

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY EFAL LEARNERS IN MASTERING A COMPREHENSION PASSAGE IN THE FET PHASE

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ABSTRACT

Learners' performance in English first additional language (EFAL) reading comprehension among school learners at most schools in South Africa is a tremendous concern. The aptitude to interpret main ideas from the text constitutes the meaning-making process, which is the comprehension process that is required when reading comprehension passages. Deep comprehension is achieved when a reader progresses beyond literal comprehension to using the text combined with prior knowledge to construct understanding. English is used as a medium of teaching and learning in most South African public schools, although most of these learners are EFAL speakers. To counter this unease, reading comprehension passage strategies become useful. This study aimed to investigate the challenges encountered by EFAL learners in mastering a comprehension passage in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase and how to cope with those challenges in dealing with a comprehension passage. The study employed a qualitative research design to collect data. The sampling frame was 14 EFAL learners in South Africa. The results of the study show that EFAL learners need to use multiple reading comprehension passage strategies including inference to boost their understanding of any comprehension passage in an EFAL setting. Teachers' immense input is required in equipping EFAL learners with the skills to cope with challenging comprehension passages.

Keywords: reading comprehension, english first additional language, first additional language, additional language, curriculum and assessment policy statement

INTRODUCTION

It is globally known that children usually struggle with reading in English as a second language (L2) 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 (Scott & Saaiman 2016; Molotja & Themane, 2018).

English second language reading ability is in great demand because of its global appeal, particularly in science, technology and advanced research. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about L2 learners' reading comprehension in South Africa (Mboacha, 2015). The connections

between research and reading comprehension in L2 contexts in South Africa are not well supported because of the multicultural and multilingual diversity in L2 learners and their surroundings (Mboacha, 2015). Besides, high failure rates and comparatively low levels of learner achievements observed in matric results over the years have been attributed in part to learners' poor English reading comprehension abilities (Mboacha, 2015).

Data has shown that children who have English as a first language experience higher rates of educational attainment than children learning EFAL at each stage of education. This pattern of relative underachievement suggests that current educational practice is failing to meet the literacy needs of children learning EFAL (Burgoyne, Kelly, Whiteley & Spooner, 2009). Failure to identify comprehension difficulties and provide support for the development of comprehension will lead to reduced access to the curriculum and an inability to reach the individual's full potential (Cain & Oakhill, 2006b).

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on reading instruction in primary, secondary and higher education (Lei, 2010). The literature has shown that comprehension strategy instruction, including multiple reading strategies, has been justified in being beneficial to helping learners become strategic readers and improve their reading comprehension (Klapwijk, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to provide learners with a reading strategy instruction that focuses on teaching reading comprehension passages strategies that can help them become strategic readers. In a South African context, many learners in high schools demonstrate a low level of strategy knowledge and lack of metacognitive control (Cekiso, 2012).

Many governments prioritise education transformation to escape resource limitations and poverty through an educated workforce achieving economic development (Prinsloo, Rogers & Harvey, 2018). However, despite increasing investment in education and some improvement, achievement remains poor among South African learners. In identifying possible contributing issues, language has been purported to be an influential factor, given the political history and multilingual context of South Africa (Prinsloo, Rogers & Harvey, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the Department of Basic Education (2011:8), the 'First Additional Language' (FAL) refers to a language which is not a mother tongue but which is used for certain communicative functions in a society, that is, medium of learning and teaching in education.' The curriculum also assumes that learners may not have any knowledge of the additional language when they arrive at school. Therefore, the emphasis is on developing learners' basic interpersonal communication skills. In the South African context, it is also generally accepted that there are learners who use their FAL as a language of learning and teaching and that these learners need a great deal of support. In many schools in South Africa, children use their additional language, which is often English, as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in Grade 4. This means that they must reach a high level of competence in English by the end of Grade 3' (Department of Basic Education, 2011:8)

In the Intermediate and Senior Phases, learners continue to strengthen their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. At this stage, the majority of children are learning through the medium of their FAL, English and should be getting more exposure to it. Greater emphasis is

therefore placed on using the FAL for thinking and reasoning. This enables learners to develop their cognitive academic skills, which they need to study subjects like Science in English. They also engage more with literary texts and begin to develop aesthetic and imaginative abilities in their additional language (DBE, 2011).

