

The teacher's role in teaching reading comprehension skills to Grade 9 English Home Language learners



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Background: The high number of poor-performing learners in reading comprehension in South African schools is a concerning factor that calls for studies to mitigate this problem. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) of 2021 indicates that about 81% of South African Grade 4 learners who participated, failed to reach the required benchmark in the test. Research indicates that teachers are not conversant with theory and explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies.

Objectives: This study aimed to investigate the role played by teachers in developing Grade 9 learners' reading comprehension skills in English Home Language and establishing which reading comprehension skills and strategies are taught to learners.

Method: This study used a qualitative approach. Four data sets were utilised to collect data including a document analysis, a questionnaire for learners, interviews with teachers of English and lesson observations.

Results: The findings of the study show that there is little guidance on how to teach reading comprehension skills. It also emerged that instead of teaching reading comprehension skills, teachers merely 'test' learners' answering skills.

Conclusion: This study suggests that there is a need for re-training and assisting teachers in explicitly teaching reading comprehension skills to learners. Learners may benefit from the enhanced expertise of teachers and become more proficient in reading comprehension.

Contribution: The study has provided invaluable insights into the current teaching practice of comprehension skills with actionable insights for teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers to support learners' academic success and bridge the gap between praxis and theory.

Keywords: reading comprehension; home language; social constructivism; CAPS; A-RTP; senior phase.

Introduction

Reading comprehension is an integral part of learning. To acquire information and knowledge in written form, one must be able to read with understanding. The inability to read with comprehension can result in failure to achieve success in education. According to Bharuthram (2012:294) 'reading is the essence of all education'. This implies that anyone who wants to succeed in the field of education must be able to read with understanding to extract information from written texts. Cekiso (2017) concurs with Bharuthram (2012) that academic achievement hinges on learners' ability to read with comprehension.

It is imperative that learners are taught reading comprehension skills explicitly (Elston, Tiba & Condy 2022). According to Elston et al. (2022), 'explicit teaching is the process of teaching strategies, skills and rules individually and in a logical sequence in order to empower and equip the learner'. In teaching the strategies explicitly, there is active communication and interaction between the teacher and the learner, allowing instructional flexibility (Archer & Hughes 2011). It can be argued that explicit teaching of reading skills is critical as it allows teacher and learner interaction which is beneficial to the learner as the learner is able to ask for guidance.

The high number of poor-performing learners in reading comprehension in South African schools is a concerning factor that calls for more studies to mitigate this problem. Comprehension is considered a critical part of the reading process (Klapwijk 2015). Learners struggle with reading

comprehension and teachers continue to neglect this in their teaching (Klapwijk 2015). Klapwijk's (2015) observation calls for more studies to help learners read with comprehension and for language teachers to regard teaching reading comprehension skills as a necessity. In his State of the Nation Address (SONA) of June 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa acknowledged the dire need for teaching and learning of reading comprehension in South Africa. The problem of reading comprehension starts in the early years of schooling as indicated by the results of studies such as the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) where 81% of Grade 4 learners failed to attain the basic benchmarks for reading comprehension (Mullis & Martin 2021). The results of the PIRLS indicate a dire need for the reading comprehension problem to be addressed as South Africa came last out of the 43 countries that participated (Howie et al. 2012).

This study was conducted to investigate and establish the role played by teachers in teaching reading comprehension skills to Grade 9 English Home Language learners and to explore the learners' experiences in the teaching and learning of reading comprehension skills. Learners must be equipped with reading comprehension skills to enable them to apply different strategies in their reading comprehension. Comprehension remains a critical part of the reading process. According to Rutzler (2020):

[R]eading comprehension is crucial for basic survival in the education system and the requirement to comprehend what you read is omnipresent in every student's life from Math class to History. (p. 2)

This assertion implies that reading with understanding is essential for learners to be able to do well in various subjects in the curriculum. It is important for learners to know the strategies they need to employ when they encounter different texts to be able to read with understanding.

Tiba (2023) posits that the teacher's role is important in making learners aware of reading comprehension strategies and intentionally teaching these strategies to learners so that they become competent readers. This implies that teachers have a significant role to play in learners' acquisition of reading comprehension skills and in the selection of appropriate materials to be used (Alyousef 2006). Integrating reading strategies into teaching, reading comprehension is critical to equip learners with an ability to use strategies such as predicting, summarising, and visualising to process information and actively engage texts. Bharuthram (2012:204) posits that 'reading is the essence of all formal education'. This implies that the inability to comprehend when one reads, hampers one's progress in education.

The main research question in this study is: What is the role of the teacher in developing comprehension skills in Grade 9 English Home Language learning?

The sub-questions to be considered are:

- What reading comprehension skills do the teachers teach to Grade 9 English Home Language learners?
- What comprehension strategies do the teachers implement when teaching Grade 9 English Home Language?
- What teaching strategies do teachers implement when teaching Grade 9 English Home Language comprehension skills?
- How do the Grade 9 English Home Language learners experience the teaching of reading comprehension skills?

