



Original Research Article

## ‘By Grade 5, learners can read, right?’: Examining the reading ability of Namibian learners

B.L. Liswaniso

University of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia

### ARTICLE INFO

Received: Sept 2022  
Accepted: Sept 2023  
Published: May 2024

#### Keywords:

Decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, Zambezi Region

### ABSTRACT

By Grade 4, English as a second language (ESL) learners are expected to read fluently and be able to read to learn from their grade-appropriate texts. The purpose of this article was to examine the reading ability of learners in Namibian schools (in the Zambezi Region), with a view to enhance the learners’ literacy levels. A quantitative research method was used in which three literacy tests were used in four schools to assess 365 Grade 5 learners’ decoding and reading comprehension levels. The analysis of the results showed that the learners had low decoding and reading comprehension skills. Considering the low reading levels of the learners, it seems the schools do not provide effective instructional practices. The results suggest that there is a need to improve learners’ reading comprehension levels through teacher empowerment to enhance their instructional practices.

### 1. Introduction

Comprehending a text is the main reason for reading; it makes sense, therefore, to assess learners’ reading levels and teach them how to comprehend what they read. By Grade 4, learners should be able to read fluently and comprehend reading materials at their grade level. However, many learners in Africa, particularly in Namibia, go through Primary Phase (Pre-Primary–Grade 7) with weak reading ability and they perform poorly academically (Liswaniso & Pretorius, 2022; Shigwedha, Nakashole, Auala, Amakutuwa & Ailonga, 2017; The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) III, 2010; SACMEQ II, 2005; SACMEQ I, 1998). To date Namibia has participated in four SACMEQ assessments that test reading and mathematics skills at Grade 6 level, namely SACMEQ I (1995), SACMEQ II (2004), SACMEQ III (2007), and SACMEQ IV (2013). The first three SACMEQ assessments found that Namibian

Grade 6 learners were poor readers and had reading comprehension levels below the SACMEQ reading average of 500 points. Even though the Namibian learners performed a bit above the average in SACMEQ IV in 2013, their performance was still not desirable. These SACMEQ results highlight a serious reading challenge in Namibian schools.

Two broad stages are identified in the reading trajectory; the early ‘learning to read’ stage and the later ‘reading to learn’, when reading is used as a learning tool. Learning to read needs to be given special attention in preschool and Grades 1–3 because learning is cumulative in nature (cf. World Bank, 2018; Hernandez, 2011), which means that if the early stage of reading is not properly established, later reading becomes challenging. Pedagogic focus and opportunities for reading to learn, fluent reading, pleasure reading, and reading for meaning should be given priority by Grade 4 for success in

schooling in the upper grades (cf. Liswaniso & Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius, 2014) and for learners to contribute positively in society later in life. Learners who are illiterate can become relatively disadvantaged and if literacy is not achieved for all learners, the inequality gap widens, thus constraining economic growth (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018; Graham & Kelly, 2018).

This article reports the quantitative results of a baseline study which was conducted in September and October 2018 to provide information about the learning and teaching context in Namibian schools (see Liswaniso, 2021). The purpose of this article to examine the reading ability and learning context of learners in Namibian schools (in the Zambezi Region) to establish the learners' reading needs, with a view to mitigate reading failure. Although similar studies had been previously conducted on this topic, the current study included the assessment of decoding aspects in addition to reading comprehension assessment.

### 1.1. The Objectives the study

It is within this broad context that this article examines the reading ability of Namibian learners. The following two research questions were designed to capture salient aspects of the learners' reading levels:

- *What are the decoding and reading comprehension levels of the Grade 5 learners?*
- *What is the relationship between the learners' decoding and their reading comprehension scores?*

Based on the results of the above research questions, conclusions and implications for reading instructional practices are drawn.

## 2. Understanding reading

The purpose of this section is to situate this study within a literacy theoretical framework. The section will provide a brief discussion of reading, its broader context, its components, and some instructional practices.

### 2.1 What is reading?

Reading is regarded as "a complex process that requires the automatic integration of multiple cognitive and linguistic abilities" (McWeeny, Choi, Choe, LaTourrette, Roberts, & Norton, 2022). The purpose of reading is to make meaning of a text (Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Day & Bamford, 1998). A question to ponder is: How do readers understand texts, as in the following example:

Belden decided to be adventurous. He ordered a chai latte. He scalded his tongue after taking a sip.

