

Teachers' perceptions of reading instruction in selected primary schools in the Eastern Cape

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Background: There is a general outcry that too many South African Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3) teachers do not know how to teach reading and are currently teaching reading in an *ad hoc*, unsystematic way.

Objectives: In response to this, this study explored the Foundation Phase teachers' perceptions of their role in teaching reading. The focus was on the relevance of the initial training, awareness of reading strategies and how these strategies were reflected in their classroom practice.

Method: The study was qualitative in nature and a case study design was followed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine teachers who were purposively selected from three public schools. Content analysis was used to analyse the data.

Results: Regarding the initial training programme, teachers received at tertiary institutions, the findings of the study showed that the majority of teachers were not adequately prepared to teach reading and to deal with learners who experience problems in reading. Some teachers indicated that they were not even trained to teach in the Foundation Phase. The findings also showed that the majority of respondents doubted if their classroom practice would yield positive results as far as reading instruction is concerned. The findings further indicated that the majority of respondents only paid attention to oral reading (observing punctuation marks and pronunciation), without attending to reading comprehension. There was a general consensus that the new ways of teaching reading were necessary in order to improve the reading ability of learners.

Conclusion: Recommendations based on the findings are that institutions of higher learning that train Foundation Phase teachers should do so in ways that adequately equip them to produce student teachers who are knowledgeable about research and theory regarding how individuals learn to read. Workshops on appropriate instruction of reading strategies are recommended for in-service teachers.

Introduction

Reading is a core competency at school, and all academic achievement depends to a lesser or greater extent on reading literacy. The ability to read refers to more than just being able to recognise letters and decode words; it includes the ability to construct meaning from the written word and familiarity with the various forms and functions of written texts (Pretorius & Machet 2004:45). The importance of reading literacy in the learning process is further acknowledged by the University of California Report that states that the ability to read is highly valued and it is important for personal, social and economic well-being. Regrettably, there is a general outcry not only in South Africa, but worldwide about teachers' inability to teach reading to learners whose mother tongue is not English. For example, the literature on reading literacy has shown that teachers are not receiving adequate professional development in effective strategies to address English learners' literacy development (Darling-Hammond 2000; Klapwijk 2012; Moats et al. 2010; National Reading Panel 2000; Pretorius & Machet 2004; Van Staden 2011; Zimmerman et al. 2007). Subsequently, Howie (2006) reports that inadequate subject knowledge of teachers is among the factors that contribute to learners' inability to read. Thus, teachers' classroom practices have a significant impact on student outcomes. This is a cause for concern as teachers play an important role as mediators, facilitators and monitors of the reading process (Richards in Rido, Ibrahim & Nambiar 2014).

In order to address the learners' reading challenges, Moats et al. (2010) are of the view that knowledgeable teachers who provide quality instruction are crucial in helping children become

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successful readers. In addition, Richards et al. (2014) point out that in order to successfully fulfil their instructional roles, English Foreign Language (EFL) or English Second Language (ESL) teachers are required to possess a number of qualities that include interaction strategies. They further argue that some teachers employ distinctive interactional characteristics, whereas others often disengage with their learners as they fail to maximise their pedagogic potential and promote interaction in the classroom. Kuzborska (2011) is of the view that teachers' understanding and interpretation of reading instruction has a profound influence on their classroom practices. This sentiment is echoed by Richards and Rodgers (2001) who state that teachers' perceptions influence their goals, procedures, materials, classroom interaction patterns, their roles, their learners and the schools they work in. Richards and Rodgers (2001) further point out that teachers' assumptions about language and language learning provide the basis for a particular approach to reading instruction. Therefore, this study examines teachers' understanding and interpretation of their reading instruction in order to make them aware of the effective strategies of teaching reading so as to increase learner academic achievement.