Literature review

Literature abounds with evidence, indicating that learners in general struggle with reading comprehension (Beck & Condry 2017; Howie et al. 2012; Pretorius 2002). The PIRLS 2021 states that approximately 81% of Grade 4 South African participants failed to reach basic benchmarks of reading comprehension. This may be an indication that difficulty with reading is encountered by learners at an early stage in primary school before moving to high school. The struggle to read with comprehension affects learners' academic performance negatively. According to Pretorius (2002), the high failure rate in Grade 12 could be because of poor reading comprehension. This could be because the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and the learners' home language are different. According to Klapwijk (2015), there is a perception by teachers that comprehension is not part of the reading process. Another obstacle to effective teaching of reading comprehension is that teachers do not undergo adequate training on how to teach reading comprehension. There is a lack of conviction among teachers about the effect of strategy instruction. Klapwijk (2015:1) further comments that 'teachers continue to neglect it [comprehension] in their teaching'. This could be another reason why learners have difficulty with reading comprehension.

The National Reading Panel (2000) emphasises the importance of teaching reading skills explicitly to learners. The pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading phases were not of significance in the responses given by teachers in their approach to teaching reading comprehension. Pre-reading strategies help learners to think about what they are going to read (Khayali 2014:63). The during-reading phase activities clarify to learners the work they will be reading, while the post-reading phase is when learners can reflect on what they will have learnt, and practise answering what they would have read (Khayali 2014:65).

Learners continue to read without understanding, despite a myriad of studies that have been carried out to understand how teachers teach reading comprehension skills (Beck & Condry 2017). Block and Duffy (2008), Bucuvalas (2002), Graves, Juel and Graves (1988), Paris and Hamilton (2009) and Williams (2008) have written extensively on teaching and learning of reading comprehension.

Furthermore, Condry (2023) posits that:

[t]eachers are ill prepared to understand how to teach reading for meaning and the foundational reading skills, and do not receive adequate input in literacy instruction during their undergraduate studies. (p. 2)

The above assertion about teachers implies that teachers are not adequately equipped to teach reading comprehension as expected.

Reading comprehension in the Senior Phase

Block and Duffy (2008:29) define comprehension as a 'fluid process of predicting, monitoring and constructing meaning from the text'. Reading is a complex and multifaceted activity. It is argued by Goodman and Goodman (2009:92) that the 'study of reading is the study of reading comprehension'. Most literature regarding teaching of reading comprehension skills focuses on primary schools. This is supported by Pretorius (2002:172) who states that '[a]lthough research on reading levels at secondary school is sparser, the findings are equally dismal.'

Klapwijk (2015:3) points out that at Intermediate Phase and Senior Phase (Grades 4–9), the lack of comprehension skills among learners makes learning difficult both 'cognitively and physically'. The study suggests that comprehension instruction should be done in all classes across all subjects. This may help assist learners master these skills. Another study by Matjila and Pretorius (2004) established that Grade 8 learners struggled with reading. This finding could suggest that teaching reading comprehension skills must be emphasised at the Senior Phase.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) document is the main source to guide the teaching of reading comprehension in the Senior Phase. The document only lists the items to be taught but does not provide clearly defined methods of how teachers should teach reading comprehension. An example from the CAPS document is shown in Table 1.

There is a close relationship between reading and comprehension as the two cannot be detached from each other. According to Snow (2002:11), reading comprehension is a process that simultaneously extracts and constructs meaning through interaction and involvement with written language.

TABLE 1: Extract from the curriculum and assessment policy statement document.

Reading comprehension and reading strategies	Page 58
• Skimming and Scanning • Intensive reading • Visualisation • Inferring meaning and conclusions • Fact and opinion • Meaning of words	

Source: Department of Basic Education, 2023, *National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. Annual Teaching plans 2023–2024*, Government Printing Works, Cape Town, viewed 02 February 2024, from <https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/NationalCurriculumStatementsGradesR-12/2023ATPs.aspx>

Yurko and Protsenko (2020:106) define reading comprehension as 'the ability to process text, understand its meaning, and to integrate with what the reader already knows'. This definition is in line with what the Schema Theory says. According to Scott (2010), the Schema Theory in reading describes the process by which the reader's background knowledge combines with the information from a text to create understanding. In reading comprehension, three phases are identified which are pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading phases (AD-Heisat et al. 2009). Khaiyali (2014) concurs with AD-Heisat et al. (2009) that:

