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INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM FORMULATION, AIM OF RESEARCH, RESEARCH STATEMENT, CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS, RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH PROGRAMME

1.1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 The challenge of reading comprehension in South Africa

Today our world is a reading world. Richeck, Cardwell, Jennings & Lerner (1996:4) hold the view that because reading is the basic requirement for all academic subjects, failure in school can often be traced to inadequate reading skills. Gunning (2000:2) maintains that reading is first and foremost, magical. It opens the door to a vast world of information, fulfilment, and enjoyment. After having learned to read, the person is never quite the same. The challenge of reading comprehension in South Africa especially in the township schools is great since learners experience difficulty with reading comprehension.

Difficulty reading with comprehension leads to frustration and demoralisation as far as most learning at school is concerned. In South Africa, many learners especially from historically disadvantaged townships and rural areas experience a diversity of learning problems of which one is certainly poor reading comprehension. Unfortunately some of these learners leave primary school and proceed to secondary school with little or no support having been given in order to overcome their reading problem. The scholastic performance of learners who experience reading difficulties is usually poor. Difficulty to read with comprehension negatively affects the learning and understanding of other school subjects, hence the poor performance in their overall learning and a high dropout rate related to economic reasons. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (1997:152) point out that some of the learners may leave school early with an aim of earning a living since the family is struggling economically and the fact that there is no visible progress in their school work.

When looking at the South African township secondary schools, we find that there is a serious need for ways or techniques that can be used to improve the reading comprehension of these learners in Grade 8 and 9. For techniques of best practice and learning support to be effective in difficult conditions such as township secondary schools, they have to meet the following requirements:

- They should be fit for use in a group of learners.

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- They should not be sophisticated methods that need expert knowledge in order to be successfully implemented.
- They should be techniques that can be used by teachers in ordinary school settings.
- They should be able to improve the learning and achievement in other subjects.
- They should be able to address the reading problem of learners in a holistic manner.

One technique that merits research in the improvement of reading comprehension is the imaging technique. Imaging, or Gestalt imagery, is the ability to create imaged wholes. The creation of imaged wholes is seen as a critical factor in oral and written language comprehension. Bell (1991:246) maintains that, despite good decoding, good vocabulary and adequate background experiences, many individuals experience weak imagery, thus processing “parts” rather than “wholes” from verbal stimuli, spoken or written. This contributes to language comprehension difficulty that may show in the following symptoms: weak reading comprehension, weak oral language comprehension, difficulty following directions and a poor sense of humour.

The Department of Educational Psychology of the University of Pretoria has already conducted two studies on the effect of teaching learners to use the imaging technique in the improvement of reading comprehension. One study was done by Wagner (1999) where Grade 5 learners in a multicultural former model C school were involved. The second study was done by Jordaan (2000) in a special school, and it involved learners in the intermediate phase who were learning disabled and environmentally disadvantaged. Both studies indicated that the imaging technique has a potential to improve the reading comprehension of learners in the primary school facing diverse barriers to learning.

No research looking at the use of the imaging technique in township schools or at secondary school level in South Africa has been found. Educational context and the level of cognitive development and functioning are crucial considerations in examining the use of learning support techniques from a psychological perspective. Should the imaging technique as learning support for reading comprehension be researched in respect of secondary school learners in township schools, it would therefore be necessary to look at the particular way(s) in which it would have to be adapted to suit these particular learners.

1.1.2 The problem of having a second language as the language of learning

One of the barriers of learning, is learning by means of a second language. Donald *et al.* (1997:157) highlighted that before the change of government in South Africa in 1994, the policy that applied to all speakers of languages other than English and Afrikaans was that, beyond the first four years of school (that is, Gr R to Gr 3), the medium of instruction had to shift to one "official" language. In practice, this means that the majority of children have to learn through a language other than their first language (that is, the language in which they are most competent, and in which they feel most comfortable). The fact of the matter is that most learners in the township areas are neither comfortable nor competent in English or Afrikaans. The difficulty that learners are encountering is that they learn in English at school as a medium of instruction without prior exposure to the language during their early years of development. Township learners are at most exposed to English as a medium of instruction for three years (Gr 5-7) before entering secondary school. Despite the new changes in the education provision in South Africa as far as the second language as a medium of instruction is concerned most schools in the townships still prefer English from Grade 4 up to high school level.

