

Strategies to Enhance Grade Four Reading Skills in Rurally Located Primary Schools in the O.R.Tambo Coastal District

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines strategies to improve reading skills among Grade Four learners in rural primary schools within the O.R. Tambo Coastal District, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The study sought to identify practical approaches for improving reading proficiency in this context. It was grounded in Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism theory, which emphasises the importance of social interaction in learning; in this case, the emphasis is put on grades. An interpretive paradigm guided the research process. The study adopted a qualitative methodology with a case study design, and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with ten Grade Four teachers selected through convenience sampling. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Key findings revealed effective strategies to enhance reading skills, including the use of picture books, the "Drop Everything and Read" initiative, grouping learners according to ability, and employing diverse teaching methods and styles. These strategies were designed to cater to the diverse needs of learners and promote engagement with reading. The study addresses a significant gap, as limited research and implementation efforts have been made in rural primary schools regarding reading enhancement strategies. The recommendations propose that educational stakeholders collaborate to cultivate a strong reading culture through targeted interventions. These include organising workshops focused solely on reading instruction strategies and fostering more significant support for teachers in rural settings. By implementing these recommendations, Grade Four learners stand to benefit from improved reading skills, laying out a stronger foundation for academic success in their learning. This research makes a meaningful contribution to the discourse on literacy development in under-resourced educational contexts.

Keywords: Reading Skills, Grade four Learners, Primary Schools, Literacy Enhancement, Academic Success.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is a critical competency that underpins learners' academic success and lifelong learning. Main et al. (2023) define reading as the cognitive skills and processes that allow one to decode and interpret the meaning of a written text, as well as critically evaluate and apply the acquired information. Reading proficiency involves several components, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, fluency, and comprehension strategies (Chamba & Ramirez-Avila, 2021). On the other hand, reading strategies refer to deliberate and purposeful techniques that readers employ to improve their comprehension, retention, and engagement with the text (Dhakal, 2024). Examples of these tactics include summarising, asking clarifying questions, visualising, and making predictions (Martina et al., 2023). These skills and strategies interact and complement each other to build a strong foundation for effective reading and are therefore vital for learners to successfully complete their education journey.

While reading proficiency is essential, many South African primary school learners in rural areas struggle significantly to develop these skills. In these learners' everyday contexts, isiXhosa or other indigenous languages are the primary languages, and they are the first languages in these contexts; however, English is the first additional language that is not their home language (Posel et al., 2022). Learners must read and comprehend content in a language they are not proficient in, making the change to English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) starting from grade four, as a first additional language, even more challenging for them (Cronje, 2024). As a result, reading comprehension, which is vital for academic progress, is an area of concern as per the results of the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which found that many South African primary school learners were still challenged to read for meaning (Roux et al., 2023).

This issue is particularly concerning in rural primary schools, such as those in the Eastern Cape, where resource constraints and sociolinguistic challenges impede educational outcomes. While several studies have demonstrated the significance of reading proficiency, many of these studies were conducted in urban areas, and research on the unique challenges faced by rural learners has been limited. This research gap necessitates targeted interventions and strategies to address and improve reading skills and techniques among rural primary school learners, equipping them for success in school and beyond. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to focus on strategies for improving reading skills in Grade Four for rurally located primary schools in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District, Eastern Cape. The research objective guiding this study is to:

- *Determine the strategies to enhance grade four reading skills at rurally located primary schools in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING READING SKILLS

The mind map below illustrates the reading strategies identified in the literature.

Figure 1

A Cyclical Model of Integrated Reading Strategies Informed by Social Constructivism (Singer & Moscovici, 2008).