Purpose of the study

There is a growing body of research that shows correlation between aspects of formal teacher preparation and quality of teaching or student outcomes (Klapwijk 2012; Sailors 2008; Schwab 2011; Xie 2011). To this end, Van Staden (2011) is of the view that putting a quality teacher in every classroom is key to addressing the challenges of reading achievement in schools. This view is echoed by Van der Merwe and Nel (2012) who point out that reading instruction demands knowledgeable, strategic, adaptive and reflective teachers. In addition, the National Reading Panel (2000) claims that all new ways of looking at reading would require some professional development. However, the Reading Horizons (n.d.) discovered that when teachers are initially trained prior to their professional career, they are given little instruction on how to teach basic literacy to beginning and struggling readers and this leaves a lot of learners without the basic literacy they need to succeed in education. Therefore, this study seeks to explore teachers' perceptions of reading instruction in selected primary schools in the Eastern Cape in order to make recommendations on how reading teachers in the Foundation Phase should be supported. In order to achieve this goal, the following questions guided the study:

- How does the initial training programme of teachers equip them to address learners' reading problems?
- What impact does teachers' classroom practice have on learners becoming successful readers?
- What reading strategies do teachers emphasise in their classrooms?
- Do teachers believe that new ways of teaching reading are necessary in order to improve learners' reading ability?

Definition of reading

Several scholars have defined reading in various ways. Leipzig (2001) defines reading as a multifaceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency and motivation. Based on this definition, Leipzig points out that understanding how readers integrate these facets to make meaning from print is important in the reading process. Cziko et al. (2000) argue that reading is not a straightforward process of lifting the words off the page. They further argue that reading is a complex process of problem-solving in which the reader works to make sense of a text not just from the words and sentences on the page but also from the ideas, memories and knowledge evoked by those words and sentences. Goodman (1988) defines reading as a receptive psycholinguistic process wherein the actor uses strategies to create meaning from text. Consequently, Pretorius and Ribbens (2005) argue that the cognitive-linguistic accomplishment of reading comprises two main components, decoding and comprehension. They state that decoding involves the perception and parsing aspects of reading that 'translate' written symbols into language, whereas comprehension refers to the overall understanding process whereby meaning is assigned to the whole text. Pretorius and Ribbens further state that beginner readers initially learn to master decoding skills, as comprehension cannot effectively occur if decoding has not been mastered. However, Oakhill, Cain and Yuill (1998) argue that skill in decoding does not necessarily imply skill in comprehension. Regrettably, the reading literacy literature points to teaching practices in the first 3 years of schooling that focus on decoding skills at the expense of comprehension (Pretorius 2002) resulting in reading with accurate pronunciation but with little understanding of what they read.

The reading literacy literature identifies two reading processes, that is, the bottom-up and top-down processes. The theories that stress bottom-up processing focus on how readers extract information from the printed page, claiming that readers deal with letters and words in a relatively complete and systematic fashion (Gough in Abraham 2000). In addition, Reutzel and Cooter (2013) point out that bottom-up theories hypothesise that learning to read progresses from children learning the parts of language (letters) to understanding whole text (meaning). On the contrary, the top-down processes believe that the uptake of information is guided by an individual's prior knowledge and expectations. In this process, Goodman in Abraham (2000) states that the readers sample the text for information and contrast it with their world knowledge, helping to make sense of what is written. Rumelhart's (1985) reading model recognises the interaction of bottom-up and top-down processes simultaneously throughout the reading process. Rumelhart argues that reading is both a perceptual and a cognitive process. He emphasises that many different sources such as feature extraction, lexical knowledge and semantic knowledge (the study of meaning in language as well as the changes of meaning) have an influence on the readers' interpretation of the text. Similar to the bottom-up and top-down processes,

Houck and Ross (2012) differentiate between reading to learn and learning to read. They define learning to read as an initial stage of the reading process whereby the focus is on the learners' mastery of skills such as concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics and alphabetic code and word analysis strategies. On the contrary, reading to learn develops over a lifetime and includes fluency and automatic word recognition, vocabulary development, comprehension acquisition and strategy development (Stahl in Houck & Ross 2012). Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to foster and develop reading, both in learning to read and applying that knowledge in reading to learn.

