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Investigating English First Additional Language educators' reading comprehension practices in selected schools in Gauteng, South Africa

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Educators' reading comprehension instructional practices have been identified as 1 of the factors that contribute to learners' poor reading comprehension performance. To this end, several studies were conducted to identify and analyse educators' practices while teaching reading comprehension. As a result, the aim of the study reported on here was to investigate educators' teaching practices when teaching reading comprehension in order to diagnose challenges and then make recommendations. The study was qualitative in nature with a case study design. For the purpose of data collection, 3 Grade 9 English First Additional Language (FAL) educators were purposively chosen. The observation data collection method was followed and content analysis was used to analyse data. With regard to the choice of reading comprehension strategies, the findings reveal that the educators did not appear to have a thorough knowledge of reading comprehension strategies. In the observed lessons, the reading comprehension strategies were neither applied explicitly nor implicitly. Educators tended to change the reading lessons into vocabulary lessons. The findings further reveal that the educators relied on traditional questioning techniques that did not engage learners with the text. Thus, the reading comprehension support, motivation and feedback from educators were limited. The main recommendation is for teacher training institutions and universities to play a more active role in developing both pre-service and in-service educators' reading comprehension instructional practices.

Keywords: Educators; English First Additional Language classrooms; reading comprehension; reading comprehension instructional practices

Introduction

Reading is central to learning, and subsequently, an important goal of teaching reading is to improve reading comprehension, which is a critical aspect of reading and has a considerable impact on a learner's entire academic life (Nurie, 2017:108). Informed by the aforementioned significance of reading comprehension, South African school learners participate in a number of national and international literacy studies that measure learners' reading achievement in different grades and at various intervals. The results of these assessments have been studied by a number of academics and sadly, they all agreed that South African school learners demonstrate poorly developed reading comprehension skills (Govender & Hugo, 2020; Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena & McLeod Palane, 2017; Spaull, 2016).The literature reveals that many other countries also experience a similar problem. For example, Elleman and Oslund (2019) lament that, despite decades of research in reading comprehension, international and national reading scores indicate stagnant growth for learners in the United States of America. Similarly, the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results reveal that the average achievement in reading in Australia has experienced long-term decline. The report specifically revealed that the average achievement of a 15-year-old Australian in 2018 was almost 1 year of schooling behind in reading compared to that of a 15-year-old Australian in 2000.

Arguable, at the heart of this problem is the educators' inability to teach reading comprehension effectively. This view is supported by Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) who conclude that learners display poor reading ability due to educators not seeming to have a clear understanding of effective reading comprehension instructional approaches. Despite the above-mentioned reading challenges displayed by South African learners at school level, there has been little research conducted to examine the pedagogical practices of educators in teaching reading comprehension at various levels (Boakye & Linden, 2018; Cekiso, 2017; Klapwijk, 2012; Madikiza, Cekiso, Tshotsho & Landa, 2018; Rule & Land, 2017; Zimmerman, 2014). Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) declare that despite the fact that much research exists in South Africa about learners' low literacy levels, few studies have been conducted that detail descriptions of instructional practices and what educators are actually doing in their reading comprehension classrooms. These studies report on the challenges in putting reading comprehension instruction theories into practice, resulting in poor reading comprehension instruction. Collectively, these studies indicate that educators use traditional approaches to teaching reading comprehension and more specifically, teachers teach reading comprehension in the way they were taught to read by their teachers when they were at school. This situation is worrying since the literature reveals that a great deal of development has taken place globally regarding the effective teaching of reading comprehension (Ariandika & Kartikawati, 2018; Beeman-Rygalski, 2014; Magnusson, Roe & Blikstad-Balas, 2019). Accordingly, we regarded it as important to explore how South African English First Additional Language (EFAL) educators keep abreast with current developments in reading pedagogy, given the current poor reading proficiency of learners referred to above. To assist in addressing learners' poor reading proficiency, Brevik (2019) and Cekiso

(2017) suggest that EFAL educators need to assist learners in developing reading comprehension strategies such as activating prior knowledge, previewing, asking questions, explicitly modelling, scaffolding and guided strategy practice. It is against this background that we focused on reading comprehension strategies used by educators during reading comprehension instruction in the EFAL classroom.

