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Exploring the pedagogical content knowledge of reading comprehension in isiZulu

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Abstract

This study addresses the pressing concern of the 'reading crisis' in South African primary schools, where numerous learners struggle to acquire fundamental reading skills in isiZulu during the early grades. This research sought to determine the factors influencing reading instruction in the foundation phase. The study explored foundation phase teachers' pedagogical content knowledge when teaching reading comprehension to learners in isiZulu classrooms. Six foundation phase teachers were purposively sampled from one public school in Soweto. A qualitative research case study design was used, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to capture teachers' pedagogical approaches to reading comprehension and their understanding of the content knowledge that is required to effectively teach reading comprehension in the early grades. Data was analysed inductively to identify themes and patterns to answer the research question, "How do foundation phase teachers teach reading comprehension in early grade classrooms? The findings of this study underscore the necessity of enhancing teachers' instructional capacities to effectively teach initial reading skills. Furthermore, the results highlight the importance of augmenting teachers' pedagogical content knowledge in comprehension strategies, thereby empowering them to better support learners' reading development in isiZulu. Providing teachers with professional development on the science of reading and the pedagogy of comprehension can bridge this knowledge gap and enhance teachers' instructional practices.

Introduction and background

Early grade reading instruction plays a critical role in laying the foundation for future academic success, particularly in multilingual contexts where students must navigate the complexities of learning to read in their home language. In South Africa, isiZulu is one of the most widely spoken languages; yet, research suggests that children who are learning to read in isiZulu struggle to acquire basic reading skills in their early years of schooling (Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Du Toit, Scherman & Archer, 2006; Howie, Van Staden, Tshele, Dowse & Zimmerman, 2012; Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena & McLeod Palane, 2017; DBE, 2023). The latest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results (Spaull, 2023) reveal a concerning decline in South Africa's reading scores, dropping from 320 in 2016 to 288 in 2021 (DBE, 2023). This downward trend indicates a growing number of learners struggling to read with comprehension. The 2030 Reading Panel's Background Report (Spaull, 2023) further underscores this concern, highlighting that reading remains a significant challenge for primary school children in South Africa (Spaull, 2023). Moreover, the report notes that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this problem, with a staggering 82% of children unable to read for meaning (Spaull, 2023). These alarming findings emphasise the urgent need to revamp early-grade reading instruction, particularly in isiZulu, to improve literacy outcomes and address the reading crisis in South Africa.

Despite the introduction of the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) in South Africa in 1997, which aimed to promote mother-tongue instruction from Grade R to Grade 3, many children continue to be denied the opportunity to learn in their native language (Bruggink, Swart, van de Lee & Segers, 2022). Several factors

contribute to this disparity, including the scarcity of schools offering mother-tongue instruction in other African languages, particularly in densely populated areas like Gauteng with a multilingual population. Furthermore, a growing trend among parents to prefer English as the language of instruction from the outset has also undermined the policy's objectives.

Problem statement

Although learners in this study are instructed in their mother tongue, isiZulu, they struggle to comprehend what they read, highlighting the need for urgent intervention to enhance the pedagogy of reading instruction in isiZulu. We have observed that teachers often employ a prevalent strategy when teaching reading comprehension, wherein they re-read paragraphs containing answers to questions to facilitate meaning-making and accurate responses during shared and guided reading sessions. Rule and Land (2017) and Granville (2001) allude to the same observation. Nevertheless, this approach is restrictive, as educators frequently rely on repetitive drilling of a single assessment text, thereby prioritising test preparation over meaningful learning (Granville, 2001; Rule & Land, 2017). This pedagogical approach constrains the development of essential strategies that learners require to independently comprehend texts, ultimately hindering their autonomy as readers. Teachers must shift their approach to reading instruction, moving beyond mere drill-and-practice methods and instead focusing on developing and strengthening students' reading comprehension strategies. Although drilling and practice are important (Baddeley,1998), they should be used to develop the relevant skills of remembering and comprehending. By doing so, children can be empowered to apply relevant reading strategies independently, becoming strategic and critical readers who can navigate complex texts with confidence and accuracy.

