

## Original Paper

# Challenges of Grade 4 English First Additional Language Reading Instruction

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### **Abstract**

*This research was conducted at Dzindi Circuit of Vhembe District, Limpopo Province in South Africa. The aim of the study was to investigate challenges teachers face when teaching English First Additional Language (EFAL) reading at Grade 4. This study used a quantitative research paradigm. Questionnaires were administered to 20 teachers who teach Grade 4 at selected primary schools in Dzindi Circuit. The theoretical framework used for the study was bottom-up approach to reading, the cognitive view or the top-down processing, and the metacognitive view. Data were analysed quantitatively using frequency analysis. Analysed data were then presented in the form of tables. The study established that teachers who participated in the study were qualified enough to teach reading at Grade 4. However, there was a discrepancy in the involvement of learners' parents and in assisting struggling learners. Moreover, many EFAL teachers were not sure whether to include the learners' first language when teaching reading. The study therefore recommends that teachers be retrained about effective methods of assisting struggling learners. It further recommends in-service training for teachers especially in teaching reading in the context of a different mother tongue.*

### **Keywords**

*Reading skills, English First Additional Language, Reading approaches, Teaching Reading challenges*

## **1. Introduction**

Literacy is one of the essential components of education. Incapable readers are deprived of vital knowledge on social, political, cultural, and health concerns (Nsenyane & Amaniampong, 2021). As a result, someone who can read may easily adapt to the world that is changing all the time and not be surprised by new developments or revolutions. International studies have shown that low literacy rates are a major issue for the majority of developing nations. In South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, for

example, almost 50% of the population lacks basic reading and writing skills (Tlale, 2021). South Africa received the lowest score in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which was carried out in 40 nations between 2006 and 2016. Compared to the global average of 94%, only 13% of Grade 4 students were able to meet the low international norm (Govender & Hugo, 2020). The results sparked questions regarding the effectiveness of reading literacy instruction in South Africa's primary schools (Tlale, 2021). It is therefore pivotal to probe the gravity of challenges faced by EFAL teaching when teaching reading.

Being able to read fluently is fundamental to success in life because it is a skill required for all academic endeavours (Iheakanwa, Obro & Akpochafo, 2021). Since various students will typically have varying degrees of reading proficiency, teachers must be able to identify each student's unique reading demands (Didion, Toste & Filderman, 2020). Teachers should not use coercion to make students read when they are not ready because this will probably make them dislike reading (Ewing, Khatri, Irsheid & Castleberry, 2022).

Most teachers in South Africa became confused and unsure of what was expected of them as a result of the curriculum transformations and attempts at innovation that ranged from Curriculum 2005 to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS), which later became the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), followed by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Their students' reading levels suffered as a result of their uncertainty about how to teach reading (Bao, Qu, Zhang & Hogan, 2020).

One of the most startling conclusions of the Department of Basic Education's September 2012 Annual National Assessment (ANA) was that students were not able to read comprehension (Govender & Hugo, 2020). This means that strategies for helping students comprehend what they read must be sought. To create lesson plans that will effectively teach reading, teachers must, therefore, possess the knowledge of what contributes to text comprehension. In a different assessment by the National Department of Education, 52 000 students in Grade 3 from mostly urban schools had an average reading and writing score of 39%. In rural areas, this score would most likely be much lower (Loopoo & Balfour, 2021). This indicates the urgency of finding solutions to the problem already dire.

## **2. Literature review**

Reading is defined as decoding a written text and efficiently processing the acquired information (Hellekjaer, 2009). Similarly, Cekiso (2017) defines reading as the ability to recognise words, comprehend them and be fluent with necessary motivation. This immediately implies an interaction between the reader and the text. Therefore, one of the principal goals of teaching reading should be about inculcating an interactive relationship between the reader and the text. Logically, reading as a receptive skill should be first mastered in the learner's mother tongue, which should set a good foundation for the reading ability in other subsequent languages.

Nonetheless, learners often experience reading difficulties caused by their inability to acquire word recognition at a rapid pace (Rivers, 2018). This could be a result of limited vocabulary which slows down reading progress (Milton, 2012). In fact, Pretorius et al. (2016) have shown a strong correlation between vocabulary and all dimensions of proficiency in a language including speaking, listening, reading and writing.