Teaching strategies are a teacher's methods and techniques to assist learners in reading in a Grade Four English as a First Language class. A teacher selects the most appropriate teaching strategy for teaching a topic being studied to match the learners' level of learning and the stage in their learning journey. According to studies on reading strategies, teaching learners is one of the most effective ways to help them overcome their reading challenges (Ntsala et al., 2017). Some of these strategies include:

MOTIVATION STRATEGIES

Providing a conducive environment and engagement in building a reading culture are important. However, it is also necessary to carefully consider how motivation is defined in this process. Motivation driven by external rewards, as seen in the current trend, may not be enduring when such rewards are unavailable. Instead, the challenge is to motivate in a way that fosters intrinsic interest and enjoyment in reading. This will involve moving beyond instrumental goals to enable students to find a personal value and joy in text, with teaching strategies that aim to support basic reading literacy in its varied aspects, such as cultural enjoyment and critical interpretation (Zhou, 2022). Resources such as well-stocked libraries may also be inauthentic and token if not supported by classroom practices that truly promote students' agency. The questions then are whether such strategies create students who "good" readers in school and whether it will be enough to promote avid readers for life. Evidence from context-specific research also indicates that neglecting holistic motivating practices leads to underperformance, highlighting a persistent mismatch between intention and implementation (Bokolo & Mathew-Odou, 2025).

READING ALOUD

Reading aloud effectively models fluency and exposes learners to new texts (Almuslimi, 2020; Maqbulin, 2022); however, its implementation requires critical refinement. Traditional teacher-led approaches often reinforce a dynamic power, positioning the teacher as the sole authority for interpretation and understanding. To counter this, a shift towards dialogic reading—punctuated by open-ended questions and collaborative meaning-making—transforms a passive activity into an interactive, co-constructed event. Furthermore, the significant anxiety provoked by mandatory peer read-aloud must be addressed, as it can humiliate struggling readers and reinforce negative self-perceptions. A critical, differentiated pedagogy is essential, employing strategies such as choral reading, echo reading, or assisted technology to ensure that all students experience success. The objective is to use read-alouds as a supportive scaffold, not a spotlight on deficiency—a principle particularly vital for EFAL learners, for whom poorly scaffolded sessions can exacerbate anxiety and hinder comprehension (Dludla et al., 2024).

GROUP PROCESS STRATEGY

Group work promotes cooperative learning (Baltzersen, 2024; Johnson & Johnson, 2018); its effectiveness is not automatic. Poorly implemented grouping can exacerbate inequalities, leading to social loafing or domination by high achievers. Success requires explicit structures: defined roles, individual accountability, and direct instruction in collaborative skills—practices supported by evidence that ESL learners benefit from structured peer interaction (Anbalahan et al., 2023). Moreover, not all learners are socially motivated; a balanced approach must also value independent work. Frameworks like Project-Based Learning (PBL) enhance group work by embedding reading within purposeful, collaborative projects, making the process more meaningful and goal-oriented (Imbaquingo & Cárdenas, 2023). Thus, moving beyond simple grouping to intentional design is crucial.

USING GAMES TO PROMOTE READING

Games effectively engage Grade Four learners in literacy activities; a critical distinction is needed between simple reading practice and deep comprehension. The functional reading of game instructions or card labels often involves skimming information but may not cultivate inferential thinking or critical analysis. To ensure games transcend mere "edutainment", they must be integrated with explicit metacognitive strategy instruction, such as summarisation and questioning, which significantly benefits young ESL learners (Teng, 2019). Educators must critically select games that genuinely promote literacy development at their core and leverage tools like mind mapping (Zhang, 2025) to help students organise and synthesise information. The goal is to harness the motivational power of games as a bridge to more complex, non-gamified texts, ensuring they contribute meaningfully to comprehensive reading development.

