

The Impact of Teacher's Skills on the Teaching and Learning of English Reading to Grade One Learners in Tsholotsho Rural District in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study explored the impact of teacher skills on English reading teaching among grade one learners in Tsholotsho Rural District, Zimbabwe. The research reveals that teacher skills play a pivotal role in determining learner outcomes. However, some teachers in the district lack teaching skills, affecting their ability to deliver effective reading instruction. The study finds that teachers in the district predominantly use the phonics method, whole word approach and THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills) for teaching English reading. These methods are favoured for their effectiveness in teaching basic reading skills. However, the introduction of Ndebele sounds prior to English sounds poses a challenge. The research underscores the importance of teacher skills in improving reading outcomes. It highlights the need for targeted teacher training and support to enhance teacher effectiveness. The study's findings have implications for educational policy and practice, emphasizing the need for deploying infant trained teachers to rural schools to teach grade one classes.

Introduction

Controversy continues over the best methods for teaching English reading, (Glordano 2000). Reading skills play a pivotal role in the process of learning. Learning without acquiring reading skills is like a ship without a sail. So just as it is impossible to construct a house without a foundation. It is impossible to build an understanding of concepts without reading skills. Effective teaching techniques are crucial for improving students reading skills, (Kucer 2004, Rasinski 2017). It is accepted that teaching practices influence children's learning and development (Hamre & Pianta, 2010), but findings concerning which specific teaching methods best promote children's academic and reading interest development are mixed. Reading ability is one of the most crucial factors in the learning process. Reading is the basis where all learning starts. Therefore, the ability to read affects not only school children's study, but also affects overall national competitiveness, (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018). It is definitely a link that should never be neglected in elementary education and national development (Huang, Tsai and Huang 2015). A large number of children are going through school without mastery in reading which is a real concern to the Zimbabwean nation if vision 2030 and sustainable development goals are to be achieved, Marima, Kangethe and Runo (2016). The reading difficulty as a result of poor reading culture is not limited to only Zimbabwean learners. Internationally, research indicates that there is a growing concern

in many countries around the world over reading disabilities among pupils. According to Sadker (2005), many learners lack the necessary reading abilities to make success of their academic years at school. According to Owu-Ewie (2006) in Africa, education and language issues are very complex because of the multi-ethnic and multilingual situation. The case is even more complex and severe when the official language of the nation is different from the indigenous language (Omoniyi, 2013). It has been revealed by researchers that reading situation in Africa basic schools constitutes a serious educational crisis. Effective teaching methods and skilled teachers are crucial for developing English reading skills among grade one learners, particularly in rural areas. In Zimbabwe's Tsholotsho Rural District, teachers face unique challenges in teaching English reading, including limited resources and lack of skilled teachers to teach grade one learners.

Literature Review

Pedagogical approaches for young learners in primary school need to be embedded with meaningful yet fun activities in order to engage and motivate them to learn (Abdul,2020). Identifying ways to help rural schools improve teachers' pedagogical skills in ways that have the greatest impact on student achievement should be a priority area of research in rural education (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Teacher quality is a critical determinant of student achievement, and rural schools often struggle to attract and retain teachers who are well qualified to teach in these contexts, (Monk, 2007).

Lack of explicit phonics instruction can lead to decoding difficulties and reading struggles, (Moats, 2000). Teaching methods can affect learners negatively or positively, (Chikuni, 2024). Shumba and Gada (2018) points out that, learners cannot read because they lack understanding of the alphabetical principle and this stemmed from invalid teaching methods. This is an indication that one of the factors affecting teaching of reading in rural schools is unsound teaching methods applied by teachers.

According to Shumba and Gada (2018) it is evident that learners failed to acquire decoding skills because the teachers lacked the competencies in teaching reading English explicitly. This shows that, the absence of decoding skills in learners, as in that study, impedes word recognition and word attack skills. This indicates that poor decoding skills of learners in rural schools emanated from wrong teaching methods applied to teach reading in English. Teachers are the ones who make a difference in the classroom, by providing explicit instruction, teaching phonological awareness, teachers can assist struggling readers in making gains toward closing the reading gap (Dudych 2015).