Comprehension strategies are essential for fostering a lifelong love of reading and learning and preparing learners for success in an increasingly complex and information-driven world, as well as academically (Snow, 2002; Pearson, 2004). This study investigates the instructional methods used by teachers in the early grades to teach reading comprehension in isiZulu. To achieve the aim, the study was guided by the following specific objectives: 1) to explore the pedagogical approaches used in foundation phase classrooms for reading comprehension, and 2) to identify the essential content knowledge that teachers need to effectively teach reading comprehension in early grades. This paper aimed to answer the research question: "*How do foundation phase teachers teach reading comprehension in early grade classrooms?"*

Theoretical framework

The integrative theoretical framework of the Direct and Indirect Effects Reading Model (DIER) (Kim, 2017, 2019) was employed as a conceptual lens to elucidate the essential skills and knowledge that teachers require to foster reading comprehension in isiZulu. Grounded in the Simple View of Reading, the DIER model posits that reading comprehension is a product of the interplay between word reading and listening comprehension. However, the DIER model extends this foundational framework by specifying the constituent skills involved and their complex relationships. Specifically, the model integrates word

reading, listening comprehension, and other critical component skills of text comprehension, including working memory, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, inference, and comprehension monitoring, into a unified framework, thereby illuminating their direct and indirect interconnections (Kim, 2017).

The component skills of reading comprehension are structured in a hierarchical framework, characterised by intricate direct and indirect relationships. As posited by Kim (2017), the DIER model's hierarchical structure comprises multiple layers of interconnected components and skills. Within this framework, specific component skills exert a direct influence on reading comprehension, whereas others contribute indirectly by modulating the development of intermediate skills. Notably, all reading component skills play a vital role in the successful acquisition of reading comprehension, emphasising the importance of explicit instruction and integration of these skills in reading instruction (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Adams, 1990; Kim, 2017; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). Skills such as word reading, listening comprehension, and text reading fluency are regarded as proximal skills directly related to reading comprehension. In contrast, distal skills support proximal skills and contribute indirectly to comprehension through these proximal skills (Kim, 2017, 2019). The hierarchical relationships indicate that lower-level processes are necessary for developing higher-level processes, underscoring the interdependence of component skills.

See Figure 1 below for a visual representation of these relationships.

Literature Review

The results of the 2006, 2011, and 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) for South Africa revealed a counterintuitive trend: having an African language as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) does not necessarily confer an advantage in reading comprehension for students whose home language corresponds to the LoLT (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). In essence, language proficiency does not automatically translate to fluent reading, as reading is a distinct skill that requires explicit instruction (Henning & Simelane, 2022; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Nevertheless, language proficiency plays a vital role in learning to read as it provides the foundation for decoding, comprehension, and overall reading proficiency. In their study, Metsala et al. (2021) found that fostering growth in oral language skills, such as syntactic awareness and morphological awareness, in elementary classroom settings may positively impact children's reading comprehension abilities, potentially leading to improved literacy outcomes. Spaull and Pretorius (2019) argue that although comprehension is the main goal of reading, its development depends on two sets of skills that must be explicitly and simultaneously developed to achieve reading comprehension: oral language comprehension and decoding (Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). They further emphasise that both skills are essential for the development of comprehension. Kim (2017, 2019) expands on this idea by specifying the reading component skills and the nature of their relationships, stating that various component skills must be integrated to produce text comprehension (Kim, 2017, 2019; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019).

Despite external factors contributing to weak reading skills, such as socio-economic backgrounds and inadequate teacher training in teaching reading in African languages (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016), a significant knowledge gap remains. As noted by Van Rooy and Pretorius (2013), research is scarce on effective reading instruction in African languages, highlighting the need for further investigation in this area. Trudell and Schroeder (2007) argue that current reading methods for teaching initial reading in African languages are often based on the linguistic structures of European languages, rather than those of African languages. For example, isiZulu has a unique language structure that differs from English, with longer, multisyllabic words, tone, agreement form in words, etc., in contrast to the simple graphemes and shorter words used in English (Land, 2015). Furthermore, it is stated that children learning to read in languages with regular orthographies tend to read faster and more accurately than children learning to read in English, which has an opaque orthography (Land, 2015). However, most children have not mastered the basics of decoding in their home language by Grade 1 or 2, making reading for meaning unlikely (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). This highlights the need for developing reading instruction that takes into account the distinctive features of African languages (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007).

