

Improving learners' comprehension skills in the early years through group discussion

Margaret Funke Omidire

Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

Author's note: Please address correspondence to Margaret Funke Omidire.

(ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5784-7734>)

[email: funke.omidire@up.ac.za](mailto:funke.omidire@up.ac.za)

Abstract

Multilingualism is a natural phenomenon that is common in many schools in sub-Saharan Africa and globally. This article reports on the utilisation of group discussion by teachers to improve the comprehension skills of learners in their multilingual classes. The study aimed to examine solutions to low comprehension skills among learners whose language of instruction differed from their home languages in multilingual classes. The participants were teachers (n=12) and learners (n=134) from four purposively sampled primary schools. Data generation included non-participatory observations of comprehension lessons, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and analyses of teachers' lesson plans and learners' workbooks. Data was analysed using thematic data analysis. The initial findings indicate that some teachers employed peer tutoring and limited group work. Other teachers utilised a quiz-bowl approach in comprehension lessons, which appeared to limit learners' independent thinking in discussions. However, further analysis indicated that group discussions could be an asset if the teachers were trained to model and scaffold the art of asking questions for learners to observe and learn. Future research should examine the longitudinal influence of the structured use of group discussions with linguistically diverse primary school age learners.

Key terms: group discussion, comprehension skills, support strategy, multilingualism, primary schools

Introduction /Language development in young learners

How can the use of group discussions inform our knowledge on the development of comprehension skills in young learners? This article aims to contribute to this knowledge to improve comprehension skills in the early years. The foundational development of language skills in the early years creates appropriate structures for later learning. Young children require proper guidance and instruction as well as appropriate mediation of learning to enhance their ability to respond appropriately to oral and written text – especially when they lack proficiency in that language. **Lack of proficiency in this context refers to the learners' inability to use receptive and expressive language for learning at an academic level.**

Moreover, in multilingual contexts the mere development of decoding skills is not adequate for long-term academic success. The challenges associated with learning in multilingual contexts where the language of instruction differs from learners' home languages have been well documented in literature (Charamba, 2020; Dash & Das, 2019; Gorter & Cenoz, 2017). Also, well documented is the poor literacy and comprehension skills among young learners across Africa. It is therefore expedient to explore and understand the strategies used by teachers that in their opinion have been effective in bridging the gaps in multilingual classrooms. One of such strategies is the utilisation of group discussions. There is considerable evidence that instructional approaches that explicitly emphasize dialogic classroom discussions may promote students' ability to state and support arguments in various subject areas (Edwards-Groves & Davidson, 2020; Schuitema et al., 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2017). This has also proved successful in multilingual contexts (Berland & Reiser, 2011, Lawrence et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2017).

Group discussion to enhance learning

Research shows that oral dialogue/guided talk/peer discussions characterized by a high degree of relevant arguments and counterarguments support the development of participants' comprehension of the text topic (Rydland & Grover, 2019). Tyas (2019) concurs that small group discussion is one of the teaching methods that can be used by the teacher in the teaching and learning process. However, students may lead one another astray during a discussion if a more knowledgeable peer or teacher is not present to question misconceptions and ensure rigorous understanding of the topic. This underscores the importance of teachers' role as the mediators/facilitators of learning and having oversight of the whole process. The production of peer-group talk is a collective and distributed endeavour in the sense that learners contribute to the construction of meaning while taking turns to listen to one another. An intervention study was conducted by Murphy et al. (2018) on developing students' discourse to promote high-level comprehension. Student participants (n = 35, female = 19) were recruited from two fourth-grade classrooms in one elementary school at the beginning of the school year. The study aimed to investigate discourse patterns in literacy classrooms and the effects of discussion on high-level comprehension among others. Findings parallel the predicted growth in positive student critical-analytic thinking, as evidenced in discourse, over the entirety of the intervention. There was also an increase, on average, in the students' written high-level comprehension scores over the course of the intervention (Murphy et al, 2018).

According to Djamarah (2006), the ultimate aims of a small group discussion are to enable students to be more actively involved in the teaching and learning process, make the process engaging and enjoyable as a result of close interaction with peers, and to improve students' final learning outcomes. The skills acquired during a small group discussion include techniques for problem solving, confidence in communication and appreciation for teamwork.

These skills are enabling for students through creating a sense of involvement in decision-making and collaboration.

Group composition should be planned so that students feel free to share their ideas and disagree while simultaneously having access to their more knowledgeable peers. Sagala (2008) argues that groups are more effective if they consist of only three to four students. This is not always possible in situations where there is a high teacher-learner ratio and a class size of between 40 and 50 learners. According to McKeown et al. in McLaughlin (2012, p. 433), class discussion plays an important role in reading comprehension. Discussion promotes dynamic engagement in creating meaning from a text. The problems that students have with reading comprehension can often be solved through discussion as they can help each other to comprehend the text through repetition and consolidation (Blickenstaff et al., 2013; Tyas, 2019). Using this technique can also decrease students' anxiety.

