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Teaching English home language to foundation phase learners from diverse backgrounds

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Background: Teaching English as home language (EHL) could be a complicated process in a country like South Africa, where there are eleven official languages operating in a multicultural society. This requires capacitating teachers with appropriate and relevant strategies to strengthen their teaching, especially in the foundation phase.

Aim: This paper examines the appropriateness and relevance of the extant strategies for teaching EHL comprehension skills to foundation phase learners from diverse language backgrounds.

Setting: This study was conducted in King Cetshwayo District, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Methods: This was a qualitative case study involving four purposively selected grade one teachers in one urban primary in South Africa. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, field observations and document analysis. Content analysis was used to analyse the data.

Results: The two main findings were that (a) the teaching of EHL comprehensions skills lacked the appropriate strategies, and (b) the teachers faced several challenges – including operating under an unclear policy framework, the paucity of strategies in phonological awareness, and the lack of appropriate reflection images to which the learners could be exposed to improve their skills.

Conclusion: The study concludes that adequate and regular professional teacher development programmes and activities are needed to enable teachers to do their work more effectively.

Contribution: By closely and systematically examining the strategies used by teachers who were non-native English speakers, to teach EHL to leaners who were also non-native English speakers, this study has made important contributions to both attendant theory and classroom practice.

Keywords: English home language; comprehension skills; foundation phase; diverse language backgrounds; Grade 1 learners.

Introduction

In South Africa, teachers, parents, employers and professionals contend that there is a crisis concerning the continuing inability of learners to read and understand what they have read, especially in the foundation phase (Govender & Hugo 2020; Rule & Land 2017). Indeed, many studies have consistently reported that South African learners' abilities to read and appreciate what they have read at both national and international levels are poor (Dlamini 2018; Govender & Hugo 2020; Naidoo, Reddy & Dorasamy 2014; Noor 2016; Rule & Land 2017; Zimmerman 2014). In the same regard, the Annual National Assessment (ANA) of 2014 also recorded very low output in literacy skills by South African learners who exhibited an inexcusably low literacy rate (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011). On the international platform, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) conducted in 2016 revealed that Grade 4 South African learners were neither able to 'read for meaning nor retrieve basic information from a text to answer simple questions' (Schmidt, Condy & Tiba 2021:268). Furthermore, the study showed that by far the majority of South African Grade 4 learners 'did not have basic reading skills by the end of the Grade 4 school year' (Howie et al. 2017).

The challenge of text understanding by learners in South Africa is compounded by the fact that more and more teachers face learners coming from increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Diallo & Maizonniaux 2016). This suggests the need for inclusive teaching strategies,

which could benefit learners from different backgrounds. Currently, it is common to find learners who are culturally, linguistically, ethnically and socio-economically different from one another – all sitting together in the same classroom. More specifically, since the advent of democracy in the country in 1994 and the discontinuation of segregated development on the basis of race and ethnicity, teaching learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds has increasingly become the norm rather than the exception.

Similar cases exist in other countries around the world, with a focus on finding ways of teaching comprehension skills effectively to learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Diallo & Maizonniaux 2016). For example, the influence of diversity has presented extraordinary challenges for language teachers in the United States, Canada, Australia and most European Union countries, where learners of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds must navigate conventional curricula in a new language that is dominant in schools (Diallo & Maizonniaux 2016).

Concomitantly, the performance of learners in the English language, which has been used by most schools as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), has been worrisome. In general, the poor language performance has been attributed to the fact that these classrooms are made up of learners coming from different language backgrounds. Accordingly, this has brought into focus the importance of paying attention to the messages that the existing methods of comprehension instruction communicate to learners from such a variety of backgrounds and how these methods work in such classrooms in promoting literacy learning for all learners (Hammerberg 2004; Joubert et al. 2019).

It was against this background that the researcher conducted this case study to examine the appropriateness and relevance of the extant strategies used to teach English home language (EHL) comprehension skills to foundation phase learners from diverse language backgrounds. Thus, the central theme of this study was to explore how teachers who were non-EHL speakers taught EHL to learners who were also not EHL speakers. Indeed, there are some differences in how EHL is taught and assessed by EHL versus non-EHL teachers (Hyland & Anan 2006). So for South Africa, which has provided for EHL to be taught by non-EHL speakers to learners who are not EHL speakers from as early as the foundation phase, this matter must be taken seriously and explored – especially given the preponderance of evidence showing the importance of teaching young learners in their own home languages (Wiseman & Odell 2014, 2020).

More specifically, therefore, the main theme of this article is on the teaching of EHL comprehension skills by non-native English speakers to Grade 1 learners from diverse non-EHL linguistic backgrounds. At the point of entering Grade 1, these learners are not yet able to read English texts at all. The article first presents a review of pertinent literature, leading into a description of the study's theoretical framework, the

research methods and then a reporting of the results. In doing so, the authors sought to contribute to the research into foundation phase teaching concerning the challenges of teaching EHL by non-EHL speakers. Of necessity, this situation evokes the notion of culturally relevant teaching, which typically emphasises teachers' attempts to have culturally and linguistically diverse students sustain their own cultural values, instead of assimilating mainstream cultures.

Statement of the problem

The EHL comprehension skills are part of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum for the foundation phase, encompassing the following three main focus areas: (1) listening and speaking, (2) reading and phonics and (3) writing and handwriting (DBE 2011). In this respect, the department directs that the teaching of home language level should provide for language proficiency that reflects the basic interpersonal communication skills required in social situations and the cognitive academic skills essential for learning across the curriculum – emphasising the teaching of the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills at this language level. This is carried out to provide learners with a literary, aesthetic and imaginative ability that will provide them with the capacity to recreate, imagine and empower their understandings of the world they live in.

