

## READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES OF THE EFAL LEARNERS IN THE FET PHASE: TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

The level of English First Additional Language (EFAL) Reading Comprehension competence among school learners in some schools in South Africa is a concern. English is used as a medium of teaching and learning in most South African public schools although the majority of these learners are EFAL speakers. To counter this anxiety, reading comprehension interventions become handy. This study aimed to explore the reading comprehension strategies of South African high school EFAL learners in the FET phase. The study employed a non-experimental quantitative design to collect data. The general version 7.0 questionnaire on strategy inventory of language learning (SILL) Oxford (1990) on identifying strategies learners use in reading comprehension was used. The sampling frame was 80 grade 11 high school EFAL learners in South Africa. The results of the study show that EFAL learners use multiple language learning strategies to enhance their understanding of English in an EFAL setting. It is difficult to strike consistency in language learning strategies because the choice of a language learning strategy differs from one EFAL learner to another. It remains important that language practitioners become aware of the need to equip EFAL teachers and learners as they strive to sharpen EFAL learners' language learning skills.

**Keywords:** English First Additional Language; Reading Comprehension; Language learning strategies; English as a foreign language

### INTRODUCTION

This study is a culmination of a study whose research question is: What are the reading comprehension strategies of South African high school EFAL learners in the FET phase? In today's global world, the importance of English cannot be denied and ignored since English is the greatest common language spoken universally. With the role of English as an International Language and as a Lingua Franca, it is reasonable that English education becomes important in many countries. In terms of teaching English as a First Additional Language (EFAL), the roles of teachers are primarily to focus on the development and the practise of the language to improve various skills including reading and comprehension, writing, grammar, listening and speaking (Mangaleswaran & Aziz, 2019).

In South Africa, the dominance of English in the education sector is still an important factor in post-apartheid South Africa (Coffi, 2017). Moreover, it is Kwesi Prah's opinion that because of the status enjoyed by 'languages of colonisation', in South Africa's case, English, this language tends to be languages of education and literacy while the African indigenous

languages are reserved for informal situations (Prah, 2000; Coffi, 2017). Moreover, most parents in South Africa regard English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) because it seems to provide upward social and financial mobility (Coffi, 2017; Gardiner, 2008).

It is globally known that children usually struggle with reading in EFAL at various grades of their schooling (Molotja & Themane, 2018). Young learners in South Africa are struggling to acquire the reading skills needed for their future academic and occupational progress (Mboacha, 2015). In arguing for the importance of being able to read, Palani (2012) states that being able to read effectively is the most important avenue of effective learning and academic achievement. It is, therefore, necessary that learners engage in good reading habits to improve their reading ability. Learners have to be introduced to pleasure reading to form good reading habits, which will then transcend into improved academic reading skills (Molotja and Themane, 2018).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The development of EFAL reading comprehension is imperative in most South African schools where English is the medium of instruction and a foreign language. English is a foreign language to a majority of learners at all levels and at the same time, it is the medium of instruction to subjects like Mathematics and Business Studies. One of the critical goals of the South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (DoE, 2011) is for learners to be proficient in and to process, the content in the English syllabus, in each of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among these skills, reading is seen as the fundamental tool to facilitate students to succeed in education from primary levels onwards. In light of the importance of reading, comprehension is the major goal of reading.

Sari (2017) defines reading as the information from the text, either in the form of text or from a picture or diagram, or a combination of it all. Reading is also a skill to know, see and understand the contents of what they read. That is, after reading something, the reader already knows the information obtained from what he has read. One important point of reading is to understand the communication between writer and reader. Hedgcock adds that reading is a complex interaction of cognitive processes and strategies (used by the reader) and various types of information (contained in the text) (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). In other words, reading can be defined as a process of making reasonable interpretation in apprehending a text, which has four characteristics: purpose, selection, anticipation, and comprehension. Talking about comprehension is one of the characteristics of reading.

