

Teachers' Views on Approaches used for Teaching Reading Comprehension in English as a Second Language in Primary Schools in the Shiselweni Region of Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

Appropriate teaching approaches in teaching reading comprehension in English as a second language are vital to ensure maximum instructional delivery and understanding of the text that is being read. This study sought to establish teachers' views on teaching approaches used in teaching reading comprehension in English as a second language in the Shiselweni region of Eswatini. The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm and followed a qualitative research approach which applied a case study design. Individual interviews and observations were used to collect data. A purposive sample of seven (7) teachers was used. Data were analyzed for content and conclusions were drawn. The findings of the study revealed that reading comprehension was best taught using an integrated approach towards the teaching of language arts skills. Another finding was that teachers encountered a number of constraints in the teaching of reading for comprehension in English. These include lack of time and adequate resources. The study further disclosed that learners shared English text books which made it challenging for them to read considering their differences in their reading speed. This was also found to be challenging to teachers as they have to refer to these text books. The study also revealed that there is a disconnection between the English taught in teacher education programs and that taught in the primary school curriculum. The study recommended that updating and diversifying the teaching approaches can help maximize instruction delivery.

KEYWORDS: reading, comprehension, approaches, Second language, primary school

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill that is required for academic success and it is the third of the four language skills, which are: listening, speaking, reading and writing ((Margaret, 2016 & de Oliveira, 2015). The reading skill is a very important skill in modern societies and it is developed through teaching and learning in schools and beyond (Garton, 2015). Reading in English as a second language is a complex process which does not only include the recognition of words but also involves an intricate process of making meaning for a variety of purposes (Baghaei & Ravand, 2015). Reading in English involves multifaceted processes that will enable learners to perceive, recall, synthesize, analyze, interpret, and pronounce the words taught (Duarte, 2013).

In order for this very important skill to be effectively taught, appropriate approaches have to be utilized. English reading comprehension approaches are defined as specific, deliberate, goal-directed mental processes or behaviors which control and modify readers' efforts to decode a text, understand words and construct meaning from a text (Anastasiou & Griva, 2009) and these are very important as they ensure the understanding of a text (Serravallo, 2010). The teaching of reading comprehension in English also requires the use of carefully chosen approaches because reading is a vital skill that is required for academic success in the school curriculum (Dabarera, Renandya, & Zhang, 2014; Brown & Lee, 2015). Therefore, in order to ensure that learners read and

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comprehend what has been written in the English language careful thought and consideration has to be given during the selection of these approaches. It is also equally important that the selected approaches be appropriately applied to ensure that learners comprehend what they are reading (Dabarera, Renandya, & Zhang, 2014; Cohen, 2014).

The appropriate selection and careful choice of approaches for teaching reading for comprehension in English is also based on the notion that the process encompasses not just a recognition or understanding of individual words but, a build-up of mental representations of the text being read. In this regard, the teaching approaches should allow for integration across a range of sources of information, from lexical features to knowledge (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). Despite the careful selection of teaching approaches however, challenges are likely to be experienced, albeit that they will be greatly minimal. Some of these according to Garton (2013) and Pearson (2014) are learners' low proficiency in reading (Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim, & Jung, 2011); teachers' lack of ability to teach reading using appropriate approaches, as well as limited reading opportunities given to learners in the classroom (Aguilar & Rodriguez, 2012).

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study were to:

- Establish reading comprehension approaches used by teachers in teaching English reading comprehension in primary schools.
- Explore teachers' experiences in using different reading approaches when teaching English reading comprehension in primary schools.
- Determine the challenges encountered by teachers when teaching reading comprehension at primary school level.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teachers in the primary schools of Eswatini are unable to select teaching approaches that are suitable for teaching English reading comprehension; hence, learners are unable to read for comprehension and they fail English. The teachers' inability to select appropriate teaching approaches also results in them facing challenges in the teaching of reading comprehension in English as a second language. This is because in some of the contexts English is not the language of everyday communication (Grabe, 2009).

