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### Abstract

Research shows that South African learners cannot read competently compared to those from other countries. This study investigates the different methods and approaches used in the teaching of reading skills in Sepedi Home Language in Foundation Phase learners with special focus on a primary school in Limpopo Province of South Africa. The research study sought to understand how teachers apply the different methods and approaches in teaching reading in the Foundation Phase so that learners are able to acquire the skills taught. A qualitative research method was used for data collection, in particular interviews and lesson observation. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants in the study, which were the teachers and learners. Thematic analysis was used to analyse all the datasets gathered in this study. Key findings include the following: Learners have varied reading opportunities at school; they have a fairly adequate reading opportunity at home; they were generally dissatisfied with the overall reading time allowed at school; Foundation Phase teachers have a fair understanding of what teaching reading skills entail; current methods used for teaching reading are inadequate; difficulties of teaching reading to non-Sepedi speaking learners; Departmental Heads provide useful support to teachers; and that there is a need to improve the reading skills of Foundation Phase learners. The study recommends that the Departmental officials should schedule regular workshops and do class visits in Foundation Phase for monitoring and supporting teachers in order for them to improve their teaching of reading; teachers need to make sure that they prioritise reading by engaging learners to participate in various activities that involve reading, and that learners should have access to the reading books that they use at school even at home, so that they could practise reading.

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Review Article

## Investigating Methods and Approaches in Teaching Reading Skills in Sepedi Home Language to Foundation Phase Learners: Primary School in the Capricorn South District \*

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### Abstract

Research shows that South African learners cannot read competently compared to those from other countries. This study investigates the different methods and approaches used in the teaching of reading skills in Sepedi Home Language in Foundation Phase learners with special focus on a primary school in Limpopo Province of South Africa. The research study sought to understand how teachers apply the different methods and approaches in teaching reading in the Foundation Phase so that learners are able to acquire the skills taught. A qualitative research method was used for data collection, in particular interviews and lesson observation. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants in the study, which were the teachers and learners. Thematic analysis was used to analyse all the datasets gathered in this study. Key findings include the following: Learners have varied reading opportunities at school; they have a fairly adequate reading opportunity at home; they were generally dissatisfied with the overall reading time allowed at school; Foundation Phase teachers have a fair understanding of what teaching reading skills entail; current methods used for teaching reading are inadequate; difficulties of teaching reading to non-Sepedi speaking learners; Departmental Heads provide useful support to teachers; and that there is a need to improve the reading skills of Foundation Phase learners. The study recommends that the Departmental officials should schedule regular workshops and do class visits in Foundation Phase for monitoring and supporting teachers in order for them to improve their teaching of reading; teachers need to make sure that they prioritise reading by engaging learners to participate in various activities that involve reading, and that learners should have access to the reading books that they use at school even at home, so that they could practise reading.

**Keywords:** Foundation phase, reading, learners, methods, approaches, skills

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a very important aspect in the process of learning for both the teacher and the learner. It is therefore very important that children early on fully develop their reading skills to progress well with their studies throughout. Reading is one of the basic ways of acquiring information in our society and in academic settings in particular (Spiro et al., 2018). As such, the individual who cannot read well is at a serious disadvantage with respect to education and, consequently vocational opportunities. Research shows that not only does early reading skills lead to success as a child continues to grow, but it serves as an accurate predictor of academic success across the board, at every level and in every subject (Özsevgeç & Mutlu, 2019; Shepard, 2019). Furthermore, it becomes nearly

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impossible for students to catch up and make good academic progress if reading skills are not mastered early.

Since the transition into democracy in South Africa, there is a notable crisis in terms of the quality of education that the learners are subjected to. Research shows that South African children cannot read, write, and compute at grade appropriate levels, with large proportions being functionally illiterate and innumerate (Spaul, 2013). Acquiring reading skills is not automatic, it comes through learning. According to Ngure (2019), the acquisition of reading skills is a complex intellectual process and unlike language, which seems automatic, children require instructions in learning to read and to develop strong reading skills.

### **1.1 Main Research Question**

What are the different methods and approaches used by teachers in the teaching of reading skills in Sepedi Home Language to Foundation Phase learners in a Primary School in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province? The next sub section discusses the sub research questions.

### **1.2 Sub Research Question**

What are some of the things that are working well (successes) with regard to the teaching of reading skills in Sepedi Home Language to Foundation Phase learners?