Mikulecky & Jeffries (2004) state that comprehension is making sense of what someone reads and connecting the ideas in the text to what he already knows.<sup>7</sup> According to Smith, comprehension may be regarded as relating aspects of the world around us—including what we read—to the knowledge, intentions, and expectations we already have in our head. It is the purpose of reading and learning to read. Richards & Schmidt (2002) say that comprehension is the identification of the intended meaning of written or spoken communication. They also add that contemporary theories of comprehension emphasize that it is an active process drawing both on information contained in the message (bottom-up processing) as well as background knowledge, information from the context and the listener's and speaker's purposes or intentions

(top-down processing) (Richards & Schmidt (2002). It is also supported by Smith that readers learn the meaning by making sense of words from their context, using what is known to comprehend and 'learn' the unfamiliar (Smith, 2004).

Arkarsu & Harputlu (2014) view reading as a complex processing skill in which the reader interacts with the text to create meaning. Nhapulo, Simon & Van Herreweghe (2017) claim that extensive reading aims to 'cultivate' students' ability to read a long text and still gain understanding and to read and understand words and sentences at first glance without the need to reread. Besides, students who fail to master reading skills at an early stage, have low motivation for learning, behavioural challenges, and low academic achievement, and are possibly at risk of not graduating from high school (Almutairi, 2018).

Therefore, reading comprehension can be defined broadly as the process of constructing meaning by coordinating several complex processes that include language, word reading, word knowledge and fluency (Middleton, 2011). Reading comprehension involves understanding and interpreting information within the text. Reading comprehension is a process of relating the readers' background knowledge with the information in the text to get the message of the text. Reading comprehension is not only the matter of knowing and remembering the meaning of all words in the text, but it is more about how the students build and construct the meaning of the text (Sari, 2017).

Considering the raised points above, the current study asserts that the reading aptitude of EFAL learners to comprehend texts written in English is critical in preparing such learners to be fully handy in the socio-economic, political, and religious platforms. Thus, learners must attain the obligatory reading comprehension strategies in EFAL for them to be able to tellingly relate with their reading texts at school.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Population**

Four township high schools in South Africa were chosen to take part in the study. Only 80 EFAL high school learners were chosen to take part in this study. From this sampling frame, 20 learners from each chosen high school took part in the study. These particular schools were chosen because the majority of these learners share the same home language, either Sesotho or IsiZulu. All the schools under study use English as the language of instruction. Simple random sampling was used in this research to give an equal opportunity to all learners and do away with sampling bias.

### **Research Approach**

It was a study within the normative approach. It also needs to be remembered that the normative approach is mainly characterized by the use of Likert-scale questionnaires to which learners indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with several statements. Thus, the researcher adopted a non-experimental quantitative perspective to collect data.

This statement questionnaire employs a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 = True, 2 =

Usually not true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Usually true of me to 5= Always true of me. The questionnaires were administered on the learners and analysed them through descriptive statistics. The researcher used the general version 7.0 questionnaire on strategy inventory of language learning (SILL) Oxford (1990) on identifying strategies learners use. This is the version predominantly used by non-English speakers who are learning English (ESL, EFAL or EFL students). However, in some statements, the researcher modified them so that they became relatable to the respondents understudy in South Africa. The adaptation of this questionnaire for use in the present study presented 8 statements related to strategies EFAL learners use to master reading comprehension.