The above example raises further questions about understanding a text. What kind of meaning do readers make (literal or inferential)? What skills are needed to make meaning? The issues raised in these questions will be addressed throughout this literature review section. Scholars have approached reading from different perspectives, such as a cognitive view (Day & Bamford, 1998) and a sociocultural view (RAND Reading Study Group (RRSG), 2002). The term reading is a construct that encompasses both cognitive and sociocultural views. To fully understand what reading involves, the two views of reading should not be set up as oppositional, but as harmonising views/approaches because each one views comprehension with a different lens.

From a cognitive perspective, reading is defined as the ability to construct meaning "from written representations of language" (Wren, 200, p. 13), or it is a complex process of identifying words in a text to construct meaning (Kocaarslan, 2016; Lee & Spratley, 2010; Day & Bamford, 1998). Cognitive reading can also be described as a process in which a reader constructs a "coherent mental representation of a text" (Kendeou, van den Broek, Helder, & Karlsson, 2014, p. 10). The reading process in the cognitive view involves much of what happens in the mind. The sociocultural approach to reading is concerned with how reading is perceived and valued, how it is practised in a cultural setting, and what is considered as 'adequate' reading. Reading is viewed as a sociocultural activity because it is acquired through social interactions, represents how a specific cultural group (or discourse community, e.g. home) "interprets the world and transmits this information" (RAND Reading Study Group (RRSG), 2002, p. 20). Because of space constraints, this article will focus on the cognitive view of reading.

Kendeou et al. (2014, p. 11) refer to two categories in which the cognitive processes of reading can be classified: Firstly, cognitive reading involves lower level processes (e.g. letter identification and decoding process) of translating "written code into meaningful language units". Secondly, it involves higher level processes (e.g. inferential process) of combining language "units into a meaningful and coherent mental representation". The meaning construction process starts with words (word reading may depend on sub-lexical features such as phonemes and letters), and also occurs at sentence level as well at text level. The process involves the use of general knowledge of the world and knowledge of how texts work. The above example shows that reading is a complex process that goes beyond word level.

To understand the text provided earlier, a reader must have resources to identify words and apply context knowledge (cf. Castles et al., 2018). One has to have means to identify unfamiliar words such as adventurous, chai latte, and scalded, and be able to recognise that the pronoun he in the second sentence indicates that Belden is a proper noun for a male. The reader needs to be aware that ordering a chai latte is part of café/restaurant culture. Additionally, the reader should be able to tell that scalding his tongue implies that a chai latte is something hot, and taking a sip implies that this something hot is a liquid drunk from a cup/mug. One can also infer that being adventurous in this context is not about being physically adventurous but being adventurous in a culinary/food sense. All this shows that reading is a complex process involving a number of interrelated components and skills and need to be taught systematically. This suggests that teachers for English as a second language must have strong content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge about reading to provide effective instructional practices.

Before the term reading comprehension is explained, decoding will be described first because it is the foundation from which reading comprehension is built.

## 2.2 Decoding

Reading consists of decoding and comprehension. Decoding is the process of transforming print (written code) into spoken language by corresponding letters or graphemes to their sounds to access a text's meaning. Efficient decoding skills are critical in reading because they form the surface level of text representation which represents the "exact wording of a text" (Hwang & Duke, 2020, p. 2). This level of text representation is crucial as it provides surface-level memory of the text. Readers with low decoding skills may not read fluently and it becomes quite difficult to comprehend a text.

The major component of decoding influencing reading comprehension is oral reading fluency (ORF). ORF is the ability to recognise words quickly and accurately; it involves reading in phrases and with appropriate expression (Grabe, 2009). Research shows that automaticity in word recognition helps to free the working memory for a reader to concentrate on comprehension of a text (Pretorius & Murray, 2019). Fluent readers recognise words automatically and reading is less taxing to their working memory. Reading fluency is affected by a range of factors such as age or grade level/reading skill, reading purpose and text difficulty.

Reading fluency is usually measured in oral reading

by words correct per minute (WCPM) (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). Skilled readers in English first language (L1) read around 150 WCPM aloud and between 250 and 300 WCPM silently (Grabe, 2010; Nation, 2009). In skilled readers, silent reading is much faster than in poor readers. The shift from oral to silent reading happens around Grade 3. A relationship between fluency and reading comprehension exist in both English L1 and in ESL (Grabe, 2010).