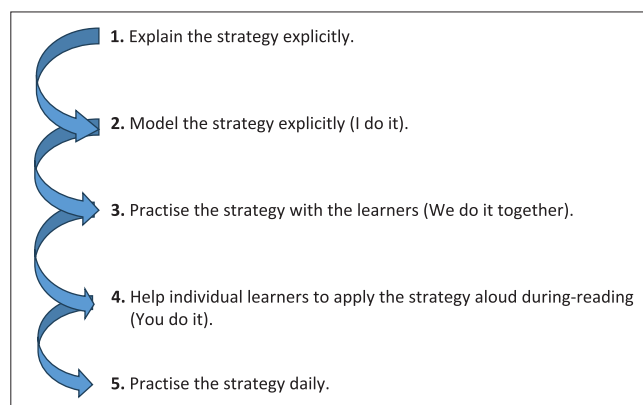
these three phases are important in assisting learning as they provide learners with opportunities to think about what they will be reading and be able to make predictions about the work. The three phases are important as they enhance reading comprehension and understanding through the activities that are done in each phase work. (p. 62)

The learning and teaching of reading comprehension

Pretorius and Murray (2019:187) advocate for five stages that must be followed in teaching reading comprehension. These are shown in Figure 1.

Stage 1 refers to the pre-reading activities where learners' prior knowledge is activated. Activating prior knowledge helps learners build a mental framework that focuses their attention and enables learners to engage with the text using what they already know (Pretorius & Murray 2019:188). In activating prior knowledge before reading, the teacher can ask learners to focus on pictures or the title of the text and discuss what they know about the topic. Stages 2, 3 and 4 refer to the during-reading phase where the teacher demonstrates and practises strategies with learners and helps individual learners. The fifth stage is when learners implement what they have learnt and assess what new knowledge they will have gained during the reading process.

The five stages can be fitted under the three phases proposed by the Schema Theory.



Source: Adapted from Pretorius, E. & Murray, S., 2019, *Teaching reading comprehension*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town

FIGURE 1: Five stages in the explicit teaching of reading comprehension.

The National Reading Panel (2000) posits that:

[t]he idea behind explicit instruction of text comprehension is that comprehension can be improved by teaching students specific cognitive strategies, or reason strategically when they encounter barriers to comprehension when reading. (p. 3)

According to Al-Issa (2006:62), the pre-reading phase increases learners' interest in the text read. This is the phase where the teacher explains and models the strategies which are stages 1 and 2 according to Pretorius and Murray (2019; Figure 1). Activation of prior knowledge happens in the pre-reading phase.

The during-reading phase includes practising the strategies with the learners and helping them apply them aloud during the reading. Learners at this stage can integrate their background knowledge with the new knowledge of the text and search for deeper meanings, using the 'Think aloud' strategy to compare their findings with other learners (Brown, Oram-Cardy & Johnson 2013). The during-reading phase provides learners with tools to answer questions.

According to AD-Heisat et al. (2009), the post-reading phase helps in deepening learners' comprehension of content read in combination with their prior knowledge. At this stage learners can summarise, and differentiate between summarising and retelling (Duke & Pearson 2009). This last phase is where learners work individually and apply the strategies daily in their reading. Learners can reflect on skills acquired and check if they are able to apply what they have learnt.

The teacher taught a summary to the learners. He started to explain the purpose of summarising and the steps that they were going to use in responding to the summary task. In stage 2, the teacher read with the learners and together identified the relevant quotations to formulate their points. In the final stage, which is phase 3, learners were asked to summarise quotations identified with the help of the teacher.

Teachers must be intentional in teaching reading comprehension strategies explicitly (Phala & Hugo 2022) and need to be skillful in how they approach the teaching of reading comprehension skills. They need to closely monitor the activities of the learners to ensure that they are implementing the strategies correctly as modelled. The Schema Theory and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; Vygotsky 1978) advocate for the explicit teaching of reading strategies. The explicit teaching of strategies is beneficial for learners as argued by Boakye (2015) and Guthrie et al. (2004). Learners have an opportunity to practise and apply what they will have been taught. Teachers can monitor the learners' progress during that time (Archer & Hughes 2011).

Klapwijk and Van der Walt (2017:27) state that learners struggle with reading comprehension, yet most language teachers neglect the explicit teaching of reading comprehension skills. Some of the issues that prevent the explicit teaching of

reading comprehension skills to learners are that preparation for teaching skills takes a lot of time. The other reason is that some classrooms are overcrowded, which makes individual attention almost impossible. In a study done by Klapwijk (2012), it was revealed that when teachers obtained knowledge of teaching comprehension skills explicitly, they changed their teaching methods to focus more on discussing reading strategies and techniques with their learners. Tiba (2023:3) concurs with the assertion and states that 'professional development training can develop teachers' knowledge to explicitly teach reading comprehension strategies'. It might be beneficial to remind even experienced teachers of the importance of teaching reading comprehension skills explicitly. Some teachers claim not to know how to teach reading comprehension skills explicitly and indicate they are not aware of any comprehension instructional frameworks for teaching (Liang & Dole 2006:742). This could imply that institutions where teachers are trained might not put enough emphasis on training teachers how to teach reading comprehension skills explicitly.