For the validation of the questionnaire, it was piloted on 20 learners at a school the researcher was working. The suggested modifications to the questionnaire were implemented. Then, the questionnaire was handed out to the respondents and collected by the researcher. The respondents participated voluntarily in the study. Before administering the questionnaires to the respondents, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to them.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 1: I think of relationships between what I already know and new information in the provided text

Statement	Response	Percentage
True	34	42.5
Usually not true	20	25.0
Somewhat true	13	16.25
Usually true of me	8	10.0
Always true of me	5	6.25
Total	80	100

Forty-three percent of the respondents indicate that they consider the relationships between what they already know and new material in an additional language (AL). This resonates with Haukas's (2015) recommendation, thus, rather than attempting to maintain learners' previous knowledge in isolation, teachers should help learners to become aware of and draw on their existing knowledge. Second, learners should draw on experiences from previous learning material when learning content especially in a new language (Charamba, 2020a; 2020b). Learners should become aware of which learning strategies they have used previously as well as reflect on, test, and evaluate the extent to which those strategies can be transferred to a new language learning context. Even Zano (2020a; 2020b; 2019) reports that when learners lack a solid background to the subject under study, it becomes challenging them to score highly in the given task as highlighted:

Table 2: I practice the sounds of SL.

Statement	Response	Percentage
True	42	52.5
Usually not true	7	8.75
Somewhat true	4	5.0

Usually true of me	6	7.5
Always true of me	21	26.25
Total	80	100

Fifty-two percent of the respondents approve that pronunciation is pivotal in learning a SL. Understandable pronunciation is one of the basic requirements of EFAL learners' competence and it is one of the most important features of language instruction. Good pronunciation leads to learning while bad pronunciation promotes to great difficulties in EFAL language learning (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012). Learners with good English pronunciation are likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners with bad pronunciation will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016). Such learners may avoid speaking in English and experience social isolation, employment difficulties and limited opportunities for further study. We judge people by the way they speak, and so learners with poor pronunciation may be judged as incompetent, uneducated or lacking in knowledge. Yet many learners find pronunciation one of the most difficult aspects of English to acquire and need explicit help from the teacher. Therefore, some sort of pronunciation instruction in class is necessary.

Table 3: I first skim an SL passage then (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully

Statement	Response	Percentage
True	49	16.25
Usually not true	4	5.0
Somewhat true	6	7.5
Usually true of me	8	10.0
Always true of me	13	61.25
Total	80	100

Six one percent of the respondents report that it is always true of them to skim through a given extract then go back and read thoroughly for details. The importance of skimming and scanning has been confined by Marliasari (2017) whose research aimed to find out whether or not it was effective to teach skimming and scanning techniques in reading a narrative text by the tenth-grade students of SMAN 1 Gelumbang. The population of this study was all tenth-grade students of SMAN 1 Gelumbang. The sample of this study was 60 students. It indicated that the null hypothesis (Ho) was rejected and an alternative hypothesis (Ha) was accepted. It could be concluded that it was effective to teach reading comprehension by using skimming and scanning techniques to the tenth-grade students of SMAN 1 Gelumbang.

Table 4: I find the meaning of an SL word by dividing it into parts that I understand

Statement	Response	Percentage
True	52	65.0
Usually not true	2	2.5
Somewhat true	3	3.75
Usually true of me	9	11.25
Always true of me	14	17.5
Total	80	100

Majority of the respondents, 65%, indicates that they work out word meaning by focusing on morphology. According to Cook (2016) and Lems, Miller & Soro (2010), English is a morphophonemic language. Words contain both phonemic and morphological information. Morphemes are defined as the “smallest linguistic unit of meaning” (p. 225). The pronunciation of a morpheme may change depending on the surrounding sounds. (ex. please, pleasure) The sound may change but the morpheme information is still contained in the word. For EFAL learners to grow in their mastery of academic English, it is helpful for them to understand the connections between words. It is important to understand that words with the same root are related to each other in meaning and to understand how prefixes, affixes and suffixes can change the meaning of the lexical category of words. By understanding the relationship between words, EFAL learners can understand new words by using morphological cues (Cook, 2016).