VALUING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is an ethical imperative for inclusive education (Said et al., 2018); its feasibility presents the central challenge. The theory is often reductively equated with tiered worksheets, overlooking its demands for ongoing assessment, flexible grouping, and diverse instructional strategies. Significant systemic barriers—such as large class sizes, limited resources, and time constraints—often impede implementation. As Ahmad et al. (2023) found, teachers

recognize diverse learner strategies but lack the capacity to address them individually. Without systemic support through professional development, planning time, and multi-level resources, DI risks becoming a superficial practice that inadvertently creates internal tracking. Its necessity is undeniable, particularly for foundational skills like EFAL reading (Caddy, 2015). However, its success depends on systemic empowerment to tailor instruction to diverse learning paces and starting points (Budiman et al., 2023).

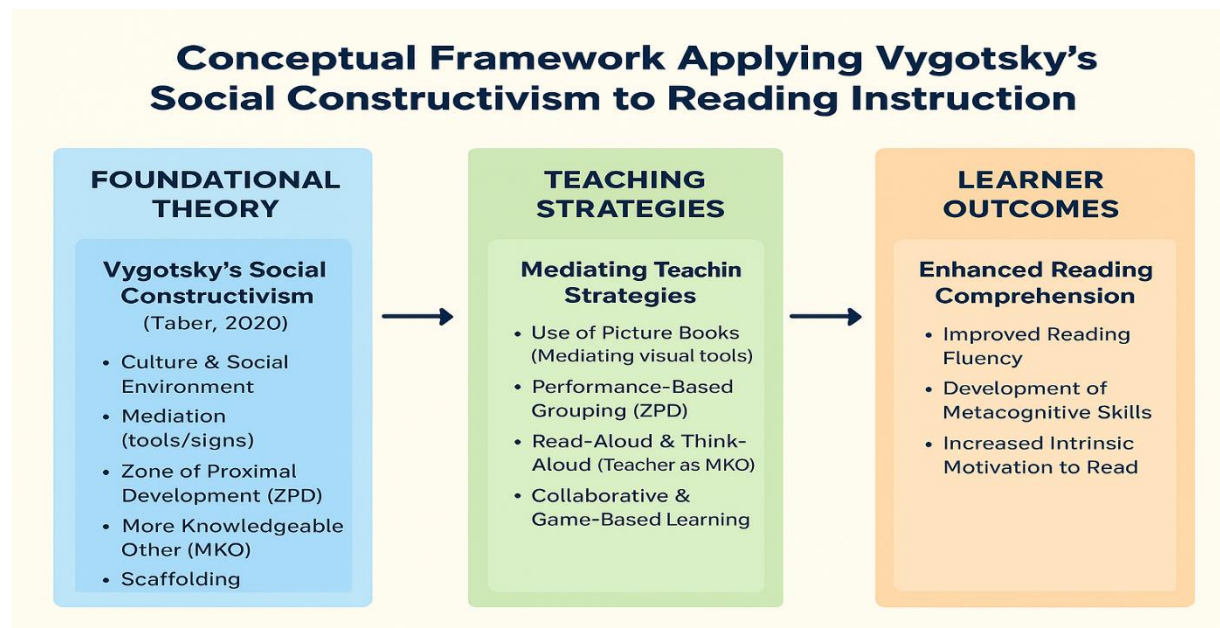
COGNITIVE READING STRATEGY

Cognitive processes, according to Wirahyuni and Martha (2022), are direct language-learning procedures. They assist the target language in receiving ideas through cognitive processing and comprehension of the language being studied. When reading, a person can use what they already know to assist them in understanding what they are reading. The reader can deconstruct language, read a book, and take a consistent mental picture of the text using cognitive reading skills. Readers can get this representation, draw different inferences, and finish the reading. Learners can respond to questions, remember precise book information, and use the knowledge they just learnt. Learners can also connect the concepts they read in the book to their current knowledge and perspective. Zarra-Nezhad et al. (2015) bolster the point of view stated above by adding that cognitive strategies like summarising, translating, guessing, and getting meaning from the situation are associated with students' understanding of the texts since they help them link what they read with their previous knowledge.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 2

Original Source (Vygotsky,1978)



