Improvement from Within: The Free Voluntary Reading Approach and Reading Comprehension for Rural English Fal Learners

Mosebetsi Mokoena[1], Cias Tsotetsi[2]

University of the Free State, QwaQwa Campus, South Africa.

Abstract

The teaching of reading and reading comprehension for English first additional language (FAL) learners remains a challenge in many rural schools. As a result, many English FAL learners continue to perform and compare poorly in national and international reading benchmarks. This study explores a free voluntary reading approach (FVR) as another strategy for improving reading comprehension for English FAL learners in a rural high school. It reports on the school conditions that facilitate the application of this approach as well as the factors that may impede or enhance the success of this approach. Following its qualitative nature, the paper adopts Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) and Social Constructivist Theory (SCT) as methodological and conceptual frameworks, respectively. The free attitude interviews (FAI), oral reflections and focus group discussions (workshops) are used to generate data from ten co-researchers. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed for data analysis. The findings suggest that co-researchers prefer to choose and decide their own reading materials in the English FAL classrooms. The establishment of drop-in boxes is another condition necessary for successful application of FVR approach. Furthermore, the findings indicate that effective modelling of reading enhances the

application of this approach. Finally, the nature of classroom arrangement is important for the success of free voluntary reading approach.

Keywords: reading comprehension, free voluntary reading, rural, English first additional language

Introduction and Literature Review

The terms, such as 'extensive reading,' 'sustained silent reading (SSR),' 'pleasure reading,' 'book flood,' and 'independent reading' are all synonymous with 'free voluntary reading' (hereinafter referred to as FVR) (Yamashita, 2015:168). According to Grabe and Stoller (2011:286), FVR can be defined as "an approach to teaching and learning of reading in which learners read large quantities of material that are within their linguistic competence." The term, 'reading' refers to "a way of recognizing letters and words and being able to get meanings from the text" (Foncha, Mafumo & Abongdia, 2017:8762). For Granville (2001:15), at the basic level, reading involves focusing on the decoding of texts, word recognition, phonics etc. Furthermore, in the views of Van Staden and Bosker (2014:2), there is more to reading than recognising letters. To them, it is a cognitive process requiring the application of knowledge, skills and meta-cognitive strategies.

Van Wyk and Louw (2008:246) explain comprehension in terms of three levels. This involves comprehension that focuses on factual content and comprehension at an interpretive and analysis level. Moreover, at the centre of comprehension is the overall understanding and construction of meaning from the text (Bertram, 2006:6). In this study, these words, reading and comprehension have been combined to form a concept known as reading comprehension. According to Pardo (2004, cited in Coetzee, Van Rensburg & Schmulian, 2016:307), reading comprehension is "…the process through which students apply prior knowledge and experiences when interacting with written text in order to gain meaning and understanding from that text within a particular socio-cultural environment." In the context of this study, this concept involves interacting with the text, deriving meaning from it, interpreting and analysing it, and then reflecting on it.

Post-apartheid South Africa ushered in curriculum and policy reforms for the country's education system. These reforms sought to transform the entire education system including pedagogical