Spaull and Pretorius (2019) argue that teaching literacy should be the primary responsibility of primary schools, emphasising that teachers should be knowledgeable about reading comprehension and be able to answer key questions such as "What is it? How does it develop? How is it measured? How is it taught?" In contrast, Ngema (2021) found that teachers appeared to have different understandings regarding which initial skills should be taught to learners to prepare them to become proficient readers. The teacher is the most critical resource for teaching reading (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Ngema, 2021). If a teacher understands that the goal of reading is comprehension and knows how to develop the various components that lead to it, they are well on their way to becoming an effective reading instructor (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). However, Taylor's (2019) study, which examined the pedagogical content knowledge of both pre-service and in-service teachers, revealed that teachers are insufficiently trained in the specific methods required to teach literacy in the early grades. Van der Merwe and Nel (2012) argue that teacher preparation programmes do not explicitly equip pre-service teachers with the skills to teach reading, instead, they focus on training them to teach the curriculum.

In addition, policies fail to provide the necessary support for teachers to guide reading instruction effectively (Bharuthram, 2012). As a result of inadequate teacher training and monitoring, learners face difficulties in acquiring basic reading skills, contributing to the ongoing reading challenges among South African primary school children. Consequently, there should be an alignment between how teachers are trained in higher education institutions and the practical demands of the classroom (Taylor, 2016). This is in line with the Council for Higher Education (CHE) (2010), which argues that higher education institutions should adapt to evolving educational needs to enhance the quality of teacher preparation.

Rule and Land (2017) in their study postulate that the South African education system has lost the plot in the teaching of reading. Their research found that teachers in early-grade classrooms and adult centres rely on what they termed the “cycle of oratorical reading reproduction,” using the same methods their teachers had employed when teaching them to read in primary school. The study revealed that teachers

viewed reading instruction as primarily an oral performance, rather than a cognitive exercise focused on accessing meaning in text aloud (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007). This suggests that attention to comprehension remains neglected in many South African classrooms (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). Moats (2020) argues that teachers must transform their teaching practices to align with the current science of reading to improve reading instruction. Henning and Simelane (2022) also assert that the science of reading should be incorporated into teachers' toolkits to guide their instruction.

Studies by researchers such as Duke and Pearson (2009), Duke, Pearson, Strachan and Billman (2011), Pretorius and Lephalala (2011), and Pretorius and Murray (2022) have demonstrated that directly teaching and modelling comprehension strategies enhance readers' ability to understand texts. To effectively develop children's foundational reading skills that support comprehension, teachers must explicitly teach comprehension strategies and provide students ample opportunities to practice implementing these strategies independently. This was evident in the study by Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), which showed that reading comprehension strategies with explicit instructions, such as prediction, summarisation and questioning, lead to improved reading outcomes in South African classrooms. These strategies help children better understand texts and enhance their overall reading comprehension.

Research methods and design

This study employed an interpretative qualitative research design to gain a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. As defined by Merriam (2002), Henning (2004), and Creswell and Poth (2018), an interpretative qualitative design is an inquiry approach that seeks to understand a phenomenon from the participants' perspective, constructing knowledge based on their viewpoints and interpretations. This approach enables an in-depth examination of the meaning of human actions and experiences. The present study explores the reading instruction employed by foundation phase teachers to teach initial reading in isiZulu, specifically focusing on reading comprehension. The research sought not only to describe teachers' classroom practices but also to understand how their beliefs and knowledge influence their instructional decision-making and practices when teaching reading comprehension.

This case study employed a focused inquiry approach to investigate the research objectives by creating a bounded system centred on the foundation phase isiZulu teachers who teach reading comprehension. Consistent with the perspectives of Sturman (1997), Merriam (1998), and Stake (2013), this case study involved an in-depth examination of a phenomenon within a bounded system. This approach enabled the exploration of complexities and addressed "how" and "why" questions in a real-world context (Yin, 2003). This design facilitated the collection of rich, contextualised data, providing a nuanced understanding of participants' instructional practices, beliefs, and opinions. Observing participants in their natural setting without controlling their behaviour yielded accurate and insightful data. Furthermore, the participants were free to express their beliefs and opinions without constraint, enriching the data and offering an authentic representation of their experiences and perspectives.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore the beliefs and knowledge that shape teachers' instructional practices and decision-making when teaching reading with comprehension. A standardised set of nine open-ended questions guided the interviews, which lasted approximately 20 minutes each. The semi-structured interview approach facilitated active interaction with the participants (Kvale, 2012; Patton, 2002). It enabled the use of probing questions and clarifications to garner deeper insights into the phenomenon under investigation. This approach also allowed participants to express themselves in their own words, encouraging detailed and reflective responses (Leavy, 2017). The interviews were digitally recorded using a personal cell phone, and the recordings were subsequently transferred to a laptop and external drive for secure storage. The interview recordings were then transcribed verbatim to facilitate data analysis.