By the time learners enter Grade 10, they should be reasonably proficient in their FAL about both interpersonal and cognitive academic skills. However, the reality is that many learners still cannot communicate well in their additional language at this stage. The challenge in Grades 10 – 12, therefore, is to provide support for these learners at the same time as providing a curriculum that enables learners to meet the standards required in Grade 12. These standards must be such that learners can use their additional language at a high level of proficiency to prepare them for further or higher education or the world of work (DBE, 2011).

The development of L2 reading comprehension is imperative in environments where English is the medium of instruction and also a foreign language. In South Africa, English is a foreign language to a majority of learners at all levels, and at the same time, English is the medium of instruction to subjects like Economics, Accounting, and History. One of the critical goals of the South African CAPS 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.

Arkarsu and Harputlu (2014) view reading as a complex processing skill in which the reader interacts with the text to create meaning. Nhapulo, Simon and 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. Also, 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).

A comprehension is an act of understanding what is read, the ability to gather meaning from printed symbols. Reading comprehension is a process of translating signs and symbols into meanings and incorporating the new information into existing cognitive and effective structures (Carretti & De Beni, 2006). Comprehension is a complex process that requires an active interaction between the student's background knowledge of the context, the purpose of the reading material and the level of vocabulary and language used by the authors to gain the meaning of a text (Almutairi, 2018). Reading comprehension is defined as the level of understanding of a text that comes from the interaction between the words that are written on a page and how they trigger knowledge outside the text to construct meaning by interpretation (Mboacha, 2015). Reading comprehension skills are particularly critical for students as they progress in school and the focus becomes no longer on learning to read but rather on reading to learn (Kisau & Hiller, 2013).

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

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section provides briefly the theoretical framework that forms the basis for this study. In conceptualising this study, Skinner's (1957) behaviourist theory is the conceptual framework upon which this study hinges.

This theory is dependent on replicating what others say or write. This theory advances that language learning is an unconscious procedure and does not engage mental/cognitive processes. Skinner (1957) propounds that behaviourism is a behavioural approach to mental life that is not mechanistic and the internal states are not remitted. He developed a different kind of behaviourist philosophy, which came to be called radical behaviourism. Besides, Skinner (1957) states that children begin out as clean slates and language learning is a process of getting linguistic behaviours printed on these slates. Language acquisition becomes a process of experiencing a language that is conditioned behaviour, the stimulus-response process, stimulus-response and feedback reinforcement. Consequently, learners learn language gradually through imitation, repetition, memorisation, controlled drilling and reinforcement. As a contrast, reinforcement can either be positive or negative. Skinner (1957) asserts that an inclusive account of behaviour involves an understanding of selective history at three levels: biology (the natural selection or phylogeny of the animal), behaviour (the reinforcement history or ontogeny of the behavioural repertoire of the animal) and for some species, culture (the cultural practices of the social group to which the animal belongs). This whole organism, with all those histories, then networks with its surroundings. Repeatedly, Skinner (1957) expressed even his behaviour as a result of his phylogenetic history, his reinforcement history (which includes the learning of cultural practices) interaction with the environment at the moment.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research questions for this study were as follows: What makes a comprehension passage so challenging? How do you cope with those challenges in dealing with a comprehension passage? This case study was designed as a qualitative research project. Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey (2016) state that qualitative research seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. The author's further point out that qualitative research is effective in obtaining culturally specific information about values, opinions, behaviours and social contexts of specific populations. For this qualitative study, only 14 EFAL learners were used as respondents, meaning 7 Grade 10 and 7 Grade 11 EFAL learners. These learners were stationed at one high school in South Africa. The researcher used two focus group discussion panels to collect data. The researcher believed that this number of respondents would make it possible for them to keep the focus group on task. A small number of respondents characterises qualitative research; phenomenology research can typically range from three to ten (Creswell, 2014). Before the respondents took part in the focus group interviews, they were informed of the general aims of the study: To investigate the challenges encountered by EFAL learners in mastering a comprehension passage in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase and how to cope with those challenges in dealing with a comprehension passage. The focus group

discussion participants were referred to as either Learner1 to Learner 14 to ascertain anonymity and confidentiality.

In the focus group discussion session, the motivation that kick-started the session was enquiries that were based on the subject matters devised from the aim of this qualitative study. During that time the researcher tape-recorded and also wrote some notes. The stimulus questions allowed participants and the researcher to dwell on the subject under discussion that was ultimately channelled into a more detailed and solid debate. As the focus group worked together, the researcher was able to comprehend the interpretation behind the analysis and views articulated by focus-group participants. A shared view about the theme was thus attained through probing and consideration.

