and intellectual goals can be achieved best by teaching reading comprehension using the approach the learners find most suitable and accommodating. “Effective teachers of comprehension enact practices that reflect the orchestration of knowledge about readers, texts, purposeful activity, and contexts for the purpose of advancing students’ thoughtful, competent, and motivated reading” (Snow, 2002: 30).

### *Approaches*

Keeping in mind that there are different approaches to teaching reading and, hence, reading comprehension, particular attention was paid to the teachers’ ways of implementing these approaches to determine the different perspectives and practices implemented by teachers who teach English reading comprehension to Grade 2 FAL learners.

While understanding that there are a number of approaches associated with the teaching of reading and, hence, reading comprehension, there was a constant discourse between the approach used to teach reading comprehension and learners’ response to the text and questions during the reading process. Three overarching approaches have been identified, namely the bottom-up approach (Ahmadi, Ismail & Abdullah, 2013: 238; Carnine, Silbert & Kame’enui, 1990: 3; Grabe & Stoller, 2002: 32; Gunning, 2010: 8; Joubert et al., 2015: 104; Long & Zimmerman, 2008: 12), the top-down approach (Cross & Paris, 1988: 133; Gunning, 2010: 312; Guthrie et al., 2004; Krayenoord, 2010; Palincsar, 1986; Palincsar & Brown, 1988) and the interactive approach (Konza, 2006: 9; Macaro, 2003: 120). It should be noted that further literature (Barchers, 1999) refers to the reading approaches as reading models. In essence, the bottom-up approach, also known as the “phonological processing approach” (Long & Zimmerman, 2008: 12), “expects learners to first decode individual letters and words before there is any focus on comprehension” (Long & Zimmerman, 2008: 12). This approach suggests that learners start building their way to reading comprehension from the basics of language. “The bottom-up model shows that the reading process is supported by each word in the text and a learner decodes each word to understand the meaning” (Ahmadi et al., 2013: 238).

The top-down approach to fostering reading comprehension, also known as the “whole language approach” (Long & Zimmerman, 2008: 12), “refers to... the students’ prior

information and expectations [which] help them to construct meaning from a reading text” (Ahmadi et al., 2013: 238). Therefore,

...the focus is on how whole text is accessed and understood by the learner. The reader samples words and strings of words, predicting and inferring the meaning underlying them. Meaning can only be activated by accessing prior semantic, syntactic and discourse knowledge. (Long & Zimmerman, 2008: 12)

The interactive approach “refers to the reading process which is supported by an interaction between the text information and the learner’s background knowledge as well as interaction between different types of metacognitive reading strategies” (Ahmadi et al., 2013: 238). It is important to understand the role each of these approaches plays in the teaching of reading comprehension. Each learner, who has his or her unique teaching and learning preference, will be naturally more inclined to an approach to teaching reading and, hence, reading comprehension, based on the background of the literacy instruction to which he or she has been exposed. The reading material is thus also classified according to the different approaches to teaching reading. Reading material for Grade 2 learners is arranged according to predictability, high frequency and decidability, as Gunning (2010: 109) maintains. It is imperative to understand that the teacher plays a major role in unlocking the learners’ reading comprehension potential, based on the choice of reading material and making the learners aware of the reason they need to read. The teacher is also responsible for setting the example in the class and displaying the correct reading behaviour and attitude throughout the entire reading process.

### Teaching reading comprehension through the reading process

The reading process is made up of three stages – ‘before reading’, ‘during reading’ and ‘after reading’ – and the process of teaching reading comprehension starts as early as in the ‘before reading’ stage. Since not all learners enjoy reading and they may have poor reading fluency, which ultimately affects their development of reading comprehension, the reading process is broken up into smaller sections to set various goals for the learners to reach throughout the entire process of reading.

The teacher plays an integral part in all three stages of the reading process (Burt & Ridgard, 2014: 4). During the ‘before reading’ stage, the teacher assists the learners with looking at the cover and pictures of the book to make informed predictions about the book. The teacher reads the blurb, that is, “[the] description of a book esp. printed on its jacket as promotion by its publishers” (Oxford Dictionary, 1995), to facilitate the learners in making further predictions about the book. It is during this stage that the teacher starts to activate the learners’ background knowledge and determine what they already understand about the context; continuous probing is used to activate what the learners know about the subjects of the story. Vocabulary development also takes place during this stage. During the ‘during reading’ stage, the teacher encourages the learners to continuously look back and reflect on what they have read.