Table 5: I try translating word for word

Statement	Response	Percentage
True	3	3.75
Usually not true	53	13.75
Somewhat true	5	6.25
Usually true of me	8	10.0
Always true of me	11	66.25
Total	80	100

Sixty-six percent of the respondents do view translation as one of the best strategies in vocabulary knowledge. Waldorf (2013) in Napu & Hasan (2019) states that translation is a process of mobilizing the meaning of a particular text from one language to the close equivalent of the target language (TL). Translation can be concluded as the process of transferring ideas from one language to another language. Therefore, the EFAL learners are only transferring the ideas without changing the purposes of a source text (SL). The purpose of the text in the translation work means the precise meaning of the source text should be conveyed in the target text. Also, the EFAL learners have to realize that they are only stating the same ideas as written in source language text from one language to another language without changing the ideas that have been written in the source text (Napu & Hasan, 2019). Hence, the EFAL learners are expected to have a better understanding of the source text before they translate a text from the source language to the target language (Napu & Hasan, 2019).

Table 6: To understand unfamiliar SL words I make guesses.

Statement	Response	Percentage
True	19	23.75
Usually not true	3	3.75
Somewhat true	5	6.25
Usually true of me	30	37.5
Always true of me	23	28.75
Total	80	100

The result shows that 28% of the respondents rely on guesswork to explain new words. Guessing from the context includes gaining knowledge of unfamiliar family members of previously known words (Nation, 2015). One has to consider the specific context as the other words and sentences that envelope that expression. New vocabulary knowledge is most efficiently absorbed when it is assimilated to the already known words by using it in a context; complex explanation of a vocabulary item will lead to a narrow scale understanding, for the case that meaning can be shown with very simple sentences (Alqahtani, 2015). Learners make use of the context to approximate the meaning of a given word. The example sentences used to explain meaning should teach the meaning of the new word.

Table 7: I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in SL

Statement	Response	Percentage
True	17	21.25
Usually not true	2	2.5
Somewhat true	4	5.0
Usually true of me	11	13.75
Always true of me	46	57.5
Total	80	100

The result shows that 58% of the respondents give precedence to reading as one of the most important language skills. Some researchers are interested in how extensive reading can broaden the learners' vocabulary breadth (Kulikova, 2015; Webb, 2008; Schmitt, 2008). Although second language learners might not be masterly at deriving unfamiliar lexical meanings from extensive reading, reading might intensify and fortify the understanding of moderately recognised expression (Kulikova, 2015; Schmitt, Jiang & Grabe, 2011). Nation (2001) reports that learning from the given background is a snowballing development, thus, even minute growth in information is worthy of noting. It becomes imperative for EFAL learners to choose the reading materials that arouse their enthusiasm and maintains the aroused interest. These EFAL learners must choose the reading material that is within their level of comprehension; otherwise, incomprehensible material would inject boredom in them.

Table 8: I practice SL with other learners

Statement	Response	Percentage
True	69	86.25
Usually not true	1	1.25
Somewhat true	4	5.0
Usually true of me	3	3.75
Always true of me	3	3.75
Total	80	100

Eighty-six percent of the respondents indicate that they broaden their vocabulary breadth by practising SL with other learners. Learners are more prone to harden their comprehension of unfamiliar words when teachers allow them to sift them in the course of one physical involvement (Marzano, 2004). One such activity is to engage in conversations. Simply talking

with other people can help a learner to discover new words (Kumar, 2014). The researcher realised that learners did not struggle to retell a story from a book once read especially if it was either folklore or fable. Learners easily retrieve any story with both human and animal characters probably because most of such stories have bizarre happenings which learners find thought-provoking and memorable.

## **DISCUSSION**

The interpretation of every statement reflects the positive, negative or neutral attitude of the respondents towards strategy inventory for language learning. As results show, the respondents report that they value the link between what they already know and new learning material in SL. This shows the need for teachers of an additional language not to treat their learners as empty vessels as they introduce new teaching and learning material to them. The SL teacher needs to use activities, which require the SL learners to use their background knowledge to interpret the new learning material. It becomes important for any EFAL teacher to value their EFAL learners' background knowledge and experiences as these determine the pace one masters new vocabulary. Learners learn faster if the lesson moves from the known to the unknown, simple to complex. It is for this reason that learners employ the strategy of relating what they already know to the new material.