Observations

The primary objective of the classroom observations was to gather firsthand data on the instructional practices employed by teachers when teaching reading with comprehension. Classroom observations provided a unique opportunity to collect reliable data, as they enabled direct observation of the phenomenon from a firsthand perspective (Merriam, 2002). Through these observations, we witnessed the initial reading instruction employed by teachers, gaining insight into the pedagogical approaches used to teach reading with comprehension. The observations allowed us to hear, see, and experience the classroom reality, which might not have been captured through interviews alone. Furthermore, the observations enabled me to validate the teachers' self-reported practices from the interviews, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their instructional approaches. To capture the data, detailed field notes and videos were also captured and later transcribed for analysis.

Sampling

This study used purposive sampling to select high-calibre participants, denoted by Henning (2004) as "desirable participants." A total of six foundation phase teachers were meticulously chosen based on their expertise in teaching initial reading, language proficiency, and professional development levels. The selected teachers were all native isiZulu speakers, proficient in the language, and had participated in workshops organised by the Department of Education focused on enhancing reading comprehension and pedagogy.

Their involvement in these initiatives enabled an examination of the pedagogical content knowledge acquired through higher education and government-provided training. The participant's rich, nuanced insights effectively addressed the research question, providing invaluable perspectives on teaching reading comprehension in isiZulu.

Analysis

This study employed an inductive approach to analyse the raw data collected through interviews and classroom observations, facilitating a grounded, participant-centred examination to identify patterns and meanings that addressed the research question. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, the qualitative data was systematically organised before analysis. Interview and observation data were transcribed verbatim, incorporating nonverbal cues to capture the richness of participant responses (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

As Henning (2004) emphasised, data familiarity is crucial for competent analysis. Therefore, we conducted an immersive review of transcripts, audio recordings, and videos to understand the data comprehensively. This process enabled the identification of initial patterns and themes. Data analysis followed Merriam's (1998) guidelines for qualitative coding and categorising. The analysis involved breaking down transcribed data into smaller, meaningful units, identifying recurring patterns, and assigning open codes using a colour-coding system. Similar codes were grouped into 13 categories, which were then condensed into eight distinct categories. These categories were organised into eight themes, and further refinement led to the collapse of these themes into three main themes. This process provided a nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon, yielding rich insights into teaching reading comprehension in isiZulu.

Findings

The analysis yielded three pivotal themes: 1) teachers' instructional approaches lacked comprehensive, systematic, and explicit instruction, hindering effective teaching of early reading skills in isiZulu; 2) teaching approaches employed by teachers failed to explicitly focus on comprehension strategies, underscoring a critical gap in reading instruction; 3) teachers demonstrated limited knowledge of research-based practices for teaching early reading skills, highlighting the need for enhanced professional development. These findings collectively indicate that teachers require additional support and training to develop pedagogical content knowledge and instructional skills in teaching early reading skills in isiZulu. The study's outcomes emphasise the importance of targeted teacher training to enhance reading comprehension instruction and, ultimately, improve children's literacy outcomes.

Discussion

Teachers lack comprehensive, systematic, and explicit instruction

As Shulman (1986) emphasises, effective teachers require robust PCK to render complex subject matter accessible and comprehensible to learners. This perspective is reinforced by Ngema (2023), who underscores the critical role of teacher quality in facilitating reading comprehension, highlighting the significance of the instructor's expertise in promoting meaningful learning outcomes. Given the complexity of reading, this study recognised that, while teachers acknowledged the importance of

teaching isiZulu phonemes as a fundamental aspect of learning to read, their approach was largely limited to phonemic awareness. Below are transcripts from the interviews.

T5: Phonemic awareness is important. I have attended a workshop in which they've trained us to teach letter names and sounds. When I came back, I applied the information in my class, and I could see an improvement in the classroom when it comes to reading isiZulu. So, if we can have more workshops that will put more emphasis on phonemic awareness. Learners must know sounds and how to segment the words.

T2: Teachers must know letter name and letter sound system, Yes, the teacher should also know how to differentiate the sounds of English and isiZulu.