The qualitative data for this study were analysed using the content analysis method which reduced the volume of information and identified significant patterns. The researcher analysed the participants' responses to focus group interview questions closely, finding links and similarities in the responses and coded them appropriately. Then, the researcher abridged and positioned the results into themes. In this research, the course of categorising and theme formulation was pursued by a grouping of themes entrenched in the aims of the study and focus group interview questions that were used to gather data.

RESULTS

Theme 1: What makes a comprehension passage so challenging?

Most students struggle to understand a long sentence with a complicated structure. It is supported by a report by Barfield (1999), which shows that nearly 12% of students had difficulty understanding long sentences in a graded story and 20% in an academic text. Because of this issue, students who cannot comprehend long sentences cannot grasp the main idea presented in the text. Sometimes, the passage is usually long, thus learners may struggle to understand. The respondents had this to say:

There is nothing as difficult as making sense of a long sentence in reading comprehension. By the time I reach the full stop, I can't retell the introduced idea in the first part of the sentence (L3).

I prefer short to long sentences because I can easily recall the message. Dealing with a long sentence is challenging because many words will make me confused and lost (L4).

The comprehension passages are very long, especially as you progress from Grade 8 onwards. By the time I read the last sentence in the last paragraph, I can't remember what was raised in the earlier paragraphs. If I had an option, I would prefer shorter ones to these longer ones (2).

The findings indicate that the learners either lack background knowledge or cannot relate new material to older material. According to constructivist perspectives, learning entails building on what the learner already knows so that the learner can apply it to the current situation, restructure it and create new knowledge (Hyslop-Margison, 2008). As a result, interactive or social learning becomes extremely effective because it involves the sharing of experiences from various

backgrounds and interests of different learners. People frequently move from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex. When students lack a solid foundation in the subject under study, it becomes a problem. The learners had this to say:

The time we are given by the teacher to complete a comprehension passage, which is two pages long, is never enough for me considering that the passage will usually be based on unfamiliar experiences (L7).

I struggle with a comprehension passage that talks about issues I have never experienced, read about or seen. It's like a nightmare for me because I would then need lots of time to tell what it is about because everything is new to me (L1).

The results show that students cannot identify keywords in the given sentences. According to Saaristo (2015), language learning is essentially grammar learning; grammar is unavoidable in language use and learning. Grammar is important because it creates a language; it aids in the identification of the various words that comprise sentences in any language. It aids in the development of communication and writing skills. Similarly, knowledge of vocabulary is essential for mastering reading comprehension. The value of vocabulary knowledge in learning a second language cannot be overstated. There is evidence to suggest that the quantity of vocabulary plays a significant role in predicting reading comprehension capacity (Nation 2015; Zano & Phatudi 2019). Vocabulary is essential in second and foreign language acquisition because, without its appropriate and sufficient knowledge, learners cannot understand others or express their feelings. Vocabulary knowledge of a foreign language is necessary; it provides learners a broader ability to produce well-structured written texts and contributes to the comprehension of utterances as well as reading comprehension. The respondents had this to say:

My teacher always tells us to use the surrounding words to get meaning in case we cannot understand a given comprehension passage. Using a context to get correct answers for a comprehension passage is not that easy for me (L9).

Some words have different meanings, so when I see one in the comprehension passage, it's difficult for me to tell if I'd have chosen the correct one. In turn, this element of doubt affects my marks in comprehension passages (L12).

In some passages, they use informal or strangely new words. The use of non-everyday terms makes my understanding of a passage slower (L14).

A title does not only cover the core idea (the content) of the passage but also expresses the author's tone. A title is like a common theme that runs through the passage, that is, it integrates the various ideas or issues discussed. The title is not meant to reflect the conclusion (inference) rather, a title summarises the author's ideas or points succinctly & must come from what is directly stated in the passage. It is important to read the title of a reading passage first and think about the information to come for it helps speed up your reading when you know what is to come, knowing what information to expect increases your comprehension and activates prior knowledge. A text's title is an important tool for assisting learners in understanding and accessing information in

informational texts. By taking the time to understand the title, the learner will be more confident that the content of his/her responses will be relevant, earning you one more point. Identifying the keywords and command words in the title is the most important aspect of understanding the title. All of these are taken into account in the following:

Sometimes I fail to see the connection or link between the title and the comprehension passage itself. Usually, this is so because the comprehension titles they give us are so short that you can't guess the matter to be discussed (L5).

