

Examining the Impact of Fictional Stories on Reading Comprehension: Successes and Insights

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension challenges are prevalent worldwide and continue to deter the goals set by various national curricula. This is particularly clear in South Africa's Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which emphasizes essential competencies such as literacy and numeracy. Above all, CAPS underscores skills, attitudes, and knowledge as the fundamental goals needed to produce independent citizens. To promote the acquisition of these competencies, reading strategies like reading aloud and paired reading are commonly implemented. However, despite these efforts, reading comprehension in the English First Additional Language (EFAL) at the intermediate phase remains an important challenge to achieving curriculum outcomes. This study aims to examine how the use of fictional stories can enhance EFAL reading comprehension. The study employed a participatory action research approach using qualitative method, with structured interviews generating the results. Additionally, 13 participants from a district in the Free State were purposively sampled. Human values such as forgiveness, sympathy, and empathy, along with reading engagement, were identified as core aspects attributed to fictional stories. Fictional stories enhance reading comprehension as readers not only develop critical thinking skills but also benefit from values like compassion, empathy, and humility conveyed through characterizations. The study findings aim to affect policy frameworks and strategies aimed at enhancing reading comprehension in intermediate schools.

KEYWORDS

Fictional stories; EFAL; reading comprehension; CAPS and characterizations.

BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION

The International Reading Literacy Study Report (2016 & 2021) placed South Africa at the bottom of the list globally in terms of reading skills, showing that Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning. In other words, reading comprehension continues to pose challenges in the intermediate phase. Hence, rigorous strategies such as independent reading and reading aloud (DBE, 2007), implemented to improve reading comprehension, have faced impediments, including disruptions caused by COVID-19 (USAID, 2021). These disruptions pose a risk to the objectives of fluency and reading literacy as outlined in the National Development Plan's (NDP) vision for 2030 (NDP, 2030). Therefore, the severity of these risks requires an inquiry into the effectiveness of existing reading strategies in the intermediate phase.

Similarly, reading comprehension challenges are also observed in Turkey (Basaran & Cabaroglu, 2014), where reading skills have been examined to identify the causes of poor comprehension. In contrast, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (PISA, 2023), ranks Japan fifth in problem-solving skills. This prompts reflection on the strategies Japan uses to equip learners with essential social skills. It suggests that literacy and numeracy strategies and resources are prioritized, although literacy experienced a slight drop from 86% between 2018 and 2021 (PISA, 2023). Meanwhile, mathematics performance remained steady at 92% during the same period. Similarly, 25% of learners in countries like Brazil and Mexico scored below the OECD average, with reading scores dropping by 3% and 5%, respectively. In lower-grade government schools in Kenya, learners can read only two words per minute, far below the national benchmark for grade-level reading assessment (USAID, 2021). Unsurprisingly, South Africa faces similar challenges, with 81% of Grade 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners unable to read for meaning (PIRLS, 2021). The disparities in reading proficiency between North American, South American, Asian, and African countries highlight a global phenomenon that continues to challenge existing reading strategies. This highlights the need for alternative approaches to reinforce current strategies and improve reading comprehension.

Moloi and Adegiori (2023) claimed that using fictional stories as a learning strategy improves the reading comprehension of first-year university students. Therefore, despite the use of independent reading and reading aloud as strategies in South Africa's Department of Basic Education's primary school reading program (DBE, 2011), fictional stories posit an alternative approach. This study aims to examine the insights and successes of using fictional stories to cultivate reading comprehension for EFAL intermediate-phase learners. Overall, reading is the ability to engage with a text to discern and interpret its meaning (Sha et al., 2022). This suggests that when a learner can read and explain the text in their own words, they have achieved reading comprehension. Evidently, the aforementioned accounts paint a bleak picture, as global statistics reflect a persistent challenge that undermines efforts, mechanisms, and strategies to improve reading skills.