In addition, several factors have been cited as responsible for challenges in reading. These include poor family background, language factors, personality factors, neurological factors and learning styles (Moyer, 2014). Evans and Kim (2013) noted that learners from poor family backgrounds are exposed to high stress levels that impact negatively on their academic performance. This is similar to what was observed by Aud et al. (2012) that a disproportionately large number of learners from poor family backgrounds had poorer academic performance compared to their counterparts from well-to-do families.

Similarly, schools that are not well-resourced and lack such amenities as libraries produce learners with low levels of reading (Ningomasha, Uutoni & Yule, 2012). Sadly, Darling-Hammond (2015) reports that only 27% of schools in South Africa have libraries which, according to Month (2018), explains the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) acknowledgement that improper facilities for learning make reading a difficult exercise for learners. In fact, most of the poorly resourced schools are located in rural areas.

Whilst the ability to read contributes to academic achievement, lifelong learning and sustainable development, Leseyane et al. (2018) argue that children with dyslexia underperform since academic engagement requires reading and writing. In other words, one of the challenges faced by the learners is either undiagnosed dyslexia or inability to assist dyslexic learners, which affect their academic performance.

On the other hand, Cekiso (2017) argues that learners' inability to read can be traced to teachers' inadequate subject knowledge. Teachers' subject knowledge is influenced by the training they received. This means that teachers with inadequate knowledge could either be placed in wrong subject areas or something went wrong during their training. Interestingly, in his investigation about teachers' perceptions about reading instruction, Cekiso (2017) reports that most teachers who participated in the study admitted to have received no preparation about how to deal with learners who experience reading difficulties. Unfortunately, this has dire consequences for learners' reading abilities.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical frameworks adopted for this study are bottom-up, top-down and meta-cognitive. A brief elucidation shall suffice.

#### *3.1 The Traditional Bottom-Up View*

The classic theory approach to reading, which dates back to the 1950s, founded on behaviourist psychology, holds that learning is the result of repeated stimuli and responses that become ingrained in

the mind (Saracho, 2023). In fact, the audio-lingual approach, which created habits through drills, was made possible by this behavioural shaping (Ramadhani, 2020). Phonics is the strategy used in conjunction with this bottom-up approach to reading that teaches students how to correctly match letters to their matching sounds. According to Turner (1995), phonics views reading as a linear process that decodes every word in a book and eventually connects them to phrases and sentences. In phonics, the meanings of individual words are combined to determine the meanings of individual clauses to make sense of a given text (Short, 2018). The bottom-up model deals with progression input and transfers it to the next step without allowing the later stages to affect the earlier ones.

The bottom-up approach focuses on analysing smaller units in the text and creating meaning from such smaller units (Barton, 2003). This paradigm prioritises text decoding above comprehension until the point at which practice and mastery of the decoding process allow for greater comprehension (Mohamed & Bayat, 2022). For beginning readers, this model provides a solid platform to learn how to master the decoding process.

### *3.2 The Cognitive View (Top-down Processing)*

Psycholinguists provided descriptions of how representation of a foreign language developed in a learner's mind, disproving behaviourism theory (Kolb, 2014). Meaningful learning, as opposed to rote learning, is about relating newly learned information with previously learned information (VanPatten, Keating & Wulff, 2020). This shift in thinking in the cognitive sciences in the 1960s gave rise to the cognitive (top-down processing) view (Gençer & Yıldırım, 2022).

The way that we understand how students learn to read has drastically changed as a result of this new (top-down processing) method (Bygstad, Øvrelid, Ludvigsen & Dæhlen, 2022). Thus, to establish meaning, this method explains how to connect the text with the reader's past knowledge. For that reason, this method focuses on meaning extraction from written language as well as text decoding.

This model is not a reverse of the bottom-up model mentioned above, and hence, it is not about processing that moves from the largest to the smaller units in the text, as the top-down model could imply. According to Nadea (2021), the top-down model of text processing depends on the reader's prior knowledge of both the text's structure and its content. In the top-down paradigm, the reader actively interacts with the text, deriving meaning and making predictions from it (Pardi, Schroeder & Letzkus, 2023). It is clear that in the top-down reading model, reading the text and deriving meaning from it happen at the same time. A reader who uses this style of reading has more reading experience than a reader who uses the bottom-up paradigm.