However, it has generally been observed that most teachers use oratorical reading approaches, which are not based on understanding the passage but on fluency and word pronunciation, to teach EHL – leading to the majority of learners not clearly understanding what is being said as well as what they read, because this approach is not a successful way for learners whose home language is not English (Gove & Cvelich 2010). Therefore, it is argued that the focus must be on teaching strategies that can help learners to understand what is being taught in a language they initially do not understand. This is particularly relevant to learners in the foundation phase, whose English comprehension skills still need to be developed from scratch.

Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies currently used to enhance the teaching of EHL comprehension skills to learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the foundation phase, with a view to finding out how these strategies could be enhanced. More specifically, this study sought to address the following research question: what are the strategies used by foundation phase teachers to teach EHL comprehension skills to learners from diverse language backgrounds?

Literature review

Literature on literacy has shown that there are very few studies on the teaching of EHL comprehension skills to foundation phase learners who are not English native

speakers and instead come from diverse African language backgrounds. In the meantime, there is a great outcry that many South African foundation phase teachers lack the ability to teach EHL comprehension skills to their learners – who typically come from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Madikiza et al. 2018). Kotze, Van Der Westhuizen & Barnard (2017) advocate comprehension skills as a strategic mechanism in which readers use the context of the text as a guide in accordance with their current information. In the same vein, Cekiso & Madikiza (2014) affirm the point that the awareness of teachers and their application of reading strategies is necessary for developing learners' reading skills.

Similarly, Mvududu & Burgess (2012) aver that the teacher should be encouraged to develop awareness about the learning needs of learners from diverse language backgrounds in order to design and adopt appropriate teaching strategies and approaches. As such, teachers must understand the importance of relying on some strategies, including representing learners' language knowledge in the classroom as well as using linguistic diversity as a learning resource for all learners to benefit from their lessons (Calvo 2017). This way, the teacher can produce meaningful results with regard to reading instruction, especially considering that learners who are weak in English comprehension skills are likely not to have the necessary command and skills in the language to successfully pursue higher education and other careers (Cassata 2016).

Klapwijk (2016) & Calvo (2017) propose teacher development activities to enhance teaching EHL comprehension skills to foundation phase learners from different backgrounds. The proposed teaching approaches entail the incorporation of EHL comprehension skills into initial teacher education programmes as part of their preservice training for professionalism in the current global world. However, both preservice and in-service teachers need to be supported with strategies to manage classroom linguistic diversity. Klapwijk (2016) believes that if teachers approach their job with a change of direction, this could imply more successful practice in providing learners with information and equipping them with the necessary skills.

Policy is another factor that has emerged in some countries as a possible constraint in the teaching of EHL comprehension skills. A study conducted by Dhillon & Wanjiru (2013) in Kenyan primary schools revealed that the efforts made by teachers to address the challenges of teaching English in the context of unclear national language policies were notable. The *South African Schools Act*, Act 84 of 1996 (Department of Education 1997), which stipulates that learners be taught in English only from Grade 4, is a case in point. The policy states that teaching at the foundation phase should be conducted in the learners' home languages, which according to PIRLS accounts for poor results of learners in EHL comprehension skills at Grade 4 (PIRLS 2017). The global use of the English language affirms the position that English-language reading comprehension is important for many reasons – including the notion that the English language is positioned as (1) a universal language, (2) the language of science and technology and (3) the language of modern inventions and discoveries (Alqarni 2015).

On the question of the methods of teaching, Klapwijk (2016) opines that teaching approaches can affect the achievement of foundation phase learners in EHL comprehension skills, particularly where most of the learners come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, it is important that foundation phase teachers explore and use the most effective strategies to teach EHL in the context of classrooms with learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Certainly, in South Africa, there is an urgent need for appropriate and effective teaching strategies within the context of the plurality of linguistic and sociocultural classrooms, especially in the implementation of the espoused school curriculum for early reading education. A good starting point would be to give cognisance to the development of preservice teachers so that they are well informed in their preparation and instructional approaches that suit teaching EHL in diverse linguistic settings (Ngwaru 2017). It is important to ensure that learners have a clear understanding of what good reading is, as well as the benefits behind learning EHL.

Theoretical framework

A schema is a high-level complex knowledge structure that functions as scaffolding in the organisation and interpretation of experience (He 2016:143). The schema theory describes the acquisition of knowledge and skills as an interactive process, which is neither 'an exclusively bottom-up process nor exclusively top-down process' (He 2016:143). This study adopted the schema theory as its theoretical framework (Rumelhart 1980), juxtaposed with Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978). According to Rumelhart (1980), the schema theory illustrates how readers use existing experience to understand and learn new information from the text. The theory asserts that a written text holds little meaning of its own without relating it to learners' previous language skills and encouraging the learners' interactions with new ideas. This theory allows readers to derive meaning from their previous knowledge systems. In concurrence, Al-Jarrah (2018) agrees that a linguistic schema is like letter information and sound correspondence. In furthering this school of thought, it is understood that readers indulge in reading to obtain knowledge – thereby implying that the interpretation of text makes the schema theory a cognitive activity that processes signals, perceptions and skills (Almutairi 2018). In basic terms, the schema theory is an expression of a proposition within the cognitive framework, which can be designed to apply to conceptual development. In practical terms, a schema represents an academic operation which organises the learner's knowledge structure (Liu 2015).

Within the context of this article, the schema theory was regarded as critical to the process of reading as it adequately helps to explain why readers with correct schemata may be expected to significantly perform better than those whose

schemata lack the understanding of words and object relations. Thus, the schema theory provides the readers with textual direction on how to recover meaning from knowledge previously acquired (Al-Jarrah 2018; Pourmohammadi 2016). The reason for this is that a comprehension ability requires applying what a reader has already learned from a new message (Alqarni 2015; Pour-Mohammadi 2016).