Importance of comprehension to learning

Rote learning – the memorisation of information largely by repetition – has been found to be effective for learning basic information such as the alphabets and multiplication tables. Rote learning was used extensively by teachers in the past (Khamees, 2016). In recent years, questions have been raised about the long-term damage of extended use of rote learning in the overall scheme of learning (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2015). Students who are used to learning merely by rote fail to fully comprehend the message of a text or passage and may have difficulty critically engaging with text and building an argument (Zohrabi et al., 2018). Development of adequate comprehension skills is often encumbered by habitual rote learning. Since learning should be more than mere memorisation and recall of facts, the emphasis on developing comprehension skills is not misplaced. Comprehension is crucial for proper engagement with

and questioning of information, leading to the development of individuals who can contribute meaningfully to society.

Evidence-based strategies for developing comprehension skills

Breiset (2010) discusses three strategies for developing comprehension skills. These are building background knowledge, teaching vocabulary explicitly and checking comprehension frequently. These strategies appear to be simple and straightforward enough. Building background knowledge involves eliciting learners' experiences and making associations that will aid their understanding of text. This could also be accomplished by guiding learners through new books by highlighting the glossary and explaining the main ideas prior to reading. Breiset (2010) also argues that learners be allowed to use their respective home languages. Although the explicit teaching of vocabulary is also a strategy that has been used extensively, this requires resources such as multilingual dictionaries and other instructional materials. Checking comprehension frequently can be achieved by asking higher-order questions that require critical thinking and not merely questions where the answers can be picked out in the text. In addition, learners' summarising and the use of graphic organisers can also be employed to check their comprehension of any given text. However, this is most effective where the class size is small. With large classes, other strategies need to be included to complement this strategy. The structural disparities in society mean that a large number of schools are overpopulated and under-resourced. This reduces the efficacy of some of these strategies for developing comprehension skills.

Group discussion as a strategy for developing comprehension skills

Research has shown that group discussion in classrooms encourages learners to share ideas and inspires questioning among peers. This kind of approach often results in better

participation and engagement when compared to the whole-class approach to teaching. It also enhances understanding of the text and thus improves learning (Jones, 2014; Siswanti & Ngadiso, 2014; Wu, 2008). Williams (2008) argues that when teachers appropriately model techniques such as skimming and scanning the text for main ideas, these techniques can also be developed within groups. They help learners develop the skill of identifying the main ideas being put forward in the text and enable the teacher to gather information on the extent of the learners' comprehension. Williams (2008) further argues that learners are more at ease when they are allowed to collaborate with their peers. They strengthen one another's ability to locate, highlight and comprehend the main ideas and other information portrayed in a text. In the same vein, there is the opportunity for developing higher levels of contextualisation and analysis of the text. However, the role of the teacher as facilitator/mediator in the process is essential, as it determines the extent of success of the group discussion. Guidance from the teacher helps the learners to remain focused and be steered in the right direction. Questions are asked to elicit critical engagement with the text being read.

It is generally agreed that certain factors need to be considered when forming groups for classroom discussion. These factors include ability levels, personality, language, social skills and, in some instances, gender (Tugman, 2010). Li (2017) states (as do other scholars) that group sizes should be small. It has been proposed that three to four learners per group are ideal for greater participation and for boosting the confidence of those learners who are unsure of themselves. Smaller groups also allow for better sharing of information and equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Small groups are easier for the teachers to manage in terms of giving the required attention and assistance to groups. Learners with low levels of ability – as opposed to average-ability learners – have proved to gain more when they are included in smaller groups (Li, 2017). Groups with heterogenous ability have been found to be more effective for increased engagement and promotion of critical thinking skills. Attention

should also be given to arranging classrooms for optimal interaction, in other words, by seating learners in such a way that all group members will be visible/audible to the whole group.

The lack of classroom control and excessive noise levels are some of the challenges of group discussions as identified by teachers (Jones, 2014). Additionally, there are teachers who still believe that code switching, which naturally occurs in multilingual classrooms when learners are placed in a group, is a disadvantage. This view is fast dissipating in the face of overwhelming evidence that the use of home languages for learning – either in the form of code switching and/or translanguaging – is actually beneficial (Cahyani et al., 2018; Probyn, 2015).