### *3.3 The Meta-cognitive View*

The metacognitive perspective describes the control one exercises to make meaning of a text, rather than just acknowledging how past knowledge affects one's interpretation of a particular text (Ramadhanti & Yanda, 2021). The reading process is split into three parts by this control, which is known as the "before reading," "while reading," and "after reading" (Rondon & Tomitch, 2020). Establishing the goal of reading and the format or kind of a text are the main objectives of the

pre-reading phase. The "while reading" stage concentrates on the overall qualities of the provided material, such as identifying a topic sentence and determining the author's motivation for writing the text – reflecting on the techniques proficient readers employ to evaluate if their strategy was successful. This metacognitive process evaluative part is such a useful model that should be used with students whenever possible.

The two levels of interaction that are the emphasis of the interactive model, also referred to as the balanced model, are the reader-text interaction and the interaction between the top-down and bottom-up approaches (Van de Ven, 2023). Because of this, when reading interactively, the reader processes a text by interpreting language components within it (a process known as the "bottom-up approach") and connecting its meaning to prior knowledge about the book's content. Thus, this kind of reading is a good indicator of how well a reader is mastering the craft of reading.

#### **4. Research Design**

This research used a quantitative methodology. When establishing or validating associations between measurable variables and drawing generalisations is necessary, this method is typically employed (Isia, Hadibarata, Jusoh, Bhattacharjya, Shahedan, Fitriyani & Syafrudin, 2023). In this study, questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data.

#### **5. Population**

Population is a group of persons on which a researcher generalises study findings (Strauss, De la Salle, Sloshower & Williams, 2021). The sample is selected from this group. The target population was made up of Grade 4 teachers who taught EFAL in the 20 rural schools in Dzindi Circuit in the Vhembe District.

#### **6. Sample and Sampling Procedure**

According to Casteel and Bridier (2021), a sample is extracted from the population for purposes of inclusion in the study, or a subset of measurements drawn from a population in which we are interested. It is a small portion of the total set of objects, events, or persons from which a representative selection is made.

The circuit office provided the list of schools from which the researcher randomly selected twenty. The schools were written on pieces of paper, put in a box, and then selected. From each selected school, one Grade 4 EFAL teacher was purposively selected. The researcher obtained informed consent from the selected respondents before they could take part in the research.

#### **7. Data Collection Method**

The quantitative method, according to Mohajan (2020), emphasises the measuring link between variables rather than processes. However, the quantitative approach—which assigns numbers to the

perceived attributes of a phenomenon—is defined by Wu, He and Christakos (2021) as the best measurement of the properties of phenomena. To gather data from schools, the researcher in this study sought authorisation from the province, district, circuit, and schools. Questionnaires were distributed to respondents in person along with instructions explaining how they should fill out the self-administered questionnaire. Questionnaires were collected one week after they were distributed.

## **8. The Questionnaire**

A questionnaire is a document with questions or other types of items designed to solicit information appropriate for analysis, according to Hernández, Hidalgo, Hambleton, and Gómez Benito (2020). The questionnaire used in this study included items on which Grade 4 EFAL teachers evaluated tactics for teaching reading more effectively.

These are the tactics in the questionnaire that teachers evaluated: scheduling additional courses, particularly for students who have difficulty with various reading skills; attending to each student's unique reading demands; and enhancing students' word-recitation skills; stressing the connection between a letter's sound and its appearance; using the native tongue of the students; making do with little resources; including parents of learners in their kids' reading; motivating students to read their writing; allowing students to read and involving authorities when appropriate reading materials are hard to come by. Respondents were asked to rate how often they used these tactics to teach EFAL reading more effectively. The ratings were Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, and Never.

To improve validity, the questionnaires were piloted before being distributed and only contained closed-ended items. To eliminate any doubts and errors, the questionnaire was tested on the five teachers who were not included in the sample.

## **9. Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistical analysis in the form of frequency and percentages was used. Since frequency analysis deals with the number of occurrences, it was chosen as an appropriate analysis for the data. Calculating the frequency at which the item occurred and representing frequency in percentage was presented in tables to summarise data.