In line with the schema theory, Vygotsky coined the term ZPD to explain conditions under which learning may occur. In terms of his model, the learner needs to be brought into the cognitive space where he or she is in possession of the essential background knowledge or skills to be able to relate to new concepts. In this regard, this conceptualisation of the conditions for learning is complementary to what the schema theory espouses. Accordingly, within the context of the classroom, it is the teacher's responsibility to bring the learner into the ZPD to ensure that learning takes place as planned. So effective teachers are those who are able to mediate learning successfully for learners in this 'zone' and ensure that as many of them attain a level of independence to learn on their own. Cooperative learning will thrive in the ZPD, as each learner is supported both by peers and the teacher towards attaining the espoused learning outcomes. In this regard, Vygotsky recommends that teachers should always be alert for any mismatch between the requirements of a task and the ability of the child to finish that task. In other words, teachers should be aware of the current level of understanding a child has and the difficulty level of the upcoming task (McLeod 2012).

In this respect, giving the example of listening skills, He (2016:143) advocates presenting the learning of listening skills in three stages, namely (1) the pre-listening stage, consisting of 'warming-up activities' conducted in order to familiarise learners with the listening materials to follow, as well as activate their extant schemata and build up new ones; (2) the while-listening stage, where several activities are carried out in order to help learners achieve successful listening, including training them (learners) to make predictions, associations and inferences on the basis of their extant schemata; and (3) the post-listening stage. In this stage, learners may be:

- required to repeat sentences, make sentences and reconstruct dialogues and passages with the help of the responses they had written in the while-listening stage
- asked to retell the story, while teachers assist learners by providing cues and reminders
- required to undertake related consolidation activities, such as note-checking, role-play, debate, speeches and summarising
- Asked to respond to after-class assignments about memorisation, recognition and reconstruction of sentences as well as reconstruction of schema, in order to help learners with both short-term and long-term memory work.

This example of listening skills could be generalised and extended to the acquisition and other language skills.

In summing up, the schema theory deals with the method of reading, in which readers are required to integrate their previous experience with the new text they are reading. Thus, reading with the activation of the schema will allow the learner to disseminate new information in a concrete manner into the prior knowledge system (Gilakjani & Ahmadi 2011; Lekota 2014; Liu 2015). Accordingly, from the teaching point of view, this entails that learner be assisted to associate their existing background knowledge with the incoming information. From this interaction, the extant schema is activated – thereby evolving into a new schema. This means that learners who do not have an appropriate schema for what is being taught would find it hard to acquire the intended knowledge and comprehension skills. It is the responsibility of the teacher to bring the learner into Vygotsky's ZPD so that they can also share in the knowledge and skills that are being developed (Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi 2010:248). This is how the task of successfully accomplishing the teaching and learning interface is achieved. This explains the importance and rationale of both the schema theory and Vygotsky's ZPD in the teaching of the comprehension skills of EHL, which involves reading and understanding the text, the perspective and the related skills to be applied while reading for comprehension.

Research methods

The research methods used in this study are presented briefly here under the various subheadings.

This investigation adopted the qualitative or interpretive research paradigm to explore teachers' experiences of teaching EHL comprehension skills to learners from diverse language backgrounds. Research in the interpretive paradigm reflects the reality of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the individuals concerned (Creswell 2014; Creswell & Poth 2018; Kuhn 2014). The qualitative or interpretive researcher seeks to retain the truth in social pedagogy that remains central in ontological and aetiological analyses requiring an interpretation of human life – in the context of being with others and being in the universe (Creswell & Poth 2018; Scotland 2012).

The objectives of qualitative research designs are interpretative and naturalistic (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018; McMillan & Schumacher 2014). Thus, qualitative research is typically situated within participants' natural environments, seeking to make sense of, or explain, phenomena in terms of the interpretations that the people living in those environments bring to the research (Creswell & Poth 2018; Yin 2018). Overall, qualitative research aims at gaining an understanding of the lives of people from their points of view and recognising the concepts that people use, as well as how people construct what they construe as the truth.

Research design

More specifically, this study adopted a qualitative case study research design, involving one primary school located in

Empangeni, King Cetshwayo district, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The qualitative case study design was found to be appropriate for this study for being descriptive, comprehensive, explorative and contextual in its nature and aims. Accordingly, it was envisaged that the qualitative or interpretative case study design would allow the researcher to gather in-depth information from foundation phase teachers of EHL comprehension skills.

A case study is an in-depth analysis of a particular case, while the case could be a person or group of people exhibiting some behaviours or characteristics of interest (Creswell & Poth 2018). The use of a case study demonstrates and authentically deepens the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Bertram & Christiansen 2014). In a case study, the researcher aims to assess and observe the participants regarding a particular situation (Cohen et al. 2018; Maree 2016), thus helping to facilitate a full understanding of the case (Creswell & Poth 2018). In this study, it was envisaged that focusing on the challenges faced by foundation phase EHL teachers of learners from different language backgrounds would help the researcher gain deeper perspectives about the teachers' experiences and practices and capture the degree and importance of their strategies in teaching EHL comprehension skills, in line with the research objective.

Population and sampling technique

Grade 1 teachers were purposively selected for possessing information and having the experiences and knowledge to help the researcher to address the research question of the study (Creswell 2014). The unique characteristics in this context included teachers who taught Grade 1 EHL comprehension skills to learners from diverse language backgrounds but were themselves not native EHL speakers. The research sample comprised recently graduated EHL teachers and those with more than 5 years of teaching experience. The mother tongue of all the four participating teachers was isiZulu.