Donald *et al.* (1997:157) point out that a basic and uncontested notion in educational psychology is that language and thinking - and therefore learning - are intimately tied together. Because of this basic relationship between language, thinking and learning, there is now a great deal of evidence that if children's process of formal learning is abruptly cut off from their first language, this can negatively affect cognitive development in general as well as scholastic performance in particular.

Secondary school learners often experience reading problems. In South Africa there are few special programmes to support the development of English as a second language (L2) and reading skills for secondary school learners. Many learners from educationally disadvantaged environments are unable to access the very few special programmes. There is an overwhelming need to develop techniques which will address the development of the second language (L2) as the language of learning and teaching in the early grades of secondary school. Reading comprehension should receive special attention since it forms a focal point for overall language development.

1.1.3 The disadvantaged environment

An educationally disadvantaged environment logically exacerbates the problems of any learner,

especially those who need to learn through the second language. Donald *et al.* (1997:182) maintain that a school with too few classrooms, poor teaching and library resources, high pupil teacher ratios and inadequately qualified teachers will struggle to help its students achieve. Learners in the townships often attend in poorly resourced schools while coming from poverty stricken families. Some of these learners lack emotional support, intellectual stimulation, proper language development and adequate socialisation. Lack of resources such as books, magazines, newspapers and dictionaries at home puts the child in a disadvantaged position.

In addition to these facts most poorly resourced schools in South Africa have also had very little help from Education Support Services. Reasons for underachieving are seldom picked up or appropriately treated (Donald *et al.* 1997:182). Thus a technique of reading support that will take the above mentioned factors into account in the ordinary classroom will be of great help to both the educators and the learners in improving reading comprehension early in the secondary school.

1.2 PROBLEM FORMULATION

In this research the researcher will be investigating how the imaging technique can be made of use in the particular situation of a township secondary school, as a form of group learning support to improve reading comprehension.

The learners that will be involved in this research are Grade 9 learners from a township secondary school. Grade 8 learners are an appropriate group with whom to conduct the research study on the imaging technique since it is their first year at secondary school level. Grade 9 learners, however, will be selected to participate because, during the year of the research study, the Grade 8 learners are being introduced to Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in Curriculum 2005. The change of the curriculum, the new way of learning and the uncertainty of both educators and learners about OBE introduce variables which will affect interpretation of the research results. More stable learners who have followed the usual way of learning are needed so that the results of the research will not be compounded by changes brought by OBE.

The research problem is thus formulated as follows:

How should the imaging technique be adapted for optimum value as a technique in developing the reading comprehension skills of learners in Grade 9 in a township secondary school?

The main problem will be elucidated by researching the following subquestions:

Subset 1: Content:: reading comprehension and the imaging technique

- (a) What extrinsic barriers are obstructing the development of reading comprehension skills in English as the language of learning and teaching of Grade 9 learners in a township school?
- (b) What extrinsic barriers are obstructing the mastery of the imaging technique as learning support to improve the reading comprehension skills of learners in a township secondary school?
- (c) How should the imaging technique be adapted to enable learners in a township secondary school to master the technique and thus improve their reading comprehension skills?

Subset 2: Educator

- (a) What are the difficulties experienced by the educator in the use of the imaging technique in learning support for reading comprehension in a township secondary school?
- (b) How should the imaging technique be adapted to enable the educator successfully to use the technique in learning support and across the curriculum in the township secondary school?

Subset 3: Learners

- (a) What intrinsic barriers are obstructing Grade 9 learners in a township secondary school in developing their English reading comprehension skills?
- (b) What intrinsic barriers are obstructing Grade 9 learners in a township secondary school in mastering the imaging technique in learning support to improve their reading comprehension skills?
- (c) How should the imaging technique be adapted to enable the learners in a township secondary school to master the technique and improve their reading comprehension skills?

1.3 AIM OF RESEARCH

The aim of this research is to examine and adapt the imaging technique for optimum value as a feasible learning support technique in developing the English reading comprehension skills of learners in Grade 9 in a township secondary school.

1.4 ASSUMPTIONS

The following assumptions on this study are as follows:

- The imaging technique is viewed as a learning support that can be used in the development of reading comprehension skills of township secondary school learners.
- The development of the reading comprehension skills through the imaging technique is seen as a key to successful learning of township secondary school learners who experience a diversity of reading difficulties.