practices. As a result, there was a shift from the use of the traditional teacher-centred practices to employing more constructivist and learner-centred approaches in the classrooms (Van Staden & Bosker, 2014:1). The teaching and learning of second language (formally referred to as First Additional Language (FAL) to the majority of non-English speaking learners across the country was no exception. However, while many aspects of language teaching and learning in South African classrooms have been transformed to some extent, the teaching and learning of reading comprehension amongst these learners remains a challenge. As a result, their reading skills and comprehension abilities have been severely hampered (Van Wyk & Louw, 2008:245). This is evident in the poor performance of the country's learners in the national and international comparative studies (Mensah, Pillay & Sibaya, 2017:8749). For example, reporting on the National Reading Strategy (NRS), the Department of Education (DoE) (herein referred to as Department of Basic Education (DBE)), revealed that more than half of learners in the intermediate phase performed far below average in the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) tasks in 2005, (DoE, 2008b). In this regard, Zimmerman and Smit (2014:2) point to the ineffective teaching and learning of reading comprehension in intermediate phase classrooms. Teachers in this phase emphasise the importance of decoding text at the expense of mastering reading comprehension skills. In addition to decoding texts, Pretorius (2002) also refers to rote learning and verbatim recall that characterise the teaching and learning of comprehension. On their first participation in the Progress in International Literacy Survey (PIRLS) 2006, the country's Grade 4 and Grade 5 learners had the lowest achievement (Zimmerman & Smit, 2016:1). A similar performance was also demonstrated in the subsequent prePIRLS 2011 (Zimmerman & Smit, 2014:1; Mensah et al., 2017:8749). Furthermore, the more recent PIRLS 2017 results showed no improvement in the reading comprehension of many learners across South African primary schools. According to Matier Moore and Hart (2007), learners' poor performance in PIRLS results from the ineffective teaching of reading in schools. In this case, little emphasis is put on the teaching and learning of reading comprehension. Studies have indicated that South African classrooms still have learners who are unable to read (Van Wyk & Louw, 2008; Zimmerman & Smit, 2014; Makiwane-Mazinyo & Pillay, 2017; Mensah et al., 2017). Similar observations were made by the DBE and it acknowledged that "South African youth do not read as well as their foreign counterparts" (Van Wyk & Louw, 2008:246).

Attempts have been made to improve learners' reading comprehension skills in South Africa and elsewhere. In the United States of America (USA), under the auspices of the National Institute of Child

Health and Human Development (NICHHD), the National Reading Panel's Teaching Children to Read identified a number of strategies to remedy the instruction of text comprehension. These procedures include comprehension monitoring; cooperative learning; graphic and semantic organisers; story structure; question answering in which feedback is given; question generation by the learner; summarising the main ideas; and multiple strategy teaching (Zimmerman & Smit, 2014:2). In South Africa, the 2008 Government Gazette outlined the National Reading Strategy (NRS) (Republic of South Africa, 2008). The aim of this nationwide campaign was to improve the reading competence of all South African learners. In addition to addressing these challenges, the government also responded to the calls made by the United Nations Education and Scientific Cooperation (UNESCO), as well as Education For All (EFA) aimed at increasing literacy levels in 2015 (Mensah et al., 2017:8749). In their recent study in South Africa, Foncha et al. (2017) found that learners' reading comprehension skills can be enhanced if reading is viewed and taught as a social practice. In another study, Makiwane-Mazinyo and Pillay (2017:10453) point to the need for the training of teachers in teaching reading.

In addition to these attempts, recent scientific studies have focused on factors that affect reading literacy development, the use of technology-assisted reading for improving reading skills, and profiling classroom reading comprehension development practices (Van Wyk & Louw, 2008; Van Staden & Bosker, 2014; Zimmerman & Smit, 2014; Coetzee et al., 2016). However, there still remains a dearth of scientific studies on the school conditions under which free voluntary reading (FVR) approach can be used to improve reading comprehension for English FAL learners in a rural high school within the South African context

This situation continues despite the noted successes of this approach. For instance, according to Machet and Olen (1996:2), the use of learner-centred practices, such as FVR is more effective than direct instruction. Furthermore, implementing FVR in the teaching and learning of reading comprehension improves learners' academic performance (Denton, Wolters, York, Swanson, Kulez & Francis, 2015:81). Thus, the use of FVR as an approach for improving reading comprehension for English FAL language helps to inculcate a culture of reading. In addition, there is consistent evidence that FVR is effective for language acquisition (Cho et al., 2008:69). Corroborating this, Warrington and George (2014) note that there is a strong positive relationship between reading attitude and intrinsic motivation. In a study in Australia, it is reported that there was an increase in learner motivation towards reading as a result of engaging in FVR activities (Barry, Huebsch & Burhop,

(2008) cited in Velluto & Barbousas, 2017:3). Likewise, reporting on the results of a study conducted in Korea, Cho, Choi and Krashen (2008:70) revealed that learners in the FVR class showed more confidence and less anxiety towards reading in English. This is particularly important, as many English FAL learners lack confidence and become anxious when they read. In this regard, FVR enhances the reciprocal relationship between emotional development and reading (Yamshita, 2015:172).