Data collection and analysis

The study employed a multimethod approach that included the use of in-depth semistructured interviews and direct classroom observations. Both deductive and inductive reasoning methods were used in data collection and analysis. Data analysis involved transcription of audio-recorded data as well as coding to generate themes from the collected data. The semistructured interviews allowed for open-ended responses that provided individual teachers an opportunity to narrate their perspectives and demonstrate their understanding of teaching EHL comprehension skills to Grade 1 learners from different language backgrounds. Semistructured interviews are perfect for analysing questions and recognising the views and clauses of the respondents' clarifications about issues being probed (Creswell 2014). The raw data were analysed for patterns that emerged, in line with the tenets of qualitative data analysis (Bertram & Christiansen 2014; Male 2016). Accordingly, in the initial stage of this interpretive analysis, the researcher remained close to and immersed in the data set and avoided as much as possible the temptation to start coding or prematurely jumping to broad categorisations of the data. It was only once the researcher was familiar with the data that she started to see patterns emerging. These were in the form of individual words, phrases and sentences. At this point, the researcher started making detailed analyses of small sections of the data from the themes that best represented the data. In this process, the researcher moved from open coding, which involved immersion in the data set and identifying emergent patterns, to axial coding – which involved linking individual open codes into categories or clusters, which are used to develop theoretical themes and concepts.

Ethical considerations

Ethics are the standard for judging proper and improper behaviour (Bertram & Christiansen 2020). In qualitative research methods, seven ethical concepts are important: informed consent and voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, credibility, authenticity, dependability and confirmability (Creswell 2014; Creswell & Poth 2018).

To conform to the ethical principles of informed consent and voluntary participation, potential participants were informed that participation in this research was voluntary, and the participants were not coerced into participation and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. With respect to confidentiality, the names of the participants were only known to the researcher (Creswell 2014). Furthermore, the researcher ensured that the identities of the respondents were only known to herself; even in the case of semistructured interviews, pseudonyms were used. The anonymity of the participants was maintained by using pseudonyms to stand for the four teachers who participated in the study, while credibility was achieved by explaining and clarifying the various aspects of the study to the participants to allow them to understand the circumstances and characteristics of the research (Polit & Beck 2012).

Dependability was achieved through triangulation, using three data sources to complement each other, namely interviews, direct observations and documentary analysis (Bhandari 2020; Schwandt, Lincoln & Guba 2011). To achieve authenticity, the qualitative research approach followed in the study was deemed to be both appropriate and adequate in addressing the stated research objectives. Furthermore, the researcher had the ability to undertake the study using appropriate techniques that enabled her to harness the feelings and experiences of the participants. Regarding confirmability, the participants were given an opportunity to verify the accuracy and correctness of their responses before the final results were finalised, thereby confirming that the collected data reflected the responses of the participants and not the bias of the researcher (Bertram & Christiansen 2014; Cohen et al. 2018).

Results and interpretation

This study sought to explore the strategies employed by foundation phase teachers to teach EHL comprehension skills to learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. From the transcripts of the semistructured interviews, classroom observations and documentary analysis, the researcher identified dominant patterns in the strategies used in teaching English comprehension skills and then clustered them and assigned thematic names to them. Most of these strategies are the commonly used ones for teaching EHL comprehension skills, which also assist learners to decode meanings from what they read. This improves learning with understanding. Altogether, there were six strategies that were created from the emergent themes, namely (1) using phonological awareness to introduce letters and sounds; (2) using creativity from a 'special reading book' for learners; (3) a focus on vocabulary, pronunciation and repetition; (4) using games, puzzles and songs to enhance comprehension skills; (5) using additional technical strategies; and (6) doing instant learner correction during lessons. These are presented and discussed next.

Using phonics to introduce letters and sounds

The results indicated that all the four participating teachers started their lessons by using phonics to introduce sounds and letters as a common strategy. The participants stressed the importance of using this strategy during the teaching of EHL comprehension skills to their learners and indicated that they used different ways of teaching sounds and letters to the learners. In their own words, this was what they had to say:

'I show a picture on the board, ask learners what they are seeing. Learners tell the things they see in the picture. Learners can see the related things of the picture that they see on the board. Young learners like to compare things by doing that, they add vocabulary because they will come across different pictures in the text.' (PA1)

'It is good to me as a teacher that my learners can identify pictures in advance before I tell them what to do … I tell a story to ask learners to repeat sounds. Learners give words with related sounds. That is good to me as a teacher that my learners can identify pictures in advance before I tell them what to do.' (PA2)

'I put flashcards with pictures on the board, let the learners read after me. When they are reading on the board, I point to the letters, sound by sound. In the end they pronounce the whole word.' (PA3)

'I write the sight words on the board and read word sounds to them repeatedly. While doing that, I point to the letter corresponding to the sound, then the whole word, to motivate or encourage pronunciation.' (PA4)

PA4 went further:

'I read word by word with them, pointing with the ruler to help them to identify sounds. This method of pointing word by word has an advantage and disadvantage, but I use it. Because in the end, they pronounce words to me one by one.'

PA4 stated that *sight words* were compulsory for learners to be familiar with before commencing with EHL comprehension skills of the 'special reading book'. This indicated that PA4 believed in learners starting with *building up words using sounds*, *repeating sight words* then proceeding to *sentences*, *paragraphs* and *storybooks*.

PA4's approach agrees with the views of Van Der Walt, Evans & Kilfoil (2009) that the effective approaches of teaching EHL comprehension skills need to increase assertiveness to address existing challenges in learning at the foundation phase level. This view is based on the understanding that teaching EHL comprehension skills to foundation phase learners from diverse backgrounds plays a significant part in the learners' education. Indeed, phonics could be a significant approach to improving the teaching of EHL with respect to learners from different language backgrounds. Hugo et al. (2016) stress the point that it is important for learners to consider word recognition to acquire adequate vocabulary for learners' comprehension of their grade level reading for academic success.