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by Barlett's (1932) Schema Theory. Barlett's Schema Theory is based on the belief that written texts do not have meaning in themselves but the only function that they serve is guiding readers to use their prior knowledge and

experiences in order to construct meaning from a text. According to this theory, a person's ability to read and understand a text is as a result of an interaction between the individual's background knowledge and the text. What this means is that both the reader and the text have a role to play in ensuring that the text is understood. Of importance to note is that the reader should be able to relate what they are reading to their own background or prior knowledge. In support of this theory Adams (2010) states that one's ability to comprehend a text is also dependent on it being interactively processed. What this means is that for a text to be understood it has to be processed using both the Bottom-up and Top-down processing. Processing a text using the Bottom-up entails starting with the specific data of the text to the general while Top-down processing entails starting with the general (An, 2013).

V. EMPIRICAL STUDIES

The review of literature reveals that there are two approaches that are viewed as major for the teaching of reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). These are the Phonic approach and the Whole Language approach. In the Phonic approach, focus is on associating letters of the alphabet with the sounds that they correspond with as well as matching the words being read with pictures (Chall, 2018; Stanovich & West, 2014). Focus also is on the learners' ability to recognize sounds that make up certain words as well as the learners' ability to combine/blend letters and sounds to form words. For Grabe and Stoller (2002) the Phonic approach is appropriate for learners that are beginning to read as it lays a good foundation for reading, while the Whole Language approach is preferred for upper grade learners.

In the Whole Language approach, the teaching of reading is done bearing in mind that reading is a cognitive process as it involves thinking as well as one's intellect in order to find meaning. In this approach therefore, readers are expected to participate actively in what they are reading so that they construct meaning. Participating actively means they use their experiences, background, knowledge of their values, norms, and everything that they know to understand a text. The text is also read as a whole and it is not dissected.

Literature further reveals that other minor approaches that can be used for the teaching of reading are the Linguistic approach, Multi-Sensory approach, and Reading Comprehension approach (Grabe & Stoller, 2002) The Linguistic approach is an approach where whole words are taught using the different parts of speech. Of importance to note about this approach is that there is no teaching of reading above sentence

level, hence it is suitable that it be used with learners who are beginning to read (Chall, 2018; Stanovich & West, 2014). Another approach is the Multi-Sensory approach which is an approach that attempts to teach reading using senses. The last approach is the Reading Comprehension approach where reading is taught for purposes of ensuring that readers are able to find meaning from what they are reading. From the description of this approach, we are able to deduce that it is specific to the teaching of reading comprehension, hence may be considered as the best approach for teaching reading comprehension. Research however, indicates that there is no best approach for teaching, but what teachers should do is adopt an eclectic approach when teaching as there is no approach that can ever be perfect on its own (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Researchers are guided by a certain paradigm when conducting research. Tashakkori (1998) defines a paradigm as the model in education underlying the worldviews guiding the researchers or as a basic set of beliefs that guide action. In education, two research stances have dominated the scene and have become the most popular. These are the positivistic model and the interpretive / constructivist mode of inquiry (Grotty, 2003). This study was guided by the interpretivist research paradigm.

VII. RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative research approach and applied a case study design (Welch, 2017). Shank (2012) expresses that qualitative research is a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning. By systematic, Shank (2012) means planned, ordered, and following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative community. By empirical Shank (2012) means that this type of inquiry is grounded in the world of experiences. The study also applied the case study research design as it focused on two schools in one region out of a total of four regions.

A. Population

The overall sample of the study was English teachers from all schools within the Shiselweni region. Since it was not possible to engage all these teachers in the study a few were selected to take part. English teachers were considered appropriate for the study as they are the ones teaching English reading comprehension. Their views were sought by the study in order to understand the approaches that they use for teaching reading comprehension in English. The teachers' views were also sought to identify learners' problems in failing to comprehend an English comprehension text.