A notable gap existed in providing comprehensive, systematic, and explicit instruction, which failed to address the full range of skills necessary for reading development. Kim (2017, 2019), Tumer and Hoover (2019), and Pretorius and Murray (2022) assert that teaching reading requires the simultaneous development of various components to set children on successful reading trajectories from the outset. Children struggle to develop cohesive, integrated reading skills when these components are taught in isolation. In contrast, teachers in this school believed that teaching phonemic awareness in the early grades was sufficient to help children read age-appropriate texts with understanding. According to Simelane (2022), reading comprehension cannot be reduced solely to phonemic awareness.

This perspective is echoed by Duke and Cartwright (2021), who propose the Active View of Reading model. This framework posits that a multifaceted process encompassing vocabulary knowledge and morphological awareness facilitates word recognition and language comprehension. Duke and Cartwright (2021) emphasise that explicit instruction in these skills is crucial for children's reading comprehension, and teachers should be aware of the rationale and importance of integrating these components into their teaching practices. The prevailing assumption that decoding skills are sufficient for constructing meaning is misguided. While phonemic awareness is a fundamental skill for learning to read (Ehri, 2005; Simelane, de Klerk & Henning, 2024), children will struggle to comprehend texts without explicit instruction on word meanings. In essence, although phonemic awareness is essential for developing the alphabetic principle, which underpins word recognition, it is insufficient on its own for early reading development.

Research by Kim (2017), Moats (2020) and Turner and Hoover (2019) highlights the importance of integrating the components of reading comprehension, as they are interdependent and develop in tandem. However, the data analysis revealed a disconnect between this understanding and the instructional practices at the school, where teachers tended to view reading as a discrete activity, prioritising phonemic awareness while neglecting other essential reading components.

The teaching approach lacked explicit focus on comprehension strategies

In their attempts to promote reading comprehension, the teachers at this school relied on superficial strategies, prioritising the act of reading over explicit instruction in comprehension skills. They assumed that repeated readings of the same story would inherently lead to comprehension. This approach resonates with Granville's (2001) observation that reading comprehension exercises in schools often resemble ritualistic practices, where teachers read aloud, pose questions, drill answers, and require students to transcribe correct responses into their notebooks, without fostering deeper understanding or critical thinking. The teachers' perspectives on this matter are elaborated below.

T3: I give children enough time before written comprehension. Also, give them the text to read at home for them to have a better understanding of what they are reading.

T4: On Tuesday I start doing that story with them. Explain every word. It can take three days … then Friday they write down the answers.

T2: [In comprehension, children comprehend by repeatedly repeating the story or text].

Research by Duke and Pearson (2009), Duke, Pearson, Strachan and Billman (2011), Pretorius and Lephalala (2011), and Pretorius and Murray (2022) converge on the importance of introducing explicit instruction on comprehension strategies in the early grades. This approach enables children to become more attentive readers and develop a deeper understanding of various texts. However, our observations at this school revealed that comprehension strategies were not presented in a way that facilitated independent use, thereby limiting children's ability to engage with the text actively. We concur with Duke and Pearson (2009) and Duke et al. (2011) that children can develop into attentive comprehenders when provided with clear, explicit descriptions of strategies, including their application in the classroom. Specifically, teachers should employ explicit explanation, modelling, and demonstration of these strategies to empower children to construct meaning from texts (Pretorius & Murray, 2022). As Pretorius and Murray (2022:186) note, this approach fosters a "habit of mind", which is essential for developing proficient readers.

During the interviews and classroom observations, we observed that teachers primarily used the question-and-answer technique as an assessment tool to evaluate reading comprehension, rather than as an instructional strategy to foster critical thinking and independent learning. The focus appeared to be on evaluating student understanding rather than empowering them to develop essential skills, such as self-questioning, critical thinking, and monitoring their comprehension. This finding resonates with Bruggink et al.'s (2022) assertion that when children generate their questions driven by curiosity, they become more actively engaged in the process of clarifying the text and developing a deeper awareness of their comprehension, thinking, inferring, and reasoning skills. The teachers' perspectives on this matter are presented below.

T6: read the text first. Ask learners to read after. After that, we repeatedly read the story until I can see that they are able to read it with understanding. Then, we begin to summarise, and the learners answer orally before writing down.