Theoretical framework

In this case study, the Schema Theory (Scott 2010), the Sociocultural Theory of Learning, and the ZPD (Vygotsky 1978) were utilised. The Schema Theory emphasises the importance of utilising background knowledge to understand current information from a text read. One's background knowledge combines with the current information from a text read to create understanding. According to Pretorius and Murray (2019):

[A]ctivating prior knowledge to build a mental framework helps learners to focus their attention, and it increases interest in what they are reading and helps them engage with the text. (p. 188)

Teachers can assist learners by selecting texts that are within the learners' experiences. This will help promote the activation of prior knowledge that they have and be able to interpret the current information and establish meaning. Learners are likely to do well in a reading comprehension passage if there is a familiarity with the topic of the text, since the understanding of a text depends on how much related schemas readers possess while reading (Al-Issa 2006:41). The more familiar the reader is with the topic, the greater the chances of understanding a text. The choice of texts is therefore critical in promoting reading comprehension.

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Learning emphasises the importance of social context: one cannot separate learning from its social context. There is interaction between the teacher and the learner during the learning process; the interaction happens within the ZPD. According to Leach (2015), teachers are the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) in the teaching and learning process. Teachers are more skilled than learners and so give guidance. The ZPD refers to 'the difference between what a learner can do unaided and what he can do when helped' (Rahardi 2011:25).

Chaiklin (2003) posits that:

[t]he common conception of the Zone of Proximal Development presupposes an interaction between a more competent person and a less competent person on a task, such that the less competent person becomes independently proficient at what was initially a jointly accomplished task. (p. 2)

Donald, Lazarus and Moolla (2015:79) concur with Chaiklin (2003) that the ZPD is the space where a child cannot perform a task independently but needs the guidance of a more knowledgeable person. The teacher as the MKO can then engage a learner in that critical space where there is potential for development. Mediation takes place in the ZPD.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of ZPD implies that knowledge is not something fixed but is constructed and passed through social interaction. Teachers play a critical role in the development of learners' reading comprehension skills. The central part of Figure 2 indicates where the learner is in relation to their achievement level. The second layer, labelled as ZPD, is where the learner is able to perform with the aid of the teacher or an MKO. Beyond that point is the zone yet not reached by the learner where the intervention of a teacher is needed.

The integration of the three theories, the Schema Theory, ZPD and the Sociocultural Theory of Learning, enhances the teaching of reading comprehension skills. The Schema Theory emphasises the use of prior knowledge to combine with current information to understand what the learner will be reading. Activation of relevant schemas is pivotal. For the tasks that a learner is unable to perform independently, the ZPD is used where the teacher takes the lead role in assisting the learner understand what they will be doing. Learning occurs through social interactions. The Sociocultural Theory of Learning promotes a collaborative environment where learners interact with the teacher and with other learners.

Research paradigm and approach

This study used an interpretive paradigm where meaning is socially constructed and formulated within contexts (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). The study is qualitative and was

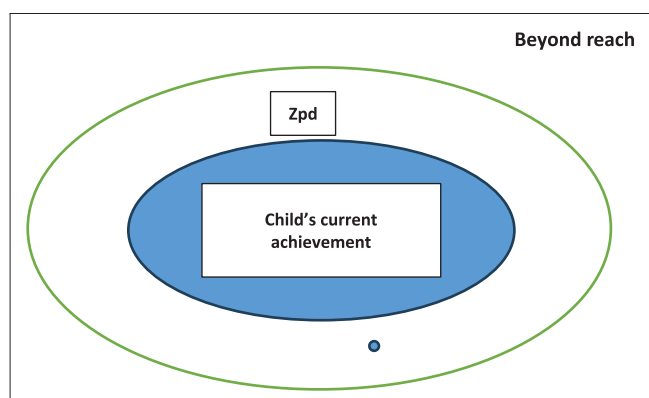
conducted in a natural classroom setting where learner-to-learner and teacher-to-learner interaction occurred. Four data collection methods were used. The study utilised document analysis of the Senior Phase CAPS document and the Revised Annual Teaching Plan (R-ATP). The second tool used was a questionnaire for learners, which they completed at home. The third method was interviews with teachers and the fourth was lesson observations.

The results of document analysis of the R-ATP and the CAPS document indicated a lack of detail in the steps of how to teach reading comprehension explicitly. On page 14 of the CAPS document, there is mere mention of the length of the passage to be read and nothing else and there is a list of strategies on page 58. This leaves teachers with no guidance of how to teach reading comprehension explicitly. A study carried out by De Lange, Winberg and Dippenaar (2020), focusing on the CAPS document for the Intermediate Phase, concluded that there is not adequate guidance in the document to help teachers improve in teaching reading comprehension skills to learners.