Similarly, reading comprehension is the ability to extract meaning from a text, explain it, and apply that meaning to real-life situations, demonstrating true understanding (Levesque et al., 2021). Meanwhile, fictional stories (FC hereafter) are narrative texts containing imaginative or non-factual elements designed to challenge the reader's critical thinking (Moloi & Adegoriol, 2023). As a result, reading comprehension involves deducing implied meanings and applying them to sociocultural contexts to bring about a tangible understanding. In this way, fictional stories have the potential to equip learners with reading comprehension skills that are applicable to social contexts and help establish real-world understanding. Notably, this study aims to examine the insights of using fictional stories in the EFAL intermediate phase to enhance reading comprehension. To achieve this, the study proposes the research question: How can fictional stories impact EFAL intermediate learners' reading abilities to improve reading comprehension? This question is addressed through the objective of a) examining the successes of using fictional stories in Grade 7 as a reading strategy to enhance reading comprehension (RC hereafter). Consequently, the research is conducted under the guidance of this research question and objective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the literature review that underpins this paper and provides the rationale for undertaking the study, with the aim of improving reading comprehension and addressing the challenges of reading in the intermediate phase. This section aims to examine the values and empathy developed through reading fictional stories, which have a direct impact on both cognitive and affective domains.

Production of human values

The purpose of reading is to gain knowledge and become informed, which, in turn, demonstrates that an individual is learned across various aspects of life. Therefore, reading should be accompanied by the acquisition of certain skills and behavioral changes as evidence that the reader has indeed become knowledgeable. Marjokorpi (2023) argued that human values must be aligned or altered as an indication of this knowledge acquisition. This view is supported by Masrai (2016) and Russel et al. (2015), who noted that values reinforce and highlight intelligence, suggesting that the completion of any informational text should lead to education. Furthermore, this education should be demonstrated through the pursuit of certain goals. This suggests that reading fiction can instill and nurture values that are embraced and followed by the majority of a community. Regardless of the story's subject or focus, fiction reflects the culture and society from which it originates (DeKeyser, 2015, 2017).

Therefore, those who conform to these values are expected to adopt or internalize the values portrayed in the stories they read. However, the definition of values oscillates between "good behavior" and "bad behavior" (Li & Zhang, 2020), implying that bad behavior shows a lack of balanced values, while good behavior reflects balanced values. These behavioral patterns can be learned or unlearned through fictional stories (FS), where bad behavior is discarded, and

good behavior is embraced. Additionally, human values can be modeled or imitated from certain fictional characters. For instance, a reader who reads about a farmer character who loves plants and understands their importance to human capital and the ecosystem may adopt those values and apply them in their own life. This would demonstrate that the reader has achieved a level of comprehension, as comprehension is necessary to translate what one has read into social practice. Conversely, when comprehension is not achieved, this is reflected in the failure to implement the human values presented in the story into real-life practice.

Fictions influence empathy

Human beings are naturally meticulous and inquisitive, often exploring various facets of life to experience the consequences that will either shape or challenge them. However, this curiosity does not prevent people from being empathetic and sympathetic toward others, shaped by personal experiences and hindsight (Kozar, 2016). That said, not every reader of fiction will develop empathy, as there is not always a direct causal relationship between empathy and reading fiction (Argo et al., 2008). The debated issue is whether empathetic individuals enjoy reading fiction more than those who are less empathetic. Argo et al. (2008) suggest that those who find enjoyment in fiction are often empathetic. However, there is limited research confirming that empathetic readers tend to enjoy fiction more. Nonetheless, the core idea remains that fiction has the potential to cultivate empathy in its readers, ultimately enhancing their enjoyment of the reading experience. Lantolf et al. (2015) noted that for a reciprocal relationship between empathy and fiction to exist, there must be emotional engagement with the story. In other words, the reader must be emotionally immersed in the narrative, becoming captivated or deeply involved in the text. This emotional involvement improves the reader's skills, allowing them to experience the story and ultimately achieve reading comprehension (RC). Emotional engagement further highlights that empathetic readers tend to understand, perceive, and feel the pain of characters, and then apply those emotions to real-life situations, reinforcing RC. Moreover, empathetic readers know when to act, react, or refrain from certain behaviors (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013) because they can connect the roles of fictional characters to real-life scenarios.