The overarching theoretical framework underpinning this study is Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory. At its core, this framework suggests that the development of thought is essentially a social process. Rather than the individualistic and isolated activity implied by the other theories presented in this section, Vygotsky (1978) proposed that a child is "provided with 'cognitive tools' (for example, language, symbols, or the social relationships)" through his or her culture and social environment, which is internalised for higher-order thinking (as cited in Taber, 2020, p. 343). In this theoretical paradigm, learning is a social and active process through which a learner negotiates meaning through experiences with more capable peers, their culture, and their previous learning (Shah, 2019). This perspective holds considerable relevance to the South African context. The post-apartheid curriculum developed in 1997 was underpinned by constructivist principles that promote active learning and deep, critical thinking (Taber, 2020).

The theoretical orientation of this study is further strengthened by the relevance of the social constructivist approach to the reading process itself. In a narrow sense, reading could be characterised as an active search for meaning, a process during which symbols are decoded. However, in a more significant way, it is also an engagement with meaning. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reading is also based on this premise that the reading process is a transaction between a text and a reader where the reader's individual experiences, history, social context, and reading purpose all come into play to create meaning. Social constructivism can be an ideal theoretical perspective on which to ground up a study of literacy skills, as it provides a lens through which the ways in which these skills are developed together can be seen. The focus of this perspective on learners acquiring these skills, with guidance, not in isolation, but through exposure to the print environment, conversations about texts, and the support of both teachers and peers in the ZPD (ZPD), underscores the relevance of the theory to the design of this study.

A conceptual framework was developed for the purposes of this study to show how Vygotsky's theory was applied. Figure 1 shows the interrelationships between the major tenets of the Social Constructivism theory, in this case, mediation, the ZPD, and the More Knowledgeable Other, and the specific aspects of the teaching strategy (the grouping of learners, the use of read aloud and visual supports) which is to be used as an intervention in this study and the hypothesized improvement in the literacy skills and, by extension, the reading outcomes of the Grade Four EFAL learners in this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

QUALITATIVE APPROACH

The research design for this article was qualitative. The reason for selecting this research approach is based on the purpose of this article, which is to explore the various perceptions that Grade 4 teachers have of reading strategies. It is essential to note that a qualitative approach is most suitable for an article that aims to make sense of complex issues or matters related to social life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The use of the qualitative method also allowed the researchers to conduct an in-depth analysis of the problem at hand, which included obtaining a more detailed explanation of "how" and "why" teachers implement reading strategies and in which contexts the phenomena are most likely to be encountered (Maree, 2016). As a result, the choice of using qualitative methods in this case was primarily because they provide explanations suitable for answering the article's purpose.

INTERPRETIVISM PARADIGM

The interpretivist paradigm was chosen for this study because it aligns most directly with the research question at hand, which focuses on teachers' perceptions and experiences. Interpretivism is based on the premise that reality is constructed through human interaction and lived experience (Denzin et al., 2023). This study aims at exploring teachers' beliefs about what they think best promotes reading in their classrooms; as such, it examines multiple, contextually bound realities, rather than a single, objective truth. The interpretivist paradigm is concerned with how individuals make sense of the world and attach meaning to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In the context of this study, this means examining how Grade 4 English FAL teachers in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District interpret and give meaning to the practice of reading instruction. Interpretivism, then, offers the appropriate philosophical grounding for this inquiry into teachers' personally constructed understandings.

CASE STUDY RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study utilised a case study design. The use of a case study as the research design was justified by the aim of providing a contextualised and in-depth description of a particular phenomenon within its real-life context. The study sought to explore teachers' perceptions and strategies for supporting Grade Four EFAL learners' reading skills in rural schools within the O.R. Tambo Coastal District. The case study approach was selected as it enables a detailed examination of this bounded system, resulting in a narrative account of the experiences and practices of the participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2023). This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between teaching strategies, learner needs, and the rural school context (Bassey & Owan, 2019). The case study design did not aim to provide a generalised set of facts; instead, it offered a localised and contextualised analysis of how and why particular strategies were perceived as effective by the participants.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The population for this study comprises Grade Four English FAL teachers in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District. Using a purposive sampling technique, ten Grade Four teachers from various schools around the district were selected. The sample size of ten participants is justified for this qualitative case study based on the principles of information power and saturation, rather than the statistical representativeness sought in quantitative research.