Learners come to school with cultural awareness that influences their approach to acquire a new language. The learners navigate and learn new concepts by using their individual worldviews as their reference points or schemata. Therefore, it is important that the methods used by teachers are well aligned to the ways learners learn. In the context of this study, the use of the EHL-in-Education strategy helped connect the worldviews of learners with the new information. This enhanced learner comprehension and deep learning, thereby leading to the actualisation of the learners' full potential. This way, learners understood what was being taught and were assisted to gain the target EHL comprehension skills through the comments of the participants and by using various ways of presenting letters and sounds.

Creativity through the use of the 'special reading book' for learners

Participants revealed that they used stories with pictures from the EHL-in-Education book and gave them to learners as a strategy to increase their EHL comprehension skills. According to the participants, learners listened attentively throughout the lesson as their teachers read them stories, contending that stories with pictures easily made the learners understand the meaning of the stories before the introduction of the content. The teachers regarded using stories with pictures as a prerequisite to teaching EHL comprehension skills to Grade 1 learners. In this regard, the teachers expressed themselves as follows:

'Really, this makes them happy; when I tell a story, while learners listen attentively to the story. After that, I ask learners about the sound that is repeated several times in the story. After that, I ask them also to give me words with the same sounds that we are learning.' (PA1)

'I give learners [an] A4 worksheet with pictures of the sound that they are learning, intending to see whether they can identify the

sound or letter. In the worksheets, learners write following the dotted lines. After that, those who are fast are able to quickly identify that those letters form a word that they were sounding.' (PA2)

'Learners won't be the same … I ask learners to draw any picture with the sound that they have learned, and learners end by colouring the drawn picture. Yes, some learners are very creative; they even explain the drawn picture, and that makes me feel that I have worked.' (PA3)

'I let learners copy the sight words from the board while pronouncing them. Sight words are always on the wall. After they have read, I ask them to draw pictures that will have the sound of the sight words, as they have seen which words have the common sounds.' (PA4)

To the respondents, learning to read is one of the most important things that a learner wishes to achieve in EHL. The given excerpts illustrate how helpful the participants found the use of sight words, sounds and images in facilitating learners' attainment of the required EHL comprehension skills. Indeed, many reports indicate that matching words with semantically related pictures facilitates word recognition and memory – thereby showing that pictorial stimuli reinforce and facilitate learning and comprehension of new words and text (Chien 2015; Hazamy 2009; Shmidman & Ehri 2010; Strauber et al. 2020). However, there is also evidence that pictures may be helpful but can also serve as false 'cues' for word recognition (Dittlinger & Lerman 2011:341; Meadan, Stoner & Parette 2008). In particular, Meadan, Stoner & Parette (2008:47) contend that the use of matching pictures while introducing new words to learners could be detrimental to their future learning because the children may have to depend on 'extra cues' when faced with unknown words. For their part, Dittlinger & Lerman (2011:341) reported that their research participants 'learned the words more quickly when they were presented alone rather than with pictures, regardless of their prior learning history with respect to pictures representing the words'. Therefore, some caution needs to be exercised when this strategy is used.

Motivating learners in pronunciation, vocabulary and repetition

The respondents contended that pronunciation was a big problem for many learners and reported that many learners mispronounced many words:

'Yoh, I do this to help learners so that they can read. Repetition is good for my young learners, and after that, I give them a chance to repeat and repeat a word.' (PA1)

She continued:

'Yes, I motivate learners to pronounce the words, but you know, kids are kids. What I have seen that works for me: repetition helps. Although others are good to cram words, in the end, they can pronounce words.'

'Mmm, I monitor them … by standing nearby to encourage pronunciation. What I love with my learners is that they like to impress me as their teacher that they know.' (PA2)

'Yes, I usually give myself time to monitor them to ascertain whether words are correctly read. As you know, young learners

copy others only to find that I mix words after someone has pronounced the word.' (PA3)

'Repetition is good, but it is not good because good learners are crammers, but I have a way of catching them. They always read for me in the reading corner.' (PA4)

This strategy focuses on how learners learn to read correctly and fluently – and how they find meanings of words used in the text to understand the text provided to them by teachers. From classroom observations, it was clear that the teachers were able to converse well in English, but the learners were only able to do so very slightly. A classroom situation that does not encourage students to read lacks a reading culture. In this study, the participants were pleased with how they taught pronunciation; however, some of them gave a number of reasons why they were not satisfied with some of the recommended strategies, which they characterised as 'oratorical'. According to them, instructions on pronunciation simply take too much time, whereas they had limited time. Thus, the teachers opined that more resources were needed to provide guidance on pronunciation. One of the teachers felt that because pronunciation was not assessed, this discouraged teachers from spending too much time on it.

Using games, puzzles and songs to enhance comprehension skills

The results of this study indicated that learners loved and had fun playing games, working out puzzles and engaging in song. This was reflected in the following comments by the respondents:

'Ja, I give them puzzles to sort and arrange the words accordingly. Puzzles excite them, and I can see when they start to arrange word-puzzles. Learners who are shy work hard, as my school is having resources. Each child has a puzzle … learners use the strategies … unaware. As a Grade 1 teacher, I must use different skills to encourage my learners.' (PA1)

'Yes, to fit the puzzle, word and game meaning. Learners like that, as to them it is like a play, while to me they are learning because they read the words at the same time. I start with difficult words to explain, and then let them sort the puzzle. Sorting of words makes them crazy as there are pictures that direct them.' (PA2)

'Songs and games are helping my learners to learn new sounds quickly. I like to play with them as that makes them feel at ease while we are doing our schoolwork. I usually ask them to create a game with the sound of the week … using the learned words. Games help them to remember sounds and make words also.' (PA3)

'I teach them songs with the sounds … always, they sing even outside … during the recess time. What I have seen with my Grade 1 learners is that they like something that will make them play while learning at the same time. Sometimes, they use what they have seen on TV as an example of sounds.' (PA4)

These interview excerpts reflect the participants' belief in the effectiveness of the strategy of using 'active play' activities in teaching EHL vocabulary and word usage. Songs can help automate the teaching of EHL comprehension skills to enhance practice. In effect, the learner is placed in an area

where the targeted language can be used in communicative situations. Where there was a clear lack of interest, the teachers inspired the learners by using contemporary songs as a teaching tool. The skills learned were then moved to learning other parts of the language curriculum.