In English home language (HL), oral reading norms have been established based on a large data set involving different grades (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). According to these norms, an average Grade 5 learner at the 50th percentile can increase fluency by 30 WCPM, from 110 WCPM at the beginning of an academic year be able to 139 WCPM by the end of the year. A Grade 5 learner who reads slower than 90 WCPM has a challenge with word recognition (Taylor, 2011). For L1 learners, reading 90 WCPM can be achieved by the end of Grade 3 (the average is 107 WCPM) and by Grade 5 the reading norm is 139 WCPM at the 50th percentile (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006).

As the recommended WCPM by Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006) was done in the context of HL readers, the reading speed may not be the same for ESL readers. For this reason, Pretorius and Spaul (2016) argue that Hasbrouck and Tindal's (2006) reading norms are not appropriate for second language (L2) readers in developing countries. In the ESL context, a reading norm has not yet been established. ESL readers generally read about 20 words per minute slower than their L1 grade peers (Pretorius & Spaul, 2016).

Reading fluency is considered as a 'bridge' between decoding and comprehension (e.g., Wawire, Liang & Piper, 2022). Learners who are not fluent in reading tend to find reading comprehension quite challenging (National Reading Panel, 2000). A study by Pretorius and Lephala (2011) found a strong relationship between English reading fluency and reading comprehension amongst Grade 6 L2 learners ( $r = .80$ ), while a study by Başaran (2013) found reading fluency to be an indicator of reading comprehension among Grade 4s but the relationship was much weaker ( $r = .39$ ). Although there are relatively fewer studies conducted on the relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension in ESL, these studies generally show the importance of reading fluency for reading comprehension in the L2 context, and the results seem to agree with English L1 research findings (Grabe, 2010). It must be noted that reading fluency on its own does not guarantee comprehension, but it is a prerequisite for reading comprehension.



### 2.3 Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension involves the understanding process that occurs when meaning is constructed from a text (Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Pretorius, 2002; Day & Bamford, 1998). This understanding process is mediated through language knowledge, knowledge of a language's written code as well as higher-order reading skills. The RRSg (2002) provides a comprehensive definition of reading comprehension which encompasses both cognitive and sociocultural perspectives. Reading comprehension is defined as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (RRSG, 2002, p. 11). Reading comprehension is affected by many aspects such as ORF, vocabulary knowledge, language knowledge, background knowledge, thinking skills, knowledge of text structure, and reading motivation and interest (Pretorius and Murray, 2019; Aaron, Joshi, Gooden & Bentum, 2008).

### 2.4 Types of reading comprehension

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) framework describes four types of comprehension processes that assess reading comprehension, namely literal comprehension, making straightforward inference, integrating information and ideas, and critical or evaluation comprehension (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, Trong & Sainsbury, 2009).

Literal comprehension is the lower level of reading comprehension and it requires the extraction of explicitly stated information in a text (Liu, 2010; Howie, Venter, van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, du Toit, Scherman & Archer, 2008). This is the easiest level of comprehension which deals with facts presented explicitly in a text and it includes the Who, What, Where, When, and How form of questions whose answers are explicitly stated in the text (Pretorius & Murray, 2019). A reader reading at a literal level does not only understand explicitly stated information, but also tries to relate that information to the information being sought in the question (Mullis et al., 2009). Although this type of comprehension requires little interpretation (and readers are not required to fill gaps in meaning), it is important for forming a text base representation. However, learners need to be taught to process information in a text beyond the literal level for meaningful reading.

Inferential reading comprehension requires readers to go beyond explicitly stated information to fill in gaps in meaning (Mullis et al., 2009). According to Liu

(2010), inferential reading requires readers to draw conclusions, make generalisations, and predict outcomes. Some inferences are easier to make whereas others are more complex. Readers can make inferences between adjacent sentences (local meaning, e.g. determining the referent of a pronoun) and inferences across several sentences or paragraphs (global meaning, e.g. identifying generalisations in a text). This type of comprehension demonstrates reading ability and distinguishes skilled readers from less skilled readers (Pretorius, 2002).

In interpreting and integrating information and ideas, a reader makes inferences or processes the text beyond the sentence level (makes global inferences). The reader integrates text information or meaning with his/her background knowledge and experiences to construct a deeper understanding of the text (Mullis et al., 2009). This shows the importance of prior knowledge and experience in comprehending a text. Examples of this reading level include getting the theme of a text (or overall message), inferring the motive of a character, and determining an alternative to actions of a character.