It is during the final stage, 'after reading', that the Grade 2 teacher should create a platform where the learners can actively reflect on what was read (Burt & Ridgard, 2014: 4). This can be done through a number of strategies, which include discussing highlighted parts of the story, retelling the story, acting out the story, showing understanding by answering higher-order thinking questions, comparing predictions throughout the story to the actual story, making links between the story and the learners' real-life world, milieu and context, comparing different elements (characters, settings and events) in the story with other stories and summarising the story. The reading process forms the foundation of the theoretical framework for reading comprehension. Refer to table 1.

## Teaching framework

For the purpose of interpreting my empirical data. I developed a "reading comprehension teaching framework" on the basis of my scholarly review. The teaching framework is an interactive reading comprehension tool that engages the teacher and the learner in the text throughout the reading process. In a nutshell, the reading process consists of three stages; before reading, during reading and after reading (Burt & Ridgard, 2014:5).

The teaching framework of the study is built on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) and the revised taxonomy by Krathwohl and Anderson (2010). The conceptual framework, which acts as a teaching framework as it guides teachers in teaching reading comprehension through the different stages of reading, consists of an integration of the different levels of knowledge one acquires through scaffolding, the revised taxonomy of Krathwohl and Anderson and the three stages of reading, namely 'before reading', 'after reading' and 'during reading'. 'Scaffolding' refers to the process when a novice learner is guided by a knowledgeable other to attain skills on a higher level (Attarzadeh, 2011: 5; Lidz, 1991: 80; Schwieter, 2010: 31). The revised taxonomy consists of six levels of knowledge, namely remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate and create.

Going through the three stages of reading, it is evident that natural progression takes place, starting with the 'before reading' stage, eventually moving to the 'during reading' stage to end off with the 'after reading' stage, with the ultimate aim of teaching English reading comprehension. The stages of reading have been divided into different levels of thinking and reasoning, as suggested by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory and Krathwohl and Anderson's (2010: 64) revised taxonomy. The revised taxonomy is based on Bloom's taxonomy. The teaching framework adopted for this study is an amalgamation of the ZPD theory and the revised taxonomy of Krathwohl and Anderson (2010). This teaching framework represents a holistic process, which will continually encourage teachers to evaluate their strategies and techniques of teaching reading comprehension. The teaching framework serves as a guideline for teachers to determine whether the proposed strategies and question levels are being used or not.

Each ZPD level has a double-barrelled title depending on its origin. For example, ZPD 1 – remember: The section 'ZPD 1' refers to the level of thinking and reasoning according to



the ZPD. The second part of the title, 'remember', originates with the corresponding level of thinking and reasoning according to the revised taxonomy (Krathwohl & Anderson, 2010: 64).

The table below illustrates how the different levels of thinking according to the revised taxonomy (Krathwohl & Anderson, 2010: 64) were integrated with the ZPD. The learners, of whom many were boys, battled to develop reading comprehension, despite the teacher scaffolding their thinking and reasoning skills according to the ZPD and the various levels of knowledge according to the revised taxonomy. As already mentioned, the framework served as a foundation for the interpretation of empirical data.

**Table 1: A reading comprehension teaching framework**

The stages of reading divided into different levels of thinking and reasoning according to the ZPD and the revised taxonomy