Thus, the aim of the study was to examine the current practices of educators in teaching reading comprehension and how they handled and arranged reading comprehension in their teaching. Specifically, we sought to examine the educators' pedagogical practices in teaching reading comprehension in Grade 9 English FAL in selected classrooms in the Tshwane South district in Gauteng. For the attainment of this objective, the following questions were formulated:

- How do EFAL educators teach reading comprehension in their classrooms?
- How are reading comprehension lessons organised in an EFAL classroom context?

The Importance of the Educator in the Reading Comprehension Instruction Process

The International Reading Association (2005:2) contends that "every child deserves excellent reading teachers, because teachers make a difference in children's reading achievement." To this end, Karadağ (2014:890) points out that educators are human resources responsible for teaching their learners about problem-solving, reasoning, individual judging, questioning, analysing and evaluating texts, drawing conclusions and making decisions. In addition, Johnson, Araujo and Cossa (2017), in stressing educators' important role in developing learners' reading comprehension skills, assert that teachers should endeavour to provide high-quality reading comprehension instruction to develop their learners' knowledge and skills. In doing so, educators need to teach their learners effective reading comprehension strategies, and practice appropriate reading strategies in the classroom (Brevik, 2019; Cekiso, 2017). The above assertions highlight the critical role that educators play in learners' reading comprehension development, as well as the high demands placed on educators to incorporate strategic reading into their classroom practices (Israeli, 2017).

Taylor (2014) hypothesises that many educators simply do not know how to effectively approach reading comprehension instruction. Although educators play an important role in developing their learners' reading proficiency, in order to perform this responsibility, they need to have a good grasp of reading comprehension instructional strategies. However, this has not been the case with many educators. For example, the results of a study conducted by Al-Husban (2019) reveal that teachers' practices were mainly reading aloud and teaching vocabulary. Other factors in reading comprehension were not taken into account. However, it is important for educators to recognise that learners come from diverse backgrounds, speak various languages, and possess different experiences and levels of intelligence, which all need to be acknowledged during reading comprehension instruction, and valued within the socio-cultural context of the classroom. The implication is that educators should recognise learner differences and take these into consideration when planning reading lesson activities. This is important for providing a fair learning opportunity for all learners.

The Importance of Reading Comprehension Instruction

Elleman and Oslund (2019) view reading comprehension as one of the most complex cognitive activities in which humans engage, making it difficult to teach, measure, and research. However, research indicates that deepening learners' understanding of a text necessitates a constant focus on reading comprehension instruction and scaffolded strategy practices (Brevik, 2019). Supporting this view, Sofiana (2018) argues that learners' performance in reading comprehension develop due to the implementation of reading comprehension strategies like activating background knowledge, previewing and asking questions. Consequently, educators who are well-equipped with these strategies, and are able to employ them in their reading comprehension practices are likely to improve the reading comprehension skills of their learners. In this regard, Nurie (2017) states that reading comprehension research has produced detailed and valuable information regarding the development of reading comprehension skills through modelling and guided practice of reading strategies until learners eventually use these strategies independently.

Klapwijk (2015:1) is of the view that comprehension forms a critical part of the reading process. However, learners still demonstrate reading challenges, because educators continue to disregard effective reading instructional approaches in the classroom. In other words, educators portray an ambivalent attitude towards reading instruction. This is also the case with South African educators; Cekiso (2017) and Rule and Land (2017) found that educators were still using traditional reading instruction methods.

Theoretical Framework

In this study we used the socio-cultural theory of literacy as a theoretical lens. This theory is rooted in research (Bates, 2019; Nagel, 2012; Street, 2001)

that considers the influence of members of society, such as educators, within the literacy learning process. Consequently, literacy and the accompanying reading comprehension practices are perceived as forms of "reading literacy capital" that allow those who possess it, to participate in valued literacy engagements (Hull & Moje, 2012:2). However, Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016:2–3) point out that although reading comprehension is the goal of reading instruction, research indicates that poorly qualified educators contribute to learners' poor reading comprehension practices. In line with this view, the socio-cultural theory of literacy provided a theoretical framework to investigate reading comprehension practices in the EFAL classroom environment, where meaningful reading comprehension abilities are influenced by the reading instruction practices of the educators.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research approach was followed. Aspers and Corte (2019:155) define qualitative research as an iterative process in which improved understanding by the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied. Thus, researchers capture the individual's point of view. In our study, the EFAL classroom and EFAL teachers constitute the scientific community studied as we tried to make sense of the educators' reading instruction practices. In line with the qualitative approach, a case study research design was used. In this regard, Yin (2014:16) defines a case study research method as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a temporary phenomenon within its real-life context." Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) state that a case could be an individual, a role, a small group, an organisation, a community, or even a nation. Similarly, Schoch (2016) declares that case study research focuses on a specific event, person, place, thing, organisation, or unit (or if more than one, typically a small number). Accordingly, the case study design enabled us to collect data based on real-life reading comprehension practices used by the selected EFAL educators.