In a study conducted in Canada on supporting struggling readers by Dudych (2015) in Manitoba province, Manitoba's reading scores were the lowest in Canada. Results are clear that Manitoba teachers need to reflect on current teaching practice and make changes to improve the quality of reading instruction that students receive. This serves as an indicator that changes to the way teachers support struggling readers in the classroom and beyond its walls are essential. Teachers cannot simply continue to teach in their current manner and expect learners' to do better. Research in reading identifies several reoccurring themes deemed essential to support struggling readers. Teachers are the ones who make a difference in the classroom. The findings of the study by Muranda, Tshabalala, Ncube and Khosa (2015) reveal that the majority of infant teachers were not qualified to teach these classes. The study also reveal that teachers taught English using vernacular words and this confused the children.

The lack of English skills is prominent especially in rural areas as indicated in the study conducted by, (Hossain 2016). To achieve increased success rates, the basic foundation of English skills should be made strong from the grassroots level (Biddha & Thinley, 2010). Research by LaPrairie (2014) found

that the teaching and learning practices in Bhutan are heavily inclined towards the traditional method of rote learning and memorization.

Pupils with problems in reading have problems in school performance in general (Eyre, 2006; Tellez, 2006; Dadzie, 2008; Adebayo (2008); Botha et al. (2008) and Lindner (2008) point out that many teachers have under-developed understanding of teaching literacy and also have negative attitude towards teaching pupils reading strategies. Botha et al. (2008) claim that, the employment of unqualified language teachers has a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning of how to read. Njie (2013); Lucas (2011); Harrington (2001); also lament that most pupils have poor literacy skills as a result of teachers' incompetency and the poor teaching methodology they use to teach reading in class. It has also been highlighted by Harrington (2001) that the most significant factor in student's learning is the quality of the teacher. Therefore, even in cases where reading materials are adequate, reading skills of poor readers are not improved because the most important person, who is the teacher in this case does not know how to help the poor readers, (Tellez, 2006.)

Adebayo (2008) claims that, good method of teaching employed by teachers can enhance pupils reading ability. Teacher professional development plays an important role on students' growth, (Chambers, 2011; Hausman 2001). Cayir (2017) posits that, it can be seen that assessment is not only about measuring performance of learners in reading, but also considering how the teaching process is impacting on the children. Unfortunately, most teachers are not oriented towards helping poor readers in their classes. In their training, they were not adequately prepared to teach all children according to their needs, (Tellez 2006). If children do not acquire basic reading skills in their elementary school years, their future educational and occupational performance could be severely affected, (Murnane, Sawhill & Snow, 2012)

Early literacy experiences in preschool lay the foundation for future reading achievement, (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). However, Maruyama (2007) cites considerations which support the view that reading difficulties are caused by neurological factors. On other hand, Torgesen, (2002) states that, deficiency in phonological awareness skills are a primary cause of reading, Whilst, Dudych (2015) believe that, an effective reading program includes a home reading component. Yalch (2017) says, schools' educational resources and physical infrastructure have a significant effect on infant's success.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm Approach and Design

The study was guided by the interpretivist philosophical paradigm in generating data from the selected sample. According to Creswell (2013), the interpretivist approach to research accepts that reality is relative and has multiple facets all depending on the context of the individual attaching meaning to that truth. Interpretivism as a research philosophy defines the approaches that are used to embrace the way people involved in a phenomenon under research give meaning to the data that they provide during data collection and interpretation processes (Maree & van der Westhuizen 2013).

In this study the qualitative research approach was adopted to address the objectives of this study. The qualitative research approach attempts to discover truth by exploring how and why participants interact with each other (Nieuwenhuis 2013). The use of a qualitative approach to describe a given phenomenon provided an in-depth representation of the relevant inputs from all the relevant grade 1 teachers regarding their practices in teaching reading. In addition, using a qualitative approach for this study allowed for a thick description of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2016).