The application of song and music as a motivational tool in teaching and learning in the classroom was affirmed as leading to creative and improved language performance. Games, puzzles and songs are some of the learning materials that could be used to avoid classroom boredom. They potentially could play a special role in the teaching of learners from different language backgrounds. The inclusion of games during class time benefits both learners and teachers. In addition, teachers can achieve the intended educational outcomes by using games, especially when teaching vocabulary.

Use of drills and modelling

The participants remarked that drills helped to highlight the importance of practice, and practice is key to developing communicative skills. From classroom observations, the researcher observed teachers making great efforts to model the proper pronunciation of words:

> 'You know, the learners can't read English, as it is not their home language, but need to be directed. Modelling and drills are the best method for my Grade 1 learner, as even the pronunciation needs to be done correctly.' (Female, Grade 1 teacher, 40 years old)

> 'Oh no, this method helps my learners to grasp words easily. And by doing drills, it improves their vocabulary.' (Female, Grade 1 teacher, 47 years old)

> 'Oh, it's hard to say much about reflective image as learners are not the same, but drills work for me. Learners imitate their teacher a lot. While I was using this method, other learners gave me a new word with the same sound. I was very excited to see that they had started to understand, bit by bit.' (Female, Grade 1 teacher, 56 years old)

These excerpts showed that the respondents found the drill and modelling strategies to be effective in assisting learners to acquire skills and abilities in grammar and practise EHL rules. Through listening, imitating and performing skilful tasks, learners obtain a new form of verbal competence, explicitly or inexplicitly. In this study, the participants reported that they found dialogues and drills to motivate learners from diverse language backgrounds. However, they decried the lack of ongoing teacher development training opportunities and clear teaching strategies from the CAPS documents, with regard to the teaching of EHL for foundation phase learners.

Instant learner correction during lesson

The participating teachers concurred with the notion that correcting learners instantly in class, as well as active participation, improved the attainment of EHL comprehension skills. In this regard, the teachers had the following to say:

> 'In this time, learners find it difficult to exhibit comprehension skills in English HL. Oh yes, this is why there is a need for English HL [*home language*] comprehension skills training to be

provided to help teachers to teach learner[s], strategies to develop the skills and knowledge for quick understanding of reading materials.' (Female, Grade 1 teacher, 35 years old)

> 'Sometimes learners like to be corrected by their peers, and that makes me see the improvement of EHL comprehension skills.' (PA2)

> 'Correcting learners in the class promotes good English HL comprehension skills, articulation and concentration. While I am correcting the other one, those who are quick also correct the peer group member.' (PA3)

> 'I do usually correct them while reading, as that helps to identify the mistakes quickly. As you know that learners like to play, all the time they need to be corrected.' (PA4)

From these verbatim responses, the respondents supported the view that feedback and corrections are essential, not only to serve as a progress display by a learner but also as a platform to raise their motivation.

Writing and reading require additional technical strategies

The participants stated that technology assisted learners to understand the text. Furthermore, they stated that the acquisition of EHL comprehension skills is something that develops over a long period of time. The data showed that teachers had other ideas that they thought would increase their learners' knowledge of EHL in Grade 1. Some of these ideas included the incorporation of information technology into teaching and learning. The participants gave the following motivating points:

> 'I give learners worksheet with pictures to see if they can identify missing letters in the word and fill them in. Sometimes you can find that they mix letters, but that needs me as a teacher to correct them before it goes further.' (Female, Grade 1 teacher, 35 years old)

> 'I give learners worksheets to match words with the pictures. What is exciting here is that my learners know technology, as they usually play with their parents' phones.' (Female, Grade 1 teacher, 40 years old)

> 'I give learners a few short sentences to circle the learned sound of the week. In trying to find out whether they are able to identify the sound, even those who were struggling manage to finish their work.' (Female, Grade 1 teacher, 47 years old)

The excerpt from PA2 indicates the importance of technology in encouraging learners to be *au fait* with reading while playing around with their phones. She expressed hope that technology could contribute a lot to learners' knowledge and understanding. Overall, the participants in this study contended that strategies were needed to enhance their lessons in the teaching of EHL comprehension skills.

Discussion of findings

This was an exploratory study, investigating the strategies used to teach EHL comprehension skills to foundation phase learners from diverse language backgrounds. From the collected data, main themes were inductively and interpretively generated. Data from the semistructured interviews with the four participating teachers and from classroom observations revealed that teaching EHL comprehension skills to Grade 1

learners was a very difficult activity. Teachers had to continuously navigate between working as learning facilitators and as information transmitters.