Participants

Three teacher participants from two different schools were involved in the study. Two of the three teachers were from the same school and the third participant was from the second school. Initially, six teachers had indicated that they would participate in the study but three decided not to participate. The three teachers taught English Home Language at Grade 9 level. The first reason for no longer participating was that they felt under pressure to cover content as the learners were only attending school fortnightly during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The teachers said that they would lose a lot of contact time if they participated in the study. The second reason was that they were uncomfortable being in contact with outsiders during the pandemic and would rather refrain from participating. This happened just before the commencement of the field study. The consent form indicated that they could withdraw at any time without having to give any reason. Only three teachers remained. The researcher had a meeting with the teachers to explain what the study entailed and to make them aware of their rights.

The plan had been to involve the entire Grade 9 streams in the two schools. All Grade 9 groups in both schools were invited to participate in the study. This was to provide a large pool of responses from which to draw themes. When two teachers withdrew from one school, only one class could participate. In the second school one teacher withdrew from participating, leaving two Grade 9 classes to participate. There were 32 learners in the first teacher's class and 35 learners in the second teacher's class from the same school. In the second school, there were 32 learners. A consent form was given to learners to take home for parents to indicate willingness to let their children participate. All the consent forms were in the affirmative. It was explained to learners that they could withdraw from the study if they felt



Source: Adapted from Vygotsky, L.S., 1978, *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA
ZPD, zone of proximal development.

FIGURE 2: Current achievement zone of children, Zone of Proximal Development, and zone out of range.

uncomfortable, without having to give a reason. Ninety-nine Grade 9 English Home Language learners participated in the study. The learners were given a questionnaire to complete, and 99 questionnaires were returned to the researcher after completion. Purposive sampling was used in this study. The researcher targeted Grade 9 learners learning English Home Language and Grade 9 English Home Languages teachers. All the participants had experience in the learning and teaching of reading comprehension skills.

None of the learners who participated in the study was a English home language speaker. English is their second or third language even though they study it at home language level. Most of the learners come from the Cape Flats. The two schools that participated are quintile five schools in the Metro Central Education District and charge school fees. Both schools have good infrastructure and are fully functional schools.

Data collection

The researcher used four methods for data collection. Firstly, two documents were used: this included an analysis of the CAPS and the R-ATP. This was important as the CAPS document is the main guiding document which informs teachers of what to teach. The R-ATP was also included as it streamlined content that was to be taught. Secondly, the learners completed questionnaires where they indicated their own experiences regarding the teaching of the reading comprehension skill. Thirdly, teachers completed semi-structured interview questions. This was done because there was fear of possible COVID-19 infections if close face-to-face interviews were conducted. Table 2 lists the questions asked in semi-structured interview questions.

Fourthly, lesson observations were done. It was important to see how the lessons were conducted. The researcher sat in classes as an observer and never interfered with the lessons. A prepared observation tool was utilised to tick off what the teacher did during the lesson.

TABLE 2: Semi-structured questions for teachers.

Questions for teachers.
1. How many years have you been teaching English Home Language?
2. How many years have you been teaching Grade 9?
3. How do you assess the learners' comprehension before you start teaching them comprehension?
4. How do you assess their comprehension after you have taught them how to understand a text or book?
5. Describe how you teach reading comprehension.
6. What specific strategies or techniques do you teach the learners to use to help them comprehend what they read?
7. Which aspects in teaching comprehension in English First language do you find challenging?
8. Do you find the CAPS document helpful with regard to comprehension instructions?
9. Do you in your lessons strictly adhere to the CAPS guidelines? Or how do you adapt or change it to fit your purpose for the learners' levels of comprehension?
10. In your opinion, what is the most effective way of teaching reading comprehension skills to English First Language learners?
11. In your opinion, what specific comprehension strategies or techniques are important and therefore must be taught to Grade 9 learners?
12. If you perhaps know about teaching pedagogies or theories, which of those specifically would you say that you apply in your teaching comprehension?

Source: Sibanda, M., 2023, 'The role of the teacher in developing reading comprehension skills in Grade 9 English Home language learners', Unpublished master's thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, viewed 03 March 2024, from <http://etd.cput.ac.za/handle/20.500.11838/3180>

CAPS, curriculum and assessment policy statement.

Data analysis

The data that were collected using various instruments were collated and put into several categories. This was done inductively as the researcher first collected the evidence and established patterns and made conclusions from data available. Codes were established by 'marking the segments of data with symbols, descriptive words or unique identifying names' (Maree 2016:116). In the process of coding, data that have a similar theme are grouped together and labelled. The researcher can then make conclusions from the data collected. The various responses obtained through questionnaires, interviews, lesson observations and information obtained from document analysis were categorised into themes. Emergent coding was used where meaning units are identified. This happens after some preliminary examination of data which is open coding (Maree 2016).

From the data collected and analysed, themes and patterns were identified of what the learners experienced in the teaching of reading comprehension and teachers who indicated how they taught reading comprehension skills. Triangulation was used in identifying and highlighting differences and similarities in the data collected to indicate similar or different themes from the different data collection tools. The data collected were analysed manually. The different methods of data collection reduced chances of bias. The data gathered was co-analysed by an independent researcher to ensure accuracy of results obtained. Participants transcripts were made available for verification of the accuracy of information.