B. Sampling

According to Cresswell (2013) sampling procedures refer to choosing part of a population to take part in a study. In agreement with this assertion Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) state that the sample size determines the extent to which the researcher can make statistical and / analytic generalizations. In this study a total of seven (7) teachers that were picked from two (2) schools were selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was employed in order to gain in-depth understanding of the study from people who are known to have information about the study (Patton, 2002). The selection of the teachers using purposive sampling was also based on that as people who teach reading comprehension in the schools, they had the information that was sought.

C. Research Instruments

One on one interviews with teachers were conducted with the aid of a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were used as an instrument for collecting data in this study because they are viewed as one of the most useful qualitative research instruments for collecting data needed to understand personal experiences, views, and perspectives of people (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). According to Cresswell (2013) interviews provide useful information when you cannot directly observe participants, and they permit participants to describe detailed personal information. The interviewer has better control over the kind of information received as they can ask specific questions to elicit this information. A semi structured interview guide which consisted of the three (3) research questions in this study was used. Other questions emerged as the interview progressed as the researcher was probing the responses for clarity purposes. The interview targeted seven (7) teachers who teach English reading comprehension. Classroom observations were also used for the collection of data. This was done for purposes of triangulating the data gathered from the interviews.

D. Data presentation

Data collected from interviews and classroom observations were presented under these themes: integrated approach when teaching language skills, phonics in teaching reading comprehension, comprehension instructions and assessment.

E. Integrated approach to the teaching of Language Skills

All the seven (7) teachers that were interviewed felt that reading comprehension was best taught using the integrated approach towards the teaching of language skills. This was based on the belief that listening,

speaking, reading and writing are basic language skills which are interrelated; hence an attempt to develop them simultaneously should be done. One of the teachers remarked that:

The reading skills are a part of the other three language skills; listening, speaking, and writing, hence these should be taught together so that learners can get a holistic development in these skills. On the same note, one teacher observed that:

Teaching reading comprehension is complex as it also involves the teaching of the other skills. The participants were aware that the reading comprehension skill could not be taught in isolation but should be integrated with other language skills.

Another thing that came out from the teachers' responses was that the reading comprehension skill is not taught every day, hence, the participants developed their own teaching strategies where they devoted some of the time scheduled for teaching other language concepts for reading comprehension. According to these participants the teaching of reading comprehension required a lot of time yet the time allocated for this activity in the timetable was not adequate.

The participants further disclosed that learners shared English text books which made it challenging for them to read considering their differences in their reading rates. According to some of the teachers learners were different hence they read at varied rates. Sharing a textbook was therefore problematic in that if one wanted to turn to the next page the other/s would still be on the previous page. The sharing of books was also found to be challenging to teachers as they have to refer to these text books, more especially if they wanted learners to do some reading at home. The study also revealed that there is a disconnection between the English taught in teacher education programs and that taught in the primary school curriculum. The participants revealed that what they learn at college or university is totally different from what they are expected to teach. They therefore felt that instead of focus being on very difficult concepts that they learn during training focus should just be on the teaching of the aspects of language that are taught in the primary school curriculum. The study recommended that updating and diversifying the teaching approaches can help maximize learners' learning.

F. The role of phonics in teaching reading comprehension

The participants mentioned that teaching phonics is the basis for learning to read and the following extracts illustrate their point:

I start with the letters of the alphabet and then teach the learners how to produce the sounds that are attached to the letters which is the beginning phase of phonics reading.

On the same note, one participant mentioned that; *I provide phonics instruction in teaching reading comprehension because it helps the learners with the correct pronunciation of words while reading.*

Phonics was therefore another approach that teachers used when teaching reading comprehension to learners. In addition to using the Phonic approach when teaching reading comprehension, the teachers also said that they used the Whole Language approach. The reasons given for using this approach was that unlike the Phonic approach which limits learners to the reading of words and sentences, this approach gives learners the opportunity to read texts above sentence level. Again, the approach encourages learners to actively participate during reading as they have to construct meaning from the text that they are reading in order to understand it.

