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Foundation Phase teachers: The 'battle' to teach reading

A B S T R A C T There is evidence that learners attending South African schools have reading problems. This article is an attempt to gain insight into some of the possible reasons why learners in Grades 1 to 3 fail to become proficient readers. Research was conducted in the province of Gauteng with Grade 1 to 3 teachers at 11 schools. During this mixed method research it became clear that due to many problems teachers 'battle' to teach reading properly. These include the home language spoken by the learners and the teachers, the reading methods used in the classrooms and the lack of reading materials in the classrooms. Research needs to be done in South African schools to advise individual schools about their language policy and the teaching of reading. The findings of this research can also be used to pave the way for well-planned in-service teacher training on the teaching of reading.

Keywords: reading, teaching reading, reading methods, Foundation Phase teachers, home language, classroom practices

1. Introduction

A young child is usually keen to learn to read, especially when entering the so-called 'big' school. Will there be a competent reading teacher at school? Is there a parent, caregiver or sibling at home who can help him or her to master the difficult task of learning to read? For many young learners learning to read only happens at the formal school where it is in the hands of the Foundation Phase classroom teacher to teach the acquisition of reading skills.

From research reports it seems as if the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase is not effective, with the result that many young learners attending South African schools have a reading problem. In the latest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) done in 2006, South Africa's score was the lowest of the participating countries (TEACH South Africa, 2010:2). This was confirmed in 2008 in a national report on the results of 1 000 Grade 3 learners. This report indicated that eight out of every ten learners obtained less than 50% for mathematics and language skills. The report indicated that 35% of Grade 3s country-wide obtained between 0% and 34% for literacy, which included reading. When it is taken into

account that literacy constitutes the foundation for studies from Grade 4 onwards, this is indeed a bleak picture (Rademeyer, 2009:6).

The reading research that is available in South Africa indicates that in general learners' reading skills are poorly developed. This applies from primary school through to tertiary level (Pretorius & Machet, 2004:47). Fleisch (2008:98) states that primary education in South Africa is in a crisis and he bases his viewpoint on a range of cross-national studies. However, these studies often provide few real insights into the generative mechanisms, the underlying reasons or causes that link children's experience with language in their school context to their failure to become proficient in reading and mathematics (Fleisch, 2008:98).

This article is an attempt to provide, albeit on a small scale, insight into some of the possible reasons why learners in the Foundation Phase fail to become proficient readers. During a research project that was done at schools in eleven informal settlements and at two inner-city schools in Gauteng, the issue of reading methods and problems that teachers experience to teach reading to the young learners was investigated. The research shed some light on some of the reasons causing the poor reading performance of young learners. This article seeks to explain some of the reasons and to discuss some ways of addressing this complex issue.

2. Facilitating early reading development

Before young learners start learning to read, teachers need to prepare them to ensure that they are able to learn to read. This entails various activities related to the acquisition of literacy which in the past were often referred to as 'reading readiness' activities. The choice and use of reading methods constitute the other important aspect in the teaching of reading.

2.1 Early reading development

Many young learners come to school without the tools they need to begin the complex task of learning to read. These tools include knowing how to listen, how to decipher non-verbal messages or how to follow directions independently. Usually these learners were not exposed to pre-reading activities as part of their development in becoming readers. Pre-reading is characterised by a child's ability to listen to a book or story being read aloud and, eventually, to be able to retell a favourite story by turning the pages in a book and 'reading' the pictures. Children may not have well developed concepts of print and they may not realise that the story comes from the words and not from the pictures. They do, however, know that the story is somewhere between the two covers of the book. Emergent reading comprises children pointing to words in the text and some 'power' words. These words include their own names and the names of familiar people. In this stage concepts of print become more sophisticated and children realise that letters differ from one another and that they are different to whole words (Sonderman & Farrell, 2008:86).

Pre-reading activities play an important role in preparing young learners for learning to read in a Grade R class. Some of these learners are not taught in their home language and are exposed to multilingual situations when they enter school. There are also many young learners in South Africa who did not have the benefit of attending a Grade R class where learners are introduced to pre-reading skills. Young learners who come to school 'without all the necessary

tools to begin the complex task of learning to read, as well as to write, will depend on the teaching abilities of a highly qualified classroom teacher who can make use of what they do bring: their cultural schemas (Dorr, 2006:138).