Before reading	During reading	After reading
<p><b>ZPD 1 – REMEMBER</b></p> <p><b>Knowledge questions: (remember)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activate prior knowledge</li> <li>• Make predictions</li> <li>• Vocabulary development</li> </ul> <p><b>Evaluate:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate the cover and the title of the book: discuss your idea of what the story might be about</li> </ul>	<p><b>Knowledge questions: (remember)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look back, answer knowledge questions</li> <li>• Evaluate understanding</li> </ul> <p><b>ZPD 2 – UNDERSTAND</b></p> <p><b>Comprehension questions: (understanding)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test learners' concentration skills</li> </ul> <p><b>Application questions: (apply)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put yourself in the story, what would you do differently?</li> <li>• How would you end the story?</li> </ul>	<p><b>ZPD 4 – ANALYSE</b></p> <p><b>Knowledge questions: (remember)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revise names of the characters</li> <li>• Revise the setting, time</li> <li>• Revise the name of the book</li> </ul> <p><b>Comprehension questions: (understanding)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show understanding by answering in-depth questions</li> <li>• Name the elements in the story</li> </ul> <p><b>ZPD 5 – EVALUATE</b></p> <p><b>Application questions: (apply)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retell the story</li> <li>• Act the story out</li> <li>• Change the story to suit your context</li> </ul> <p><b>Analysis questions: (analyse)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss favourite and least favourite characters</li> <li>• Discuss like or dislike for the story</li> </ul>

Before reading	During reading	After reading
	<p><b>Analysis questions: (analyse)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compare your predictions to the plot of the story</li> <li>• Discuss characters thus far</li> <li>• Discuss like or dislike for the story thus far</li> </ul> <p><b>ZPD 3 – APPLY</b></p> <p><b>Evaluate:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is your favourite character?</li> </ul> <p><b>Create:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a new character for the story</li> <li>• Create a new ending for the story</li> <li>• Create a new title for the story</li> </ul>	<p><b>ZPD 6 – CREATE</b></p> <p><b>Evaluate:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate title for the book</li> <li>• Appropriate pictures used in the book</li> <li>• Compare first and second predictions to the book.</li> </ul> <p><b>Create:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a new character for the story</li> <li>• Create a new ending for the story</li> <li>• Create a new title for the story</li> </ul>

## Methodology

In order to study reading comprehension, a qualitative research approach was adopted, using a case study design (Maree, 2012: 72; Yin, 2014: 16). Three independent English schools were purposively selected as research sites and the three schools accepted the invitation to participate in the study. From the three research sites, 10 teachers (primary participants) participated in the study. Each teacher and her interaction with her learners formed the nucleus of the study. Nine of these teachers were Grade 2 teachers, and

one was the Grade 2 guided reading teacher. All the teachers<sup>1</sup> selected had at least two years' experience of teaching English reading to learners in Grade 2. For the purpose of exploring if boys take longer to develop reading comprehension, I selected both male and female FAL learners and analysed the process of learning to read and developing reading comprehension. From the group of learners I worked with, there were eight girls and eight boys.

<sup>1</sup> All participants gave consent to take part in the study. Parents of the learners who were observed, gave informed consent. Ethical considerations were adhered to.

Another important key variable was the way the teachers taught reading. I started exploring the ways in which the teachers taught reading comprehension and the ways in which the learners constructed their own understanding of the text. These processes led me to reflect and analyse the data to look at an emerging reality, revealing possible differences between boys' and girls' development of reading comprehension.

The data for the study were collected by means of classroom observations, individual semi-structured interviews with Grade 2 teachers and reflective journaling by the researcher, thereby facilitating the process of the triangulation of data. An interview schedule was used during all the interviews. I started the data gathering process by interviewing the teachers teaching at English independent schools selected for the study. During the interviews, the focus was on their perception of teaching English reading comprehension and how they went about doing this in the classroom. Thereafter, the teachers were observed teaching English reading comprehension. The interviews and observations were supplemented by in-depth qualitative reflective notes made during the process.

The data were analysed by means of thematic analysis. The data collection allowed for the data to be documented in the form of interview transcriptions, observation checklists and reflective journals. The different manuscripts were perused to identify codes, which were grouped into five themes, as can be seen in the table below:

**Table 2 An overview of themes that emerged from the data.**

<b>Theme 1:</b> Pre-comprehension strategies
<b>Theme 2:</b> Classroom practice: steps and stages
<b>Theme 3:</b> Resources used in teaching English reading comprehension
<b>Theme 4:</b> Making reading fun
<b>Theme 5:</b> Alternative strategies for teaching English reading comprehension

## Findings

In analysing the data, it became evident that there were teaching strategies used to teach reading comprehension, which were aligned with the three stages of reading as seen in the teaching framework (see Table 1) – before reading, during reading and after reading. The strategies used to teach English reading comprehension to Grade 2 FAL learners are pre-comprehension strategies, classroom practice and alternative strategies for teaching English reading comprehension. Throughout the observations of the various participants, the stages for teaching reading comprehension were covered by the participants.