What are some of the things that are not working well (challenges) with regard to the teaching of reading skills in Sepedi Home Language to Foundation Phase learners?

What is the level of reading competency in Sepedi Home Language to Foundation Phase learners at the sampled primary school?

What intervention strategies can be recommended to improve the acquisition of reading skills in Sepedi Home Language to Foundation Phase learners?

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. Research Model**

The study used a qualitative approach to collect data to draw the conclusions from the interviews and lesson observations conducted. In a qualitative approach, interviews and lesson observation were used to collect data from both teachers and learners in the Foundation Phase. This design was selected for the purpose of investigating different methods and approaches used in the teaching of reading skills in Sepedi Home Language in Foundation Phase learners.

### **2.2. Sample**

Three teachers and twelve learners, four learners per grade from the same school, were purposely selected. The sample size for this study consists of three (3) teachers from the population of sixteen (16) (1 teacher per grade), and twelve (12) learners from the FP grades (4 learners per grade).

### **2.3. Data Collection**

Data were collected through interview questions: a different data set for teachers and learners, as well as observations with teachers and learners as the main objective was to answer the research questions of this study. A voice recorder was used as a tool during both interviews and lesson observations with teachers and learners.

### **2.4. Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data, which were the categorised into themes and presented together with supporting literature.

### 3. RESULTS

The study revealed that learners are largely taught to read by family members like their mothers, sisters, and brothers; learners have varied reading opportunities at school; learners have a fairly adequate reading opportunity at home; learners have varied access to Sepedi reading books at school; learners have access to adequate Sepedi reading material/books at home and that learners were generally dissatisfied with the overall reading time at school. Some of the findings revealed in this study from the teacher's perspective are as follows:

#### 3.1 Current methods used for teaching reading are inadequate

The study indicates that there needs to be improvement on the current methods being used for teaching reading in the Foundation Phase.

*“Reading every day, providing learners with books to read at home and seeking colleagues’ assistance/collaboration”* (Grade 2 teacher).

*“Use of different types of reading books and flash cards”* (Grade 3 teacher).

#### 3.2 Learners are making some progress in their reading abilities

Data shows that learners are making some progress in their reading abilities, though on a larger scale. Data also reveals that the creation of various reading opportunities for learners contributed to the reading improvement amongst learners. However, the lesson observation showed some reading challenges amongst learners.

According to one teacher, *“when learners start to read well, it's an achievement or success when learners read with an understanding of what they couldn't read before”*.

#### 3.3 Difficulties of teaching reading to non-Sepedi speaking learners

One of the key challenges faced by teachers of Foundation Phase in the Sepedi speaking communities was that of teaching reading to non-Sepedi speaking learners. This challenge is also compounded by the growing tendency amongst parents to give more attention to English at the expense of local African languages at home. This has a negative impact on reading in Sepedi.

In the words of the Grade 1 teacher: *“We have learners that are not speaking Sepedi and it's very hard to teach them because Sepedi is not their home language”*.

#### 3.4 Departmental Heads provide useful support to teachers

Teachers clearly indicated that they have the full support of Departmental Heads in their work of teaching reading to learners.

*“They help me to choose relevant materials to teach reading skills”* (Grade 1 teacher).

*“When I teach them reading, some of the time the HOD will be in my class”* (Grade 2 teacher).

*“They provide us with material for reading and anything that is related to teaching and reading for young children. That's the support I get from the head of the department”* (Grade 3 teacher).

#### 3.5 There is inadequate class/school visits by departmental officials

It was mentioned that school or class visits by departmental officials, including curriculum advisers, are rarely conducted. Covid- 9 is raised as one of the reasons behind this inadequate school or class visits.

*“Since Covid-19 we don't see them”* (Grade 3 teacher).

#### 3.6 Foundation Phase learners have an average reading ability

Interviewed teachers rate the reading ability of Foundation Phase learners at an average level. This is an indication that a lot of work still needs to be done to improve the reading competency of the learners.

*“Out of 10% of learners, only 4% can read” (Grade 1 teacher).*

*“I think between 50-60% can read well with fluency and understanding. Others are still struggling” (Grade 3 teacher).*

*“Some can read fluently; others can read but slowly and we have those who can't read at all” (Grade 2 teacher).*

### **3.7 There is a need to improve the reading skills of Foundation Phase learners**

The study shows that there is a serious need to improve the reading skills of foundation phase learners.