Reading instruction

Reading instruction has been viewed in a variety of different ways for learners who struggle to read, and there were several different techniques and strategies that educators used sporadically over the years to teach reading. As a result of this situation, reading instruction was not considered to be as important as other areas of instruction such as vocational, functional and social skills (Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrin-Delzell & Algozzine in Scruggs 2008). Similarly, Hurst, Wallace and Nixon (2013) point out that there has been a common perception among teachers that being a skilled reader is a qualification enough to be a skilled teacher of reading. He argues that being a skilled reader does not mean one has an explicit awareness of the structures of written and spoken language that is necessary to effectively teach reading. Responding to this problem, the reading literacy literature has revealed that in order to teach the reading components (e.g. phonemic awareness, phonics and alphabetic code, and comprehension), the effective reading strategies can be taught and learners benefit from such instruction (Cekiso 2012; Lai, Tung & Luo 2008; Scruggs 2008; Song 1998). The reading strategies are defined as deliberate, conscious procedures used by readers to enhance text comprehension (Sheorey & Mokhtari in Monos 2004) and their application is believed to contribute to efficient reading (Auerbach & Paxton in Monos 2004). In the reading context, reading strategies indicate how readers perceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read and what they do when they do not understand (Block in Li 2010). Based on the definition of the reading strategies, Cekiso and Madikiza (2014) are of the view that teachers' knowledge and application of reading strategies instruction is important to improve learners' reading proficiency. This view is supported by Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) who point out that in order to develop reading skills programmes in an informed manner, teachers' understanding of their learners' metacognitive knowledge about reading and reading strategies must be increased.

The literature on reading strategies has shown that teaching strategies is one of the most effective means of helping students to overcome their reading problems (McNamara & Magliano 2009:34). McNamara and Magliano further state that strategy instruction across a variety of domains builds on the notion that less skilled learners should learn strategies

that mimic those exhibited by skilled learners. In addition, Lau and Chan (2003) point out that

while skilled readers know how to use effective strategies to facilitate the functioning of various cognitive processes and construct meaningful understanding of the text, poor readers simply read the text word by word without any strategies. (p. 177)

Consequently, a number of studies have been conducted that sought to identify learners' reading strategies (Cekiso & Madikiza 2014; Lau & Chan 2003; Li 2010; Oranpattanachi 2010) and those that focused on reading instruction strategies (Cekiso 2012; Lai et al. 2008; Song 1998; Scruggs et al. 2010). Cekiso (2012) conducted a study on the possible effects of reading instruction on Grade 11 ESL learners' reading comprehension. The results indicated that learners who received reading strategy instruction improved their reading comprehension and outperformed those who were not exposed to the intervention programme. These results are supported by a number of studies that maintain that comprehension strategy instruction has positive effects on learners' reading comprehension (Caverly, Nicholson & Radcliffe 2004; Lai et al. 2008; McNamara & Magliano 2009; Song 1998). Thus, training in reading strategies has potential to enhance the reading comprehension of the learners. It is against this background that the current study seeks to investigate teachers' perceptions of reading instruction so as to improve their classroom practice with regard to teaching reading.

Professional development for teachers

Moats et al. (2010) are of the view that the majority of teachers at all levels have not been prepared in sufficient depth to prevent reading problems, to recognise early signs of risk or to teach learners with learning disabilities successfully. According to Zimmerman, Howie and Smit (2011), this evident situation does beg fundamental questions for the development of teacher training curricular in the area of foundational literacy skills and support for learners with literate language development difficulties in South Africa. They further argue that, as the initial teacher training programmes which teachers are exposed to in training institutions may largely determine their literacy and reading instruction strategies, it is paramount that an exploration into what are considered as effective literacy teaching strategies for learners from diverse backgrounds is undertaken. According to the California State University (2007), becoming an expert teacher of reading is a career-long endeavour. They further point out that professional reading teachers plan quality reading instruction by drawing on the knowledge base of how children learn to read, grade-level expectations and the fundamentals of effective reading instruction. In addition, they suggest that teachers must be knowledgeable about the reading process in order to make informed decisions that positively affect students' reading achievement.