Findings of the study showed that the participating Grade 1 teachers preferred to use phonics and letters to introduce their lessons in teaching EHL comprehension skills to their learners. This approach is supported in literature by a number of authors, including Odima (2015) & Nanchengwa (2016). This strategy is also referred to as the 'all-rounded' phonological awareness skills, requiring recognition of the phoneme as the smallest unit of language that can bring about a difference in meaning. In using this approach, teachers teach learners new ideas that are used as an integration point for the techniques they know. In addition, language is a key artefact that forms connections between the mind's worldview and the understanding of the world around. Basic comprehension skills are prerequisites for academic learning, economic development and stability through the ability to participate effectively in the employment market (Govender & Hugo 2020). Similarly, Gilakjani (2016) argues that when the content schema is familiar to learners, this makes understanding the subject of the text easier. In this context, Batibo (2015:100) argues that 'language is intertwined with complex cultural values and a specific worldview'.

In concurrence, the results affirmed the point that during the presentation of the text, learners need to have contextual knowledge. This means that previous knowledge is essential for learners' consistency in linking the new knowledge of content correctly with their prior knowledge for them to understand new knowledge of content (Govender & Hugo 2020). This will also encourage learners to gather new information and use it when needed – thereby indicating that learners need to be reinforced by various techniques during the lesson presentation, which could, for example, include providing the learners with a simple outline of comprehension of word types.

Some authors identify various types of reading strategies that can affect classroom actions and argue that the use of such approaches has the potential to enhance the teaching of EHL comprehension skills (Gilakjani 2016; Kara 2015). In turn, this implies that teachers should know how to link the learning experiences of their learners to the curriculum, because the foundation for new experience is what learners already know. This is also in line with the schema theory, which stresses the building of an appropriate schema for any new information to find meaning through the two complementary processes of accommodation and assimilation. Accordingly, the teacher must be able to integrate learners' previous knowledge from their schemata into what they are doing that day in the EHL lesson. This approach is further supported by the works of Vygotsky (1978), which opine that the social and cultural experiences of learners are important for language development.

In concurrence, Klapwijk (2016) states that strategies can be said to refer to the ability to ensure that prereading is introduced to encourage the learners to guess new words that are being taught (Madikiza et al. 2018; Thuraisingam et al. 2017). Thus, considerable emphasis is placed on the recognition of letters and sounds for clear development of EHL comprehension skills. Thus, there should not be a lack of properly established phonological laws to support the development of these abilities in the early years of school, as they are considered the best predictor for reading ability.

On the second strategy involving creativity and the use of the 'special reading book' for learners, Ankrah, Nyanta & Opoku (2017) observe that acquiring the ability to read fluently is not an easy operation that simply involves letters and decoding words. Learners understand the content in the book by first looking at pictures then associating them with sounds. In concurrence, Zhang (2018) reports that learners' English language skills improve when visual pictures are used in home language teaching because the pictures fit the given words and the concepts needed for the lesson being taught. In the classroom context, the presence of teachers around the learners makes it possible for them to identify the relevance of a picture and the word while reading the book (Matamoros-González et al. 2017). Reflecting on the researcher's classroom observations, the learners were very excited when they saw themselves being able to read their books. In addition, it was clear during these classroom observations that the participants went the extra mile with their learners to improve their attitudes and EHL comprehension skills.

On the third strategy that focuses on assisting learners with correct pronunciations, vocabulary and the importance of repetition, Kersten (2015) emphasises the point that learners who speak the same language must be surrounded by people who speak that language. Although it is not an easy task, teachers should support learners with strategies for understanding and give them as many opportunities as possible to improve their pronunciation, listening and writing skills. Conversely, spelling errors caused by inaccurate pronunciations can be reduced because teaching pronunciation skills plays a very important role in learners' contexts and situations. To achieve this, teachers need to focus on pronunciation and repetition regularly.

Apart from time and educational support issues, which were seen as detracting from the teaching of pronunciation, the teachers also felt uncertain about how to teach pronunciation. This resulted from inadequate teacher preparation, compounded by the lack of espoused teaching strategies by way of policy guidelines and in-service training. Klapwijk (2016) avers that teachers in a South African primary school classroom not only need knowledge and skills about teaching strategies but also the specific underlying linguistic concepts and knowledge for them to teach effectively. Thus, it is envisaged that EHL comprehension skills teaching does not get the attention it deserves. More precisely, Klapwijk (2016) reports that some teachers were not clear about specific educational know-how and techniques, as well as critical pronunciation structures.

The importance of emphasising the teaching of pronunciation is that it promotes diversity by identifying the benefits of a variety of models and standards, both native and non-native, as speaking models. The learners can be asked to practise pronunciation by reverting to their phonetic transcriptions and word stresses and never ignore pronunciation as it enhances better oral communication. In this study, the findings highlighted that teachers felt disempowered when it came to improving EHL pronunciations. Indeed, from classroom observations, the pronunciation exercises and drills witnessed by the researcher were very inconsistent and shifted across levels, skills and teachers.

The fourth strategy related to the use of games, puzzles and songs to enhance comprehension skills. To let learners feel and experience the environment and culture of EHL, teachers may use artefacts, images and movies to direct learners to perform a variety of English activities, such as English corner and role plays (Jian-Ping & Li-Sha 2016). It is important to develop language skills by encouraging young learners to practise word recognition, patterns, spelling and comprehension of letter-sounds. This means that teachers need high-level texts on the knowledge of EHL, not just comprehension but the pedagogical experience of how to teach better. Therefore, it would be useful for teachers to create successful ways to teach games, puzzles and phrases, such as using appropriate tricks and pleasures.

Some authors support the position that there is an association between contextual knowledge and the comprehension skills of EHL (Gajria & Jitendra 2016; Kendeou & O'Brien 2018). In this study, the teachers' responses gave a clear picture of the positive impact of the activities, which they engaged their learners in, as making a major contribution. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the technique of incorporating context knowledge using games, puzzles and songs while teaching words helped adapt the teaching style to the comprehension skills of EHL – especially with respect to learners from diverse language backgrounds (Gajria & Jitendra 2016; Kendeou & O'Brien 2018). Participants alluded to the fact that music was also a powerful way to influence school learners' emotional behaviour, as they saw singing as a calming game or practice, not as an educational process.