2.2 Teaching reading

Teaching reading usually revolves around two issues, namely the decoding of the text and comprehending when reading. Decoding refers to those abilities used for reading whereby written signs and symbols are translated into language. Comprehension deals with the understanding of the text during which process meaning is assigned to the text as a whole. A skilled reader is able to use both decoding and comprehending rapidly and simultaneously (Bohlmann & Pretorius, 2002:196).

These two issues also relate directly to the two best known methods used to teach reading, namely phonics or the phonic approach and the look-and-say or the whole-word approach. Phonics is regarded as an important cueing system that young learners use along with other kinds of information to make sense of written words (Dahl & Scharer, 2000:584). The phonics approach regards reading as a 'bottom-up' approach, which requires the reader to learn individual letters and letter features first, followed by digraphs and other multi-letter units before single words are read. The relation between sounds and symbols in texts is therefore important. In this approach there is a strong link between phonemic awareness, the ability to process words automatically and fast, and reading achievement (Wallace, 2001:23).

The look-and-say approach to reading is seen as a 'top-down' process. Reading is concept-driven and the meaning comes first. Readers first read words, then sentences and eventually stories. This approach relies on a learner's visual memory and a learner is lost if he or she does not recognise a word. Individual letters or sounds are not recognised, but rather the shape of the word (Joubert, Bester & Meyer, 2008:91). Many teachers opt to use the phonic approach and the whole-word approach when teaching reading, but this necessitates good planning.

The language experience approach to teach reading is also a whole-word or whole-sentence approach. The language experience approach allows learners, and especially second-language learners, the opportunity to rehearse speaking and talking before they read and write. This approach, which could be of value in many South African classrooms, integrates reading and writing with some kind of life experience of the learner. Four steps are used in the language experience approach: experience, description, transcription and reading (Gordon, 2007:97). Because learners provide their own phrases and sentences and eventually their own stories, they find the text relevant and interesting and they usually do not experience problems reading it (Diaz-Rico, 2008:171). The language experience approach could thus be established as an 'inside-out' approach to reading, as Gregory (1996:94) refers to it. The language experience approach actively involves the learner and places him or her in control of his or her own learning. Its aim is to draw upon the language, knowledge and experience of the learner as the basis for initial reading material (Gregory, 1996:100). This approach enhances learners' self-concept when they see that their stories are important enough to be written down, discussed and read. It uses young learners' personal cultural schemas (Dorr, 2006:138, 145). The knowledge and cultural schemas that children bring to school are becoming increasingly varied – not only locally but also globally – and teachers need to take cognisance of this trend.

Clearly it is not an easy task to teach reading. This is particularly true of the South African context where there is such great variety in the backgrounds and cultures of the young learners as well as in the infrastructures of the schools.

3. Research method

A mixed method approach was used in the research. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:14, 16) state that the time for mixed method research has come. When quantitative research coming from a positivist stance is mixed with qualitative research that argues for the superiority of constructivism, it leads to a mixed method approach that has pragmatism as its philosophical partner. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2006:23) argue that although the mixed method approach cannot provide perfect solutions, it can incorporate the strengths of both research methods.

The research was done in schools in areas in Gauteng where people are not affluent and therefore the teacher is usually the only person who exposes young learners to literacy and reading. A random selection was made of schools in informal settlements and inner-city schools. A total of eleven primary schools were included in the research project: 10 departmental schools and one peri-urban private school, funded by a church community. Altogether 30 Grade 1 to 3 teachers participated in the research. An attempt was made to interview one Grade1, one Grade 2 and one Grade 3 teacher from each school, but at two of the schools it was not possible.

In the three of the schools the learners represented all the ethnic groups of South Africa and they were thus speaking all the official languages of South Africa. In the other eight schools the home languages of the learners were isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi or Setswana. There were children from Zimbabwe and Mozambique in all the schools and most of them do not speak any of the South African official languages. In ten of the schools one third of the learners were from neighbouring countries, and in one school up to 50 per cent of the school population were from such countries. Therefore, the learners spoke many different languages, including languages that South African teachers do not speak.