## **10. Presentation of Questionnaire Results**

The first element is the demographic profile, which includes information on the respondents' gender, age, educational background, teaching experience in rural areas, and teacher-to-student ratio.

### *10.1 Demographic Information*

The demographic information of the study participants, which examined the challenges teachers face when teaching Grade 4 English FAL reading, is shown and discussed in this section. The study participants' age, gender, and educational attainment are included in this data.

## 10.1.1 Gender

**Table 1. Gender**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Female	16	80.0	80.0
Male	4	20.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

The gender distribution of the respondents who filled out the questionnaire shows that 20% of the respondents were male and 80% were female. This is consistent with findings from other studies (Allen, Jerrim & Sims (2020) that show that women make up the majority of primary school teachers.

## 10.1.2 Age of Respondents

**Table 2. Age**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
22-30 years	3	15.0	15.0
31-35 years	1	5.0	20.0
41-45 years	7	35.0	55.0
46 and older	9	45.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

The age distribution of the respondents indicates that 35% of the respondents were between the ages of 41 and 45, and 45% of respondents were older than 45. This suggests that eighty percent of the responders were older than forty. It follows that most responders had a great deal of teaching experience. The fact that choosing to become a teacher is typically done as one's first career decision rather than as a second or third supports this. Aside from the expected experience that comes with being older, the results of this study were consistent with those of the Agyapong, Obuobi-Donkor, Burbuck and Wei (2022), which indicated that approximately 77% of the teachers were older than 40.

## 10.1.3 Academic Qualifications

**Table 3. Highest Academic Qualification**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Grade 12	1	5.0	5.0
First degree	12	60.0	65.0
B.Ed Honours	5	25.0	90.0
Master's degree	1	5.0	95.0
Doctoral degree	1	5.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Table 3 shows that 25% of respondents held an Honours degree, while 60% held a first degree. Five percent of those surveyed had both a master's and a doctoral degree. This suggests that a resounding 95% of participants held a first degree or above. It is reasonable to assume that these credentials will help provide more efficient instruction. These results stood in stark contrast to those of the PIRLS 2016 by Howie, Combrinck, Tshele, Roux, McLeod Palane and Mokoena (2017), which showed that the majority of teachers did not meet the minimum requirements, having only completed Grade 12 as their highest qualification and that less than one-third of teachers had completed a Bachelor's degree.

#### 10.1.4 Teaching Experience

**Table 4. Experience as an Educator**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
0-5 years	8	40.0	40.0
6-10 years	1	5.0	45.0
11-15 years	1	5.0	50.0
16-2- years	3	15.0	65.0
21 or more years	7	35.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

According to Table 4, 15% of the respondents had between 16 and 20 years of teaching experience, while 35% had more than 20 years. According to the statistics, 55% had more than ten years of experience as teachers. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of respondents are familiar with the relevant difficulties encountered by educators when teaching English FAL.

#### 10.1.5 Teaching Experience in a Rural School

**Table 5. Teaching Experience in a Rural School**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
0-5 years	8	40.0	40.0
6-10 years	2	10.0	50.0
16-20 years	3	15.0	65.0
21 or more years	7	35.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Table 5 shows that over 20 years of experience teaching at a rural school was possessed by 35 percent of the respondents. Significantly, 40% had taught for no more than five years in a rural school. 15% of those surveyed had worked as teachers at a rural school for 16 to 20 years. This indicates that over 15 years of experience teaching in a rural school was possessed by half of the respondents. It is expected of such seasoned educators to have good tactics of dealing with reading difficulties that may be unique to rural schools.



## 10.1.6 Teacher-learner Ratio

**Table 6. Teacher-learner Ratio**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
1:60 and above	1	5.0	5.0
From 1:50 to 1:59	3	15.0	20.0
From 1:40 to 1:49	6	30.0	50.0
Below 1:40	10	50.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

According to Table 6, half of the respondents were from schools where the teacher-to-student ratio was below 1:40 per class. Nevertheless, thirty percent of the respondents reported that their school had a teacher-to-student ratio of between 1:40 and 1:49. According to this, 80 percent of the respondents came from schools where the teacher-to-student ratio was less than 1:60. Compared to what one would typically expect from rural schools, which are typically overcrowded, this is a far better picture.