Defining teacher/learner roles during group discussion

When the teacher/learner roles are properly defined and communicated upfront, the implementation of the group discussion becomes effective and achieves the desired results. Wei and Murphy (2017) indicate that the appropriate implementation of roles forms part of the process of developing critical thinking skills in learners, because then the discussion or talk is of a higher quality. The teacher is able to model the quality of techniques of talking, expression and questioning required by the learners, to give explicit instructions and scaffold the learning experience to support the learners and reinforce their positive achievements through collaborative reasoning. The teacher also has to ensure that the rules that govern group discussions are known and agreed upon by the learners. Learners have to be motivated and invested in the process, and they must be engaged and willing to participate. It is therefore imperative that the environment be non-threatening, accommodative and conducive to learning.

Zone of proximal development as a theory for enhancing comprehension skills

It is evident from the above that sociocultural theory is often used as the underlying framework for group discussion within the classroom context. The importance of social interaction and emphasis on engagement with others encourages the use language in cognitive development. High-level cognitive abilities are developed through interaction with the environment (Van Compernelle & Williams, 2013). Vygotsky's extensive research in the field of human intelligence culminated in various theories, including the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD). Central to his argument is the notion that action and social interaction coalesce to help children learn. An integral part of what is learned are the physical and social contexts within which learning takes place. Interaction between children and more mature individuals lies at the heart of psychological development. Children's social environment and social construction of the mind are important elements of intellectual development, and language and speech facilitate such development (Deutsch & Reynolds, 2000; Kozulin & Garb, 2002; Meadows, 2018; Silalahi, 2019). Vygotsky believed that pedagogy needs to be cognisant of the relationship between the development process and the learning process. Vygotsky defines the ZPD as

“the distance between his actual development, determined with the help of independently solved tasks, and the level of potential development of the child, determined with the tasks solved by the child under the guidance of adults and in cooperation with more intelligent partners” (Shayer, 2002, p. 16).

For Vygotsky, “cognitive development involves the internalization, transformation and use of routines, ideas and skills which are learned socially, from more competent partners” (Meadows, 2018, p. 106). Furthermore, according to Keenan et al. (2016, p. 45), “development was a social process: social interactions were a necessary aspect of cognitive development”.

In multilingual classrooms, social interaction is essential and fundamental to the learning process – especially for learners whose home languages differ from the language of instruction. Learning should be interactive, and the environment should facilitate and support the construction of meaning and context-embedded communication.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted to establish how group discussion could be used to develop the comprehension skills of young learners in multilingual classes. The study further aimed to explore how group discussion can enhance the overall language skills of learners – regardless of their diverse language backgrounds – through collaborative group work and discussion among peers. Peer collaboration enhances proper questioning techniques and critical thinking skills (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2016). The study specifically aimed to answer the following research question: *How can the use of group discussions inform our knowledge on the development of comprehension skills in young learners?*

The participants were 12 teachers (male n=4; female n=8), purposively selected from four schools in Gauteng, South Africa. Also involved were 134 learners from three of the classes that were observed. These were made up of 51 Grade 4 learners aged about 9 years and 83 Grade 6 learners who were about 11 years old on average. Each of the schools met the criteria of being multilingual, with at least four of the South African official languages represented (IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Sesotho and Afrikaans) in addition to English. All the teachers had teaching qualifications and their years of experience ranged from six months (n=1), two to 10 years (n=7) and 12 to 18 years (n=4). Table 1 shows the participants' details.

Table 1: Participants' information

	Teachers			
School	School location	Number of teachers	Gender	Data-gathering method used
A	Urban area (well resourced)	2	F (n=1) M (n=1)	Semi-structured interview Classroom observations

B	Township (semi-urban) Adequate resources	1	F (n=1)	Semi-structured interview Classroom observations
C	Township (semi-urban) Limited resources	5	F (n=5)	Focus group discussion Semi-structured interview
D	Township (semi-urban) Limited resources	4	F (n=1) M (n=3)	Focus group discussion Semi-structured interview Classroom observation
Total		12		
Learners				
	Grade	Age (years)	Total	
	4	9	51	
	6	11	83	
Total			134	

Three of the schools were located in townships with high risk and high needs. There is also high unemployment in the communities. These schools had limited resources for teaching and learning and the average class size was 45 learners. One of the schools (School A) was a full-service school which implies that it is better resourced and professions such as learning support specialists form part of the teaching and learning team.

The data was gathered using non-participatory classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion and learners' classwork. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using predetermined open-ended questions on the use of group discussion and other strategies to enhance comprehension skills in multilingual classrooms. Teachers' lesson plans and learners' workbooks were viewed and analysed. The data was documented using audio and video recording, as well photographs of learners' books.

The data gathered was analysed by means of thematic analysis. The recordings were transcribed and checked. Thereafter the transcripts were reviewed a number of times to ensure adequate familiarisation with the contents before coding and categorisation started. These categories subsequently resulted in the themes that were derived.