Participants and Sampling

The data for this study were collected from three Grade 9 educators from three different schools. These educators were selected purposively as they were deemed to be relevant participants with regard to providing the required information. McMillan and Schumacher (2014:352) explain that a qualitative sample can be quite small, because rather than depending on sample size, qualitative research depends more on the information richness of the cases and the analytical capabilities or the researcher. The educators were selected based on the fact that they offered English FAL to Grade 9 learners who spoke Afrikaans as first language and English as second of third language. Kerlinger (1986:110) notes that sampling, "is taking any portion of a population or universe as representative of that population or universe." Two of the selected educators were female, and one was male; their ages ranged between 36 and 45 years. The male educator spoke Afrikaans as home language and English as second language, while the female educators spoke other indigenous African Languages as their home language and English as second or third language. These educators were perceived to be skilled English FAL educators and had the following qualifications: a higher diploma, a bachelor's degree and an honours degree in education, with between 6 and 25 years' teaching experience.

Data Collection Method

Ciesielska, Boström and Öhlander (2018:33) state that "observation may be regarded as the basis of everyday social life for most people who are diligent observers of behaviours and of the material surroundings." Ciesielska et al. (2018) further point out that observation can be either participant or not, direct or indirect. In our study, the researchers responsible for data collection assumed the role of direct observers. Specifically, their role was to document the activities and behaviour of the educators and learners during reading comprehension lessons based on an observation schedule that was designed by the researchers as a collective. The educators' observations were divided as follows: 1) The evidence of planning for the lesson; 2) The organised presentation of the lesson, emphasising the reading instruction approached used; 3) The inclusion of reading strategies during instruction; 4) The transition from the instruction phase to the activity engagement phase during the lesson; 5) The facilitation of critical reading dialogues in the classroom; 6) The reading comprehension support and feedback techniques used by the educators; and 7) The educator's enthusiasm and behaviour when delivering the lesson. The focus of this study was mostly on the educators' reading comprehension practices; therefore, only the learners' responses in answer to questions asked by the educators and their interactive behaviour during the reading lessons were recorded. In addition, with the participants' permission, an audio recorder was used to make audio recordings of the observed lessons. The data were transcribed and used to support the observation schedule information during the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

The observed data were collected, analysed thematically and interpreted. Specifically, the collected data using the observation schedule and the audio recording device, were transcribed. The three authors studied the data to get a general sense of the data and to reflect on their overall meaning. The data were then categorised by grouping sections of the text into categories and labelling the categories. Then coding was used to generate themes, and, thereafter, the themes were interconnected. Finally, the themes were presented in the form of a narrative passage. We interpreted the results from all three observed lessons with the purpose of either supporting or contradicting each other, which, in turn, created space for the thematic data analysis process.

Data Reliability

Maree (2016:238) refers to reliability as the use of the same instrument at various times and or administering the instrument to a number of respondents from the same population. Stated differently, qualitative research reliability refers to the production of similar responses from different respondents. In this study we observed three Grade 9 educators from three schools within the same province.

Qualitative data reliability also refers to the degree to which the descriptions and explanations of the studied phenomenon agree with the experienced reality of the studied phenomenon. Thus, we used the actual words, statements and quotations of the research participants verbatim. To further enhance the reliability of the findings of the study, we employed an audio recording device to avoid a subjective view regarding the reading comprehension instruction practices of the educators in the classroom.

Ethical Considerations

In this study we adhered to an ethical code by receiving authorisation to undertake the study from the Gauteng Department of Education and the Tshwane District Department of Education. Furthermore, permission from the school principals of the participating schools and educators' informed consent forms of participation were obtained prior to the commencement of the data collection process. In turn, we reassured the research participants of the anonymity and confidentiality of the information collected. In addition, by doing the study we did not pose a physical threat to the participants. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee on 20 November 2017, with ethical clearance number FCRE/APL/STD/2017/20.

Findings

The findings are presented in relation to the two research questions on the way that educators teach reading comprehension in class and the way that reading comprehension lessons are organised in the EFAL classroom context.