T1: I ask questions throughout such as what, who, where, when then after I read the comprehension for the learners without any questions to deepens their understanding and then I ask questions

The study revealed that teachers at this school were acquainted with a range of comprehension strategies and integrated them into their instructional practices. However, it became apparent that they lacked explicit, systematic guidance on how to effectively teach these strategies to facilitate children's understanding and retention of information. This finding aligns with Shulman's (1986) assertion that content knowledge alone is insufficient for effective teaching; rather, teachers must also develop pedagogical expertise to translate that knowledge into effective instructional practices. The following section outlines some of the comprehension strategies employed by the teachers.

T5: Prediction the teacher thinks for a moment. Encourage learners to predict what they think the story will be about

T4: Before reading the story we talk about pictures in the book. Outside cover page … we talk about that pictures. After that, they answer the questions … then I give them correct answer.

Pretorius and Murray (2022) provide a compelling demonstration of how teachers can explicitly instruct children to activate their prior knowledge, make predictions, pose questions, and visualise content before reading, thereby enhancing engagement and comprehension. Nevertheless, the implementation of these strategies in the classroom lacked a systematic and linear approach. Instead, teachers tended to transition unsystematically from one point to another when teaching comprehension strategies, which may have hindered the coherence and effectiveness of their instruction.

Teachers have limited knowledge of research-based practices for teaching early reading skills

The teachers at this school seem to have a limited understanding of the foundational skills required to help children develop their reading abilities. This suggests that their knowledge of research-based methods for teaching early reading and building children’s comprehension skills is not as strong as it should be. According to Moats (2020), effective reading instruction demands a deep understanding of several key areas, such as word recognition, language comprehension, spelling, and writing. However, teachers solely focused on teaching phonemic awareness to support children's reading development. While phonemic awareness is crucial, it is only one part of the equation. In line with the current science of reading, focusing solely on phonemic awareness is insufficient for overall early reading development. It plays a role in helping children grasp the alphabetic principle, which is important for word recognition (Kim, 2017; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). However, children may still struggle to become proficient readers without fostering language comprehension alongside these skills (Kim, 2017; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). The teachers' perspectives on this matter are presented below.

T2: I ask them to sing the sounds of isiZulu first thing in the morning, then became familiar with the same and read then at sight].

T3: If I have to teach them inunu. I have to introduce the vowels then introduce the sound n and starting telling them that if uhm if I add a vowel to the sound n the sound will be read as or read like i-n-u-n-u [the teacher demonstrates how to sound and read out the word inunu]. If the child fails to read a word, I just ask the child to sound it out. So, after sounding out, sometimes it becomes easier for them to read the word correctly.

Moats (2020) points out that many teachers face challenges in teaching reading effectively in the early grades because the science of reading is not incorporated into teacher preparation programs, curricula, or professional development offered by district officials. This issue became clear during interviews and class observations, where teachers demonstrated conflicting views on how reading should be taught. Specifically, there was a noticeable divide between those who emphasised phonics instruction and those who favoured a whole-language approach. Treiman (2018) referred to this ongoing debate as the "Reading Wars." This division underscores the need for more training on the science of reading to assist teachers with a research-based approach to reading instruction.

Recommendations

This study recommends that educators receive targeted training and ongoing support to deliver systematic and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, moving beyond superficial coverage. To achieve this, sustained professional development opportunities should be provided, focusing on evidence-based instructional practices, comprehension strategy instruction, and effective multilingual teaching methodologies. Furthermore, a thorough review and revision of the curriculum are warranted to ensure alignment with comprehensive reading instruction, including explicit teaching of comprehension strategies and targeted support for multilingual learners. In addition, educators are encouraged to adopt more nuanced assessment approaches, transitioning from reliance on traditional question-and-answer techniques to more comprehensive evaluations of reading comprehension.

Contributions, limitations and strengths

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on reading instruction by highlighting the need for systematic and explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, multilingual teaching methods, and comprehensive assessment approaches.

This study's sample size was limited to six foundation phase teachers, which may not represent the larger population of isiZulu teachers. The study’s strength is that it provided valuable insights into the instructional practices of foundation phase teachers teaching reading comprehension in isiZulu, a previously under-researched area..

Conclusion

This study explored the instructional practices of foundation phase teachers teaching reading comprehension in isiZulu. The findings revealed that teachers lack comprehensive, systematic, and explicit instruction and have limited knowledge of research-based practices for teaching early reading with comprehension skills. The study highlights the need for targeted teacher training and support to develop pedagogical content knowledge and instructional skills in teaching reading comprehension in isiZulu. By addressing the gaps and challenges identified in this study, educators, policymakers, and researchers can work together to improve reading comprehension instruction and literacy outcomes for isiZulu-speaking learners. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of research on teaching reading comprehension in African languages and underscores the importance of context-specific, culturally responsive instructional practices that support the diverse needs of learners in South African classrooms.