Purpose of The Study

Considering the many benefits that can be attained from well -structured and supported FVR approach, we were curious to find out why English FAL learners at the school under study continued to display poor reading comprehension. These inconsistencies in reading comprehension impacted negatively on their academic performance across all the grades. This happened in spite of the many resources, strategies and time that the school spends on addressing the issue of reading comprehension. This study, therefore, arose from the need to explore free voluntary reading (FVR) as another strategy for improving reading comprehension for English FAL learners in a rural high school. In this regard, the following questions are central to this study:

- What school conditions are necessary for the successful application of free voluntary reading approach to reading comprehension?

- What are the factors that enhance or impede the application of a free voluntary reading approach to reading comprehension?

Framing The Study

This study adopted Social Constructivist Theory (SCT) as theoretical lens. As an auxiliary of the constructivist approach, social constructivism owes its origins to the works of Lev Vygotsky (Powell, [n.d]:243) and its development can be traced back to research traditions in disciplines, such as education, sociology and cognitive psychology (Savin, 1986:11; Sandu & Unguru, 2017:52). As a lens, SCT calls for research that is interactive in nature. This is research in which knowledge is not passively received (Buzkurt, 2017:211); rather, it is research where both the researcher and the participants are actively involved in the creation of scientific knowledge. This knowledge is created from multiple perspectives and multi-faceted social realities (Sandu & Unguru, 2017:57). In other words, SCT calls

for research where the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and meaning-making shifts from the individual (researcher) to the group of people. Therefore, it advocates the interaction between the individual, other social actors (participants), and the environment which leads to a collectively constructed meaning (scientific knowledge and reality) (Savin, 1986:211; Sandu & Unguru, 2017:52). In addition, SCT-couched research places importance on the relationships amongst all the interacting social actors involved in the construction of scientific knowledge, realities and meanings (Bozkurt, 2017:214; Sandu & Unguru, 2017:57).

The teaching and learning of reading comprehension seems to be a challenge at the school where the research for this study was conducted. In most cases, traditional instructional strategies are used to teach reading comprehension for English FAL learners. This situation, undoubtedly, renders learners passive participants in the learning process. In other words, English FAL learners are often marginalised as the teaching of reading comprehension is based on the assumptions of English FAL teachers rather than the needs of the former. This includes the identification of classroom conditions under which FVR may flourish. In an attempt to challenge this status quo, the use of SCT in this study enabled us to own the existing problem as well as FVR approach for improving reading comprehension for English FAL learners at a rural high school. This in itself calls for teamwork in finding solutions with the co-constructors rather than finding solutions for them. In this regard, we were able to engage in meaningful discussions guided by the dialogical methods (Chilisa, 2012:253) about the issue finding circumstances suitable for FVR approach to improve reading comprehension for English FAL learners in rural high schools.

Methodology

The free attitude interviews, group discussions (workshops) and oral reflections were used to collect data from a team of learners and educators from one rural high school. These were operationalised within the principles of Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR). As a methodological framework, PALAR is from the premise that there are different ways of knowing. These different ways involve putting people's experiences at the centre of knowledge construction. In other words, during this process, all co-researchers reflect and act critically on their concrete experiences of the social issue under study (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015:8; Schiller, Jaffray, Ridley & Du Plessis, 2018:3; Wessels & Wood, 2019:3). These critical reflection and action are characterized by collaboration, trust and team building (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018:519). The mutually constructed knowledge is aimed at effecting social and educational change as well as empowerment through democratic means and participation (Cloete & Delport, 2015:86; Wood et. al., 2017:123).