The Way that Educators Teach Reading Comprehension in Class

The focus of the first research question was on the way that EFAL educators teach reading comprehension in their classrooms. Specifically, the focus was on how educators managed reading comprehension instruction. This could be determined through the strategies they used, if any, to teach reading comprehension. In addition and of paramount importance, was how the educators interacted with the learners, the reading comprehension strategies they introduced, the reading support provided, the motivation provided, as well as the activities organised to facilitate reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension instruction strategies

The three lessons observed revealed more commonalities than differences. With regard to the choice of reading comprehension strategies, the educators did not appear to have a thorough knowledge of reading strategies. The reading strategies were not applied implicitly or explicitly. In other words, no actual reading comprehension instruction was observed in any of the three lessons. The educators tended to change a reading comprehension lesson into a vocabulary lesson. The lesson presented by Educator 1 (see lines 2–12 below), is a clear example of this claim. Even the vocabulary taught was taught out of context in most cases. Furthermore, the learners were not encouraged to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words in context. Another prominent feature in the lessons presented was that the educators depended on the traditional approach to teaching reading. For example, the focus was on oral reading, where educators tended to focus on the punctuation of the text. This is evident in what Educator 3 said: "*I want to hear the punctuation...*." Although oral reading is important for beginner readers, it is not supposed to be the major focus for Grade 9 learners. In the three lessons observed, there was no clear evidence that the teachers knew what reading strategies were and how to teach them. However, one would assume that Educators 2 and 3 knew something about the importance of pre-reading activities because Educator 2 (line 1 below) briefed the learners on the author of the story. This is a good pre-reading strategy so that the learners can guess the contents of the text they are about to read. In other words, this type of activity provides

learners with some clues and enables them to take guesses.

Similarly, Educator 3 used a relevant reading comprehension strategy at the beginning of the lesson. For example, "What is the story about?" This strategy allowed learners to make predictions; however, the educator did not introduce this strategy before reading. Furthermore, the educators did not encourage the learners to engage with the text. Based on the educators' classroom practices one can conclude that even the few reading strategies that were implemented, were implemented subconsciously because there was no clear evidence that the educators knew exactly what they were doing and what they were trying to achieve. The lessons were dominated by comprehension assessment and the educators were concerned about the correctness of the learners' answers. It can be argued that the educators were looking for only one correct answer. Only when satisfactory answers were given, the educator would proceed. In this way, the educators evaluated the learners' reading comprehension abilities, rather than implementing strategy instruction.

Educators' classroom interaction with learners

Another prominent feature of the three lessons was that the educators were only using questions as a way of interacting with the learners. Even though questioning is one of the reading comprehension strategies, the level and the purpose of questioning in the three observed lessons did not serve that purpose; instead, the educators were using a traditional way of asking questions. This traditional way of presentation results in educator domination of the class, and it is discouraged in the current reading comprehension instruction. In the three classes, there was no learner-learner or learner-teacher interaction, instead, only teacher-learner interaction took place. The learners were passive except when responding to the educators' questions. Furthermore, the learners were not given an opportunity to ask their own questions. Accordingly, this approach to reading comprehension instruction does not guarantee reading comprehension.

Support, motivation, and feedback provided

In the observed lessons, the reading support, motivation and feedback were minimal. Guided reading, according to which the educators were supposed to support a small group of learners to read a text independently, was non-existent. Since there was no formal focus on reading comprehension strategies, little formal feedback and support were given by the teachers. Feedback was only witnessed when the educators praised learners who provided correct answers to their questions. Educator feedback is supposed to go beyond this level in a class that is dominated by learners or in a class where learners are granted an opportunity to read independently. Unfortunately, this did not take place in any of the three lessons. As mentioned previously, lessons were dominated by the educators and even the activities presented provided little opportunity for learners to read with comprehension. This classroom context provided minimal or no motivation for the learners to read, and if reading comprehension instruction continues in this manner in South African classrooms, one would assume that there is little hope that learners' reading challenges will be resolved.

Activities organised by educators to facilitate reading comprehension

The dominating reading activity in the observed lessons was whole-class reading. Questions were directed at the whole group, and in most cases, chorus answers were given. There was no initial modelling of the activity by the educator and getting everyone to participate before breaking into small groups to repeat the activity. Neither was any individual attention paid to reading. It is clear that the learners' learning styles were not accommodated in the presented lessons. Oral reading, teacher questioning, and chorus answers dominated the lessons. The educators would nominate learners to read the text orally, and this activity was followed by questions. In this way, the educators were acting as task givers and evaluators of reading comprehension.