Declarations

Informed consent was obtained from all 6 teacher participants prior to participation in the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence

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Figures

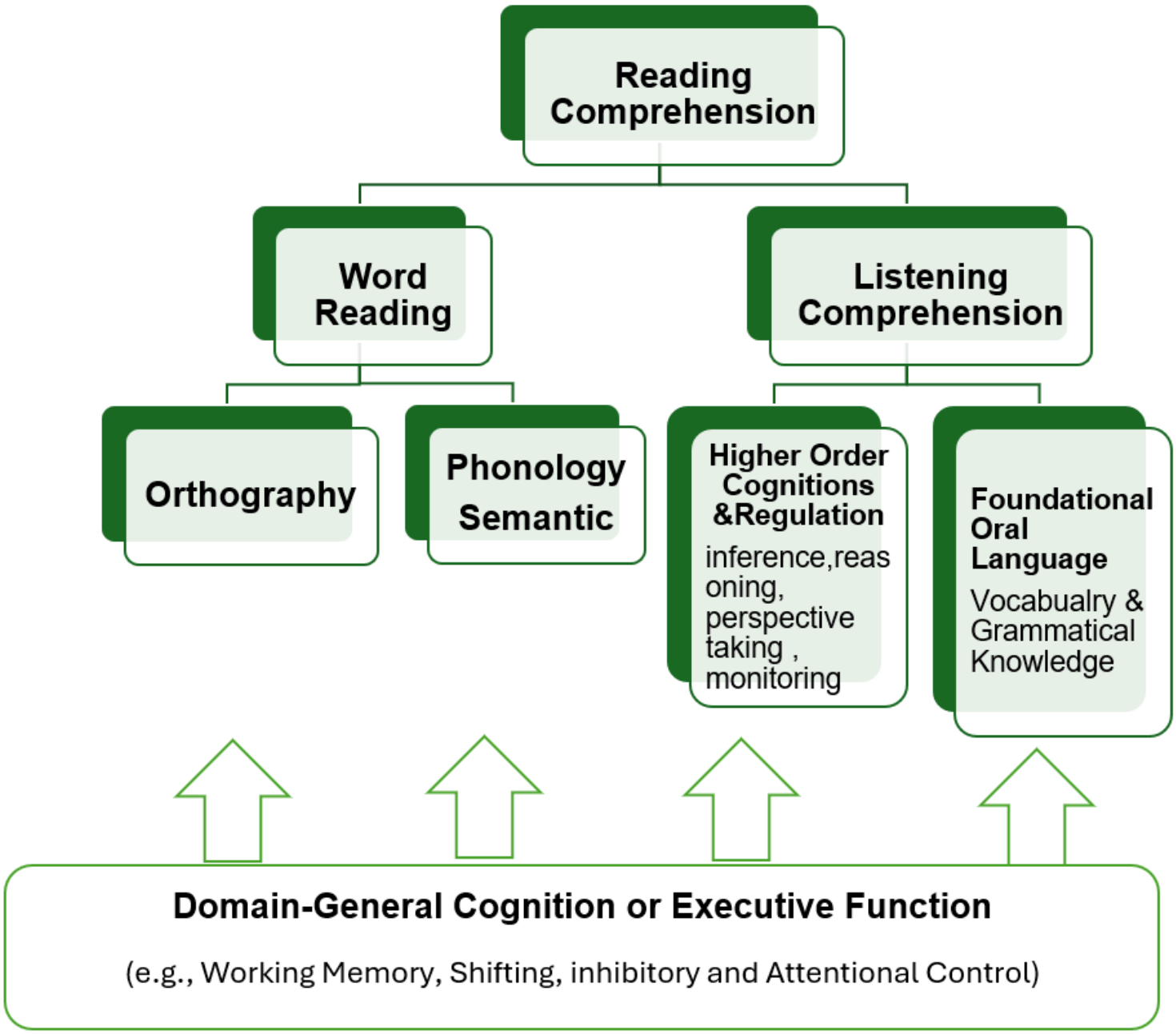


Figure 1

The conceptual model of the direct and indirect effect model of text comprehension (adapted from Kim, 2020)