Even though the majority of respondents' schools did not meet the Department of Education's national target of a maximum 35 students per teacher (Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008), there is optimism that the ratios that apply to most of the respondents' schools are appropriate for fostering an environment that is favourable to the effective teaching of English FAL reading. Nevertheless, it is challenging for low-achieving readers to receive help from their teachers in crowded classrooms.

*10.2 Teachers' Use of Various Strategies to Overcome Teaching Challenges in Reading*

Grade 4 English FAL teachers evaluated tactics for more successful reading instruction. The following tactics were rated: scheduling extra courses, particularly for students who have difficulty with various reading skills; attending to each student's unique reading demands; strengthening students' word-recitation skills; stressing the correspondence between a letter and its sound; using the native tongue of the students; making use of little resources; including parents of learners in their kids' reading; giving students time to read, encouraging them to read what they have written, and involving authorities where essential reading materials are hard to find.

## 10.2.1 Organising Extra Classes

**Table 7. Organising Extra Classes**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	0	0	0
Sometimes	7	35.0	35.0
Rarely	5	25.0	60.0
Never	8	40.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Table 7 shows that just 35 percent of the respondents occasionally scheduled extra reading classes for students who were having reading difficulties. Forty percent of the respondents never arranged extra classes for challenging students, compared to twenty-five percent who did so occasionally. This is concerning because students having reading difficulties are not getting extra help. This implies that the majority of respondents were not too concerned satisfied with students' reading performance.

#### 10.2.2 Learners' Individual Reading Needs

**Table 8. Learners' Individual Reading Needs**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	1	5.0	5.0
Sometimes	5	25.0	30.0
Rarely	7	35.0	65.0
Never	7	35.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Table 8 shows that whilst 25% of the respondents occasionally attended to learners' reading needs, 5% did so regularly. Depending on their reading needs, 35% of the respondents seldom or never gave students individualised attention, while another 35% never did. To meet the diverse requirements of their students, teachers require professional development (Knight & Wiseman, 2005).

#### 10.2.3 Learners' Ability to Recite Words

**Table 9. Learners' Ability to Recite Words**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	1	5.0	5.0
Sometimes	5	25.0	30.0
Rarely	10	50.0	80.0
Never	4	20.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Table 9 shows that a mere 5% of the respondents routinely used reinforcement techniques to enhance their learners' word recitation skills. While half of the respondents used such reinforcement infrequently, 25% of the respondents used it occasionally. Twenty percent of those surveyed never reinforced word recitation skills among learners.

## 10.2.4 Relationship Between a Letter and its Sound

**Table 10. Relationship Between a Letter and its Sound**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	0	0	0
Sometimes	4	20.0	20.0
Rarely	6	30.0	50.0
Never	10	50.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

According to Table 10, 50% of the respondents never emphasised the connection between the sound of a letter and its meaning when teaching English reading. Just 20% of the respondents occasionally utilised this tactic, while 30% of the respondents did it infrequently. Effective alphabet instruction is essential for teachers because students need to understand what each letter stands for (Kaye & Lose, 2019).

## 10.2.5 Learners' Home Language

**Table 11. Learners' Home Language**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	1	5.0	5.0
Often	0	0	0
Sometimes	4	20.0	25.0
Rarely	7	35.0	60.0
Never	8	40.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Table 11 shows that 20% of the respondents occasionally used learners' home language whilst only 5% routinely did so. Almost half of the respondents never used the learners' home language, while 30% used it infrequently. Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of code-switching, which utilises the learners' mother tongue to support EFAL acquisition (Shinga & Pillay, 2021). The fact that study participants were either unaware of this tactic or did not see its benefits raises serious concerns.