The way reading comprehension lessons are organised in the EFAL classroom context

The second research question focused on the educators' ability to organise their reading comprehension lessons. In other words, the focus was on how systematically educators arranged their lessons. We wanted to know whether there was any evidence of planning in the presented lessons.

Evidence of planning

The evidence of lesson planning reflected the traditional way of teaching reading. It was clear from their presentations that the educators had a picture of learners who needed to be fed information by them. One could deduce the educator's expectations from their presentation styles. Accordingly, one could infer that their major objective was to develop the learners' vocabulary. However, one could conclude that they lacked the skills to embed vocabulary in a reading comprehension lesson; instead, the reading comprehension lesson was converted primarily into a vocabulary lesson. Further evidence of planning was the fact that the educators requested learners to read aloud. Although, if handled properly, it is a good planning method, but the manner in which it was approached by the educators rendered it ineffective. This planned individual reading did not

allow learners to engage with the text. We did not see the learners commenting on what the other learners had read or engaging in a discussion about what had been learnt and guessing what was going to follow.

To some extent, the planning itself was not satisfactory. No proper order of events was listed, since no reading comprehension strategy was followed. For all three educators, the focus was on oral reading, and at no time were learners presented with an exercise.

Observation case study 1: Educator 1

Lesson topic: Comprehension – Living up to your words

Prescribed book: *Grade 9 English for Success*

Scheduled duration of lesson: 45 minutes (min)

Actual duration of the lesson: 28 min

1) Educator: [Educator reads passage out loud]
2) Educator: *What is a synonym? A synonym is a word with the same meaning. For the word 'possibly' in paragraph 1, where's possibly?*
3) Learner: *Simultaneous response from some learners*.
4) Educator: *Probably. Yes!*
5) Educator: *Write down an antonym for the word 'loss' in paragraph 3*.
6) Learner: *Gain*.
7) Educator: *Right. Number 2, find the following parts of speech. Noun. What is a noun again? What is a noun again?*
8) Learner: Simultaneous response from a few learners.
9) Educator: *It's a naming word. It names things. Street names. Um, Anglican Church. All proper nouns. Adjective, what does an adjective do?*
10) Learner: *It describes the noun*.
11) Educator: *Right again. An adjective describes a noun. Or a pronoun. Like what? Desk is a noun. Is a desk a noun?*
12) Educator: *You must know these things*.
13) Educator: *Do activity 5.1 in you book. I'll be right back.*
14) [Educator left the classroom] (Educator 1 quoted verbatim)