When I'm asked to give a reason for the chosen title of the passage, I always give not very satisfactory responses because the wording in the title is not always decisive and telling about what the comprehension passage is about (L6).

Theme 2: How do you cope with those challenges in dealing with a comprehension passage?

Students who lack reading strategies frequently struggle to comprehend the text. However, learners use some reading strategies to cope with reading comprehension and one of them is the use of visual clues. A visual cue as reading comprehension regards prediction making as a reading comprehension strategy and focuses on the relationship between prediction making and visual cues especially in the English First Additional Language context. Visual elements are only one way to assist in stimulating oral language production. Content that was incomprehensible to a learner previously will become more understandable once visualisation is incorporated (Stokes, 2001). Cooper's (2002) analysis of the levels of image perception as well as the roles that perception itself plays on student ability to process information, corroborates this and adds that visual elements' relatability depends on a child's funds of knowledge, cultural background and extant schemata, which are only some of the elements educators must take into account. The respondents had this to say:

When I see a reading comprehension with images like pictures, it helps me link that to what I already know especially in my mother language. It will then connect that to my current reading comprehension. Surely, it works for me (L8).

All the pictures and diagrams in a reading comprehension help simplify the content for me especially if it is not my first time to see that picture or diagram or if I even see it similar to what I once read, I easily link it to a reading comprehension I will be working on (L12).

Another reading strategy that was used by the learners is skimming. Meza (2017) describes skimming as a reading strategy that focuses on overall information by reading a piece of written text quickly, ignoring some information and using titles, subtitles and the first line paragraphs. Thus when implementing skimming reading strategies the learners would get the main idea instead of the details and they also have to ignore some parts of the text that do not seem useful to collect the information needed which might affect full comprehension of the material. It helps learners in predicting the purpose of the passage, the main topic and possibly some supporting ideas. Skimming requires a superficial reading, not an in-depth reading. The students can be trained to

skim the passage by giving them a few minutes to look through the text, having them close the book and saying what they learn. The respondents had this to say about skimming:

My teacher taught us to go through the passage fast without looking for a lot of detail. In this case, I focus on the title, introduction, probably one or two paragraphs in the body and the conclusion (L6).

During my first encounter with reading comprehension, I skip certain parts of it. My eyes just go through the script so fast so that I have a feel of what the passage is about (L13).

Likewise, Meza (2017) defines scanning as a reading strategy where the reader looks through the text for specific information. Scanning is a more detailed view of the text where the reader intends to locate the information by carefully reading every single word. Moreover, Nation (2009:70) provides a brief definition by stating, “Scanning involves searching for a particular piece of information in a text such as looking for a particular name or a particular number”. The scanning reading strategy allows the reader to extract just the information needed from a written text to answer specific questions about a text. The respondents had this to say:

Reading comprehension requires concentration. By doing so, I don't miss any information as I read slowly and ignore information that is not the reason for attempting that reading comprehension (L9).

After going through the questions, I know what is expected of me. I only look for that stuff in the text that addresses these questions. I won't spend time on stuff that is irrelevant to the questions on offer (L11).

Using dictionaries is essential for vocabulary acquisition particularly when learning English as an additional language. As a result, the use of dictionaries is critical not only in using language but also in its learning. In the process of English language learning, all learners need to possess a wide range of word knowledge, good lexical competence and extensive knowledge of English language vocabulary. Well-developed knowledge of vocabulary assists ELAL learners to comprehend, communicate and be successful in language acquisition. Among the wide variety of ways in vocabulary learning, either intentional or incidental, the use of dictionaries in L2 learning has been and will remain a useful strategy and an important tool in the hands of the students to provide quick and direct access to the mastering of the unknown words in particular and of the English vocabulary in general (Koca, Ponjani & Jashari-Cicko, 2014). Dictionaries provide students with a wealth of information about words and their proper usage. As a result, the importance of dictionaries in the learning of a second language cannot be overstated. The respondents had this to say:

I think, where possible, when we're doing a comprehension passage, not for SBA, we should be allowed to use the dictionary to explain new words. This will surely make our vocabulary grow (L8).

Since many passages have plenty of new words, when I'm doing my homework after school, I use a dictionary to look up the correct meanings of words. The dictionary will help me with pronunciation and some examples of sentences in which that word was used (L14).