The last reading comprehension level is critical or evaluation comprehension. When a reader evaluates a text, he/she examines an issue in a text, or the text itself and form an opinion about it (Pretorius & Murray, 2019). Critical or evaluation comprehension gauges a readers' ability to form some kind of judgments about a text. The reader draws ideas from past experiences or from reading other texts, and the text itself to evaluate it.

All Grade 5 learners should at least be able to answer reading comprehension questions at the first two levels (these are literal comprehension and straightforward inferential comprehension). In the PIRLS, this is the Low International Benchmark (400). Internationally, 96% of readers can reach this level (4% cannot) (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Hooper, 2017). In this article, the learners' performance was categorised only into two broad comprehension levels: literal comprehension and inferential comprehension (which included simple and complex inferencing). Learners cope better with simple inferences than with the more complex ones.

### 2.5 Teaching reading comprehension

Learners who are good readers read fluently and understand what they read. Research shows that explicit reading comprehension instruction (i.e. teaching reading strategies explicitly) is more effective than implicit teaching (i.e. through incidental exposure), especially with learners who are reading below their grade level (Çer & Şahim,

2016; Pretorius, 2014; Klapwijk & van der Walt, 2011; Almasi & Hart, 2011; Taylor, 2011). Explicit instruction refers to direct teaching of reading comprehension strategies by making learners aware of the strategies, and teaching them how to apply them consciously while reading.

The National Reading Panel (2000) has identified the following major topics that are central to learning to read: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). These topics are important part of explicit instruction strategies. Older learners at Grade 5 for whom reading is a learning tool, are expected to have some level of reading proficiency and fluency, therefore the instruction at this level should focus on reading comprehension strategies and vocabulary instead of decoding skills (i.e. phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency). However, if the lower reading skills have not developed by Grade 5, it is critical for teachers to teach the skills.

Following Taylor (2011), effective reading instruction in the primary school has four dimensions: Word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension development (Taylor, 2011, National Reading Panel, 2000). This is related to the major topics identified by the National Reading Panel (2000). For children who start decoding or recognising words, it is important that they are first taught the letters of the alphabet, and then sound-letter relationships at pre-primary level. Taylor (2011: xviii) describes four components of “grade-specific models” for reading instruction, to be developed from preschool to Grade 5, which are described below.

#### *How reading develops*

The pre-primary level is expected to develop learners’ oral language, phonemic awareness, and develop emergent literacy. By the end of Grade 1, learners should have developed a sound knowledge of phonemic awareness, letter sounds, and decoding skills. By Grade 2, learners should be able to read graded readers at Grade 2 level. If learners cannot read at Grade 2 level, an intervention should focus on helping the learners read at the appropriate grade level at the beginning of Grade 2 (Taylor, 2011). By the end of Grade 2, the learner should be able to read simple narrative texts. By Grade 3, learners should have developed oral reading fluency, have knowledge of the appropriate vocabulary, and should be able to comprehend narrative and informational texts at their level. Since learners will be required to use textbooks to read to learn in Grade 4, during the course of Grade 3 most readers should be making a transition to silent reading. In Grade 4 and 5, learners should be able to read fluently and comprehend both narrative and informational texts at their age level.

Weak readers in Grade 4 and 5 need to be supported to comprehend what they read, through using comprehension strategies (e.g. questioning, making predictions, using prior knowledge, and comprehension monitoring). In the Namibian context, the ESL Senior Primary syllabus states that by the end of Grade 5 learners should be able to read their grade-level materials independently and should be able to comprehend both narrative and informational texts (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2015).

### **3. Research Methodology**

A descriptive quantitative research design was used to analyse the reading level of Grade 5 learners, with a view to establish whether or not there is a need for a reading intervention. The research method for this study includes the educational context from which data were collected, the participants, and the data collection instruments, as described below.

#### **3.1. School context**

Four primary schools (School 1–4) within Katima Mulilo participated in the baseline study. There were only five schools with Grade 5 classes in the town. One of the five schools was randomly selected to participate in the pilot study, which was conducted in March and April 2018, and the remaining four schools all participated in the main study, which included the baseline assessments. Most of the learners were from homes with low socioeconomic status. The classes were overcrowded and some had over 50 learners in a classroom with a capacity of 35 learners.

The resources were a challenge in the participating schools. The resources that were available were not enough and did not seem readily available. All the schools that participated did not have the full complement of chairs and desks for learners. Many of the available chairs were loose or broken. School 2 did not have a library and teachers were constantly complaining about the shortage of books for learners. Although the other three schools had libraries, the libraries seemed dysfunctional as they were not reader-friendly and had limited reading materials.