In qualitative inquiry, the adequacy of a sample size is determined by its potential to provide rich, in-depth insights into the phenomenon under investigation. As Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) demonstrated in their seminal work, saturation—the point at which no new themes or information are observed in the data—can often be achieved with relatively small sample sizes, particularly in studies with a narrow focus. For this study, which explores a specific issue (reading strategies) within a well-defined context (rural Grade Four EFAL classrooms in one district), a sample of ten teachers provides substantial information power.

The choice of ten participants aligns with the guidance of Creswell & Poth (2018), who suggest that for a case study, a small number of participants (typically between 4 and 10) is appropriate to facilitate an in-depth, detailed exploration. This size allows the researcher to gather "thick descriptions" of each participant's experiences and perceptions, which is the hallmark of

qualitative rigour. Similarly, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) emphasise that in purposive sampling, the logic and power of the sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the research purpose. The ten teachers selected are such cases, as they possess direct experience with the challenges and strategies of teaching reading in the specified context.

INSTRUMENTATION

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instrument. Semi-structured interviews are a valuable qualitative research method that strikes a balance between structure and flexibility (Ruslin et al., 2022). As Struwig and Stead (2011) posit, this method allows researchers to provide each participant with a predetermined set of open-ended questions while retaining the ability to ask additional probing questions based on the participants' responses. This approach was ideally suited to explore teachers' in-depth perceptions and experiences.

DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF THE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interview protocol was created specifically for this study, informed by a comprehensive review of the literature on reading strategies in EFAL contexts (e.g., Dlodla et al., 2024; Zhou, 2022). To ensure content validity, the initial protocol was reviewed by two experts in the field of language education and qualitative research. Their feedback was used to refine the questions for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research questions and theoretical framework (Vygotsky's Social Constructivism).

A pilot study was then conducted with two Grade Four teachers who were not part of the main sample. The pilot served to check the reliability of the protocol in terms of consistency and comprehensibility, and to estimate the time required. Based on the pilot, minor adjustments were made to the wording of two questions to eliminate ambiguity, thereby enhancing the instrument's face validity and ensuring that the questions were interpreted as intended.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Grade Four teachers from rurally located primary schools in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District participated in the semi-structured interviews. Each participant had a 45 to 60-minute individual interview session, which was audio-recorded with their permission. Participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences and beliefs openly. The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to engage actively with participants' responses, using probes and follow-up questions (e.g., "Can you give me a specific example of that?") to elicit rich, detailed data and clarify meanings (Bassey & Owan, 2019). This process ensured that the participants' distinct perspectives and contextual difficulties shaped the data collection, enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

THEMATIC DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse systematically, and report patterns (themes) within the qualitative data. This study adhered to the six-phase framework for thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a widely recognised and rigorous methodology for

qualitative inquiry. This iterative, recursive process ensured a robust and transparent analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes. The process was conducted as follows:

PHASE 1: FAMILIARISING YOURSELF WITH THE DATA

The researchers actively immersed themselves in the data. This involved repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and listening to the audio recordings while interacting with the hardcopy notes captured during fieldwork. The primary purpose of this deep engagement was to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the content's depth and breadth, noting initial ideas and patterns, regardless of how minor they seemed (Alem, 2020).

PHASE 2: GENERATING INITIAL CODES

Systematic coding was applied across the entire dataset. Meaningful features of the data relevant to the research question were identified and labelled with concise codes. This process was conducted using both semantic (surface-level) and latent (underlying meaning) approaches. For example, segments discussing "using picture books", "grouping by level", and "DEAR time" were extracted and assigned initial codes. NVivo software was utilised to facilitate the efficient organisation and management of codes.