It cannot be overstated how important parents are in the home. According to Freeman and Long (1990), every student requires parental attention to achieve their learning goals. Because learning English is not the same as learning their home language, children require the attention of their parents or family members to learn English as an additional language. Students will find it difficult to learn to read without the attention of their families. They may become depressed if no one encourages them to learn English. The respondents had this to say:

I am fortunate to be born to teachers. When I reach home and I have a reading comprehension to work on, the moment I share that with my mom, she becomes intensely interested in reading it. We even share our answers, though orally (L1).

I use my mother's phone to google for information that will help me answer reading comprehension. Her phone always has data and many times I am tempted to just look for memos if it's a past national exam paper (L3).

The importance of feedback is supported by the findings of a study conducted by Stott and Beelders (2019), who report that providing timely and appropriate feedback is also known to improve learning in the EFAL. The ability to read with comprehension in a specific language means that written or oral feedback given in that language, for example, by a teacher or software, can result in learning, expanding the possibilities for providing beneficial timely, efficient and personalised feedback. Similarly, in a study by Stott and Beelders (2019), they support the importance of feedback by reporting that providing timely and appropriate feedback improves learning in the EFAL. The ability to read in a specific language with comprehension means that written or oral feedback given in that language, such as by a teacher or software, can result in learning, expanding the possibilities for providing beneficial timely, efficient and personalised feedback. The respondents had this to say:

I like it when the teacher does not delay giving us our marked papers back. I cannot wait to see where I did not get it right. I always nag her for my mark so that I do better next time. I even ask her for extra question papers for practice and the memo after I have finished the task (L7).

I am frustrated when my teacher takes his time to share the reading comprehension answers with us. When a teacher gives us our results in no time, I feel like attempting another reading comprehension so that I get a higher mark (L4).

Cooperative learning is another strategy used by the learners to master reading comprehension. High achieving students may assist low achieving students resulting in deeper learning for both. Students who teach other students must integrate and verbalise knowledge, which may deepen the learning process (Castle, 2014). Students who learn from other students may be less threatened by their lack of knowledge and, therefore, more comfortable asking questions from a fellow student rather than a professor. Furthermore, problem solving and verbalisation are keys to the

development of student critical thinking skills (McKeachie, 1978) and are integral to the cooperative learning process. An effectively designed, cooperative group solves problems through interactive discussion among members. Therefore, cooperative learning approaches may lead to the development of the need for cognition, by helping students enjoy the process of learning together. The respondents had this to say:

If it's an informal task, when I face a challenge with comprehension questions, I always rely on my friends, classmates or even the teacher for some explanations (L5).

We have unique talents in life and the same applies to a classroom. Sometimes I ask my classmates for an explanation because I know they are better than I am in reading comprehension or we even work in pairs or groups (L2).

DISCUSSION

This section includes a discussion of the participants' views that emerged from the EFAL learners in the FET phase who participated in this study.

From the study, it cropped up that participants battled with a subject matter they had never experienced. They are mainly comfortable with comprehension passages that dwell on a matter they are conscious of. This finding is supported by Zano (2020a, 2020b), Charamba (2020a, 2020b) and Mophosho, Khoza-Shangase and Sebole (2019) who report that for second language readers to reach an understanding of the written text, they rely on various skills and strategies; combining background knowledge, real-world knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, and first language-related knowledge.

The study reveals that the participants use their social contacts to get meaning from a given comprehension passage. The participants rely heavily on social contacts that include their teacher, a friend and classmates during some interactive activities to enhance competence in a reading comprehension passage. Maja (2019) who reports that classrooms are learning communities in which teachers and learners interact with each other daily in a social and interactive space supports the importance of this interaction.

The results have shown that participants battle with deciphering the message in the comprehension passage by just reading the title. This could be so because most comprehension titles are very cryptic and thought provoking. The details of the comprehension passage are intelligently condensed in the title. The rationale for this is to provoke thought in the reader and it is only through reading the comprehension passage that the aroused interest is maintained.

In other words, the title of a comprehension passage is not always seemingly telling of what the passage is about. This resonates with Hungwe's (2019) study, which reports that having read the article, students stated that the article was just too difficult for them to understand. They indicated that the title itself (In search of the Holy Grail) appeared unrelated to the article's subject matter. When asked to look up 'holy grail' in their dictionaries, students indicated that the dictionary defined the Holy Grail as the cup that Jesus drank from during his last supper with his disciples. They could not make the connection between the Holy Grail (the cup) and the human genome. This is because the meaning was inferential and required students to infer meaning to

understand the text (King, 2007). Through discussion, the meaning was negotiated until students could understand that the expression 'Holy Grail' refers to something difficult to obtain.