Institutional ethics approval was obtained prior to the commencement of the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participating schools, teachers and parents of the

learners whose classes were observed. Permission was obtained to use audio and video recording devices that were placed unobtrusively inside the classrooms.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study revealed that teachers' conceptualisation of group discussion and their perceptions regarding the efficacy of using group discussion to enhance comprehension skills. The findings further demonstrate the actual practical use of group discussions by the teachers who indicated that they utilised the strategy. Furthermore, it showed the structure of the lesson planning, the classroom arrangements and the learner groupings, as well as the teachers' facilitation techniques. The challenges associated with using the strategy were also identified. The findings from the study are discussed according to the themes that emerged from the data analysis. The main themes that emerged were; conceptualisation of group discussion, perception of the efficacy of group discussion for developing comprehension skills, formation of groups and process followed and intra group collaboration. Other themes were collaboration during group discussion, roles and responsibilities, facilitation of discussions and the challenges identified.

Conceptualisation of group discussion

The teachers understood the need for adopting group discussion as a strategy and demonstrated an awareness of the challenges faced by young learners. Below are excerpts from different teachers.

“Some learners cannot express themselves, so if they tell the learner sitting next to them what they want to say then that learner can actually be their voice.”

“collaborate, how to ask questions, how to use your time effectively, how do you monitor and share tasks and say who is going to write and do different things in a group.”

“voice out their opinions.”

“for everyone to understand.”

so, they “learn from each other.”

Perception of the efficacy of group discussion for developing comprehension skills

Below are some of the quotes from the teachers to show their views on the effectiveness of using group discussions in multilingual classes.

“Explain it to each other, so that they understand.”

“Help one another to understand the questions.”

“Explore and practice the language.”

“Through group work, they come out of their shells.”

“Helps weaker learners to shine.”

“It’s multi-faceted, some it helps to build confidence e.g. some kids when you want them to give an answer to try to speak the language. If it is in front of the whole class, they shy away but if they share with their classmates, it is much better.”

“So, when its peer-peer and in a group, it’s much better, they become freer to try to give answers. Explore and practice the language and monitor one another and that’s when even for me as a teacher, its ok.”

Formation of groups and process followed

The formation of groups provided important insights into the group dynamics and the teachers’ perceptions of the needs of the learners. The groups were made up of six to eight learners seated facing each other. The groups of six learners interacted more energetically, as the smaller number allowed them the opportunity to engage effectively with one another. Teacher 2 (School A) divided the lesson into three main timed activities: pre-discussion,

discussion and post-discussion activities. The pre-discussion was similar to an information session where the learners were given explicit instructions and informed of the rules guiding the discussion. There was an initial whole-class discussion of the difficult words found in the text such as 'orchard'. The learners were asked to suggest the meaning and then had to use their dictionaries to confirm their responses. Thereafter the learners engaged in independent discussions in their group. The post-discussion activities involved the learners coming to the front of the class to share their ideas regarding the story. The teacher played a monitoring role by moving from group to group to ensure that learners were constructively engaged.

Teacher 11 (School D) decided who should respond and whether the learner's responses during the discussion were correct, and thus learners regarded the teacher to be their only source of information. All the schools used the Platinum book series. The teacher read the passage to the whole class, explained and clarified concepts, and asked if they all understood. This is generally regarded as a quiz bowl approach. It is a teacher-centred approach and the teacher controls the discussion process. The teacher gives instructions and directs questions to only a handful of learners in the classroom, thereby limiting the participation of others in the class.

Table 2: Implementation of group discussion in observed classes

	Grade	Approach	Classroom organisation	Structure of the discussion activities	Teachers' role
<i>School A</i>					
Teacher 1	4	Quiz bowl Teacher-centred	Groups of eight and more	Whole class teacher-led	Pre-discussion explanation
Teacher 2	6	Pre-discussion Discussion Post-discussion Explicit instructions and guidance	Group of five to six learners	Learners post discussion presentation	Facilitates with questioning and engagement Models questions
<i>School D</i>					
Teacher 11	6	Quiz bowl Teacher-centred	Groups of eight	Whole-class teacher-led	Explicit instructions

Intra group collaboration

The learners explained concepts to each other in a way that was amazing to watch. They also asked questions and prompted one another to participate. This approach was especially visible with the groups of six learners in school A. Learners freely spoke to one another and clarified information. During the course of the observations, there was no indication of bullying or any other form of antisocial behaviour within the groups. There was evidence of inattentiveness within the larger groups, but no misbehaviour that warranted concern.