In this study, the co-researchers brought their different experiences in the teaching and learning of reading comprehension. The PALAR methodology enabled us to reflect on the current poor state of teaching and learning of reading comprehension and act on effecting the necessary change. Through equal participation and inclusion, in our team of co-researchers were able to share our experiences and ultimately devised a framework for improving reading comprehension for English FAL learners through the use of FVR approach.

Setting

Due to its nature and aim, the study was conducted in one rural South African high school. This school is situated in the northern part of the Free State which is classified as a rural area. While there is no universally accepted definition of the concept 'rural' (Hlalele, 2012), to a large extent, however, areas considered to be rural are characterised by a limited or non-availability of essential services such as clean water, sanitation or electricity (Kleine, White & Lock, 2013). In other cases, these areas are surrounded by farms and are exposed to limited industrialisation (Chigbo, 2013:830). The area in which this study was conducted fits all these features.

Participants

The participants in this study were two English FAL teachers and eight learners from one rural high school. The learners were from Grade 10 and 11 respectively, and the teachers were also teaching the same Grades. In order to ensure anonymity of the co-researchers, the following pseudonyms were used for both Teacher-co-researchers and Learner-co-researchers. Learners were referred as LEARNER AB, LEARNER CD, LEARNER EF, LEARNER GH, LEARNER IJ, LEARNER KL, LEARNER MN, and LEARNER OP. For teachers, the names TEACHER ST and TEACHER QR were used respectively. In addition, these eight workshops were conducted in an area where participants were able to express their views and thoughts freely and confidentially.

Procedure

The twelve weeks focus group discussions (workshops), FAI and oral reflections began with the team agreeing on finding strategies that could be used in the English FAL classrooms to improve reading comprehension. While the focus of the focus group discussions was on conditions outside the school, the team felt that much impact of this framework could be achieved in the classroom. In other words, for the FVR approach to achieve the desired outcomes, the English FAL classrooms should be considered. The data generated through team discussion, oral reflections and FAI revealed that the creation of a print-rich environment should be considered in the classroom. Consequently, the team put up boxes in each English FAL classroom. These boxes were filled with books of different genres ranging from magazines, newspapers to maps and covering a range of topics.

At this stage of our project, it became important to monitor the progress of the FVR approach in improving reading comprehension for English FAL learners. In this case, the co-researchers reported their experiences and observations through oral reflections and prompts guided by the free attitude interviews. In the previous workshop, the team had decided to create print-rich environment. Through oral reflections, the co-researchers reported that there was a change in their attitude towards reading and books in general. As a result, the readily available books increased their frequency of reading. Others revealed that their motivation to read could be attributed to the large variety of books from which they could choose.

To this far, the co-researchers had developed the habit of reading a variety of books for pleasure. It was also clear that they were experiencing with books outside those prescribed for academic purposes.

At this workshop, it was agreed that their need to improve reading comprehension for English FAL learners would be addressed through the use of more learner-centred methods in the English FAL classroom. Furthermore, the co-researchers suggested the inclusive and mutual lesson planning in the teaching and learning of reading comprehension activities. Moreover, learner-co-researchers highlighted the need to learn word-attacking skills and dictionary use. This, they argued, would help them to decipher and understand difficult words in the text.

At this phase of the research process, co-researchers were expected to implement the new learning autonomously. With regard to co-lesson planning and co-teaching, the following actions were noted:

- Teacher-Co-researchers made available the template for learner-co-researchers. They both designed a lesson in accordance with the prescripts of CAPS.
- When choosing a text to be read, they equally ensured that the text complied with the requirements of CAPS in terms of difficulty levels and length.
- When it came to the reading, learners were able to select the texts they deemed interesting.
- The reading exercise became more learner-centred with teachers assuming the role of being facilitators rather than instructors.
- Learners became active participants because they were able to interchange the leading and scaffolding roles during reading.