*“I think we can have language competitions starting from the grade levels, then we use the phases and move to the circuit lastly, we go to the cluster ... and reading corners in classrooms” (Grade 2 teacher).*

*“Implementation of more different methods and approaches ... and the introduction of independent reading” (Grade 1 teacher).*

*“If learners can visit the library and get more books to read” (Grade 3 teacher).*

### **3.8 Learners struggle to read in Sepedi**

From the lesson observation, it was clear that most of the learners who were given an opportunity to read sentences and paragraphs in Sepedi had some serious reading difficulties. This was evident when some of the learners were battling to pronounce some words and read words incorrectly from the text they were reading individually.

Reading in Sepedi had some serious reading difficulties, especially in Grades 1 and 2. Although the learners indicated in the interview data that they were able to read in Sepedi, their actual reading showed a different picture. Of the seven learners who were given an opportunity to read in Grade 1, only one (the third learner) read his/her sentence correctly. The other six struggled to read, with some getting it correct on second attempts. Some were only able to read the sentences correctly after the teacher's assistance.

In Grade 2, some learners also showed signs of reading difficulties, while some got their Sepedi words correctly, others read them incorrectly. For instance, they said 'feditše' instead of 'fetša', 'dijwalo', instead of 'jwala', and 'thuša' instead of 'nthuša'. Whereas some learners struggled to read full sentences, there were one or two who were able to read sentences with confidence and pronounced the words correctly. The observed Grade 3 lesson was more about the teacher reading and learners reading after her/him. The lesson did not give learners an opportunity to read the paragraphs on their own without the assistance of the teacher, which made it difficult

Key points during the class observations were that teachers read a passage and learners read after the teacher. The lesson was more about the learners reading after their teacher, which in a way was about teaching learners how to read and how to pronounce words. In the end, learners were asked questions about the passage that had just been reading to test their comprehension. However, the lesson did not give learners an opportunity to read the paragraphs on their own without the assistance of the teachers, which made it difficult to assess or examine the reading capacity or skills of the learners.

Key points from the interviews with the learners were that they enjoyed reading; however, the learners indicated that they only have access to one book at school, and most had no access to books at home, and relied on newspapers to practice reading. The learners also indicated that the time spend on reading at school is not enough, and also limited at home, although their family members assisted them with reading. It is concerning that most of the learners interviewed believed that they can read; however, during the practical session, very few could read a full sentence fluently, and most did not even attempt to start reading their sentence.

Key points from the teachers' interviews were that they mainly use teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches; they believe that learners' reading is improving and they are gaining reading and comprehension skills. "They grow academically and they're influenced to write independently". However, another teacher was asked to rate the reading abilities of Grade 1 readers and stated, "Average. Out of 10% of learners, only 4% can read". Most of the teachers cited more time and more books are needed, whereas others feel the learners need to pay more attention to reading, parents should be involved, and visual aids in the classroom would improve reading skills. It is concerning that many teachers mentioned that the visits and support from the department has not resumed after Covid-19, which is critical to assist teachers with strategies to counter the effects of the missed school days.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The most important question that needs to be asked at this point whether the study was able to meet its research objectives and to answer the key research question. Given the data that has been presented above, it is clear that the study was able to meet the research objectives and also answered the key research question. From the findings presented above, we now have a better understanding of the level of the reading skills of the Foundation Phase learners, at least in the study area or the selected school. The departmental officials have to enhance the teaching of reading by doing class visits in Foundation Phase for monitoring and support of teachers for them to improve. Teachers need to be capacitated in terms of teaching so that they are able to assist learners in improving their reading skills. Teachers need to make sure that they prioritise reading above everything. Parents must make provision for the acquisition of books for learners. Again, data indicated that there is a number of learners who rely on newspapers, but newspapers alone are not enough, they need to have reading books. Actually, if they had the same reading books at home as they read in school, it will assist them a lot, because they will read at home and get to understand and by the time they get to school they have a better understanding. However, there is still a need to explore this research area further, particularly the actual solution that will address the persistent poor reading skills amongst South African learners once and for all.

##### *Ethics Committee Decision*

*Due to the scope and method of the study, ethics committee permission was not required.*

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