A total of seven Grade 5 English teachers and four principals in the four schools were assessed. They displayed limited content and pedagogic content knowledge about reading, as reported in Liswaniso and Pretorius (2022). This background information will be used as a frame of reference for engaging the quantitative data.

**3.2 Participants and sampling**

A total of 365 Grade 5 learners participated in the baseline study. The learners’ ages ranged from 10.1 years to 16.1 years, with a mean age of 11.3 years. School 1 had only two Grade 5 classes whereas Schools 2–4 had four Grade 5 classes each; only two classes were selected per school using the Grade 5A – B stream of classes.

A few learners (9.5% of the total) did not participate, either because they were absent during the assessments or their parents did not give consent for them to participate. Most of the learners who participated in this study were from low socioeconomic homes and many of their parents were illiterate.

**3.3 The research instruments**

In September/October 2018 a baseline study was conducted using three literacy assessment instruments namely, the Burt Word Reading Test (BWRT), the Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) test, and the reading comprehension test. The three research instruments were piloted before being used in the baseline study. For the descriptions of the research instruments, see Liswaniso (2021). The research instruments were administered in the same order as they are listed in this section.

**4. Results of the reading assessments**

The results for decoding assessments (i.e. word recognition and reading fluency) will be presented first, and then the reading comprehension results. Thereafter, the correlations between the reading components will be examined to establish whether there is some kind of relationship in the reading scores of the literacy assessments.

**4.1 Decoding assessment outcomes**

Word reading and oral reading fluency measures were used to assess the learners’ decoding skills. All in all, 338 learners were tested on the BWRT for the baseline study. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the BWRT was .97, which is considered high. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality showed that the data for all the schools were not normally distributed, therefore, non-parametric tests were applied to analyse the data further.

Table 1 shows the learners’ means in terms of real age (in years and months), and BWRT raw score out of 110 items, including the BWRT age. The latter means are based on HL English children. There were no learners who scored zero.

Table 1: Grade 5 BWRT results

	<b>BWRT score</b>	<b>Real age</b>	<b>BWRT age</b>
All (n=338)			
Mean	52	11.3	8.2
SD	19.8		
Minimum- Maximum	1-100	10.1- 16.1	5.4-13.3
Percentiles:	37		
25 <sup>th</sup>	49		
50 <sup>th</sup>	68		
75 <sup>th</sup>			

\* The BWRT comprises 110 words in total.

Table 1 shows that the learners generally had poor word recognition ability. Even the best performing learners at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile had a low recognition word level with a mean of 68. The mean of the BWRT age of these English L2 learners is 3.1 years below the word reading norm of English HL learners of the same age.

Moving from single word reading to passage reading, oral reading fluency performance is described below.

Table 2: Grade 5 ORF test results

	<b>Total words read</b>	<b>Total errors</b>	<b>Words read correctly</b>
All (n=325)			
Mean	66.3	7.5	58.6
SD			32.2
Minimum- Maximum	6–160	1-28	0-158
Percentiles:			35
25 <sup>th</sup>			57
50 <sup>th</sup>			78
75 <sup>th</sup>			

Table 2 shows that on average the Grade 5 learners were reading very slowly, similar to Grade 2 HL readers (Hasbrouck and Tindal, 2006). One learner could not read at all and was even unable to read the title of the ORF text. Only five learners were reading at rates comparable to HL readers.

**4.2 Reading comprehension**

A total of 348 learners wrote the reading comprehension test. The Cronbach reliability coefficient for the test was .82. Table 3 shows the scores for the reading comprehension test in percentages, which was analysed in terms of literal, inferential and total score. The percentage of learners with a zero score was very low (0.6%).



Table 3: Reading comprehension scores

	Literal score	T2 Inferential score	Total score
All (n=348)			
Mean	33.5	20.5	24.6
SD	21.1	12.7	14.4
Min.-Max.:	0-83	0-69	0-74
Percentiles:			
25 <sup>th</sup>	17	12	13
50 <sup>th</sup>	25	19	21
75 <sup>th</sup>	50	31	34

Table 3 shows a weak mean total score of 24.6% for the participating learners in the reading comprehension test. Even the best performing cohorts at the 75th percentile performed below 40%. The weakest performance appears in inferential reading (a mean of 20.5%, compared to 33.5% for literal comprehension). Generally, the results indicate that the learners struggle to comprehend texts, even at the literal level.