The first strategy used to teach English reading comprehension was pre-comprehension strategies, which refer to the strategies teachers use in the early stages of teaching English reading comprehension. Some of the pre-comprehension strategies include activating background knowledge, vocabulary development, differentiated teaching and learning and making predictions. In terms of the teaching framework, 'ZPD 1 – remember' requires the teacher to activate prior knowledge, make predictions and develop vocabulary. During the data collection, I noticed how the teachers actually teach the meaning of question words originating from Bloom's taxonomy. Participant A1 stated that "comprehension can be improved by actually teaching it [the meaning of the words in the passage] and explaining terminology such as Bloom's taxonomy, explaining those words, introducing text, in terms of what it is". I also noted how the teacher ensured that the learners understand the context of the comprehension by linking the comprehension to their weekly theme. Another effective strategy observed during a classroom observation was when Participant C2 encouraged the learners to underline the words in the passage they did not understand, using a ruler, as they read the passage handed out to them. The teacher allowed enough time to explain each of the underlined words to the learners.

Strategies during classroom practice include exposing learners to reading comprehension, allowing verbal and/or written answers, addressing reading fluency, analysing reading cues and incorporating colour coding, making use of sequencing, and asking higher order thinking questions. It became clear that teachers expose Grade 2 learners to a great deal of English reading comprehension as a way to familiarise them with the skill of reading and answering English reading comprehension texts. In the class of Participant A3, I observed a bonus book system, where there is no limit to the number of books the learners can take home per day. Participant A3 motivated this as follows: "[Learners] can come and go with bonus books as they want because we just want to foster a love for reading... with that comes a love for comprehension". The kinds of texts used for reading comprehension is very important, as Participant B3 explained,

Reading material must come out of learners' environment. Not something about nuclear power...they are small kids, they are just eight years old. It should come from the home environment or the church environment...try to relate it to their life skills, Bible...just don't keep it isolated.

I observed the teachers' passion for learners having a reason for reading. "Reading comprehension is not just a matter of just slapping anything in front of learners and say 'read this and then you are going to get a bunch of questions'. Questions mean nothing if there is no prerogative" (Participant A1). Participant A4 made it very clear that reading "is not just reading for the sake of reading, there is meaning behind it".

The teachers allowed the learners to answer the English reading comprehension exercises through verbal and written answering techniques. Participant C2 explained that she allows the learners to voice their thoughts verbally before putting it onto paper. This allows them to sort through the details of the story and generate an understanding of the story as a whole. The learners need to be able to identify with the story and make it their own. The teachers assist the learners with improving their reading fluency by giving

them suitable reading material. Participant B1 asserted that “the best way to make sense of information is to use all your senses”. A practical way of incorporating all the senses is to teach the learners to use colour coding by means of circling the corresponding reading comprehension question to the answer in a specific colour. This enables the learners to link the reading comprehension question to the answer in the passage provided. Through sequencing, teachers train learners to analyse the story by placing the different parts of the story in a sequence. This is believed to help the learners identify their stance. Questioning and higher-order thinking questions play a major role in teaching English reading comprehension. Higher-order thinking is an opportunity for learners to think ‘out of the box’ and use their critical and creative thinking abilities. During observation, the teacher started with clear knowledge questions about the book and as the questions progressed, so did the level of reasoning and higher-order thinking. An example of this was asking each learner to elaborate on his or her favourite and least favourite part of the story. Conducting the reading activity on the carpet allowed the learners to ask questions about the book more easily. The boys took longer to respond to the question and answered the question in context. In this case, there was a clear difference between the time the boys and the girls took to acquire reading comprehension. Making reference to the teaching framework, ‘ZPD 2 – understand’ supports the strategies suggested for classroom practice. Furthermore, ZPD 2 is part of the ‘during reading’ phase of the reading process, which creates a platform for the teacher to effectively ask the learners questions related to the teaching framework.

The use of resources and access to resources have a direct impact on learners’ motivation to read. A learner’s motivation to read can influence their reading fluency and thus their reading comprehension since motivation leads to confidence, and confidence to competence. Personal preferences and motivation (or a lack thereof) also needs to be kept in mind. The boys who participated in the study did not generally like to read. There are things that some people like doing more than other people; [reading] comprehension is one of those things.