Collaboration during group discussion

The classroom observations of group discussion sessions showed the young learners to be working collaboratively and engaged. The apprehension associated with speaking to the whole class was apparently removed, as the learners who were observed, fully engaged in either asking questions, trying to explain to one another, and in some instances disagreeing with one another. This observation was confirmed by one of the teachers:

“Some learners cannot express themselves, so if they tell the learner sitting next to them what they want to say then that learner can actually be their voice.”

Others stated, *“through group work, they come out of their shells”*, and when referring to the value of group discussions, another teacher stated *“helps weaker learners to shine”*.

Roles and responsibility

The role of the teacher can either enhance and enable the process, or act as barrier or constraint. Although the teachers who participated in our study considered their role as developmental, this was not clear from the observations.

“I am going around to check if people are really asking any questions?” (TCO (Z):

L683 -684, p. 158)

"It is to mould their answers. So, while I walk around and then I want to ask their feedback and maybe say it better because you hear what they want to say, but they are not putting it right." (TI (X): L147-150, p. 128)

"I avail myself in each group because they might not understand the topic. While I did explain at the beginning, I avail myself to explain to each and every group."

Facilitation of discussions

The teacher facilitated the process by using prompts and questioning techniques to invigorate the discussion. The teacher also asked questions that required the learners to think. Teacher 2 for instance modelled and asked questions that required elaborate responses to enrich the discussion. Learners were given enough time to explore and discuss concepts in their groups before they had to provide feedback to the class.

"What do you think an orchard is? Before we go to the dictionary, let's see if we can discuss and find out..."

"Can we discuss. Let's see if you can come up with a solution. We are not reading ahead."

Teachers used leading questions to assist learners to practise higher-order thinking skills. This was evident in the questions posed by Teacher 2 and the following responses given by the learners:

"What about making peace with others. What did you learn from the father or from the snake?"

"Right now, you have 2 minutes to talk to the people in your group and discuss what question you have for Helen. If you had to meet her now if she walks in here, what would you ask her?"

Response from learner: *"Why choose Radcliffe college?"*

Another leading question posed by the teacher was:

“How do think Helen Keller’s parents felt about her success? Imagine you are born, you can’t see and can’t hear and then you end up graduating? How is that going to make a parent feel?”

Challenges identified

The challenges identified by teachers ranged from extended workload and time constraints to learner-based challenges, which indicated that the group discussion as a strategy could pose difficulty for some learners.

It is important to consider that *“children are different, do not understand at the same level,”* as well as come from *“different backgrounds.”*

Teachers indicated that a lack of discipline and noise from the learners are some of the challenges that they have faced when attempting to implement group discussions. The problems with discipline sometimes had a discouraging effect and resulted in teachers resorting to the whole-class approach, which is less effective.

The findings from this study indicate that learners’ working in groups and engaging in group discussions of text holds promise for the development of language skills and for improving comprehension. Peer collaboration and cooperation are clearly visible. Teachers’ perception of their role during group discussions can either frustrate or facilitate the objectives of the discussions. The questioning techniques used to moderate the group discussion must therefore be learner-centred. The findings further indicate that the composition and size of the groups have an important effect on the enhancement of comprehension skills in multilingual classes. To summarise – as with most strategies used in teaching and learning settings, the use of group discussions is associated with challenges. However, these challenges can be overcome with the proper planning and flexibility in terms of procedure.

DISCUSSION

How can the use of group discussions inform our knowledge on the development of comprehension skills in young learners? Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and his concept of the zone of proximal development raised the awareness of scholars in the field of child and cognitive development with regard to the importance of social interaction, socially constructed meaning and the role of interaction with more able peers, adults or individuals in the learning process (Meadows, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, it emphasised the place of language as a tool in these processes (Silalahi, 2019). Research has since consistently supported the work of Vygotsky (Lantolf et al., 2015; Tyas, 2019; Rydland & Grover, 2019). However, we still find ourselves in a position where the knowledge derived is not being put to optimal use in multilingual contexts. It is evident that more work needs to be done to ensure that young learners are supported to develop comprehension skills in the early years (Bowyer-Crane, Fricke, Schaefer, Lerva & Hulme, 2016). In the situations where group discussions are utilised appropriately, evidence shows that learners engage to a greater extent, they question the text and other information that they are exposed to, and they are better able to derive deeper meaning from the texts all of these skills facilitate the development of critical thinking skills (Murphy et al., 2017; Siswanti & Ngadiso, 2014). Murphy et al. (2016) argue that even though there is empirical evidence that small group discussions are useful tools in supporting critical thinking, the role of the teachers in the facilitating the process cannot be understated. They argue that teachers need to undergo training for using high quality talk in the classroom to be effective in supporting learners. The findings from the current study showed that group discussions provided the opportunity for peer assistance and support, which might have been lost in a larger classroom setting. The learners were able to share their experiences, make inferences to support their responses and arguments, and engage in productive discussions. All of this resulted in better understanding of the study materials (Croninger et al., 2017; Li, 2017).