**4.3 Relationship between reading components**

Non-parametric Spearman’s rho was applied to determine relationships between the two decoding scores (the BWRT and ORF), and the reading comprehension (RC) test scores.

Table 4: Correlation between ORF, BWRT and reading comprehension

	RC total	Literal	Inferential	ORF	BWRT
RC total				.74	.72
Literal			.72	.68	.66
Inferential				.70	.68
ORF					.84

All correlations highly significant at the .001 level (2-tailed)

**5. Discussion of the results**

The study reported in this article was meant to establish the learning context and reading levels of Grade 5 learners in low socioeconomic schools to determine whether the learners need extra support to enhance their reading skills.

The decoding assessment results in this study showed that the learners had poor word recognition ability and they were reading very slowly (the mean of 58.6). Since ORF is the bridge between decoding

and comprehension (Pretorius & Spaul, 2016), learners need to develop sufficient fluency in reading to benefit from reading texts. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), learners with low reading fluency levels can have difficulties in comprehending their reading materials. According to international standards, learners reading less than 40 words WCPM in English are non-readers and can hardly understand what they read (Draper & Spaul, 2015). In this study, 31% of the Grade 5 learners fell in the category of non-readers. Pretorius and Spaul’s (2016) findings indicated that ESL learners reading below 70 WCPM struggle to comprehend what they read. Following Pretorius and Spaul’s (2016) reading threshold, 69.7% of the learners who participated in this study struggled to comprehend their reading texts.

For the learners in this study whose reading is slow and laborious, understanding aspects of a text at inferential level when reading is even harder. The low reading comprehension in both literal and inferential reading relates to their poor decoding skills. According to McCormick (1995), a score level of 50% or less on a reading comprehension test indicates that the learners are reading at a frustration level. The mean score for the test was 24.6%, suggesting that the learners were reading at frustration level, following McCormick (1995).

The relationship between decoding skills and reading comprehension established in this study supports Gough and Tunmer’s (1986) simple view of reading. In this model, reading comprehension relies on decoding skills and linguistic comprehension. The low reading comprehension levels of learners in the baseline study might have been partially caused by their poor decoding skills. These learners need higher decoding skills for their attention resources to focus on meaning construction rather than on word identification (cf. Kuhn & Stahl, 2003).

Good decoding skills can be a pathway for the learners to develop better vocabulary levels and reading comprehension. Reading is too effortful if decoding takes up all one’s time and cognitive energy. ESL teachers need this understanding and have adequate pedagogic content knowledge to support their learners to develop reading comprehension skills. Teachers’ knowledge about reading relates significantly to their learners’ achievement in reading comprehension (Taylor, 2011). It must be noted that with good instructional practices, ESL learners can perform at similar decoding levels to their English HL peers (cf. Lesaux, Rupp, & Siegel, 2007; Chiappe & Siegel, 1999). ESL learners’ main challenges lie in vocabulary and reading comprehension. Even some of the learners

who appeared to read relatively fast in the ORF test were not able to answer some comprehension questions on parts of the text that they had read. Altogether, the results suggested a need for a reading comprehension intervention.

Although the Grade 5 learners displayed a positive reading attitude (see the findings of the main study, as reported in Liswaniso, 2021), they seemed to receive little support in terms of reading development for them to transform their reading attitude into the motivational drive to read. Positive reading attitudes usually develop when learners are motivated to read (Applegate & Applegate, 2004) or when they can decode without difficulty (Clark & Poulton, 2011). A positive reading attitude is enhanced through reading instruction and opportunities to read. Furthermore, it should be noted that a positive reading attitude does not necessarily translate into action (Guthrie and Knowles, 2001). The positive reading attitude displayed by the poor readers may be aspirational (i.e. how the learners would like to see themselves) rather than how they actually are. Considering the socioeconomic status of the learners, many of them read only in the classroom. Even when reading materials are available, their poor decoding skills may make reading an arduous activity. Therefore, they need direct instruction in decoding and reading comprehension to become better readers.