## 10.2.6 Improvising for Shortage of Resources

**Table 12. Improvising for Shortage of Resources**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	1	5.0	5.0
Sometimes	3	15.0	20.0

Rarely	10	50.0	70.0
Never	6	30.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Data on respondents' improvisation in response to resource scarcity is shown in Table 12. Merely 5% of participants stated that they frequently innovate due to resource scarcity. 50% of the respondents improvise infrequently, compared to 15% who did so occasionally. Thirty percent never make improvised for the shortage of resources. One obstacle preventing schools from realising their full academic potential is a lack of resources (Bingimlas, 2009). Teachers in rural schools should be able to improvise because of the widespread lack of resources. The notable low degree of improvisation in this study raises concerns and is likely to have a negative effect on student progress.

#### 10.2.7 Involving Learners' Parents

**Table 13. Involving Learners' Parents**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	1	5.0	5.0
Sometimes	2	10.0	15.0
Rarely	9	45.0	60.0
Never	8	40.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Table 13 shows that 5% of the respondents frequently got the learners' parents involved. While 45% of the respondents hardly ever involved the parents of the learners, 10% of the respondents did so occasionally. Significantly, forty percent of the respondents never involved learners' parents with their kids' reading. While this is concerning, the majority of parents in rural areas may lack literacy and are therefore unable to support their children. This is consistent with research by Comer (1984) which also suggests that the lack of a strong home-school relationship in this study may hurt students' reading abilities.

#### 10.2.8 Encouraging Learners to Read what they have Written

**Table 14. Encouraging Learners to Read what they have Written**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	1	5.0	5.0
Sometimes	2	10.0	15.0
Rarely	6	30.0	45.0
Never	11	55.0	100.0

Total	20	100.0	100.0
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Regarding Table 14, 5% of the respondents frequently urged students to read their writing. While 30% of respondents said they hardly ever encouraged students to read what they had written, 10% of respondents said they occasionally did so. Students are best able to read what they have composed, whether orally or in writing, according to the majority of respondents (55%) who said they had never encouraged students to read what they have written.

#### 10.2.9 Giving Learners Time for Reading

**Table 15. Giving Learners Time for Reading**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	13	65.0	65.0
Sometimes	1	5.0	70.0
Rarely	6	30.0	100.0
Never	0	0	0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

While 5% of the respondents only occasionally offered students time to read, 65% did it frequently. Significantly, thirty percent of the respondents hardly ever gave students reading time. This is consistent with the results of PIRLS 2016, which revealed that South African teachers devote only 10% of teaching hours to reading, while teachers in the Russian Federation, the PIRLS top-performing nation, devote 41%. In this case, practice indeed makes perfect. Given these findings, it is not surprising that South African students, on average, have underdeveloped reading skills, as shown by Pretorius and Spaul (2016).

#### 10.2.10 Involving Authorities

**Table 16. Involving Authorities**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Always	0	0	0
Often	3	15.0	15.0
Sometimes	1	5.0	20.0
Rarely	4	20.0	40.0
Never	12	60.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

When required reading materials are hard difficult to find, 15% of the respondents contact authorities frequently, and 5% do so occasionally. A considerable 60% of the respondents had never contacted

authorities when necessary reading resources became scarce, compared to 20% who said they did so infrequently.

## 11. Discussion

The results indicate that students who had difficulties in class were not offered extra classes by 40% of the respondents. This is concerning, especially because the majority of the respondents have extensive teaching experience and are well-qualified. Some likely explanations for teachers' passive attitude include the fact that academic credentials and experience do not always translate into a passion for the teaching profession and that extra classes require going above and beyond and making many sacrifices. Furthermore, the results show that many respondents (35%) did not pay attention to the unique reading demands of their students. By teaching reading to the entire class rather than paying close attention to individual students, teachers in rural schools may feel comfortable in their approach since there is a cultural expectation that no student will ever perform in a way that is considered "extraordinary."

It was also found that the majority of the respondents (50%) never reinforced word recitation skills in learners. The importance of both positive and negative reinforcement cannot be overstated, even when it comes to the English FAL reading. A student is motivated to perform better when they receive praise or a little token from the teacher for correctly reciting a passage. The opposite is also true for students who do not receive praise or tokens for accurately repeating words.

The link between the sound of a letter and its pronunciation was either infrequently or never stressed by 50% of the respondents. It is possible that the majority of the respondents may not have had phonemic awareness, which may not be surprising (Ryder, Tunmer & Greaney, 2008). One could argue that the core of any reading instruction should be the letters and their sounds (Clayton, West, Sears, Hulme, & Lervåg, 2020). Ignoring or not knowing about such a foundation could be detrimental to students' learning efforts.