The findings also showed that proper planning is required on the part of the teachers. Planning for such discussion sessions should not be taken for granted as a skill that all teachers possess solely on the basis that they have been assigned a class or that they have a teaching qualification. Additional directed training is required.

An analysis of the lesson planning showed that teachers followed the guidelines in the policy document. Unsurprisingly, this did not always result in optimal outcomes since the learners had individual differences. Contextual issues also affected the ability of teachers to implement policy and the relevant guidelines in every situation (Mohangi, Krog, Stephens & Nel, 2016). For instance, the findings indicate that some learners required more time than others to complete their work in certain classes. Hence, teachers should be encouraged to modify the guidelines to suit the specific needs of their learners and their contextual realities. As identified by Wei and Murphy (2017), the planning of learning outcomes and the role that the teacher assumes affect the quality of teaching and learning experienced by the learners during the lessons. The teacher's role in directing the discussions and being the facilitator of learning is critical, as this ensures that the learners also learn the art of appropriate questioning during discussions (Edwards-Groves & Davidson, 2020; McLeod, 2018). In addition, the learners learn to critically engage with, and to connect and associate with their prior knowledge and experiences in the meaning-making/comprehension process. It was evident that not all the participating teachers could effectively organise a group discussion and act as a facilitator in the process. Understandably, there were multiple factors that hindered the process – particularly in classes with high teacher-learner ratios and limited space and resources. However, teacher preparation is an important factor that determines the level of success even where there are large classes.

Teacher facilitation of group discussion

The findings indicated that the variability of teachers' qualifications and experience affected their conceptualisation of the group discussion and its role in enhancing the comprehension skills of learners. Group discussions function as more than mere activities for learners to pass the time while the teacher is busy with other tasks such as marking or catching up with paperwork. Group discussion is a strategy that is consciously applied to elicit certain behaviours, and these result in enhanced comprehension (Siswanti & Ngadiso, 2014). The differences in teachers' conceptualisation and use of group discussion further determine the teachers' perception of the efficacy of group discussion as a tool for developing comprehension skills (Wilkinson et al., 2017). The majority of the teachers appeared not to understand the extent of the opportunity that group discussions provided. They saw themselves as the sole source of information and in such instances, this notion would limit the effectiveness of the group discussion (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Learners had to understand that the prior knowledge and experiences that they bring to the discussion count as meaningful contributions. In addition, the teachers' role was to correct misconceptions and misinformation, and not to be regarded as the sole source of information.

Addressing the challenges

The challenges identified were divided into two categories, namely observed and teacher-indicated challenges. The findings revealed that the seating arrangement of the learners constituted a challenge in instances where there was limited space for the teacher to move around and facilitate the discussions of the various groups. In instances where there were more than six learners per group, some of the learners did not participate adequately. The unavailability of prescribed texts that could go around meant that learners had to share books. Sharing textbooks partially solved the problem, but was certainly not ideal – especially where young learners were concerned. In instances where the schools had facilities to make

photocopies of the reading materials, the situation was adequately addressed by using loose sheets as opposed to full textbooks.

Teachers appeared to be astounded and overwhelmed by the class sizes and limited resources, and they labelled these as challenges for the implementation of group discussions. In addition, they identified noise, class control and discipline as further areas for concern. The teachers stated that group discussions caused them to lose control of the learners and constituted a nuisance to the adjoining classes. Other comments from the teachers included the belief that group discussions required more work in terms of time, effort and the need to complete the prescribed plan for the year. Obviously, many of these challenges could be addressed by providing in-service training for teachers on the use of group discussion and effective classroom management (Hambacher, Ginn & Slater, 2018). When we think of the benefits of group discussions, especially where linguistic diversity is prevalent, training programmes are a small price to pay to gain the added advantage. It is significant that even from the non-participatory classroom observations, the added value of utilising group discussions was visible. The confidence levels of the learners, their excitement at being included and being members of groups, were evident. There was positive engagement and learners challenged each other's responses in a lively but non-threatening manner. The teachers' use of pre-discussion activities, which included predictive questioning, served as an effective introduction and a form of stage setting to raise learners' level of interest and motivation to engage with the text. This was the first step in ensuring comprehension (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020). The findings also demonstrated that incorporating the use of dictionaries was a positive factor in generating and linking ideas and meaning. Allowing learners to generate their questions in the post-discussion phase facilitated the development of their comprehension and critical thinking skills (Nystrand et al., 2003; Soter et al., 2008). The three-phase system which included pre-discussion, discussion and post-discussion, worked really

well and was effective (Murphy, 2016). This was also corroborated by comparing the books of the learners from the different classes.