## **6. Conclusion and implications**

The results of this study showed that the learners were reading very slowly and struggled to comprehend texts at their grade level, suggesting that they needed assistance in enhancing their decoding as well as their reading comprehension skills. From the poor word recognition skills revealed in the baseline study, one may also infer that the learners have low levels of vocabulary knowledge; therefore there was also a critical need for teachers to systematically develop learners' vocabulary levels. Teaching only reading comprehension strategies to learners with poor decoding skills is less likely to be effective because the learners have not yet mastered the lower level reading skills (Castles et al., 2018). Therefore, reading support needed to include three components, namely fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Despite teaching happening in schools, learning to read seems not to have developed to a level that support learning. These poor readers are excluded from learning from their books and they are unlikely to access the Twenty-First century skills needed for economic development (cf. Taylor, 2019). Empowering teachers with content knowledge and pedagogic content knowledge is of paramount

importance so that they could make their instructional practices more effective and so improve learner performance. This could be done through raising awareness of teaching reading, improving their content knowledge, pedagogic knowledge of reading, and providing them with teaching and learning activities. Finally, reading to learn in Namibian schools can be achieved for all learners if in-service teachers receive necessary ongoing support and if teacher training institutions prepare future teachers adequately for teaching reading.



## References

- Aaron, P. G., Joshi, R. M., Gooden, R., & Bentum, K. E. (2008). Diagnosis and treatment of reading disabilities based on the component model of reading: An alternative to the discrepancy model of LD. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 41: 67. DOI: 10.1177/0022219407310838.
- Almasi, J.F., & Hart, S.J. (2011). Best practices in comprehension instruction. In Morrow, L.M. & L.B. Gambrell (Eds.), *Best practices in literacy instruction* (4th ed., pp. 250-275). New York: Guilford Press.
- Applegate, A.J., & Applegate, M.D. (2004). The Peter effect: Reading habits and attitudes of preservice teachers. *The Reading Teacher* 57 (6): 554-563.
- Başaran, M. (2013). Reading fluency as an indicator of reading comprehension. *Education Sciences: Theory and Practice* 13 (4): 2287-2290.
- Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 19 (1): 5-51.
- Çer, E., & Şahim, E. (2016). Improving reading comprehension skills with children's books through metacognitive strategy: The Turkish context. *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 4 (9): 109-119.
- Chiappe, P., & Siegel, L.S. (1999). Phonological awareness and reading acquisition in English-and Punjabi-speaking Canadian children. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 91 (1): 20 – 28.
- Clark, C., & Poulton, L. (2011). *Book ownership and its relation to reading enjoyment, attitudes, behaviour and attainment*. London: National Literacy Trust.
- Day, R.R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Draper, K., & Spaull, N. (2015). Examining oral reading fluency among rural Grade 5 English second language (ESL) learners in South Africa: An analysis of NEEDE 2013. *The South African Journal of Childhood Education (SAJCE)* 5 (2): 44-77.
- Gough, P.B., & Tunmer, W.E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading ability. *Remedial and Special Education* 7 (1): 6-10.
- Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grabe, W. (2010). Fluency in reading: Thirty-five years later. *Reading in a foreign language*, 22 (1): 71-83.
- Graham, J., & Kelly, S. (2018). How effective are early grade reading intervention? A review of the evidence. Policy Research working paper, no. WPS8292. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.
- Guthrie, J. T., & Knowles, K. T. (2001). Promoting reading motivation. In L. Verhoeven & C. E. Snow (Eds.), *Literacy and motivation, reading engagement in individuals and groups* (pp. 159-176). London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hasbrouck, J., & Tindal, G.A. (2006). Oral reading fluency norms: A valuable assessment tool for reading teachers. *The Reading Teacher* 59 (7): 636-644.
- Hernandez, J. D. (2011). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. New York: The Annie E. Casey.
- Howie, S., Venter, E., van Staden, S., Zimmerman, L., Long, C., du Toit, C., Scherman, V., & Archer, E. (2008). *PIRLS 2006 summary report: South African children's reading achievement*. Pretoria: Centre for Evaluation and Assessment.
- Hwang, H., & Duke, N.K. (2020). Content counts and motivation matters: Reading comprehension in third-grade students who are English learners. *AERA Open* 6(1): 1–17.
- Kendeou, P., van den Broek, P., Helder, A., & Karlsson, J. (2014). A cognitive view of reading comprehension: Implications for reading difficulties. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* 29 (1): 10-16.
- Klapwijk, N., & van der Walt, C. (2011). Measuring reading strategy knowledge transfer: Motivation for teachers to implement reading strategy instruction. *Per Linguam* 27 (2): 25-40.
- Kocaarslan, M. (2016). An exploratory study of the relationship between reading comprehension competence, reading attitude and the vividness of mental imagery among Turkish fourth-grade students. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* 8 (4): 675-686.
- Kuhn, M.R., & Stahl, S.A. (2003). Fluency: A review of developmental and remedial practices. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(1): 3-21.
- Lee, C.D., & Spratley, A. (2010). *Reading in the disciplines: The challenges of adolescent literacy*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