Observation case study 2: Educator 2

Lesson topic: Comprehension: The Whistlers

Prescribed book: *Grade 9 English for Success*

Scheduled duration of lesson: 45 min

Actual duration of the lesson: 45 min

1) Educator: *Take out your ... workbooks. In the middle of your books you have this* [holds up a piece of paper], *remember this? It's that from Chapter 1. Now before we can understand what we are on about, the name of the book is 'The Whistlers' by* [author name unclear]. *That is the author of the book. Now I'm gonna tell you about the author before I can explain for you the, the setting, the narrator, the theme, the stuff, just for you to understand the novel better, to give you that interest, that ... you know, I must read all this all.*
2) Educator: *Now let's look at the novel. Now when you read a novel, right, you are entering an imaginary world created by the author of the novel. Now imaginary worlds, anyone who understands when I say you are entering into an imaginary world. Can you answer that for me? What does that mean when the author says you are entering into an imaginary world? Did you get those cases when they say you have an imaginary friend?*
3) Learner: *Yes* [Simultaneous positive agreement from class].
4) Educator: *The thriller. Who knows what that is? When you are watching the thriller movie, what's happening in that movie?*
5) Learner: *It scares you!*
6) Educator: *It's a scary movie. It keeps up, it keeps you up to* [on] *your toes, you are always here, what's gonna happen? Just like in the book, right. Just like in the book. When you are reading the book, you are* [unclear] *and going forward, what's going to happen next, you know, you are always interested. What's gonna happen now that ... even when I say stop in the class, you're like, yoh, when I get home, I'm gonna read for myself. Because you are enjoying the book so much because it's keeping you on your toes, neh. That's the imaginary world that you are reading. You have narrative and plots, characters and the characterisation, the setting, the narrator, the theme, the* [unclear].
7) Educator: *Who knows what is a narrative in a story, what does it mean when you say a narrative? Anyone who understands that, guys? Have you ever been taught, um, novels, on reading, what must you understand when you are reading a story or a novel? Were you taught that in Grade 7?*
8) Learner: *A few learners say 'Yes' ... Most of the learners say 'No.'*
9) Educator: *So, when they told you about the narrative, what did they say? Narrative, guys. When a person is narrating the story, what does a person do when they narrate a story, what is narrating, what do they do when they say they are narrating the story?*
10) Learners: *No response*.
11) Educator: *They are telling the story. Now when you narrate the story, a story is made up of events. That is called narrative. A story is like this* [draws on blackboard], *a book is like this, every story is like this. Here it's got an introduction. Now here, this is where you introduce your characters. This is where you introduce your characters, and then as you go, that's where you narrate, you are telling the story now. Narrate the story.*
12) Learners: [Learners sit and listen, most appear uninterested]
13) Educator: *Then you get to the climax of the story, you are getting to the what of the story? What do they explain then? For example. … I am now thinking about a story about a princess. What happened to the princess? They're actually telling you about the mystery in the events that you have been told. Now they are telling you what happened, why was the princess stolen, that's an example ... . This is where the story, this is the reason the story is actually happening. It's called a boiling point. Before it was the princess, the princess was stolen, and then, um, the king was devastated, then they were looking for the princess everywhere. And now the climax of the story, that is where it is happening, and then they found the princess, and she was*

hidden in this house, it was up in the trees. They had hidden the princess. Who knows of the story that I'm talking about?

14) Learner: *Raponzel!* [Simultaneous responses from learners]
15) Educator: *Yes! Rapunzel! I'm telling you about Rapunzel, that was the story that came into my head. For you to understand the story. They found … they found the princess ...* (Educator 2 quoted verbatim)

Observation case study 3: Educator 3

Lesson topic: Comprehension: Mobile phones bring the book back

Prescribed book: *Grade 9 English for Success*

Scheduled duration of lesson: 45 min

Actual duration of the lesson: 35 min

1) Educator: [Silence for a few seconds as the educator writes on blackboard.] *What is the synonym of 'admired'? When you are being admired, what is the other word that you can use?*
2) Learner: *Some simultaneous responses from the learners*.
3) Educator: *One at a time! Encouraged? Inspired?*
4) Educator: *When you say admired, you are being admired, you are being looked up to or you are being praised. Isn't that so? What is a synonym for 'admired'?*
5) Learner A: *Praised.*
6) Educator: *Correct! Praised.* [Educator writes on board.]
7) Educator: *When we are reading a story, everyone must listen, so that you will be able to make sense of the story*.
8) Educator: *Uh ... She's gonna start to read, remember we're all gonna get a chance to read, right, paragraph by paragraph*.
9) Educator: *Right, our story today will be on page 19. It's gonna tell, tell us why the zebra has stripes today. Why the zebra has stripes today. So, can you please start reading. And please be quiet.* [Shushing].
10) Learner: Learner B reads.
11) Educator: *OK, whoa, before you continue, from the paragraph that she has read, what are we looking for there? What is the story about? What is the story going to tell us? Because now, from the first paragraph that she has read, you need, now you must be able to talk, to know, what is this story going to be about.*
12) Learner: *Learner C – The story is about a zebra with horns*.
13) Educator: *Yes … But now we need to find out why now is there the zebra with the stripes, not horns. Because have you seen a zebra with horns? No. You see the zebra with stripes. So, now. let's listen to the folklore how the zebra got the stripes and loses his horns.*
14) Learner: Learner C reads.
15) Learner: Learner A reads.
16) Educator: *Remember, let me stop you, remember when you read, I need to hear the punctuation. So, I'm not reading with you. I need to feel that there's a comma, there's a full stop. You need to make use of the punctuation even in reading.*
17) Educator: *Continue*.
18) Learner: Learner A continues to read.
19) Educator: *So, the zebra was enjoying being admired with these horns. Do you guys understand?*
20) Learner: *General positive agreement from learners. So that was why he was like, was like proud of having these horns. OK, continue.*
21) Learner: Learner B reads again.
22) Learner: Learner D reads.
23) Learner: Learner E reads.
24) Educator: *OK, what does the word 'dull' mean?*
25) Learner: *It means you are boring, Mam*. [Learners laugh in the background]
26) Educator: *Yes, boring is correct. Something that is quite uninteresting, you guys understand?*
    So OK, she is now dull and boring because of, doesn't have the horns. So, do you think that she was happy about it?
27) Learner: *No, Mam, she was sad*.
28) Educator: *Why?*
29) [Some responses from the learners.]
30) Educator: *One person at a time! Why do you think the zebra was sad?*
31) Learner: *The horns were gone in the wind* [Laughter among learners]
32) Educator: *Because she's not gonna get them back anymore … right?*
33) Educator: *Now just below the text, there are questions … Can you see them? Do questions 1–10 for homework. We will mark it tomorrow* (Educator 3 quoted verbatim).