In this regard, Kuśnierek (2016) avers that learners' recognition of funny songs correlates with a pleasurable experience. Language and music are deeply interwoven and penetrate into the emotional atmosphere of the learner. The use of songs in a lesson provides a favourable psychological environment, reduces mental stress, activates the language-related brain hemisphere, triggers the emotional state of the learner and promotes interest in improving learners' understanding of EHL (Iribemwangi & Mutua 2014). Another benefit of using songs in the EHL classroom is that the concomitant provision of linguistic materials, such as vocabulary, pronunciation or grammar, often leads to learners learning new knowledge without being directly involved.

The didactic aspect of music is usually the first to be grasped by many learners. Hence, the total physical response (TPR) is widely used by teachers, considering that learners are hyperactive, physically active and are not able to concentrate for a long time. Astulik, Megawati & Aulina (2019) also agree that the physical nature of the TPR learning process makes it appropriate to incorporate physical activity and game into the teaching of EHL comprehension skills. So using this strategy, which includes games and a variety of other activities, young learners will be able to learn language vocabulary very quickly. They must also learn the physical skills of letter-forming and higher-level skills needed for writing letters, sentences and essays (Govender & Hugo 2020).

Concerning the use of drills and modelling, Natsir & Sanjaya (2014) opine that teaching a new language through understandable dialogues and carrying out accompanying drills are essential. In this study, the respondents specifically stated that they found the CAPS documents and guidelines to be inadequate on the issue of the best teaching strategies to teach foundation phase EHL comprehension skills involving non-native speakers of English – especially as they, themselves as teachers, were also non-native speakers of English. Nonetheless, the teachers indicated that they did their best to achieve the required skills development in the learners, including making adaptations and improvising wherever they could. However, they appealed for clearer policies, specific guidelines and sample lesson plans from the DBE on the teaching of EHL comprehension skills to Grade 1 learner.

On the strategy of correcting learners instantly during the lesson, Fattah & Saidalvi (2019) support the view that the teacher can interrupt the learners when they make spelling mistakes and directly correct them. When learners have difficulty reading a word, the teacher reads the word loudly, thereby making the learners develop the skills of listening to each other during reading time. However, Murridza (2019) holds a contrary view and opines that not all mistakes need to be corrected, as some of them simply represent natural outcomes in the development of EHL comprehension skills. Moreover, some corrections depend on the purpose of activities (Murridza 2019).

In this study, the participants strongly contended that one successful way to teach oral skills was to stress the techniques of teaching EHL comprehension skills as the central theme. The participants argued that providing such strong and effective techniques was necessary to relate the knowledge of EHL comprehension skills to classroom practice and that this would have a beneficial impact on learning. Hammonda et al. (2020) aver that this situation would demonstrate the efficacy of teaching EHL learners from diverse backgrounds. Hence, Klapwijk (2016) recommends the establish, maintain and consolidate (EMC) strategy for teaching EHL comprehension skills as a dynamic instructional strategic framework for all teachers.

Conclusion

The interviews revealed a variety of emerging, unconfirmed teaching strategies in this field that demonstrated a deep awareness of learners from different language backgrounds. The results of this study showed that teachers' understanding of their role as facilitators of knowledge was disturbed by old-fashioned forms of teaching. Explicit instruction dominated their classroom interactions, as they tried their best to demonstrate various concepts to the learners. The involvement of the learners in the lesson activities mainly happened with respect to pronunciations, encouragement, drills, modelling and repetition of what the teacher said – such as through reiterations of words and answering questions. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that there were additional hands-on games, play activities and interactions among the learners, something strongly promoted by the schema theory of teaching learners from diverse language backgrounds. All the teachers made commendable efforts to use teaching aids to promote learning and learners were attentive to the guidance offered by the teachers. Overall, the results reported herein could assist teachers to teach EHL comprehensive skills to Grade 1 learners from diverse language backgrounds. The results could also encourage the DBE to support teachers, especially with respect to enabling policies and materials that can enhance the teaching of EHL to learners at the foundation phase level.

Recommendations

The authors believe that these recommendations could substantially help to improve teachers' abilities and skills related to EHL instruction. These recommendations come from the teachers themselves – that is, the actual implementers of the curriculum. They recommend:

- That the DBE and the Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (DHESI) undertake workshops to equip teachers with basic techniques for teaching EHL to learners from a variety of language backgrounds. If teachers are better prepared to teach these essential skills, which are the backbone of lifelong learning, this will further improve the education system.
- That CAPS provide a clearer policy direction on the teaching of Grade 1 EHL comprehension skills, including ways to integrate modern educational tools such as the use of digital technology and other 21st-century learning devices. The outcome of this study showed that technology integration would ensure differentiated teaching and increase the motivation of both learners and teachers.
- That the government consider organising and running continuing professional teacher development (CPTD) programmes to capacitate teachers who have specialised in early childhood education to keep abreast of the latest developments on how to best teach EHL comprehension skills.
- That teachers use various techniques to accommodate diverse learning needs in the teaching of EHL to learners from different language backgrounds. Teacher awareness

about the importance of using different teaching strategies holds prospects for classroom experiences that enhance higher learner achievement.
- That teachers develop and regularly apply effective and differentiated teaching techniques in their classrooms appropriate for enhancing EHL comprehension skills.
- That teachers make all possible effort to promote learners' development of EHL comprehension skills and other techniques through the use of images, games, puzzles, songs and flashcards. This could be achieved by involving parents to help their children with homework and support them if practical skills are needed.

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