- Lesaux, N.K., Rupp, A.A., & Siegel, L.S. (2007). Growth in reading skills of children from diverse linguistic backgrounds: Findings from a 5-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 99 (4): 821-834.
- Liswaniso, B.L., & Pretorius, E.J. (2022). The effects of a 'catch-up' reading intervention for Grade 5 learners and teachers. *Per Linguam*, 38(1): 1–26.
- Liswaniso, B.L. (2021). The design and effects of a catch-up reading intervention for Grade 5 teachers and learners in Namibia. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of South Africa.
- Liu, F. (2010). Reading abilities and strategies: A short introduction. *International Education Studies* 3 (3): 153-157.
- McCormick, S. (1995). *Instructing students who have literacy problems*. Englewood Cliffs: Merrill.
- McWeeny, S., Choi, S., Choe, J., LaTourrette, A., Roberts, M.Y., & Norton, E.S. (2022). Rapid automatized naming (RAN) as a kindergarten predictor of future reading in English: A systematic review of meta-analysis. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 0(0): 1–25. DOI:10.1002/rrq.467.
- Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. (2015). *English Second Language Syllabus (Grades 4 – 7)*. Okahandja: NIED.
- Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Foy, P. & Hooper, M. 2017. *PIRLS 2016 international results in reading*. Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Centre, Boston College.
- Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Kennedy, A.M., Trong, K.L., & Sainsbury, M. (2009). *PIRLS 2011 assessment framework*. Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Centre, Boston College.
- Nation, P. (2009). Reading faster. *International Journal of English Studies* 9 (2): 131-144.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction, reports of the subgroups*. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Child Health and Human development.
- Pikulski, J.J., & Chard, D.J. (2005). Fluency: Bridge between decoding and reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher* 58 (6): 510-519.
- Pretorius, E.J., & Lephala, M. (2011). Reading comprehension in high-poverty schools: How should it be taught and how well does it work? *Per Linguam* 27 (2): 1–24.
- Pretorius, E.J., & Murray, S. (2019). *Teaching reading comprehension*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Pretorius, E.J., & Spaull, N. (2016). Exploring relationships between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension amongst English second language readers in South Africa *Reading and Writing*. DOI: 10.1007/s11145-016-9645-9.
- Pretorius, E.J. (2002). Reading ability and academic performance in South Africa: Are we fiddling while Rome is burning? *Language Matters* 33: 179-208.
- Pretorius, E.J. (2014). Supporting transition or playing catch-up in Grade 4?: Implication for standards in education and training. *Perspectives in Education* 32 (1): 51-76.
- RAND Reading Study Group (RRSG). (2002). *Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Shigwedha, A.N, Nakashole, L. Auala, H. Amakutuwa, H., & Ailonga, I. (2017). *The SACMEQ IV project in Namibia: A study of the conditions of schooling and the quality of primary education in Namibia (SACMEQ Policy Research: Report no. 4)*. Windhoek: Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture.
- Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality. (2010). *SACMEQ III project results: Pupil achievement levels in reading and mathematics. (Working document no. 1)*.
- Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality. (2005). *The SACMEQ II project in Namibia: A study of the conditions of schooling and quality of education. [Compiled by] D. Makuwa*. Harare: SACMEQ.
- Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality. (1998). *The quality of education: Some policy suggestions based on a survey of school, Namibia. (SACMEQ Policy Research: Report no. 2. Series Editor: Kenneth N. Ross.)* Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Taylor, B.M. (2011). *Catching readers, grades 4/5*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Taylor, N. (2019). Inequalities in teacher knowledge in South Africa. In N. Spaull & J.D. Jansen (Eds), *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality – A study of the present situation and future possibilities* (pp. 263–282). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

Wawire, B.A., Liang, X., & Piper, B. (2022). The mediating role of rext reading fluency in reading comprehension in English and Kiswahili: Evidence from multilingual contexts in Kenya. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*. DOI: 10.1080/10573569.2022.2078754.

World Bank. (2018). *World Development Report 2018: Learning to realize education's promise*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Wren, S. (2001). *The cognitive foundations of learning to read: A framework*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.