G. Importance of reading comprehension instruction

The participants also felt that it was important that teachers provide adequate instruction when teaching reading comprehension. According to some of the participants most teachers did not teach reading comprehension but they tested it. This resulted in learners failing to identify the correct responses to the comprehension questions as they have not been taught how they can identify them. In addition, learners failed to find the meanings of new words as they had not been instructed on how that is done. The participants gave almost similar responses though they phrased them differently. Two participants view reading comprehension as;

Essential in reading and that teachers can foster their learners' comprehension by engaging them in different activities.

VIII. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study disclosed that teachers were aware of the two major approaches that can be used for the teaching of reading comprehension, the Phonic approach and the Whole Language approach and they also used them when teaching reading comprehension; however, they did not know any of the minor approaches, including the Reading Comprehension Approach. Utilizing these approaches means teachers focus on correct sound and word recognition as well as ensuring that learners find meaning from the texts that they are reading in line with Grabe and Stoller (2002)'s view. Utilizing the Whole Language approach is also in line with the

Schema theory, which is the theory in which the study is underpinned as the theory states that a person's ability to read and understand a text is as a result of the person's interaction between the individual's background knowledge and the text (Barlett, 1932; An, 2013). However, the non-use of the Reading Comprehension Approach indicated that teachers only focused on the use of approaches for teaching reading and not specifically the teaching of Reading Comprehension. The study revealed that the participants were aware that reading could not be taught in isolation but should be integrated with other language skills. What this means therefore is that the approach chosen for the teaching of reading comprehension should be that which will allow for the integration of the other language skills as well as one that gives learners the opportunity to use their background knowledge and their prior experiences. In line with this, the teachers suggested that an integrated approach towards the teaching of reaching for comprehension should be adopted. Many of the teachers also believed that phonics instruction is important in fostering English reading comprehension through teaching the letter sound relationships. The teachers' belief in phonic instruction is supported by Campbell (2020) who found that phonics instruction helps learners to learn at a faster rate when compared to those not given phonics instructions. Likewise, Stanovich and West (2014) argued that phonic knowledge affects decoding ability positively. According to the teachers varied approaches should be used when teaching reading comprehension so that learners can benefit.

Another finding from the study was that teachers were aware that there was no approach that is perfect when teaching reading comprehension, hence, adopting an eclectic/integrative approach was considered to be best. This finding corresponds with Grabe and Stoller (2002) suggestion as the authors say this is what should be done to ensure that learners benefit from their reading instruction. Another challenge was that learners shared English text books which made it challenging for them to read considering their differences in their reading speed. This was also found to be challenging to teachers to teach as they have to refer to these text books. The study also revealed that there is a disconnection between the English taught in teacher education programs and that taught in the primary school curriculum. The study recommended that updating and diversifying the teaching approaches can help maximize learners' learning.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that the effective approach to teaching reading comprehension was varying the

reading approaches. The classroom observations indicated that the teachers varied the teaching approaches and they used both the Separate approach as well as Integrated approaches towards the teaching of reading comprehension. The participants' beliefs are that assessment of reading was important to measure learners' reading comprehension. This can be done through a variety of different activities, including oral questioning. However, classroom observations revealed that assessment practices were often on the edge to the learning. The phonics instruction is an effective approach of teaching the learners early reading skills. This study concludes that the development of reading in second language (L2) is directly dependent on and reflective of teachers' instructional practices especially because learners are learning to read in a language in which they are not yet proficient.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study made a number of recommendations to decision makers and key stakeholders, and to teachers of English reading comprehension. These recommendations are based on the findings of the study. They also take advantage of some views in the literature. It is essential to improve the ability of teachers to effectively teach their learners (Duke & Block, 2012). In view of this the study recommends the following:

The Ministry of Education and Training should provide in-service training to teachers who are already in the field so that their teaching of reading comprehension can be improved.

Internal workshops in schools should be conducted so that teachers may see how others are teaching the reading comprehension skill in their classrooms.

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