Furthermore, Lantolf et al. (2015) suggested that fictional materials can stimulate thoughts that relate to real-world events due to the similarities between the storyline and actual occurrences. This process encourages readers' empathy as they connect with certain characters, and ultimately, avid fiction readers learn how to act and react in various situations, having already acquired the imaginative and empathetic skills that help them restrain or respond appropriately. In short, a convenient method for developing and acquiring empathetic skills is through the use of fictional stories (FS), where EFAL learners can actively engage with fictional materials to not only enhance reading comprehension (RC) but also cultivate empathy.

METHODOLOGY

The study draws on the benefits of participatory action research (PAR) as the research design, which purports equality, social justice, and empowerment. By its nature, PAR aims to liberate marginalized subjects in social inquiry, offering empowerment to the oppressed (Wood & McAteer, 2017). It is a social construct that prioritizes the most downtrodden and neglected participants in the hierarchy of knowledge. The principles of PAR emphasize fundamental goals such as empowerment, liberation, justice, and mutual respect (Cornish et al., 2023). This approach asserts that once a society is empowered, no external forces can destabilize it. Therefore, PAR is well-suited to this study's aim, as it supports social cohesion through insights and knowledge sharing.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted across different phases of PAR: planning, observation, action, and reflection. Each phase incorporated focus groups or professional workshops. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from the Free State Department of Education in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district. The sample included six English First Additional Language (EFAL) educators, two EFAL curriculum specialists, and five Grade 7 EFAL learners. For purposive sampling, variables such as 2-12 years of EFAL teaching experience, age range of 22-45 years, and a bachelor of education qualification were considered to ensure research integrity and credibility, while avoiding bias and misinformation. Among the participants, there were three female learners, two male learners, one male subject advisor, one female subject advisor, one male educator, and five female educators.

This view is supported by Creswell and Poth (2018), who emphasize that in social inquiry, research participants must be treated with equality and respect, allowing them to take charge of the transformation process. This means that participants bear the primary responsibility for solving problems and generating solutions themselves. At this juncture, PAR, purposive sampling, and structured interviews are proposed as suitable research tools and designs to explore social inquiry with vigor, freedom, transformation, and respect.

In the first phase of PAR, the planning phase, the principal researcher and participants meet in a structured setting where participants share their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs about teaching EFAL. Subsequently, interview questions are distributed, allowing participants to respond and discuss the issues raised. This leads into the action phase, during which participants read randomly selected fictional stories and answer contextual questions to assess comprehension. Additionally, contemporary themes emerging from the fictional stories—such as gender equity, loyalty, honesty, integrity, power relations, and compassion—are examined. These themes are further developed by participants during the reflection phase, where differing opinions, views, and beliefs are discussed in alignment with the interview questions. This exercise helps verify the findings and addresses any potential omissions or oversights. The validity and reliability of the study are maintained by asking participants to verify the data and compare it with the interview questions, ensuring credibility and trustworthiness of the results (FitzPatrick, 2019).

In summary, thematic analysis, which involves analyzing meaning through the description, categorization, and interpretation of data, is adopted. This technique captures the spoken and written words of participants clearly, with themes categorized based on differences and similarities. Transcription is used to record spoken words, especially when African languages are involved, with recording devices, translation, and pseudonyms employed to protect the participants' identities.

RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines the research findings and discusses the dominant themes that emerged from the data. First, the production of human values and the impact of empathy through fictional stories are analyzed, with nuanced insights developed from these perspectives. The results identify fictional stories as central to enhancing reading comprehension, as they 1) allow readers to acquire specific values from characters, such as forgiveness and respect, and 2) cultivate empathy through those values. Consequently, the conclusion is drawn that avid readers tend to be compassionate and benevolent.

Production of human values

The study examines how FS can enhance RC, highlighting the role of education in providing skills for individuals to apply when needed, particularly in the context of human values produced by FS. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) defined reading as the ability to decode, construct, and understand the meaning of a text. This implies that the comprehension of a text generates knowledge and certain skills, indicating that understanding has been achieved. This comprehension leads to knowledge, which is a fundamental aspect of human values. As Russel et al. (2015) explained, the acquisition of human values is a sign of intelligence and a demonstrative effort in the pursuit of goals.