The two alternative strategies used as a vehicle to facilitate reading comprehension were group reading and guided reading. Guided reading and group reading served as alternative strategies to teaching English reading comprehension to the Grade 2 learners. During the group reading observation lesson, the class was divided into reading groups, where the weakest group (consisting mostly of boys) remained in the classroom and the strongest group (consisting of the least number of boys) was situated quite a distance from the classroom. After reading the allocated story in a group format, they were given an A3 sheet of questions to answer in a group format. Although the teacher provided some assistance to all the groups, the weakest group received the most assistance. The stronger and intermediate groups who took part in this activity, were all able to answer the comprehension questions with support from their fellow group members.

## Discussion

Teachers' perspectives and practices in teaching English reading comprehension to Grade 2 First Additional Language learners is vital. Teachers have a lot of theoretical knowledge<sup>2</sup> about the manner in which reading comprehension should be taught to mother tongue speakers, but lack theoretical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension to non-mother tongue speakers. Further professional development needs to take place to enhance teacher knowledge regarding the teaching of reading comprehension strategies to non-mother-tongue speakers. However, teachers' theoretical knowledge means very little if it is not applied correctly in the classroom. Making reference to table 1, the three stages of reading, namely 'before reading', 'during reading' and 'after reading' needs to be incorporated throughout the teaching of reading comprehension. Each stage has specific activities and comprehension requirements teachers need to adhere to in order to make comprehension instruction effective.

The gap between theory and practice in comprehension instruction will continue to grow if teachers fail to enforce the comprehension forming activities and requirements in each of the knowledge levels in the stages of reading. This was evident in cases where there were discrepancies between the information teachers conveyed about their understanding of teaching reading comprehension, and the manner in which reading comprehension is taught. Teachers who did not segment the reading process into the three stages, battled to scaffold learners' reading comprehension: background knowledge was not activated, vocabulary was not developed and learners were not guided to make predictions. Learners were not challenged in their thinking to put themselves in the characters' shoes, neither were they asked to evaluate their predictions half-way through the text. After reading, learners were just given text and told to answer the questions. Learners battled to complete the instruction.

The overall learning atmosphere within classrooms where theory and practice was aligned, looked rather different. One teacher's understanding of teaching reading comprehension was in-line with her classroom practice. The reading process was followed meticulously in the guided reading approach. Learners from different ability groups were able to answer questions with insight, since they were guided through each stage of the reading process. An insightful observation was that each group, from the strongest to the weakest group, was guided through all the levels of knowledge in each stage of the reading process.

In this classroom, the teacher adhered to implementing the three stages of reading. During the 'before reading' stage, the teacher assisted learners with vocabulary development, activating background knowledge and making predictions after looking at the cover of the book. During the 'during reading' stage, the teacher stopped and asked learners to evaluate their understanding of the text.

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2 For the purpose of this article, teachers need to rely on their theoretical knowledge of teaching reading comprehension to Grade 2 learners.

Learners were asked questions about their most and least favourite part of the story as well as the characters they can mostly relate to. Finally, learners were asked to retell the story to each other. A lovely activity was where learners were asked to change the ending of the book according to their unique interpretation of the story.

The significance of the reading process (table 1) is notable in breaking the holistic reading process up into the three stages of reading. Learners are now guided through the process of achieving the required level of knowledge in each stage of reading. Through the assistance of the teacher, learners are able to achieve the ZPD before moving to the next stage. This means that learners are able to grasp the text section by section, instead of having to comprehend the text as a whole.

Teachers who battled to guide learners to reading comprehension failed to make use of the reading stages and enforce the levels of knowledge in table 1. This is in contrast to classrooms where learners were able to comprehend texts, as they made use of scaffolding and moving through the different reading stages and categories of knowledge. Learners from these classes, clearly enjoyed reading and eased through the answering of reading comprehension questions, since they internalised the text, right from the beginning of the reading process to the end of the final stage of reading.