Moats et al. (2010) argue that in order to successfully fulfil their roles, EFL or ESL teachers are required to possess a number of qualities that include interaction strategies.

However, some studies have demonstrated that teachers fail to maximise their pedagogic potential and promote interaction in the classroom (Schwab 2011; Xie 2011). Priestly (2011) and Swanepoel (2009) point out that initiatives aimed at the implementation of educational change fail regularly, often because teachers' roles in the change process are underestimated. In addition, Sailors (2008:647) indicates that while ample attention is paid to the professional development of teachers for teaching reading, many studies continue to focus on general reading instruction. Specifically, Sailors (2008:653) claims that there are no studies about the professional development of teachers and comprehension instruction, and new teachers still enter schools 'with the understanding of how to teach comprehension based on how they were taught to read'. In addition, Klapwijk (2012) is of the view that for teachers to make sustainable changes to their instructional methods, new implementations must adhere to specific principles and, importantly, must provide evidence that they produce results. According to Reading Horizons (n.d.), when teachers are initially trained prior to their professional career, they are given little instruction on how to teach basic literacy skills to beginning and struggling readers. They further argue that this leaves a lot of students without the basic skills they need to succeed in education, especially students with processing issues, special needs and English language learners. To fill this gap, a study that deals with teacher professionalism, in relation to reading instruction, is necessary in a South African context.

The need for teachers' continued professional development at the Foundation Phase is highlighted by the National Department of Education (2008). The National Department of Education further views teachers as key contributors to transformation in South Africa. Thus, teacher effectiveness is a critical component of the education system. According to Moats (1999), classroom teaching for reading instruction needs to be considered as the critical factor in preventing reading problems and must be the central focus for change. In addition, Zimmerman (2007) states that teachers' acquisition of the teaching skills necessary to bring about the development of literate language competency is critical. Van Staden (2011) emphasises that putting a quality teacher in every classroom is key to addressing the challenges of reading achievement in schools. He further argues that knowledgeable, strategic, adaptive and reflective teachers make a difference in student learning.

Methodology

Design

This article presents research conducted in rural public schools in the Mbizana District in the Eastern Cape. A qualitative research approach was chosen for the study. Qualitative research is usually concerned with the participants' perspectives and experiences (Best & Kahn 2006; Slavin 2007). The study also followed a case study design. Bromley ([1990] in Maree 2007:75) defines a case study as 'systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related

events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest'. Therefore, a case study was deemed relevant as the study sought to explore the teachers' experiences with reading instruction in three primary schools.

Participants

The sample for the study consisted of nine Foundation Phase teachers (two males and seven females) who were purposively selected from three public schools. Three Foundation Phase teachers were selected from each school. Their age ranged between 27 and 45 years. The participants were chosen on the basis that they were Foundation Phase teachers and shared a mother tongue (isiXhosa) with the learners.

Data collection method

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to gain insight into the teachers' understanding and challenges of teaching reading in the Foundation Phase. The interview guide solicited information on the relevance of initial teachers' training in teaching reading in the Foundation Phase, impact of teachers' classroom practice on developing learners' reading ability, teachers' awareness of reading strategies, how that awareness was reflected in their practice and teacher perceptions of the new ways of teaching reading.

Data collection procedure

The interviews took place during the period of July 2016 to October 2016 and were conducted at the respondents' schools. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Department of Basic Education in the Eastern Cape. Ethical issues regarding anonymity, confidentiality and access to the data were discussed with the participants who gave informed consent prior to data collection. Each interview took about 50 min. A tape recorder was used to record the interviews with the prior permission of the interviewees. After transcribing the data, the researcher provided the participants with feedback on the transcriptions of their individual responses to confirm whether the transcriptions were a true reflection of their views.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used in analysing the data. Silverman (2004) is of the view that content analysis produces a relatively systematic comprehensive summary of data. In this study, recurrent instances were systematically identified and grouped together.