Results and discussion

The objective of the study was to establish the role played by teachers in developing learners' reading comprehension skills. The study also set out to find out the learners' experiences on how teachers teach them reading comprehension skills.

Data set 1: Document analysis

The curriculum and assessment policy statement document

The data analysed from the CAPS document revealed that there is limited information that guides teachers on how to teach reading comprehension skills. The CAPS document lists skills that must be taught without giving teachers ways or strategies to teach these skills to learners. Teachers are left to decide for themselves how to teach the listed skills. There is no detail of where else teachers can find more information or guidelines regarding teaching of reading comprehension skills.

Table 3 shows the lists that are presented in the CAPS document without specifying how the teacher must teach these strategies. The information from the document does not assist in how to teach these strategies.

A study carried out by De Lange et al. (2020:1) indicated that 'CAPS does not provide adequate guidance for

improving reading comprehension'. The CAPS document assumes that teachers are conversant with strategies of teaching reading comprehension skills explicitly. It is important for both teachers and learners to have knowledge of reading strategies (Pretorius 2002). This is important because the reader can then choose an appropriate strategy for different texts.

The revised annual teaching plan

The R-ATP is a document that was introduced by the Department of Basic Education nationally as a recovery plan programme. The document is meant to give guidance to teachers on important aspects of the syllabus. It was introduced to mitigate the effects caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Like the CAPS document, the R-ATP does not provide detail of what should be done by teachers but lists the skills that must be taught. The document mentions the three phases in reading comprehension, namely pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading. The R-ATP lists skimming, scanning, intensive reading, summarising, and inference as skills that must be taught in Grade 9.

The document analysis pointed out that CAPS as the main guiding document offers little guidance on how to teach reading comprehension skills. The R-ATP is also sketchy and does not give comprehensive guidance on the teaching of reading comprehension skills.

Table 4 is an extract from the R-ATP. The R-ATP prescribes what must be covered but does not detail how the teacher must teach these listed activities. Each teacher must figure out how to teach reading comprehension strategies.

Data set 2: Questionnaires for learners

Lack of reading strategies

The 99 questionnaires that were issued to learners were all returned completed. There were 10 questions mainly focusing on the learners' experiences of the teaching of reading comprehension skills. Table 5 shows the questions for the learners.

The responses of the learners indicated that there was little teaching of reading comprehension skills in classes. It also emerged that instead of teaching reading comprehension skills, teachers tested learners' answering skills. It is likely that since the CAPS and R-ATP documents do not provide much

detail on how to teach these strategies, teachers find it difficult to teach the skills explicitly. Summarising is one skill that was taught by the three teachers. One other observation made was that learners were given very little opportunity to interact and share ideas. Learner-to-learner interaction may promote more discussion and sharing of ideas. Vygotsky's (1978) Theory of Sociocultural Learning emphasises the importance of social interaction as fundamental for cognitive development.

Data set 3: Interviews with teachers of English

Table 6 lists some questions that were answered by the teachers.

The four questions that the teachers responded to show a variance in the approach to teaching reading comprehension

TABLE 4: Extract from the Revised Annual Teaching Plan.

Section	Item and description in ATP	Page number
1.	Reading comprehension Reading process: • Pre-reading (introduce text) • During-reading (features of text) • Post-reading (answer questions, compare, contrast, evaluate) Reading Strategies: • Skimming, scanning, visualisation • Intensive reading • Making inference • Meaning of words • View point of writer • Fact and opinion • Implied meaning	4
2.	Reading Comprehension activities	6
3.	Reading Comprehension activities	11
4.	Reading Comprehension activities	16
5.	Reading Comprehension activities	20

Source: Department of Basic Education, 2023, *National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. Annual Teaching plans 2023–2024*, Government Printing Works, Cape Town, viewed 02 February 2024, from <https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/NationalCurriculumStatementsGradesR-12/2023ATPs.aspx>
ATP, annual teaching plan.

TABLE 5: Questions from the questionnaire presented to learners.

1.	What language do you speak at home?
2.	What language do you use in class to talk to your friends in the English class?
3.	What language do you speak to your friends during breaks?
4.	How old were you when you started to speak in English at any place?
5.	Does your English teacher speak only English in class or does he/she use more than one language in the class?
6.	Can you read your English prescribed books?
7.	Do you understand what you read?
8.	Do you read any English books other than your prescribed books?
9.	Can you tell how your teacher teaches you in class to understand what you read?
10.	How do you know that you understand what you read?

TABLE 3: Extracts from the senior phase curriculum and assessment policy statement.