1.5 RESEARCH STATEMENT

The research project aims at investigating the practical implementation of the imaging technique to improve reading comprehension of Grade 9 learners in a township secondary school. There is a need to address the barriers of reading comprehension experienced by township learners in the secondary school. Thus an ecosystemic approach that helps in the understanding of the development and learning of children in more holistic and interactive terms is needed. To fully understand and to address the reading comprehension problem on any group of learners it is important to see how the dynamic interdependence and interaction relationships between the educator, learner and content affect reading comprehension.

The point of departure of the research is theoretically from an orthodidactic framework where improvement of the interaction between the educator, learner and content aims at the improvement of reading comprehension. The research will look at the Grade 9 learners in a township secondary school who face challenges of reading comprehension such as second language problems, teaching styles, cultural differences and the curriculum holistically. The research will also look at the challenges facing educators in the township secondary schools. Finally, to fully address the research problem unpacked in 1.2, the research will look at the content as the task of reading comprehension as well as the task of imaging that impact on the learner's emotional feelings, confidence and competency.

The imaging technique will be implemented in the mainstream township secondary school. The aim is to use the technique as a support to improve the reading comprehension of secondary school learners and the learning of other subjects. The use of the imaging technique is also aimed at empowering educators with skills so that they can use it as a support in helping learners to improve their reading comprehension and their scholastic performance in all learning areas.

During the development of the imaging technique in reading comprehension, factors that are expected to influence the implementation of imaging and the involvement of the learners include the following:

- The level of the learner's cognitive development.
- The amount of English vocabulary the learner possesses.
- The method to be used when facilitating imaging .
- The milieu or cultural conditions of the learner.
- The learner's affective conditions.
- Explicit instructions and terminology to be used when implementing imaging technique.
- The learner's cognitive and experiential framework.

In order to conduct and report on this research successfully, the clarification of some concepts is necessary.

1.6 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

1.6.1 Reading Comprehension

Irwin (1991:9) defines reading comprehension as the process of using one's own prior experiences and the writer's cues to construct a set of meanings that are useful to the individual reader reading in a specific context. McNeil (1992:18) sees reading comprehension as a process which involves actively constructing meaning among the parts of the text and personal experience. The text itself is the blueprint for increasing meaning. Comprehension and retention are achieved by strategies for integrating text within personal knowledge and experience.

1.6.2 Imaging for reading comprehension

Imaging is a reading comprehension technique that is embedded in the Gestalt theory. Gestalt

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is defined as a complex organized unit or whole that is more than the sum of its parts (Bell 1991:247). In reading comprehension imaging is the making of pictures in the mind on what one is reading about. Aristotle once believed, "It is impossible even to think without a mental picture..." (Bell 1991:249). Imaging for reading comprehension relies on verbal training, directing the learner to make pictures in the mind on information to be learned. The development of metacognitive skills on visual imagery as a strategy will expectedly help learners in the improvement of reading comprehension.

Esrock (1994:196) indicated that imaging promotes the following in reading comprehension:

- It focuses on the whole rather than the parts.
- It creates sensory links between incoming language and prior knowledge.
- It positions the learner within the text.
- It helps in making the fictional world concrete.
- It enhances memory.

Training of learners on imaging for reading comprehension is important and group participation is essential.

1.6.3 Second language

Bernhardt (1998:2) defines second language as a language that is not spoken in the home and yet may be the language of wider communication. According to Ellis (1994:6), the term "second language acquisition" refers to the subconscious or conscious processes by which a language other than the mother tongue is learnt in a natural or a tutored setting when it is used as a medium of instruction. He also points out that the term "acquisition" should be used to refer to picking up a second language through exposure, whereas the term "learning" should be used to refer to the conscious study of a second language.

1.6.4 Disadvantaged

According to the Oxford Dictionary compiled by Thompson (2000:244) the term disadvantage means unfavourable circumstances or condition. Disadvantaged therefore means lacking normal opportunities through poverty.

Le Roux (1994:28) points out that Pretorius (1986:79) and Rutter and Madge (1981:5-6) maintain that families in disadvantaged environments are subjected to adverse factors such as poverty, cultural and geographic isolation, membership of a non technological cultural group etc.