Another finding from the study is that teachers do not devote ample time to teach reading comprehension passages but would rather focus on other language aspects such as summary, advertisement and cartoons. This is in line with Pretorius and Currin (2010) and Zimmerman and Smit (2014) who report that where teaching is done, only much attention is paid to teaching decoding skills. However, the manner of instruction is often done in a superficial, haphazard and decontextualised way (Pretorius & Currin, 2010; Zimmerman & Smit, 2014). Therefore, the learner may still struggle with simple decoding. Teachers also assume that once decoding is mastered, comprehension automatically follows. Teachers thus do not focus on teaching reading comprehension, which requires specialised skills. This fails the learner to smoothly transition between decoding to reading meaningfully, if at all (Pretorius & Currin, 2010; Zimmerman & Smit, 2014).

The results revealed that the participants try to work out the meanings of unfamiliar words by using the context. The results of this study confirmed the research findings from other scholars. 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 (Elyas & Alfaki 2014). Furthermore, this technique encourages learners to take risks and guess the meanings of words they do not know as much as possible. This will help them build up their self-confidence so that they can work out the meanings of words when they are on their own. 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).

The participants reported that their teachers discourage them from using the dictionary when answering comprehension questions as this stifles creativity and slackens their speed. The use of a dictionary is hotly debated among linguistics since it is one of the most popular ways of getting the meaning of a new word like 'lionise' meaning to 'extol/exalt' according to Schmitt's survey of students (Schmitt, 1997). Extensive reading provides opportunities for deliberate learning by searching for unfamiliar words in a thesaurus. This look-up can be done with a hard-copy dictionary; with the increasing use of electronic readers and tablets, look-up can be done simply by touching a word (Nation, 2015). The ease of such electronic access makes it much more likely that the learners will look up words and thus add a deliberate element to vocabulary learning. Also, it is so speedy that it takes very little time away from reading. Dictionary look-up greatly increases the chances of vocabulary learning and helps the student become confident in his/her ability to using English (Nation, 2015; Zano & Phatudi, 2019).

The participants report that teachers should give them immediate feedback after they have answered a reading comprehension passage. Many instances when learners are given a comprehension exercise as homework. Then, the teachers never bother themselves to discuss such exercises with the learners. It could be they just give them the answers without explaining them or would just put a red tick, signature and date to indicate that the learners did the homework as

instructed by the teacher. However, the need for feedback supports the results of a study conducted by Stott and Beelders (2019) who report that provision of timely and appropriate feedback is also known to enhance learning in the EFAL. The ability to read with comprehension in a particular language means that written or oral feedback given, for example by a teacher or software, in that language, can result in learning occurring, extending the possibilities of provision of beneficial timely, efficient and personalised feedback.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to investigate the challenges encountered by EFAL learners in mastering a comprehension passage in the FET phase. This study has served to show that for EFAL learners in the FET phase to tackle a reading comprehension passage with minimum challenges, they need to be equipped with several skills and strategies, which include dictionary use, inference, time management, real-world knowledge and background knowledge. Reading a comprehension passage to address all the given questions with accuracy requires EFAL learners who are ‘good comprehenders’, who decode with comprehension and operate above the frustration level. For the EFAL learners to get higher marks in reading comprehension in the FET phase, there is a need for teachers to invest in the teaching of decoding skills and explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies.

Reading comprehension is a complex process that requires a wide range of cognitive and linguistic abilities. As a result, deficiencies in any cognitive ability important to the comprehension process may cause deficiencies in reading comprehension performance. Perfetti and Stafura (2014) provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the processes and skills involved in reading comprehension; deficits in comprehension could result from a variety of sources other than decoding such as differences in sensitivity to story structure, inference making, comprehension monitoring, syntactic processing, verbal woes and a variety of other factors.

The study revealed that the learners feel shortchanged when teachers do not give devote time to teaching how to answer reading comprehension questions. They feel that the teachers’ input would certainly boost their confidence when they are eventually faced with a reading comprehension passage in the absence of the teacher. Teachers are the ones who create classroom environments that promote engaged reading. Moreover, not only do teachers have a significant influence upon an EFAL learner’s acquisition of the habit of engaged reading, but teachers also appear to be very much aware of the need for motivating their EFAL learners to read. The learners’ main battleground is a failure to link their lived experiences to the given comprehension passage. It becomes imperative for learners to broaden their reading habits so that they become acquainted with a plethora of world issues such as global warming and the latest technological and scientific discoveries.

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