Researchers employed a case study. A case study focuses on a single phenomenon in depth by interviewing a limited sample of participants and closely examining a bounded system (McMillan & Schumacher 2006). A case study investigates a particular event in its context and the researcher defines the case and its boundaries (Punch & Oancea 2014). The case in this study is teachers teaching skills in teaching of English reading to rural grade one learners. It seeks to understand the meaning attached to teaching skills in teaching of English reading in rural schools. It seeks to understand the teaching of reading in the context of rural schools and how these contexts impact on teaching. It also seeks to understand how teaching skills and teaching methods impact on the teaching of reading in rural schools.

Population

Population is a group of individuals who have the same characteristic (Creswell 2012). Shukla (2020) defines population as a set or group of all the units on which the findings of the research are to be applied. In this research the population comprises of all primary school teachers, all parents, all learners and all primary schools in Tsholotsho district.

Sampling Technique

This study employed purposive sampling to select teacher participants, allowing for an in-depth understanding of teachers' practices in teaching reading. Six grade 1 teachers from two rural schools were chosen. The sampling process occurred at two levels: firstly, rural schools were selected, and secondly, teachers who taught grade 1 learners were identified. Teachers were purposively selected for observation and interview, enabling the researcher to explore the factors hindering effective reading instruction in rural grade 1 classes. As noted by Gall et al. (2007), this approach increased variance and improved the validity of the findings. Convenient sampling was used to select 6 parents.

Data collection instruments

This study employed multiple methods to data collection (Yin, 2016). This has an advantage of the methods complementing one another thereby strengthening the findings. The researcher used: semi-structured interview, observation and document analysis. The semi-structured interview gives a chance to the researcher to probe for more information as the interview unfolds thereby supplementing on what the investigator may have omitted in the planned questions. Oral interviews usually allow respondents to speak in their own words thereby making the phenomenon clear (Gall et al., 2007). Respondents can express their ideas/views and attitudes to the benefit of the researcher (Berger, 2011). They also allow the researcher to record the conversation for analysis later. It is due to these advantages that the investigator used the interview method.

Data analysis

The data was reflectively analysed starting from the time it was collected whilst still in the field just like what researchers say that data analysis in qualitative research is in parallel with data collection (Creswell, 2016). This enabled the researcher to discover important sources and information that was been overlooked in the design. This was achieved in three ways: 1. Having consultative meetings with respondents and supervisors. 2. Having field note summaries 3. Having data summary sheets (Drew, Hardman & Hosp, 2008). The recorded interviews were transcribed, while the memos, observational &

teaching documents and records were read and analysed. Field notes were analysed and interpreted in readiness for coding in relation to the answers of the structured questions.

Theme 1: Teaching Skills

This study through classroom observation discovered that, some of the teachers lack teaching skills when teaching English reading. Moreover most of the teachers cannot speak proper English, making it a challenge to teach grade one learners proper English. The chalkboard handwriting during classroom observation, was found to be of below standard and was not for grade one level. However, most of the teachers used cardboard boxes instead of manila as learning aids for group work.

Teacher 3 had this to say, lack of teaching skills affects learning because without teaching skills the teacher may fail to deliver, leading to failure of grade one learners to acquire reading skills. Learning resources are just resources, but they need a skilled teacher to make learners acquire reading skills.

Teacher 6 pointed out that, the teaching skills are important in the teaching and learning of grade one learners reading. If the teacher fails to deliver the lesson because of lack of teaching skills, this may affect grade one learners. They may fail to acquire the reading skills.

Teacher 2 highlighted that lack of teaching skills affects pass rate of learners. It leads to failure of learners. The learners will not acquire reading skills and will go to upper grades without acquiring basic reading skills. Lack of teaching skills affects a lot.

Teacher 1 highlighted that, some of the teachers are generally trained and are not trained to teach grade one learners. Teacher 2 expressed that, when I was training to be a teacher I was not taught how to teach grade one learners English reading. I am still learning how to teach grade one learners reading. It is unfortunate that, I am using these innocent children to learn how to teach. As a novice educator, I acknowledge that my teaching practice is a work in progress, and I regret that these learners are, in a sense, my 'guinea pigs' as I hone my instructional skills.