A significant finding of this study relates to the teachers' conceptualisation of group discussion and the actual organisation of the activities which includes formation of the groups and sequence and content of the events. What some teachers refer to as group discussion does not necessarily qualify as such in the true sense of the meaning. The practice thus becomes ineffective because the process is not properly or adequately implemented. The findings showed that the group discussions that are effective in these multilingual contexts should follow the sequence of - pre-discussion (teacher-led whole class approach which includes vocabulary development and modelling of questioning techniques), group discussion (learners within their predetermined groups which includes learners generating questions for the larger group), learners post discussion presentations (per group and answering questions from others), post discussion (teacher-led whole class approach which includes clarification of any misconceptions). This of course implies that teachers have to be well prepared and able to model questioning techniques, guide the learners and direct the process.

Conclusion

The findings showed that group discussion indeed had the potential to enhance comprehension skills in multilingual classes. Furthermore, the ability of the teachers to model proper questioning – whether predictive questioning or learner-generated post-discussion questioning – developed critical thinking as the learners were able to reason beyond mere regurgitation of facts. Restrictive lesson planning guidelines would however be discouraged, as these appeared to thwart the creativity and initiative of the teachers. Some of the challenges identified during the observations and interviews could be addressed by in-service training, while the more systemic challenges such as class size and infrastructure were beyond the

capacity of the teachers. Strategies that could be effective in resource-constrained environments should be researched and employed, pending the resolution of inherent systemic inequalities. This article is adding to the current body of knowledge by noting that group discussions are important for comprehension and confirms that they constitute a workable strategy for use in multilingual classes. Furthermore, the article proposes an evidence-based sequence for the appropriate and effective implementation of group discussions in primary classes.

References

- Berland, L. K., & Reiser, B. J. (2011). Classroom communities' adaptations of the practice of scientific argumentation. *Science Education*, 95(2), 191-216.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.20420>
- Blickenstaff, J., Hallquist, E., & Kopel, K. (2013). *The effects of reading strategies in comprehension for elementary age learners*. Retrieved from
<https://sophia.stkate.edu/maed/2>
- Breiset, L. (2010). Reading comprehension strategies for English language learners. *ASCD Express*, 5(11). Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol5/511-toc.aspx>
- Cahyani, H., de Courcy, M., & Barnett, J. (2018). Teachers' code-switching in bilingual classrooms: Exploring pedagogical and sociocultural functions. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 21(4), 465-479.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2016.1189509>
- Charamba, E. (2020) Translanguaging in a multilingual class: A study of the relation between students' languages and epistemological access in science. *International Journal of Science Education*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2020.1783019>
- Croninger, R. M. V., Li, M., Cameron, C., & Murphy, P. K. (2017). Classroom discussions: Building the foundation for productive talk. In P. K. Murphy (Ed.), *Classroom discussions in education: Promoting productive talk about text and content* (pp. 1-29). Routledge.
- Deutsch, R., & Reynolds, Y. (2000). The use of dynamic assessment by educational psychologists in the UK. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 16(3), 311-331.
- Djamarah, S. B. (2006). *Strategi Belajar Mengajar*. Rineka Cipta.
- Edwards-Groves, C., & Davidson, C. (2020). Noticing the multidimensionality of active listening in a dialogic classroom. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 43(1), 83-94.

- Gorter, D., & Cenoz, J. (2017). Language education policy and multilingual assessment. *Language and Education, 31*(3), 231-248.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2016.1261892>
- Hambacher, E., Ginn, K., & Slater, K. (2018) From Serial Monologue to Deep Dialogue: Designing Online Discussions to Facilitate Student Learning in Teacher Education Courses. *Action in Teacher Education, 40*(3), 239-252,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2018.1486753>
- Iqbal, J., & Ahmad, A. (2015). Effect of extensive rote learning experience on subsequent academic achievement. *Pak Armed Forces Med, 65*(4), 510-14.
- Jones, J. M. (2014). Discussion group effectiveness is related to critical thinking through interest and engagement. *Psychology Learning and Teaching, 13*(1), 12-24.
<https://doi.org/10.2304/plat.2014.13.1.12>
- Keenan, T., Evans, S., & Crowley, K. (2016). *An introduction to child development* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Khamees, K. S. (2016). An evaluative study of memorization as a strategy for learning English. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 6*(4), 248-259.
- Kozulin, A., & Garb, E. (2002). Dynamic assessment of EFL text comprehension. *School Psychology International, 23*(1), 112-127.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034302023001733>
- Lantolf, J., Thorne, S. L., & Poehner, M. (2015). Sociocultural theory and second language development. In B. van Patten & J. Williams (Eds.), *Theories in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 207-226). Routledge.
- Lawrence, J., Capotosto, L., Branum-Mar, L., White, C., & Snow, C. (2012). Language proficiency, home-language status, and English vocabulary development: A longitudinal follow-up of the Word Generation program. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 15*, 437-451. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728911000393>.