Equally, FS offer an opportunity to engage with cultural, political, religious, and traditional aspects from which readers can learn and relate (Riedle & Harrison, 2016). As a result, these facets should align with social demands, allowing readers to acquire and demonstrate human values through subjective and objective social processes, such as problem-solving and decision-making. Therefore, RC is achieved when human values are balanced with the needs of society. The following excerpt supports the ideologies of Riedle and Harrison (2016):

Ms Chair: I read a graded book about Zulu cultural practices, and I enjoyed it because I learned how ancient people interacted among tribes and communities. The book raised several political issues that made me curious about how culture affects our lives. I appreciated how it shed light on my own culture.

Mr Table: Fiction transports you to an imagined world, where the reader interprets events in a real-life context. One of the most interesting parts I read was about the practice of elopement. It made me realize how culture, at times, imposes unnecessary pressure on men and women. I believe politics and culture are major that affect our lives.

Mr. Pen: Fictional stories are fascinating because they inspire action. I read about a pastor who abused his congregants, asking for generous thanksgiving offerings even though they were poor. It made me feel that someone needed to defend them, showing that religion can sometimes be a form of oppression.

Moreover, because cultural, religious, and political facets directly affect socialization and the reinforcement of particular behavioral patterns, an individual reader can learn both conventional and non-conventional behaviors from FS. This is because characters are embedded within these facets, shaping their roles within the plot. Consequently, both good and bad behaviors are emulated, reflecting the essence of human values. However, the debate arises within social structures and processes as to whether socialization is oriented toward good or bad behavior. Khalid and Saddozai (2018) claim that culture, politics, and religion affect our lives, as values, attitudes, and behaviors are adjusted to meet societal standards. According to Li and Zhang (2020), values encompass the concepts of "good" and "bad" behavior. This implies that an individual reader who has extensively engaged with fiction can be considered to have a balanced scale of values, thus enhancing their social responsibilities. These conclusions are further supported by the results from the following interview excerpt:

Female student: Ouch! I hate to admit it, but FS have taught me social skills, like making the right decisions, because many of the characters are placed in situations where their... mmm... what do we call this... mmm... their social skills are tested. So, I really love fictional texts.

Mrs. Lekau: You know, forgiving is very difficult for everyone, but since I started reading fictional stories... (inhales deeply)... I've learned the skill of forgiveness.

Mr. Kgebs: Huh! As a Zulu man (giggles), it's natural for us to trust easily, especially when it comes to women, but reading fictional stories has taught me not to trust so easily because it puts my emotions in risky situations.

This excerpt illustrates how human values can be learned and unlearned through FS. In the first instance, the co-researcher initially lacked social skills, but after reading FS, she developed the necessary abilities to make informed decisions. In the second example, the co-researcher struggled with forgiveness, but after engaging with FS, he acquired and internalized this vital human value. Lastly, the final extract emphasizes the importance of unlearning and relearning social skills critical to life. The co-researcher had a tendency to trust easily but learned, through FS, that such behavior can make one vulnerable emotionally and mentally. In conclusion, FS foster the development of essential human values that are crucial across various spheres of life—academically, socially, and professionally. These values, cultivated through reading FS, are imperative for enhancing reading comprehension.

Fictions influence empathy

The potential of individuals to develop the most valuable human qualities, such as empathy and sympathy, is crucial. This potential is set into motion through the acquisition of insightful experiences gained socially within their respective disciplines (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). As a

result, this potential is primarily nurtured through social practices, such as reading activities. In line with Argo et al. (2008), people learn to be empathetic and sympathetic through reading activities, particularly by engaging with FS. Argo et al. (2008) further proposed that readers of FS derive a sense of enjoyment and fulfillment, as they are captivated by the experience. This suggests that FS have a positive impact on readers, helping them acquire essential social skills such as empathy and sympathy. The following excerpt is evidential to aforementioned text:

Male learner: I have a short temper, but after reading this fiction, I realize I need to do better and start being more considerate, sympathetic, and compassionate.

Male educator: Normally, women are considered more sympathetic and compassionate. However, if society teaches young people the importance of sympathy, care, and compassion through fictional stories, we can achieve much more as a community.