Of the 11 schools that participated in this research project, only two schools had Grade R classes. With the exception of a group of the learners in the two inner-city (former model C) schools, the learners came from very poor socio-economic backgrounds and many of the teachers referred to the plans that the schools were putting in place to feed and support these learners. Teachers stated that due to the majority of these learners' domestic backgrounds, stories are not read to them at home and most of them had not held a book before the day they entered school. Some of the teachers mentioned that many of the learners did not know how to hold a pencil when they came to school for the first time.

The research comprised interviews and classroom observations of language lessons. During the interviews, the researcher asked the teachers semi-structured interview questions and then completed the questionnaires. The questions covered the teachers' biographical information, the reading methods used in the classroom, learners' reading problems and the availability of books for reading. This information provided the researcher with quantitative data. Any additional information that the teachers added was written in the open space provided for that purpose in the questionnaires. For instance, the teachers were asked to explain the following: how they teach reading, the reading problems (in more detail) or what help they

would appreciate to enable them to teach reading better. This provided the researcher with rich additional information. During classroom visits, systematic field observations were made about the classroom and, more especially, about the materials that could be used to teach reading and writing, as well as about the teachers' methodologies when teaching literacy. A checklist was kept for these details, but additional information was also recorded. This included aspects such as the availability of reading materials or wall pictures with words that can be read. Where possible, the researcher listened to the learners reading. The additional information and field observations provided qualitative data. An analysis of field observations enables a researcher to constitute elements of the statistical data and to establish whether there are patterns or trends that can be isolated (Mouton, 2001:108).

From the data certain themes that had an influence on the teaching of reading to the Grades 1 to 3 learners arose. The themes are: the home languages spoken by the learners and teachers respectively, the reading methods used, socio-cultural factors, reading motivation and the use of readers and other types of reading materials. Two good examples of practical ways to enhance the teaching of reading also emerged from the data.

4. Findings

In this section various findings that could possibly influence the teaching of reading in Grades 1 to 3 will be discussed. It includes the influence of the home language of teachers and learners, the reading methods used in the classes that were visited, classroom practices that were observed and the teachers' years of experience.

4.1 Home languages spoken in the schools

Teachers' home language: The home language of the 30 teachers is indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Home language of the teachers

Home language	Frequency	%	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative %
Sepedi	15	50.00	15	50.00
Sesotho	1	3.33	16	53.33
Setswana	1	3.33	17	56.67
isiZulu	9	30.00	26	86.67
isiXhosa	2	6.67	28	93.33
Other	2	6.67	30	100.00

The teachers involved in this research project, like many South Africans, spoke more than one South African language. They mentioned that they therefore often used code switching to explain to those learners who did not speak the language of instruction used in the classroom. In the eight schools where there were only black children, a South African official language was the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) for Grades 1 to 3 and in the other three schools English was the LOLT. The question arises whether these teachers really know the other languages that they are using. Do they know all the structures and concepts? Is their

pronunciation correct? Are they able to provide learners with the necessary support and structures to enable them to understand what is being taught via their home language and, eventually, via the language of instruction? For instance, not one of the 30 teachers indicated that they spoke Tshivenda or Xitsonga as their home language, and therefore children speaking these languages as their home language could not even be assisted by using code switching. This also applies to the learners from Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The two teachers (in the former Model C schools), who did not speak any of the African languages used in South Africa, could therefore not rely on code switching to provide support via the home language of their learners.

In a multilingual context, code switching has a role to play and it could help to relieve learners' anxiety. But too much code switching may interfere with language acquisition and use (Diaz-Rico, 2008:112). If code switching is used in the classrooms that were visited, the question could be asked whether it was fair to use it to support some of the learners in their home language, but not all the learners in the class.