Extracts from CAPS document	Page number
Reading comprehension or intensive reading texts 250-300 words	17
Reading comprehension: • For close and critical reading of the text (reading comprehension). • To understand the text comprehensively - text features - titles, illustrations, graphs, charts, diagrams, headings, subheadings, numbering, captions, headlines, format, e.g. newspaper columns, etc. • To demonstrate independent reading (reading widely for pleasure, information and learning). • Critical language awareness (being aware of the denotation and connotation of words and that it carries hidden meanings and messages, e.g. stereotypes, the speaker's prejudices and intentions).	28
Reading comprehension or intensive reading texts 450-500 words	34

Source: Department of Basic Education, 2023, *National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. Annual Teaching plans 2023–2024*, Government Printing Works, Cape Town, viewed 02 February 2024, from <https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/NationalCurriculumStatementsGradesR-12/2023ATPs.aspx>
CAPS, curriculum and assessment policy statement.

skills and the understanding of which skills are suitable to be taught at Grade 9 Home Language level. Each teacher had their own unique approach in teaching reading comprehension skills (Table 1). The different approaches could be a result of the CAPS document as a guiding document that does not state what steps are to be taken by teachers in teaching specific skills. The three teachers' responses to question 1 show that they do not consider activating prior knowledge as an important aspect in teaching of reading comprehension skills. AD-Heisat et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of pre-reading activities to situate the reading comprehension and activate learners' prior knowledge.

The second teacher indicated that selection of texts within learners' experiences played a pivotal role in their reading comprehension as they could relate to the material they would be reading. According to Scott (2010:1), in the Schema Theory, activation of prior knowledge is important as the knowledge that one possesses combines with the new knowledge and enables the reader to understand what they are reading. The lack of use of this strategy could be as a result of the CAPS document not specifying how to teach these skills, leaving it open for teachers to use methods that they perceive suitable for the purpose.

It also emerged that instead of teaching reading comprehension skills, teachers assess learners' answering skills. The responses of Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 to question 4 regarding what they consider the most effective way of teaching reading comprehension skills is, indicate that learners must respond to questions in writing. Teacher 3

indicated that learners' ability to summarise what they read was a sign of a successful teaching comprehension skills lesson. The emphasis on the answers by the teachers was not on learners' ability to use the skills taught in reading comprehension but their ability to respond to questions.

Lessons that started off as lessons to teach reading comprehension skills ended up as comprehension lessons where learners were tested in answering comprehension questions. The findings point to the fact that teachers need re-training and assistance in how to teach reading comprehension to learners explicitly.

Data set 4: Observation of teachers

The researcher observed two different lessons per teacher which resulted in six lessons observed in total for the three teacher participants. Each teacher had their own way or approach to the teaching of reading comprehension. The visits were scheduled to coincide with days when a reading comprehension was taught. It is possible that the way the lessons were delivered is a general indication of how teaching of reading comprehension is done in the various classes. The teachers did not tell the learners from the outset which comprehension skills they were going to teach. Pretorius and Murray (2019:187) state that step one in teaching reading comprehension strategies should be to 'explain the strategy explicitly'. This helps learners focus on the strategy as they will know why they are learning that strategy. This crucial step was lacking in the teaching of reading comprehension skills.

TABLE 6: Questions answered by the teachers.

Question	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3
1 Describe how you teach reading comprehension	'I always encourage my learners to read the question first, this allows them to understand what information they require from the text, but also, by reading the questions they would partially gauge an understanding of the text. I emphasise highlighting "key words" in both questions and text. As each question and text always has a main idea. I encourage them to highlight what they believe is the main idea or point, so when answering a question or reading a text they can retain the important sections. Furthermore, I encourage using highlighters as may be an approach that assists visual learners but also not to waste time [if there is a time limit]'.	'I will use two comprehensions sources. The first is used as a lesson whereby we do the activity together as a class. While doing so, I provide a list of verbal questions that may extend or build onto the questions already on the activity or worksheet. They focus on the various aspects of language comprehension. Learners read primarily and I assist with words that they may not understand. If they do not understand a word, I task them to look it up or provide them with the meaning; they make annotations. They answer the questions that I read out or formulate, and we discuss the answer as a whole. Lastly, they will practice the same method of answering questions that we practised in order to complete the second comprehension activity in class [if there is time] or at home'.	'At GET level, I will go through an article with learners and explain to them key factors'.
2 What specific strategies or techniques do you teach the learners to use to help them comprehend what they read?	'Highlighting main ideas is one of my most used techniques I use. In certain cases, we do skimming and scanning as well'.	'Scaffolding knowledge especially language. Focusing on antonyms, synonyms, connotations, and denotations. I find it useful to relate content to their lives. I encourage them to do most of the reading'.	'Repetition is a good tool to remind learners what key factors they need to look for when reading'.
3 In your opinion, what is the most effective way of teaching reading comprehension skills to English Home Language learners?	'Highlighting main ideas-questions and text. Checking the mark allocation to understand your required writing length or points. Understanding the "who, what, when, where, why and how" of the text where applicable. Reading questions, highlight main ideas. Read through text again with highlighted points and answer questions'.	'It is important to make content more relatable to learners. For example, choose texts that talk about things they know, their communities, or things that interest them. If there is a connection and desire to learn, it becomes easier. It also helps demonstrate how to answer questions. Barret's Taxonomy proves a useful tool'.	'It's always effective to ensure that learners are able to summarise what they have read as this will determine if learners understand'.
4 In your opinion, what specific comprehension strategies or techniques are important and therefore must be taught to Grade 9 learners?	'I believe all the points I mentioned above are of importance and have been effective in my teaching practice thus far'.	'Predicting, visualising, discussions, summarising, close reading. I also use Barret's Taxonomy'.	'Learners do not understand the meaning of certain words in a sentence, therefore it is important to teach learners to identify the meaning of surrounding words as it could help with their comprehension'.