Ms. Chair: Arguments are bound to happen where people live, and if we lack sympathy and empathy, we will continue to see all kinds of delinquency. For instance, this fiction was about a naughty boy who didn't care about his family or the people in his community. He eventually becomes a gangster, terrorizing everyone. This shows how important it is to be empathetic and sympathetic.

Female learner: Look, not everyone understands the importance of humanity. But if we start using fictional stories to narrate and read to our loved ones, especially kids my age, I believe we'll develop a better understanding of humanity.

Nonetheless, the central theme is how FS instill social skills into readers. Oatley (2002) claimed that for readers to develop empathy, there must be emotional engagement and motivation while reading for an ordinary reader to achieve RC. Similarly, this idea is reinforced in the context of RC, emphasizing that emotions and thoughts must be deeply connected to the text during the reading activity to foster understanding and interest. To highlight this perspective, the following excerpt provides an empirical analysis of results that align with the ideological stance on the effectiveness of empathy through FS:

Male learner: Let me tell you, my brother, since I started reading FS, I've learned compassion and consideration for others. (abrupt smile) You wouldn't believe that characters like animals can teach us, humans, to be empathetic and sympathetic, huh? It just shows how important fictional stories are in our lives—truth be told, buddy.

Female student: To, be honest I've learned the value of caring from reading FS The one I read was called Magic Love, and it taught me that people today often care less about others if there's nothing to gain.

Male educator: I didn't plan on becoming an educator when I was younger, but my grandmother used to narrate fictional stories to us, and through those stories, I learned about care, love, compassion, and courtesy. That's why I enjoy narrating or reading these stories to my learners—they hold rich knowledge and wisdom worth sharing.

This excerpt demonstrates the profound impact of using FS to enhance RC, particularly as it addresses skepticism and criticism regarding FS as a learning strategy. When FS are not

utilized, learners miss out on the opportunity to develop critical social skills that foster independence, critical thinking, and empathy. Based on the empirical data, the significance of FS in enhancing RC is underscored. It is essential to recognize that empathy and sympathy involve both thoughts and feelings. FS provide a vehicle that transports readers into the fictional world, where their emotions are deeply engaged. Readers are then tasked with distinguishing fiction from reality by using their thoughts and feelings to evaluate and synthesize narrative events in the context of real-life situations. Thus, the potential of FS to develop empathy and sympathy serves as the rationale for using them to enhance RC.

This section examined the impact of FS on enhancing RC for EFAL intermediate learners. Human values and the influence of empathy support the notion that FS can improve RC. When FS are utilized, readers engage both their emotions and thoughts with the text, which in turn elicits and reinforces comprehension. Human values, such as social skills, should be strengthened when present and developed when lacking. Furthermore, RC is affirmed when empathy is cultivated through FS, allowing readers to connect fictional events with real-life situations that challenge their social skills and empathy. Therefore, the use of FS as a learning strategy has been proven effective in enhancing reading comprehension.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Examining the impactful insights of FS to improve RC is supported by empirical data and aligns with the literature review, which anticipated the successes of using FS. Based on the results and final analysis of the data in relation to the literature, this paper successfully highlights the value of FS in enhancing RC for EFAL intermediate learners. FS improve empathy, foster reading engagement, and serve as a bridge between the unknown and the known by connecting students' prior knowledge and experiences to reading comprehension. Although FS have the potential to develop critical thinking and reasoning by helping learners distinguish between fiction and reality, this study did not address how fiction might hinder factual learning or contribute to the development of irresponsible or deceptive citizens. This highlights the need for future studies to explore the impact of fiction on teaching and learning, as well as its impact on shaping responsible, independent, and mature individuals. Additionally, one limitation of this study is that it focused solely on the successes of using FS without considering the associated challenges. Time constraints and limited financial resources also restricted the researcher from fully exploring the research scope in relation to the study's aim.

These recommendations should be considered as immediate solutions to mitigate or address the challenges of RC. Therefore, they must align with the empirical findings of this study. The study findings confirmed and supported the use of FS to enhance RC, and they should, by and large, be integrated into the ongoing development of RC strategies. Further studies are needed to overcome the aforementioned challenges and contribute to the production of knowledgeable and skilled citizens.

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