Data Collection and Analysis

The audio-tape device was used to record the responses generated through workshops, FAI and oral reflections used for data generation in this study. This was done to ensure that all responses were captured correctly in order to be transcribed verbatim at a later stage. For concise understanding, the transcription considered the patterns of the responses as well as description of prevailing themes. This study adopted Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a tool for analysis of data. CDA has largely been defined as "the study of speech beyond sentences" (Avdi & Georgaca, 2007:158).

Ethical considerations

The ethical clearance letter for this study was obtained from University of the Free State. In addition, the permission to conduct this study was acquired from the school under study. Both teachers and learners were made aware of their voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage of the study without any consequences. Lastly, learners' parents gave consent for their children to participate in this study.

Discussion of Findings: Circumstances Under Which Fvr Approach May Thrive

This section of the paper discusses the findings pertaining to the circumstances under which FVR may succeed in improving reading comprehension for English FAL learners. These findings add to, and corroborate the existing literature of circumstances under which free voluntary reading approach may flourish in order to improve reading comprehension for English FAL learners.

The discussions and FAI interviews revealed that co-researchers preferred to choose and decide their own reading materials in the English FAL classrooms. For this to happen, it became apparent that there was a lack of a print-rich environment hindered the successful implementation of FVR**.** In this regard, the statement by **(Teacher ST)** reveals that:

In most cases, you find three or more learners sharing one paper from a newspaper. In other cases, one learner in a particular class, let's say 11 B and the other in maybe 11C will be using the same newspaper article.

Adding to this, **(Learner IJ)** laments the poor state of the English FAL classrooms and their impact on learners' motivation to engage in FVR:

 The classroom does not motivate us to study because it's dirty and the walls are all empty. There is nothing that encourages you to read or anything about reading for that matter.

In response to these comments, we decided to create the print-rich environment. For a print-rich environment to be successfully realised, it is required that the classroom must stimulate English FAL learners to read. The following suggestion was made, **(Learner KL):**

I think that having pictures on walls like it used to be when we were in lower grades. Back then the walls would be decorated with pictures and drawing us and some difficult words. That used to help me a lot especially with spelling. I would also suggest that if we paste pictures and rules about grammar, spelling and reading skills will help a lot. You see, Sir, like maybe some notes on how to read for comprehension will help us understand better cause will be applying them in class.

In this case, I asked learners to bring and paste posters and big pictures in the classroom. Following the advice of Learner-co-researchers, we pasted the pictures depicting celebrities reading. They had earlier stated that they were more likely to be motivated and inspired to read if they saw one of the celebrities do it. All this resulted in English FAL learners spending time reading for pleasure instead of waiting for the teacher to bring something that needed to be read.

From the above extracts, it becomes clear that having a print-rich environment in the classroom encourages learners to engage in FVR. In addition, it provides them with a pool of resources that allows them to read a variety of books voluntarily.

Another aspect closely linked to the creation of a print-rich environment involves a functional school library:

Teacher QR: The issue of a library needs to be addressed immediately. I do think that if the library is well-equipped it is possible for us to work. I mean, we cannot use the school library in its current form. It really needs some serious attention.

Teacher ST: Of course there is a local library but they seldom borrow books from it...our school library is in shambles as you know.

The two extracts reveal the negative impact of a non-functional school library on FVR and reading comprehension in general. The unavailability of books in the school library as well as the conducive environment in learners' homes exacerbates this situation. In addressing this challenge, we decided to make the school library functional. The revival of the school library committee proved to be effective in making the library functional. In spite of not receiving any formal training in library services and administration, the committee members agreed to take charge of the management and administration of the school library.

The next step involved creating a culture of reading. In this case, the establishment of drop-in boxes was found to be another condition necessary for learners to select reading materials. The next step involved creating a culture of reading. The following suggestion was made:

Learner OP: I would suggest that we keep a box for each class. In this box we keep old newspapers and magazines and other books that we may find interesting. This will help us to read while others are making noise when there is no teacher in class.