Common conditions shared by such families include low economic and social status, low level of education, poor housing, limited privacy insufficient and unsuitable food, inadequate parental care, neglect, rejection, parental absence, unemployment and inferior occupations. Most township school learners often come from such a disadvantaged environment.

1.6.5 Learning Support

The term support means to give help or assistance, strengthen or encourage, (Thompson 200:916). Learning support is help or assistance given or rendered to a learner experiencing learning problems or difficulties in order to overcome them. Baskwill and Whitman (1997:7) believe that the most important aim of learner support is to help all learners to see themselves as effective readers who can become independent readers. A further goal of support is to help learners develop the ability to use reading strategies or skills independently in a balanced and integrated manner.

1.6.6 Learners in a township secondary school

Today most of the learners in the township secondary schools come from a disadvantaged environment. Learners whose parents are financially better off often go to ex-Model C schools and further their studies there. Learners from financially disadvantaged homes remain in the township schools. The scholastic performance of learners in the township secondary schools is often poor. Most of these learners experience English which is the language of learning and teaching as problematic during their learning.

The above mentioned factors have a negative impact on the reading comprehension of learners in the township secondary schools. Donald *et al.* (1997:183) point out that most learners who are educationally disadvantaged, are underachieving, repeating classes, becoming frustrated and dissatisfied with schoolwork. Wallace, Temple and Crawford (2000:332) mention that learners experiencing learning difficulties ultimately develop the feeling of learned helplessness or passive failure which is a sense that no matter what one does, nothing will help. This has been seen in adolescents in township schools who have reading problems, when they honestly believe that no amount of effort will bring about escape from a cycle of failure.

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN

The following research steps will be executed:

1.7.1 Literature study

The theory that underlies the phenomenon, practice and adaptation of the imaging technique as a support in improving the reading comprehension of learners in a township secondary school.

- Reading comprehension in the secondary school.
- Reading problems in the secondary school.
- Reading in the second language of learning and teaching in the secondary school.
- Reading support in the secondary school.
- Imaging as a holistic approach in the improvement of reading comprehension in the secondary school.

1.7.2 Empirical research

The findings of the practical research will be based on the following three reliable and valid points:

(1) Formative and summative assessment

Within a pretest - posttest design assessment of reading comprehension skills will be done in order to select the sample. The pretest results will be used as a diagnostic assessment in addition to being the selection of learners. Learners who obtain the lowest scores in Grade 9 will be selected and randomly assigned to the experimental group, control - treatment group and non-treatment group. The control group will receive a different method of reading support where explanation of difficult vocabulary words will be done. The different learning styles used in the imaging technique and the usual way of learning in the control group will be observed and compared in order to see how they impact the development of reading comprehension of township learners in the secondary school. The post-test results will again be analysed in detail as a diagnostic assessment.

(2) Examination and adaptation of the imaging technique as a support in helping learners with reading comprehension problems.

The examination of the imaging technique will be conducted with the experimental group of township learners in a secondary school. The research group will be Grade 9 learners of the senior phase who experience reading comprehension problems. The imaging technique will be implemented after school hours with appropriate literature and will be further developed and adapted to learners in the township secondary school. Learners will be helped in various sessions. After every session there will be reflection to reappraise the session in order to make

the necessary adjustments on the problems encountered. Continuous observation of learners' problems as well as their successes will be done.

(3) Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with learners will be conducted continually in order to get feedback from the learners about their experiences and difficulties concerning the content of the reading and the imaging technique.

1.8 RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Chapter One contains the Introduction, Problem Formulation, Aim of Research, Assumptions, Research Statement, Clarification of Concepts, Research Design and Research Programme.

Chapter Two will be concerned with the underlying theory and the development of the imaging technique as support that can be used in the improvement of reading comprehension. The investigation will focus on learners in the secondary school who experience reading comprehension problems. The principles of imaging will be investigated, with attention to the factors of environmental disadvantage and learning through a second language.

Chapter Three will be concerned with the implementation of imaging with an aim of examining the technique to improve the reading comprehension of Grade 9 learners. The results that will be obtained from the Pre-test and Post-test data and observations and reflections on the sessions will be interpreted in a qualitative manner. Interviews will be reported. The limitations of the study will be acknowledged.

Chapter Four will contain the Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations on the research.