Findings

Research question 1

How does teachers' initial training programme put them in a position to address learners' reading problems?

Regarding the initial training programme teachers received at tertiary institutions, seven out of nine teachers indicated that the training programme they went through did not

prepare them well to teach reading and to deal with learners who experience problems in reading. Two teachers indicated that they were not even trained to teach the Foundation Phase learners. Although three participants acknowledged the role played by their initial training programme to some extent, they indicated that there is a need for further development in teaching reading. They based their concern on the daily reading problems they experienced with teaching reading in the Foundation Phase. When asked if they found their initial training programme relevant, the participants expressed the following:

- Not really, I have not been trained in teaching reading and how to deal with problems encountered.
- No, because I do not have enough time to deal with struggling readers; hence, there are a number of compulsory formal assessment tasks to administer by end of each year.
- Partially it does, but it needs one to develop himself or herself; hence, we meet daily challenges when teaching reading.
- No, I was not trained to teach in the Foundation Phase.
- I find it relevant to a certain extent but there are problems I face as some learners cannot read with understanding on their own.
- The focus was only on the traditional methods of teaching in general; there was no special focus on teaching reading.

Research question 2

What impact does teachers' classroom practice have on learners becoming successful readers?

The second research question was based on the impact of the teachers' classroom practice on developing successful readers. Five out of ten participants doubted if their classroom practice would yield positive results as far as reading is concerned. They put the blame on the overcrowded classrooms and their failure to implement strategies suggested by the Department of Education (e.g. allowing learners to read for 30 min every day) because of their tight schedule. Three participants pointed to their failure to design relevant teaching aids like wall charts that would allow learners to read independently. The following statements support what the teachers said:

- No, because my classes that I deal with are overcrowded and it is difficult to give individual attention to learners who experience problems in reading.
- No, it does little because we do not implement suggested strategies by the Department of Education that require a teacher to let learners read for 30 min every day. Also we do not implement DAR (drop all and read) per week or per month.
- Not really, it is difficult to design the wall charts and display enough illustrations so that learners get meaning from pictures.

However, four participants showed confidence in their classroom practice. They were of the view that the way they

teach reading would produce successful readers. They attributed this success to the reading activities they organise in class. One respondent mentioned the fact that she engaged her learners in role playing and group guided reading. The other participant mentioned that she focused on developing spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency. The participants also mentioned that their aim was to develop lifelong readers and learners who can read for pleasure. The following statements support the participants' beliefs about their classroom practice:

- Yes, activities like role playing and group guided reading will definitely have a positive impact and make my learners successful readers.
- Yes, I teach them to pronounce words correctly and to become lifelong readers who can also read for pleasure.
- Yes, my classroom practice helps learners improve their spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency.
- Yes, my classroom practice help learners develop confidence and I also expose them to new words so that they understand their use in everyday language.

Research question 3

What reading strategies do teachers emphasise in their classrooms?

The third research question focused on the reading strategies teachers emphasised in their classrooms. In response to this question, the respondents highlighted that the reading strategies they felt are important in order to develop learners' reading skills. Eight respondents reported that they used pair reading, group reading and whole class reading. Their focus was on oral reading. In many situations, reading comprehension was not taken care of. The focus was on observing the punctuation marks and pronunciation. The following statements justify the classroom practice of the teachers:

- The whole class reads, groups read and, finally, individuals read. I use these strategies so that the fast readers or advanced readers improve the reading pace of the slow readers. In this way, the slow readers become relaxed and gain confidence.
- The teacher reads, one learner reads and others listen while they are looking at their books.
- Learners write down the difficult words so as to search their meaning in dictionaries. Drilling of certain words so as to understand them.
- I ask questions based on the story after the learners have finished reading.
- Reading audibly, adherence to punctuation and explaining unfamiliar words. Failure to adhere to these makes reading incomprehensible. It is for that reason that adherence to punctuation needs to be emphasised.
- I guide reading because I deal with young people who still need guidance. I also provide independent reading so as to know each learner better so that I provide assistance where necessary.