When teaching English FAL reading, 40% of respondents said they used the learners' mother tongue either infrequently or never. Since Grade 4 learners solely used their mother tongue for the first three grades, anything said in that language makes more sense than it might in an additional language that has just been recently introduced. Because they will not be able to understand what is being taught, most learners who are taught to read in English FAL without any use of their mother tongue are likely to become disinterested.

A significant 50% of the participants in this survey reported that they were unable to improvise because they lacked the necessary resources. When computers or tablets are regularly donated to schools in cities, teachers in rural areas may get resentful. This should not deter them from fulfilling their obligation to enable successful learning, which includes improvising when resources are limited or just making the most of what they already have.

Parents of learners were either infrequently or never active in their children's reading, according to 40% of the respondents. Parental support is known to improve learners' capacity for learning. Parents in

rural areas typically do not provide this kind of help because the majority of them are illiterate.

The majority of the responders (55%) either infrequently or never encouraged students to read their writing. What students write is what they would view as "products of their own making" and they are probably going to take pride and interest in it. It would be natural for learners to be interested in reading such work. As the saying goes, "practice makes perfect," teachers should give their students more time to read.

Of those surveyed, 60% never involved authorities when there are insufficient reading materials. Teachers should notify the authorities of the shortage of necessary resources in addition to coming up with creative solutions when there are not enough resources available. Educators may eventually give up if they realise that these authorities do not seem to be offering any assistance. Teachers should always keep in mind that the school governing body (SGB) supports the principal-led school management team in finding answers to the problems facing the school by acting as a complementary structure. Therefore, the SGB should be made aware of these limited resources.

## 12. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the discussion of the study results, the following conclusions were drawn from which recommendations were made:

- The majority of teachers in rural schools are reluctant to use the learners' home language, which would contribute to learners' reading difficulties in English FAL. It is recommended that teachers be trained about the effective use of the learners' mother tongue in assisting them learning the additional language.
- Most teachers in rural schools are not used to scheduling extra classes for struggling readers or attending to each student's unique reading needs. It is recommended that a special programme be established to assist struggling learners. Teachers should be able to use learners' peers to assist struggling learners.
- Most teachers in rural schools do not emphasise the connection between the sound of the letter and its meaning, nor do they reward students for their ability to do so. It is recommended that teachers be equipped with relevant reading approaches that enhance learners' reading abilities. The bottom-up approach to reading should be incorporated in the teaching of reading for Grade 4 learners.
- The majority of teachers in rural schools do not involve parents, which would result in the majority of students from rural schools lacking that support from home as they learn to read in English FAL. It is recommended that teachers establish a relationship with learners' parents so that if parents are illiterate, literate learners' siblings be considered as support structures for learners' reading lessons.
- Most of the teachers in rural schools do not improvise for shortages of resources, and the authorities are usually not notified of such shortages. It is recommended that teachers be equipped with school policies about how to respond to shortages of resources.

- Students are not given enough time to read, and even when they do, they are not encouraged to read what they have written. It is therefore recommended that teachers receive in-service training that will remind them of the importance of reading for the learners as it builds their confidence and is the first step towards comprehension.

### 13. Conclusion

The study investigated the challenges that teachers face when teaching reading to Grade 4 EFAL learners of Dzindi Circuit, Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study utilised a questionnaire to collect data from teachers. The results of the survey confirmed a number of challenges that negatively affect reading instruction of Grade 4 EFAL.

The study concluded that teachers do not have extra assistance given to learners who struggle with reading. In cases where there are not enough resources, teachers on the whole do not improvise or alert authorities. Teachers also do not seem to utilise learners' mother tongue even though learners had just been introduced to EFAL as a medium of instruction.

This suggests that there is a need for in-service training about effective methods of teaching reading to Grade 4 learners. Teachers need to have a sense of urgency about the importance of learners' reading abilities. Research already shows that primary school learners in South Africa do not performance to the level of their peers in other countries. This therefore calls for drastic steps to be taken to remedy the situation.

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