Placing the drop-in boxes in various places across the school yard proved useful as it increased access to the reading materials. In this regard, the collection of old books, newspapers and magazines was found to be necessary for providing English FAL learners with a variety of materials to select and read. This ignited learners' interest to engage in FVR activities. The sudden interest by learners to see what their teachers were reading seemed to have contributed in making learners engage in FVR.

Apart from the lack of print-rich environment, a pool for reading resources, and the functional school library, it had emerged earlier in the study that co-researchers felt that they were not provided sufficient support by their teachers to engage in FVR activities**.** Teachers themselves also acknowledged these views:

Teacher QR: Supporting weak learners in the FVR is one of the most important things to do. I do think that most learners need support with pronunciation while others can't read with understanding. So, as a teacher my work involves bringing the best out of every learner.

Teacher ST: We have most weak learners coming through the system. They really need support in almost everything they do. Giving them continuous support allows you as an educator to identify those who have challenges with regards to reading comprehension. I would suggest that we provide them with necessary reading materials, and form reading clubs so that they can support each other too."

Teacher QR: Unlike their counterparts in the former model c schools, our learners lack a strong support system in their homes. They don't have parents who can monitor them or even read with them after school. In English FAL learners' view, teachers were selective in their approach. As a response, the changing of the classroom setting was effective in allowing teachers to provide necessary assistance to English FAL learners. This situation made it possible for teachers to provide this support to the struggling learners. It allowed learners to seat in groups and tackle the text in their groups. This arrangement also enabled teachers to attend to learners' questions readily and effectively. The instant

feedback that learners were receiving acted as a form of scaffolding too. Furthermore, the readily available dictionaries and a variety of reading materials made scaffolding easier for teachers and learners. This situation enabled teachers to address questions from the struggling students speedily. In addition, it was also found that the readily available teaching aids such as dictionaries made English FAL educators swift and effective in providing support

When asked about the lack of motivation to engage in FVR, it became apparent that teachers were to blame. The learner-co-researchers unanimously agreed that they had hardly seen their teachers reading anything beyond the prescribed books. This pointed to the failure and the need for teachers to model this important language skill.

Learner GH: Our teachers do not motivate us to read. I mean you hardly see a teacher reading a newspaper here at school.

Learners CD: It is true. You can see how we struggle to get newspapers here at school. It shows that teachers do not read. They only know the textbooks not even a simple magazine. This thing is affecting us too as learners.

Learner MN: You know, when you see someone reading a book, you also develop the interest to read. Again, teachers are our role models we should see them read. It does not help that we should be the only ones reading in class. Teachers must read too.

 As a response to this, the teacher-co-researchers decided to become active readers. In other words, teachers became keener in modelling reading to English FAL learners. Consequently, as English FAL teachers, we made the agreement that every Thursday would be dubbed "Reading Thursday." The idea behind this project was that each English FAL teacher would set aside one hour for reading. This activity involved English FAL learners selecting reading materials from the 'Reading boxes' in their classroom and from the school library. It was during this time that both English FAL learners and teachers engaged in the silent reading. Furthermore, the "Reading Thursdays" provided the space and time for teachers to model reading in their English FAL classrooms and across the school. In this case, learners watched when the teacher scanned and skimmed the text for information. It was also found that by demonstrating how to use word -attacking skills and being in possession of a dictionary, teachers' modelling became more effective. This gave learners to the opportunity to understand the different context in which words could be used. In all these, learners were asked to make inputs.

Conclusion

While this paper attempts to illuminate the significant role that free voluntary reading approach may have on reading and reading comprehension in particular, it further argues for the need to investigate the classroom conditions under which this approach may be used in rural schools. Furthermore, the paper cautions against the uniform application of these conditions as rural high schools face challenges that are specific to them. Contrastingly, the study calls for the adaptation and tailoring of these circumstances to enable successful use of FVR approach in order to improve reading comprehension for English FAL learners in rural high schools.

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