Only one respondent out of nine seemed to have a better understanding of the reading process. This respondent mentioned the importance of reading for information or understanding. She mentioned the following:

- Learners should read with understanding. They should obtain information about the story they are reading, not just to read for the sake of punctuation and pronunciation.
- Learners have to figure out the purpose for reading. They should predict the content and identify appropriate reading strategies.
- Teachers should be able to encourage learners to read with understanding and link the lesson with the previous one.

Research question 4

Do teachers believe that new ways of teaching reading are necessary in order to improve learners' reading ability?

The focus of the fourth question was on whether teachers believed that new ways of teaching reading were necessary in order to improve learners' reading ability. All the respondents agreed that new ways of teaching reading were necessary in order to improve the reading ability of learners. They supported this statement by mentioning that new ways would boost their confidence as reading teachers. The teachers also believed that the new ways of teaching reading would assist them in tackling the reading problems experienced by their learners. One respondent mentioned that as technology has developed, new ways that incorporate technology are necessary. With regard to this question the participants mentioned the following:

- Learning to read requires special techniques, therefore, new ways will play a pivotal role in teaching reading.
- Yes, new ways of teaching reading are necessary because now we live in a global society whereby learners meet a lot of people who speak different languages outside school hence they need an approach which will make them good readers.
- Yes, new ways of teaching reading will come as a way of boosting confidence to both learners and teachers. Sometimes the old ways may be dull and not appealing to the type of learners that we have. They also add more information to the existing one I have as a teacher and help me to tackle something (practice) in a different way.
- Yes, we are living in a dynamic world where the technology has taken place. There are devices that could be used that are using voices that could enhance learners' reading skills.
- Yes, especially the use of electronic media. A dialogue can be taught better if the teacher is showing it on a projector, for example, a visit to the dentist (dialogue between a dentist and a patient).

Ethical consideration

Permission to conduct the study was received from the Department of Basic Education (Eastern Cape). The respondents who were involved in the study gave their

informed consent and assent to participation prior to data collection.

Discussion of findings

Teachers' perceptions regarding their initial training programme indicated that they were not prepared enough to teach reading in the Foundation Phase. The results of this study confirmed the research findings from other scholars. For example, the results of a study conducted by Moats et al. (2010) reveal that despite the fact that teaching reading effectively, especially to learners whose mother tongue is not English, requires considerable knowledge and skill; regrettably, the majority of practitioners at all levels have not been prepared in sufficient depth to prevent reading problems, to recognise early signs of risk or to teach learners with learning disabilities successfully. This concern is echoed by Zimmerman et al. (2011) who state that this evident situation does beg fundamental questions for the development of teacher training curricular in the area of foundational literacy skills and support for learners with literate language development difficulties in South Africa. They further argue that the initial teacher training programmes should expose teachers to effective literacy teaching strategies for learners from diverse backgrounds. In addition, Reading Horizons (n.d.) is of the view that when teachers are initially trained prior to their professional career, they are given little instruction in how to teach basic literacy skills to beginning and struggling readers. They further argue that this leaves a lot of students without the basic skills they need to succeed in education, especially students with processing issues, special needs and English language learners. The findings from these studies link well with the findings of this study as some teachers indicated that they were not trained to teach reading or deal with reading problems during their initial training.

The study also showed that some teachers doubted if their classroom practice would yield positive results as far as reading is concerned. This is supported by the fact that among the teachers, there was no evidence of a firm grasp of teaching strategies relevant to reading instruction except strategies suggested by Department of Education like allowing learners to read for 30 min every day. Unfortunately, this only pertains to time allocated for reading but does not specify how reading should be taught. Similar findings were also observed by Van der Merwe and Nel (2012) who conducted a study in identifying which reading literacy components (that are embedded in knowledge of language structure) were included in the programme. The results of their study showed that the reading literacy components were included haphazardly within the teacher preparation programme, and there was no evidence-based research included in the curriculum of the pre-service teachers. The responses also pointed to the teachers' failure to design relevant teaching aids like wall charts that would allow learners to read independently. The use of teaching aids to facilitate reading is important in the Foundation Phase. However, eight teachers out of nine indicated that they were

unable to design their own teaching aids. Only one participant out of nine showed confidence about her classroom practice.