Learners' home language: The issue of home language also relates to the learners' particular home languages, because the language of learning and teaching is not always the learners' home language. As far as the home languages of the learners are concerned, many problems were raised by the teachers. One Grade 1 teacher indicated, for instance, that in her class of 40 learners they were speaking seven different home languages, namely isiZulu (the language of instruction),Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiXhosa and Sepedi, as well as a language spoken in Zimbabwe and yet another spoken in Mozambique. If it is the policy of the Department of Education that learners in Grades 1 to 3 should receive tuition in their mother-tongue, the question may be asked in which language the learners in this class should receive tuition.

Another problem raised by teachers is that some learners 'do not know their home language'. Often a family is uncertain as to which language could be regarded as their home language, because the father and the mother speak different languages. It therefore happens that a learner does not know much about the home language in which he or she is supposed to be taught, because some fathers insist that their children be taught in their (the fathers') home language. However, it is often the case that a child could have been speaking only his or her mother's home language at home, and therefore the father's home language, which becomes the language of instruction in school, is virtually a new language to the child.

This problem of being taught in a 'new' language also applies to schools where children do not speak one of two the official South African languages that are used for instruction in a particular school. The children from neighbouring countries also have to face this new language problem.

In the four inner-city former Model C schools, learners were taught only in English and some of the learners who had not been exposed to English before also had to face a new language as their language of instruction. It is said to be important for young learners to learn to think and function in their home language up to a cognitive academic language proficiency level before being able to transfer to a new language system (De Wet, 2002:119). One therefore cannot help but wonder what happens to those learners whose home language has not been developed and who have not yet mastered the language of learning and teaching.

It was encouraging to learn from teachers that there was an 'eagerness to learn English' among the learners. One teacher remarked that the learners in her class found it 'fun to learn English'.

4.2 Reading methods used

Table 2 represents the reading methods that the Grade1 to 3 teachers used to teach reading.

Table 2: Reading methods used by the teachers

Reading method	Frequency	%	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative %
Phonics	15	50.00	15	50.00
Phonics, whole words	3	10.00	18	60.00
Phonics, read syllables	3	10.00	21	70.00
Phonics, words, sentences	5	16.67	26	86.67
Phonics, basic sight words	2	6.67	28	93.33
Whole-word approach	2	6.67	30	100.00

From Table 2 it can be noted that of the 30 teachers who were visited, only two indicated that they used the whole-word approach to teach reading, while nobody mentioned the language experience approach. The majority of teachers used phonics to teach reading. The teachers used the phonics approach to the teaching of reading in various ways.

Some indicated that they first used phonics and then introduced words, basic sight words and sentences. Three of the 30 teachers indicated that they taught phonics and then used syllables when the learners started reading. When the learners read during the classroom visits, however, it became clear that more than three teachers allowed their learners to divide words into syllables when they read. This resulted in slow, word-for-word reading and the meaning of the text could be lost. The researcher knows that without true comprehension, reading becomes senseless. The psycholinguistic approach to the teaching of reading is based on the premise that '[a]ttaching meaning to and understanding the text are the foundation of reading' (Joubert *et al*., 2008:85).

Phonics has a role to play in the teaching of reading when it comes to the learning of basic words, including frequently used words and words with an unpredictable spelling, such as the, *would or night* (Diaz-Rico, 2008:175). Phonics could be of value when a phonetic language approach is used, but it has limitations and could result in jerky word-by-word reading; the sounding out of each word; a reduction in reading speed; mechanical reading with the emphasis on correctness, resulting in a lack of comprehension; and learners not using clues to unlock unfamiliar words, while it also does not encourage independent reading (Joubert *et al.*, 2008:90-91).

It is important for young learners to become fluent readers, because of the relationship between fluent reading and improved comprehension. If automaticity with regard to skills such as word recognition could be developed, then readers could focus their attention on comprehension.

This means that readers who have good word recognition skills will be able to read fluently and with improved understanding (Schwaneflugel *et al*., 2006:499).