Teacher 4 asserted that, teaching skills are important . If teaching skills are placed correctly the teacher can teach using skills they have. Skilled teachers can improvise and write on cardboard boxes. If encouraged to read daily, grade one learners can improve. As Hattie (2009) emphasizes, the quality of teaching is the most significant factor influencing student achievement. Similarly Darling-Hammond (2000): stresses that, effective teaching is the most important factor in improving student outcomes. A common finding in school-based research is that teachers simply do not have knowledge of effective reading pedagogies and, as a result, cannot teach reading effectively in spite of their efforts to do so (Taylor 2014).

Theme 2: Teaching methods

From the data collected it is evident that, teachers in rural Tsholotsho District prefer using phonics and the whole word approach for teaching English reading to grade one learners. The phonics method involves teaching the sounds of letters before constructing words, such as breaking down "man" into "m-a-n" and "wet" into "w-e-t." This method helps learners understand the basic building blocks of words. The whole word approach sometimes called the look-and-say method, on the other hand, pairs words with pictures, aiding visual recognition and comprehension. For instance, learners look at the word "house" alongside a picture of a house. These methods are favoured because they are straightforward and effective for young learners, especially in grasping basic reading skills. However, some of the teachers in Tsholotsho district lack teaching skills to teach grade one learners.

Another widely used method is phonics method, which starts with teaching the sounds of the alphabet before introducing words. By mastering phonics, learners can decode and read any word, fostering confidence and proficiency in reading. This method equips students with the skills to independently tackle new words, significantly enhancing their reading abilities.

Teacher 4 pointed out that, we start by teaching grade one learners sounds before they start to read. They have to know the sounds of the alphabet, after that, that is when they will start reading three letter words. We use the phonemes and graphemes. They have to master the concept of the alphabet first. They should know the letter sounds, when they know them, it becomes easier for them to read. Let us say they want to read the word boy, they will use sounds to read, for example t-o-y. That is the method we use when teaching reading. I use that method because it is the easiest way for them to master the reading skills. This method enhances reading of any word. They can read any word as long as they know the letter sounds. .

Teachers in Tsholotsho rural District predominantly use the THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills) method for teaching English reading to grade one learners. Before adopting THRASS, the phonic method was widely used. Both methods share similarities, but THRASS is now preferred for several reasons. THRASS equips learners with phonetic skills that enable them to decode any word, enhancing their reading proficiency and confidence. Teachers appreciate THRASS because it allows children to read beyond their grade level, using phonetic cues to tackle unfamiliar words effectively. However, the introduction of Ndebele sounds prior to English sounds was found to be a challenge to the teaching of English reading to grade one learners.

Teacher 6 expressed that, I prefer these methods, phonics sound, look, and say method. The phonics sound that is whereby, I teach the sounds first. For example a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p before I construct the words. After mastering sounds, I then introduce reading of words. For example, the word jam they read as j-a-m then bag as b-a-g. Then with the look and say method, that is whereby a picture will accompany the word. They say the words then they look at the picture like the word tree. They look at the word fish and then look at the picture of a fish. They look at the word table and then look at the picture of a table. These methods are so easy for grade one to grasp reading, the look and say method and phonic method.

The study reveals that, teachers in rural areas prefer using phonics and the look-and-say method for teaching English reading to grade one learners. The phonics method involves teaching the sounds of letters before constructing words, such as breaking down the word "fat" into "f-a-t" and "jam" into "j-a-m" This method helps learners understand the basic building blocks of words. The look-and-say method, on the other hand, pairs words with pictures, aiding visual recognition and comprehension. For instance, learners look at the word "tree" alongside a picture of a tree. These methods are favoured because they are straight forward and effective for young learners, especially in grasping basic reading skills. However, some of the teachers in Tsholotsho district lack teaching skills to teach grade one learners.

Another widely used method is phonics, which starts with teaching the sounds of the alphabet before introducing words. By mastering phonics, learners can decode and read any word, fostering confidence and proficiency in reading. This method equips students with the skills to independently tackle new words, significantly enhancing their reading abilities.