Source: Sibanda, M., 2023, 'The role of the teacher in developing reading comprehension skills in Grade 9 English Home language learners', Unpublished master's thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, viewed 03 March 2024, from <http://etd.cput.ac.za/handle/20.500.11838/3180>

During the lesson observations, only Teacher 2 had minimal interaction with learners. The teacher tried to help learners understand concepts of what they were reading. This is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD where the teacher assists learners to do an exercise and then slowly retreats. One other method that teachers used in introducing their lesson was a recap of the previous lesson. The teachers then linked what the learners already knew with the new work they were introducing. Skimming, scanning, inference, and summarising were taught across the classes implicitly. The teachers did not tell the learners that they were going to teach the learners skimming, scanning, or inference or explain to the learners the reasons why they were carrying out the specific activities. If learners are made conscious of why they are doing specific activities, then there is purpose in what they do.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate and establish the role played by teachers in the teaching of reading comprehension skills to Grade 9 English Home Language learners. It was also to establish the learners' experience of the teaching and learning of reading comprehension skills. Data from the four instruments that were used established that there is a general lack of explicit teaching of reading comprehension skills to learners. Pre-reading activities such as predicting, activating of prior knowledge and explaining to learners the purpose of the activities is a necessity especially in South African schools where most learners come from print-poor environments (Klapwijk 2015). Even though the teachers aimed at teaching reading comprehension skills to learners, those lessons ended up as lessons assessing the learners' abilities to respond to comprehension questions instead of equipping them with strategies to develop reading comprehension skills. There is a clear gap between theory and practice which needs to be narrowed to help learners with reading comprehension skills. The fact that some teachers do not utilise pre-reading activities and do not explicitly tell learners why they are doing certain activities may contribute to hindering learners from meaningfully engaging in the reading comprehension strategies. Each teacher taught in a way that they thought benefitted their learners. Studies by Krugel and Fourie (2014:1) concluded that there is a general lack of basic language skills among most South African teachers hindering them from being effective language teachers.

Most of the learners indicated that they were unaware of reading comprehension strategies, which point to the lack of practical knowledge on the part of the teachers. The results showed that teachers approach the teaching of reading comprehension from different angles. Each teacher used a method that they felt suited their learners, as there is no provision in the CAPS document of what the teachers ought to do when teaching reading comprehension skills. The document analysis pointed out the lack of detail in the way in which the teachers should teach the skills. This is pointed out in the study by De Lange et al. (2020:5) that 'minimal attention is given to teaching of comprehension or its assessment, in the CAPS document itself'.

Muzammil and Suhono (2019), and Cekiso (2017), cited in Tiba (2023:2), state that 'teachers have the responsibility to teach learners how to apply the knowledge to comprehend any text', which according to this study does not happen. The role of the teacher is to explain the strategies explicitly, model the strategies to learners, practise with learners, and help learners to apply the strategies aloud during-reading and leave the learners to practise what they were taught (Pretorius & Murray 2019).

The results of the study cannot be generalised as it involved a small number of teachers. Only three teachers and 99 learners participated in the study. Even though the study was on a small scale, it still identified the skills that teachers emphasise in their classrooms, how they teach reading comprehension skills and learners' experiences of teaching reading comprehension skills. By exploring the teacher's role in developing learners' comprehension skills, research can provide actionable insights for teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers to support learners' academic success. It was evident that testing comprehension answering is mistaken for teaching comprehension skills. It is recommended that teachers are made aware of the importance of teaching reading skills explicitly and that more guidance be given to them, either during their training or even through workshops.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

M.S. was responsible for the research on the ground and for writing the original draft. It was also the responsibility of M.S. to find appropriate sources for the research. H.D. was the supervisor of the research project and assisted with conceptualisation, reviewing and editing the manuscript in addition to the supervision of the entire project. A.S. was the co-supervisor who was also responsible for the conceptualisation, reviewing and editing and supervising the study.

Ethical considerations

The researcher was granted permission by the Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology to conduct the research (No. EFEC 1-8/2020). The researcher kept to the strict code of ethics in conducting the research. All the participants in the study signed informed consent forms indicating that they were willingly taking part in the study and that they understood they were free to withdraw anytime

from participating. The identity of the participants remained anonymous. The schools were simply referred to as School 1 and School 2 to conceal their identity.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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