- Li, M. (2017). *Examining the effects of text genre, prior knowledge, and perceived interestingness on students' acquisition of high-level comprehension*. Master's dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, USA.
- Mbirimi-Hungwe, V. (2016). Translanguaging as a strategy for group work: Summary writing as a measure for reading comprehension among university students. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 34(3), 241-249.
- Mckeown, M. G., Beck, I., & Blake, R. G. K. (2009). Rethinking reading comprehension instruction: A comparison of instruction for strategies and content approaches. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(3), 218-253. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.44.3.1>
- McLaughlin, M. (2012). Reading comprehension: What every teacher needs to know. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(7), 432-440. <https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.01064>
- Meadows, S. (2018). *Understanding child development: Psychological perspectives and applications*. Routledge.
- Mohangi, K., Krog, S., Stephens, O & Nel, M. (2016). Contextual Challenges In Early Literacy Teaching And Learning In Grade R Rural Schools In South Africa. *A Journal For Language Learning*, 32(1),71-87 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5785/32-1-646>
- Murphy, K., Greene, J., Firetto, C., Li, M., Lobczowski, N., Duke, R. (2017). Exploring the influence of homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping on students' text-based discussions and comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 51, 336-355.
- Probyn, M. (2015). Pedagogical translanguaging: Bridging discourses in South African science classrooms. *Language and Education*, 29(3), 218-234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994525>
- Rydland, V., & Grover, V. (2019). Argumentative peer discussions following individual reading increase comprehension. *Language and Education*, 33(4), 379-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2018.1545786>
- Sagala, S. (2008). *Concept and meaning of learning*. Alfabeta.

- Schuitema, J., Radstake, H., van de Pol, J., & Veugelers, W. (2018). Guiding classroom discussions for democratic citizenship education. *Educational Studies*, 44(4), 377-407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2017.1373629>
- Shayer, M. (2002). Not just Piaget, not just Vygotsky, and certainly not Vygotsky as an alternative to Piaget. In M. Shayer (ed.). *Learning intelligence, cognitive acceleration across the curriculum from 5 to 15 years*. UK Open University Press.
- Silalahi, R. M. (2019). Understanding Vygotsky's zone of proximal development for learning. *Jurnal Ilmiah*, 5(2), 169-186. <https://doi.org//10.19166/pji.v15i2.1544>
- Siswanti, F. H., Ngadiso, E. S. (2014). The use of small-group discussion to improve students' reading comprehension. *English in Education*, 2(2), 61153.
- Tugman, H. (2010). *Literature discussion group and reading comprehension*. Northern Michigan University.
- Tullis, J. G., & Goldstone, R. L. (2020). Why does peer instruction benefit student learning? *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications* 5(15), 1-12 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-020-00218-5>
- Tyas, N. K. (2019). Students' attitude towards small group discussion in reading comprehension. *Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Scholastic*, 3(3), 8-13. Retrieved from <http://e-journal.sastra-unes.com/index.php/JIPS/article/view/377>
- Van Compernelle, R. A., & Williams, L. (2013). Sociocultural theory and second language pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research*, 17(3), 277-281.
- Vaughn, S., Martinez, L. R., Wanzek, J., Roberts, G., Swanson, E., & Fall, A.-M. (2017). Improving content knowledge and comprehension for English language learners: Findings from a randomized control trial. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 109(1), 22-34. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000069>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Wei, L., & Murphy, P. K. (2017). Teacher and student roles: Walking the gradually changing line of responsibility. In P. K. Murphy (Ed.), *Classroom discussions in education* (pp. 30-53). Routledge.
- Wilkinson, I. A. G., Reznitskaya, A., Bourdage, K., Oyler, J., Glina, M., Drewry, R., Kim, M. Y., & Nelson, K. (2017). Toward a more dialogic pedagogy: Changing teachers' beliefs and practices through professional development in language arts classrooms. *Language and Education*, 31(1), 65-82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2016.1230129>
- Williams, J. P. (2008). Explicit instruction can help primary students learn to comprehend expository text. In C. C. Block & S. R. Parris (Eds), *Comprehension instruction: Research-based best practices* (2nd ed). The Guilford Press.
- Wu, S. (2008). Effective activities for teaching English idioms to EFL learners. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 14(3). Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/WuTeachingIdioms.htm>
- Zohrabi, M., Tadayyon, P., & Dobahkti, L. (2018). Investigating the effects of rote and contextualized memorization on Iranian elementary EFL learners' vocabulary development. *Iranian Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7(2), 16-31.