The purpose of the teaching framework is to provide a common ground for reading comprehension education for FAL learners. The teaching framework is essential in any literacy classroom where FAL learners are present, as it guides the teacher in combining the teacher's theoretical knowledge about teaching reading comprehension with the practical tools needed for teaching reading comprehension. Not all teachers are equally confident teaching reading comprehension to FAL learners, thus the teaching framework can serve as a reference guide for teachers who have to teach reading comprehension to FAL learners.

The teaching framework unlocks reading during the entire reading process and assists teachers to facilitate reading comprehension in such a manner that learners do not feel overwhelmed with text and questions they have to complete.

There was a clear distinction in the manner reading comprehension was taught with reference to the teaching framework, compared to teachers who taught reading comprehension without the teaching framework. Teachers felt safer teaching reading comprehension in accordance with the teaching framework. Furthermore, there was clear progression from each stage in the reading process. In contrast there were cases where teachers relied on their limited understanding and experience about teaching reading comprehension. Learners could sense their teacher's limited confidence and were restless as a result of this. Learners thus battled to read through the text and answer the questions with the necessary insight.

The knowledge gap that was identified during the empirical phase, was the lack of a standardised tool for teaching reading comprehension. The teaching framework



can assist to bridge the identified gap and to standardise reading comprehension education, nationally and internationally. This would be beneficial to teachers who are not confident in teaching reading comprehension. The guidelines provided in the teaching framework can guide teachers until they are confident enough to teach reading comprehension on their own. The teaching framework can benefit learners alike, ensuring that all learners are taught how to do reading comprehension in the same manner, incorporating all three stages of reading. The advantage of the teaching framework is that it provides practical ideas which can be used during every stage of the reading process, it is interactive and serves as a go-to guide for all teachers.

## **Recommendations for teaching English reading comprehension**

Recommendations have stemmed from the research which are aimed at assisting teachers with the teaching of reading comprehension. The link to getting learners connected with reading materials, is to know what the learner's interests are and ensuring that the learner has access to the correct resources. Find out from the learner what sparks his/her interest and source reading material related to the learner's life context; content he or she can relate to. An alternative idea is to link reading material to the weekly theme. Truthfully the teacher's perception about teaching reading comprehension can influence learners' intrinsic motivation to read with or without the appropriate reading material. Learners need to understand the objective for the reading they are doing; they need to have a reason for reading. The teacher should remind learners what they should be on the lookout for throughout the reading process. This approach to reading comprehension will assist learners in achieving the zone of proximal development.

Learners should develop a love for books and for reading. As soon as an element of fun is integrated in reading, learners will be encouraged to pick up books and read for the pleasure of it. They will grow in their ability to read, develop reading fluency and before they know it find themselves in a cycle of reading with confidence, which may lead to competence in reading comprehension. Again, the teacher is the agent of change, and with correct perception of reading and reading comprehension, can spark a love for reading in learner's lives.

## **Conclusion**

Reading comprehension instruction remains a cause of concern across the globe. Reading comprehension is a (life) skill which needs to be practiced in order to be perfected. Learners need to be given opportunities to practice this (life) skill and in doing so unlock ways of making sense of text. The teacher plays a vital role in reading comprehension instruction throughout the holistic reading experience. By means of

segmenting the reading process into three respective stages, 'before reading', 'during reading' and 'after reading', the teacher can guide learners through the different levels of knowledge. This ensures that learners achieve the so-called outcomes in each level of knowledge, and thus reaches the zone of proximal development, before moving to the following levels of knowledge. Teachers are encouraged to make use of these comprehension-forming strategies as discussed in table 1 to aid the shaping of their perceptions and practices in teaching English reading comprehension. The teacher remains the agent of change and leads learners from the known level of understanding (ZPD 1 - Remember) to the unknown (ZPD 6 - create) level of understanding. Through investigating how English reading comprehension is taught to Grade 2 FAL learners, teachers can make use of the framework for comprehension as a guideline. The framework for comprehension is merely one way in which FAL teacher can be assisted in teaching reading comprehension. Further research is needed to establish strategies and techniques to enhance teachers' skills to teach reading comprehension to FAL learners as this is different from teaching reading comprehension to mother tongue speaker. In conclusion, the limitations to the study included the fact that only three (instead of four) research sites agreed to take part in the study, and furthermore, one school only had two teachers to adhere to the purposive sampling criteria.

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