The results have shown that ESL learners practise using new words in their sentences with their friends while mastering reading comprehension. These EFAL learners employ this strategy to solidify their understanding of the new words in the given text. It becomes imperative for the EFAL teacher to offer learning opportunities to use newly learned words. This can be realised through the classroom or even outside of the classroom informal or formal activities that the EFAL teacher tasks their learners to attempt.

The results have shown that EFAL learners use guesswork to understand reading comprehension. These EFAL learners need to consider the specific context as the other words and sentences that envelope that expression. New words are easily mastered when they are assimilated to the already known words by using it in a context. It is most probable that guesswork builds up EFAL learners' self-esteem. The EFAL teacher needs to encourage learners to use any leading clues in the supplied text. There are many clues learners can use to establish meanings for themselves such as illustrations, the similarity of spelling or sound in the mother tongue, and general knowledge (Nation, 2015). On the contrary, studies by Feldman & Kinsella (2008) and Hulstjin (1993) in Prinsloo (2015) hint that guessing from context is doubtful because it is a largely unproductive and random practice.

The respondents employ two main reading comprehension strategies namely skimming and scanning to master reading comprehension. These EFAL learners skim through any reading comprehension by just reading a passage to get a general feel of what the subject is about. Since these learners are required to answer the given questions comprehensively, they resort to scanning. This enables them to note important specific details. For this exercise to be fruitful, EFAL teachers need to give the learners more exposure to skimming and scanning opportunities so that when they attempt a formal task, they will fare fairly well independently.

The results show that the respondents sanction that pronunciation is pivotal in learning a

second language. EFAL teachers need to understand that the pronunciation of words is perfected by multiple encounters with a word in EFAL. It becomes the EAFAL teachers' responsibility to guarantee that educational vocabulary is repeated in assorted activities, using remarkable approaches whenever. It is key for the second language learner to practise pronunciation and that articulation ought to be replicated and approved by the EFAL teacher. However, the teacher needs just to guard against making the exercise a parroting one.

Majority of the respondents indicate that they work out word meaning by focusing on morphology. This means that EFAL vocabulary can be learnt through the development of prefixes, affixes, and suffixes. The scrutiny of explicit parts of speech may proffer insinuations to deduce word meaning. It becomes important for the EFAL teacher to expose their EFAL learners to a horde of these parts of speech to guess the meaning from a given root in an unknown word. For EFAL teachers, they need to give their EFAL learners enough word root practice so that they would not resort to unintelligent guesswork. The EFAL learners need to be aware of certain fixed meanings of certain prefixes as 'pre'- which means 'before' and 'bi'- means 'two'. Equally, important, EFAL teachers can also explain fixed meanings of suffixes, for example, the suffix -'less' in the word 'paperless' means 'without'.

However, Laufer warns us about the danger of word part analysis or first language cognate comparison. Sometimes learners may twist the interpretation of the context if they rely on word part analysis too heavily (Laufer, 2009). She contends that a word is not always the sum of its parts, as in the current researcher's example, 'diehard', literally means 'to lose life in a difficult/hard way'. However, that word means an 'avid' or 'unwavering 'like a supporter of a football/netball team.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study has shown that EFAL learners use a plethora of language learning strategies to enhance their understanding of English in an EFAL setting. The choice of a language learning strategy seems to depend on an individual's 'taste'. It becomes difficult to strike consistency in language learning strategies because the choice of a language learning strategy differs from one EFAL learner to another. Despite this inconsistency in the choice of language learning strategies by EFAL learners, it remains important that language practitioners become aware of the need to equip EFAL teachers and learners as they strive to sharpen EFAL learners' language learning skills.

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