For English second-language learners, the use of phonics when learning to read does not make sense either. Phonics relies heavily on decoding and for second-language learners decoding is particularly difficult, because they do not hear the language in the same way as do first-language speakers. Gordon (2007:93), for instance, makes the following statement about learners who learn English as a second language: 'At least initially, language learners perceive English words as a jumble of odd sounds. Parsing words into individual sounds with the purpose of assigning letters to these words is particularly challenging for a child who is beginning to learn English. No wonder a writer described the English she first heard as a young child upon coming to the United States from another country as an incoherent stream of "cranky wails and cries".'

The challenge to master the sound system of English was mentioned by teachers. One teacher remarked that 'the emphasis should be on the sounds and not on the letters' because, as another teacher stated, the learners are 'confusing the alphabet'.

During the interviews, some teachers raised the issue of reading and other teaching materials not being available in the various African languages. This applies to the eight schools where the languages of learning and teaching were African languages. According to some teachers, the language used in some of the materials written in the African languages is sometimes incorrect. One teacher remarked that they did not have 'enough African language books' and a colleague said that they had only 'non-African and old books'. Although the teaching of mathematics did not form part of this research project, some teachers mentioned that the 'language of mathematics' posed the biggest problem of all, because many mathematical concepts had not been translated into the African languages and therefore English words were used. The researcher noticed that in many classrooms (including Grade 1 and 2 classrooms) in these eight schools, all the pictures used were pictures with words written in English underneath the pictures, although English was not the language of instruction in these classes. So the young learners in these classrooms did not see words in their home language on the walls of their classrooms.

It was encouraging to note that many teachers were aware of the poor socio-economic background of the majority of their learners. They explained the steps that the teachers and the schools were taking to assist these learners with meals and clothing. However, none of the teachers mentioned the multitude of socio-cultural factors that could influence their learners' academic progress at school.

Socio-cultural factors could play an important role in hindering learners in their attempts to master the art of reading because, one may ask, if the context of what has to be read is incomprehensible, how can the reading itself be comprehensible? If, for example, the well-known *Janet and John* series that originates from Britain is used, do the learners understand the socio-cultural contexts of these readers?

4.3 Classroom practices

It was noted during classroom observations that many of the learners read word-for-word, sounding out most of the words. This is very typical of young learners who have only been using the phonics method to learn to read. But this type of reading slows down the whole reading

process which leads to failure to comprehend what has been read. If one cannot understand what is being read, reading becomes senseless.

Two important issues that can be found in most of the literature on reading and literacy acquisition, and which were not evident during the researcher's visit to the schools, are socio-cultural factors and the motivation to read. Teachers should never neglect motivating their learners to read, because motivational processes constitute the foundation for coordinating cognitive goals and strategies in reading (Guthrie, 2008:2). Socio-cultural factors should also be attended to in schools and classrooms, because they have a strong influence on learners' literacy achievements. This pertains especially to those learners whose home language is different to the school's language of learning and teaching. In three of the classrooms of the eight schools where the LOLT is not English, it was observed that there were beautiful pictures of for instance all types of animals on the walls, but underneath the pictures the words were written in English and not in the learners' home language.

In eight of the schools there were only readers for each learner and no other reading materials. Sometimes there were not enough readers for each learner and they had to share a reader. The teachers did not make appropriate or additional reading material for their learners. Big Books that can be used for shared reading and to demonstrate reading by the teacher were for instance not seen in many of the schools.

4.4 Examples of best practice

During the school visits various teaching practices were observed. One Grade 3 teacher with 37 years of teaching experience and who taught in an overpopulated classroom demonstrated the use of phonological awareness in an excellent way. She illustrated to the learners how one could 'play' with a word in isiZulu. She showed them that by adding prefixes and suffixes, new words could be formed. She was the one teacher who, during a reading lesson, asked thought-provoking questions, such as: 'Why do you say that?' 'What do you think will happen next?' or 'What do you think will happen if ...?' The expertise of this teacher and other teachers with similar experience is of great value and should be utilised, not only in the teacher's own school to train her peers, but also during in-service teacher training sessions.

At one of the inner-city schools that were visited, there were elderly persons from a nearby retirement home who had been involved in a reading project at the school. A group of the elderly people came to the school once a week. Each child in the school had a graded book, selected under the guidance of the class teacher. Each child was given the opportunity to read individually to one of the elderly people in the reading project. In this way, every learner got an opportunity to read a few pages aloud to an adult once a week. The adults kept a record of each learner's progress. What is of great importance, is that every learner had the opportunity to read and was motivated and supported by an adult.