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore the Grade 9 EFAL educators' reading comprehension instruction practices. Regarding the choice of reading comprehension strategies, the findings of the study reveal that the educators did not seem to have a thorough knowledge of reading comprehension strategies. This manifested itself in the educators' lack of focus on reading comprehension strategy instruction, whether implicitly or explicitly. This finding supports the results of a study conducted by Nurie (2017). The focus of that study was on the pedagogical practices in teaching reading comprehension in Ethiopia. The findings reveal that no actual comprehension instruction was observed in the observed lessons.

Our findings further reveal that all three educators focused on oral reading, and according to their observed practices, oral reading was the end goal of reading comprehension. A similar finding was made by Rule and Land (2017) who conducted a study on teachers' reading instruction practices in the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. The results of their study reveal that there was a need to move beyond the predominant mode of reading as oral performance, where the emphasis is on accuracy and pronunciation, to reading as comprehension of the meaning in texts.

The findings also reveal that the educators tended to change a reading comprehension lesson into a vocabulary lesson. In this regard, the

National Reading Panel (2000) holds the view that vocabulary instruction does not automatically lead to gains in comprehension but must be appropriate with regard to the reader's age and ability. In our study, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that vocabulary learning was not used as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. The results also indicate that the educators were only using questions during their interactions with the learners. In this regard, Nurie (2017) also observed that the questioning technique in his study was treated as the end goal of reading comprehension instruction, rather than as a means to an end.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to examine the current practices of educators in teaching reading and how they handled and organised reading comprehension lessons. The focus on the educators' reading comprehension practices was informed by the vital role played by teachers in developing learners' reading comprehension proficiency which plays a key role in the learning process in general. However, the results of the study reveal a similar trend as that indicated by the results of other studies conducted in South Africa and other countries where educators were found wanting as far as reading comprehension instruction was concerned. Specifically, the study revealed that the observed educators did not have an in-depth knowledge of the reading comprehension strategies, and, as such, no real reading comprehension instruction was observed. The manner in which the lessons were handled, the type of activities used, as well as how learners were involved in the lessons, bear testimony to this finding.

While this study yielded some intriguing results, some limitations must be acknowledged. This study, for example, had a limited sample size. However, while the study's aim was not to generalise the findings to other schools or contexts, the findings offered useful information about the selected educators' reading comprehension instructional practices. Another point worth noting is that conducting interviews with educators to better understand their reading comprehension teaching strategies can be useful for future studies.

Recommendations

An independent phase-based reading comprehension instruction module should be developed by teacher training institutions and universities as part of pre-service teacher training and development curriculum. This reading comprehension instruction module should be made compulsory for every student educator, to promote the significance of reading comprehension instruction across the grades, across the curriculum. The empowering of student educators to teach reading comprehension effectively can possibly reverse the reading instruction regression and initiate reading instructional change and progress in the South African EFAL classrooms. The development and inclusion of a reading comprehension pedagogy as part of the pre-service teacher curriculum could possibly improve the way in which educators organise lessons and teach reading in their classrooms.

In collaboration with schools, and as part of their social responsibility, all teacher training institutions, such as, teaching colleges, should conduct monthly 2-hour reading comprehension instruction workshops with in-service educators. At these workshops, reading scholars and researchers should teach educators how to arrange their lessons in such a way that they can facilitate reading comprehension activities effectively, interact with learners to promote critical reading discussions and support learners in the reading comprehension process.

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Authors' Contributions

Tilla Olifant wrote the introduction and provided the data used in the manuscript. Professor Cekiso assisted with the analysis of the data and the writing of the conclusion. Doctor Boakye assisted with writing the literature review and methodology section. All the authors participated in writing the discussion section and recommendations and reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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