Summary

The study revealed that teachers in Tsholotsho Rural District predominantly employ phonics and whole

word approach for teaching English reading to Grade One learners. These methods were found to be effective in enhancing reading skills, with phonics enabling learners to decode and read any word, and whole word approach facilitating visual recognition and comprehension.

However, the study also highlighted significant challenges faced by teachers, including inadequate training, limited resources, and lack of confidence. These factors hinder effective teaching of English reading to grade one learners in rural schools.

Moreover, the study indicated that teacher skills play a crucial role in determining English reading outcomes. Teachers' lack of teaching skills, particularly in phonics and reading instruction, was identified as a major obstacle to effective teaching.

Additionally, the introduction of Ndebele sounds prior to English sounds was found to pose a challenge to teaching English reading. Despite these challenges, teachers recognized the importance of phonics and whole word approach in teaching English reading to grade one learners.

The study's findings underscore the need for targeted teacher training programs, resource allocation, and policy support to enhance teacher skills and improve reading outcomes.

Discussion of the Findings

The study's findings underscore the critical role of teacher skills in determining English reading outcomes among grade One learners in Tsholotsho Rural District, Zimbabwe.

Teacher effectiveness is crucial, as noted by Hattie (2009), the teacher is the most significant factor influencing student achievement. Darling-Hammond (2000) also emphasizes that, teacher quality is the most important factor in improving student achievement. Chikuni (2024) advocates for teachers to pursue short courses in reading instruction.

Phonics instruction is vital, according to Kilpatrick (2015), it is essential for developing decoding skills. Moats (2000) adds, systematic phonics instruction is critical for reading success. Furthermore, Dudych (2015) states that, teachers need to reflect on current teaching practice and make changes to improve the quality of reading instruction that students receive.

However, inadequate teacher training hinders effective instruction. As Cochran-Smith (2001) notes, teacher preparation programs often fail to provide adequate training in reading instruction. Strickland (2010) emphasizes, teachers need ongoing professional development to improve reading instruction. Mzimela and Ramrithan (2016) aver that, learners in rural schools cannot read because teachers lack the teaching skills of teaching reading.

Resource constraints exacerbate challenges. Krashen (2004) argues, limited resources hinder teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Crim, et al. (2008) point out that, teachers must be adequately prepared to teach phonological awareness skills and must have a basic understanding of language structure. On the other hand, a study by Chikuni, (2024) encourages educators to create a supportive classroom atmosphere that encourages help-seeking behaviors.

THRASS method's effectiveness is supported by research. Siik & Hawkins (2013) found that, THRASS instruction improves phonemic awareness and reading skills. Similarly, Park & Lombardino, (2013) point out that, phonological awareness is a strong and significant predictor of word reading skills in elementary children. Targeted teacher training, resource allocation, and support are vital for enhancing teacher skills and improving reading outcomes.

Conclusion:

The study explored, the impact of teacher skills on English reading instruction among grade one learners in Tsholotsho Rural District, Zimbabwe. The findings underscore the significance of teacher skills in determining English reading outcomes. Phonics and whole word approach methods emerged as effective instructional strategies, but inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and lack of confidence hindered effective teaching. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions to enhance teacher skills, including training programs focusing on phonics and reading instruction. Policy makers should prioritize resource allocation to support rural educators. By addressing these challenges, educators can unlock learners' full potential, fostering a strong foundation in English reading and future academic success. The study contributes to understanding effective teaching methods and teacher skills required for successful English reading instruction in rural Zimbabwe, informing educational policy and practice.

Recommendations

- District, school administrators should provide regular professional development opportunities to help teachers stay updated on best practices in reading instruction.
- There is need for collaboration between experienced teachers and novice teachers. They should work together to provide guidance and support.
- There is need to provide teachers with the necessary resources and support to effectively implement reading programs.
- The district and school administrators should regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of reading programs to identify areas for improvement.
- The government, school administrators should allocate sufficient resources, including funding and personnel, to support reading programs.

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