4.5 Teachers' years of experience

Twenty-eight of the teachers who took part in this research project had many years of experience in the teaching profession. Only one teacher had only one year of experience, but she had been teaching pre-schoolers before; another had two years of experience. The rest had six or more years of experience as teachers in the Foundation Phase and the average number of years of experience for all these teachers came to 13 years.

It is often said that in South Africa – and in Africa – the one available resource at people's disposal that is not being used, is people. The 30 teachers in this research project have years of knowledge and experience that are not being utilised to provide peer support in their schools or for in-service teacher training for under-qualified teachers.

From the data obtained via the questionnaires, interviews and field observations, it was clear that the teachers who were targeted in this research project grappled with numerous problems. These problems include the many different home languages spoken by the learners and teachers, teachers not using a variety of reading methods, the lack of socio-cultural issues in the reading materials, a lack of reading motivation and insufficient readers and appropriate reading materials. The majority of the teachers indicated that many of learners in their classes experienced reading problems. Four teachers mentioned that they needed to have a remedial reading teacher for their learners. The teachers were also faced by other problems such as overcrowded classrooms. It became clear during the classroom visits that the majority of the teachers really tried to make their tuition successful. However, it was impossible to do justice to every learner in an overcrowded classroom with learners who spoke a variety of home languages and with limited reading resources.

5. Conclusion

Investigation into the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase revealed that it requires teachers to have sound knowledge about various aspects related to the acquisition of this important skill in the academic life of learners. Pre-reading skills and various reading methods were discussed. Additional factors such as reading motivation and young learners' cultural backgrounds and the language spoken at home were also investigated. Reading cannot be done in a vacuum and therefore reading materials have to be considered as well.

The results of the research project revealed that there are certain requirements and skills that the teachers of reading should attend to. Teachers need to be flexible and well trained in the use of various reading methods because the circumstances and the learners that they teach require this. Since the socio-economic circumstances of most of the young learners are not conducive to the acquisition of pre-reading skills, they are not exposed to reading activities at home. At school the teachers have to attend to pre-reading and emergent reading[0]. It was surprising to see that so many home languages were spoken in one class in some of the schools. This makes consideration of the learners' socio-cultural background when teaching reading even more important. Reading is not only a cognitive process; the affective domain also plays a role in reading acquisition. The absence of reading motivation in most of the schools will have to be attended to. The same can be said about enough and relevant reading materials in the home languages of the learners in the schools where home language instruction is done.

Much in-service teacher training is being carried out in South Africa. However, it is vital to consider *what* is being taught during in-service training. When it comes to the teaching of reading, researchers and objective experts should find out from teachers what they need to be trained in. Teachers should have an input in the in-service training provided so that it suits the needs of teachers in certain areas and schools. Teachers who are regarded as experts in the teaching of reading such as the one teacher referred to in the discussion of the research,

could train and advise their peers. Teachers should be trained to reflect on their own teaching and especially on their teaching of reading. They can learn to answer questions such as: What works? Why does it work? Why can some learners not master certain reading skills? Am I considering the socio-cultural background of my learners?

Teachers could also be assisted in developing improved and more appropriate reading materials for their learners. In a classroom where a variety of languages is spoken and where learners come from a variety of cultures, environmental print could be used. When environmental print is used children read about things that they are exposed to in their personal environment, such as the shops in their environment, the advertisements on taxis and buses, and street names.

From the side of government, research should be conducted into language issues in schools, as one language policy does not fit all schools. The many languages spoken in one classroom have an influence on all the learning that takes place and on the acquisition of reading. Support and guidance should be provided to schools that have to educate the children of the many so-called 'foreigners' from other African countries. These learners cannot simply be dumped on the schools with no additional assistance.

When young children enter the world of formal learning in the 'big' school, there should be a reading expert in the form of a competent teacher to introduce and guide them along the avenue called life-long reading.

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