The results further revealed that teachers were teaching a limited number of reading strategies in the Foundation Phase. They only mentioned pair reading, group reading and whole class reading, and in many cases, the focus was only on oral reading. It was clear that reading comprehension was not taken care of. This is a cause for concern as teachers' awareness and application of a wide range of reading strategies is important. This finding is supported by Pressley (2001) in Klapwijk (2012) who argues that the case is very strong in showing that teaching students to use a repertoire of reading comprehension strategies increases their comprehension of text. However, Klapwijk and Van der Walt (2011) are of the view that despite evidence of the benefits of reading instruction, it seems that teachers seldom teach reading strategies explicitly in South African schools, thereby depriving learners of the strategies they need. The concern about teachers' professional development to teach reading is expressed by Sailors (2008) in Klapwijk (2012) when he points out that teachers continue to focus on general reading instruction.

The study also showed that teachers believed that new ways of teaching reading were necessary in order to improve learners' reading ability. They mentioned that the new ways of teaching reading were necessary in order to improve the reading ability of learners as they believed that new ways would boost their confidence as reading teachers. They also believed that the new ways of teaching reading would assist them tackle the reading problems experienced by their learners and would also introduce them to new technology that would assist them to teach reading effectively. Similarly, the National Reading Panel (2000) recommends that teachers must adopt new ways of teaching, and learners must show appropriate improvement as a result. This finding concurs with Sailors (2008) who argued that despite the fact that ample attention is paid to the professional development of teachers for teaching reading, little, if any, attention is paid to the professional development of comprehension instruction.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the initial training programme of the cohort of teachers did not adequately prepare them to teach reading in the Foundation Phase. Surprisingly, some respondents mentioned that they were not even trained to teach in the Foundation Phase. For those who were trained, the focus was only on general reading instruction. Subsequently, many teachers found it difficult to diagnose and offer relevant support to the learners with reading problems. Thus, many teachers did not have knowledge and skill to teach reading. The results further revealed that teachers were teaching a limited number of reading strategies and were not confident about their classroom practice as far as reading instruction is concerned. The respondents in the study indicated that they focused on pair reading, group reading and whole class. However, it was not clear how reading was taught within those group activities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, recommendations are made as discussed below.

It is unfair for the teachers who were trained to teach other grades to be allowed to teach in the Foundation Phase. Teaching reading, especially in the Foundation Phase, requires a special skill so as to be able to diagnose and address learners with reading problems. The focus on the general reading instruction does not help learners acquire the reading skill. Instead, the focus should be on the reading strategies that help the learner interact with the text. For example, learners could be taught to activate their background knowledge about what they are going to read, and make inferences and predictions about what they are going to read. It is only in the interaction with the text that learners are able to read for comprehension. Exposing learners to the reading material alone, as it was the case in this study, is not likely to help the Foundation Phase learners master the reading skill.

The institutions of higher learning should focus on how to teach reading, especially those who offer Foundation Phase programmes. The student teachers should be aware of explicit and implicit reading strategy instruction. They should know what reading strategies are, why strategic reading is important, and which reading strategies are more effective for the ESL learner. Moreover, student teachers should be knowledgeable about research and theory regarding how individuals learn to read, how to provide appropriate literacy instruction based on assessed needs and how to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching. Having this knowledge is likely to assist them to diagnose and support learners with reading problems. The study further recommends workshops for in-service teachers. The workshops should focus on how to teach reading in the Foundation Phase with specific reference to reading strategy instruction and research.

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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