PHASE 3: SEARCHING FOR THEMES

In this phase, the initial codes were collated and sorted into potential overarching themes. This involved analysing how different codes could be combined to form a coherent pattern. The theme was defined as a meaningful and core concept that captures something important about the data in relation to the research question. Mind maps and thematic matrices were used to visualise the relationships between codes and cluster them into candidate themes, such as "Scaffolding Comprehension with Visual Aids" and "Differentiating Instruction through Grouping."

PHASE 4: REVIEWING THEMES

The candidate themes were rigorously reviewed and refined at two levels. First, at **Level 1**, the coded data extracts for each theme were reviewed to assess if they formed a coherent pattern. Second, at **Level 2**, the entire dataset was re-examined to ensure the thematic map accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data. This critical phase involved collapsing, separating, or discarding themes to ensure they were distinct, meaningful, and supported by the data.

PHASE 5: DEFINING AND NAMING THEMES

Once a satisfactory thematic map was developed, the essence of what each theme represents was clearly defined and articulated. This involved identifying the "story" that each theme tells and determining its significance to the overall research question. Precise and informative names were chosen for each theme to immediately convey their core idea to the reader (e.g., "Books with Pictures", "Learners are to be Grouped According to their Performance").

PHASE 6: PRODUCING THE REPORT

The final phase involved selecting vivid and compelling data extracts from the transcripts, which were then analyzed in relation to the research question and the existing literature. This is presented in the Findings and Discussion section (Section 4), where the final themes are woven into a coherent narrative that provides a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data.

This structured approach ensured that the analysis was not merely a description of the data content, but an interpretive process that provided deep insights into teachers' perceptions and strategies for enhancing reading skills.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical issues are also important and must be considered when doing research with human participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this project, informed consent was received from all participants, and they were aware of their voluntary participation. The identities of the participants and all confidential and sensitive information were anonymised. All ethical issues and potential risks have been discussed and approved, and the confidentiality and privacy of all participants are guaranteed. Additionally, ethical issues and principles for handling, storing, analysing, and disseminating information are observed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews are listed below and will be discussed as the findings of this investigation:

- Books with pictures
- Drop off everything and read
- Learners are to be grouped according to their performance
- Various teaching strategies

BOOKS WITH PICTURES

The participants mentioned using books with clear pictures so that learners can see what they are reading about. They responded as follows:

I think the textbooks and readers should have clear pictures that illustrate each aspect the learner reads. For instance, if the learner is reading about a boy going to the shop, there should be pictures that show a sequence of events from the boy's home to the shop. (Teacher C)

The learners we teach are still young when they reach grade 4; in this grade, there is a need to use more pictures, as English starts to become the language of learning and teaching. (Teacher E).

My learners can improve their reading if the printed material is full of colorful pictures. (Teacher F)

You see, these learners are accustomed to watching cartoons on television in their homes, and they enjoy discussing what is on TV. Personally, I believe that using pictures in reading lessons can boost learners' confidence in reading. (Teacher H)

Teachers advocate using pictures to help learners visualise narratives and stimulate discussion, thereby increasing participation in Grade Four reading lessons. This aligns with initiatives like the Early Grade Reading Programme, which supplies picture books to address resource shortages and improve comprehension (Early Grade Reading Study, 2022). Theoretically, pictures function as psychological tools that scaffold understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). For English First Additional Language learners, text alone often lies beyond their independent reading ability. Images act as a visual scaffold, bridging their current understanding and the text's meaning within their Zone of Proximal Development. This mediation is especially crucial in Grade 4, where English becomes the primary language of instruction. Supported by research on visual aids in multilingual contexts (Zhang, 2025), this strategy is not merely engaging but fundamental to meaning making in a second language, providing essential semiotic support for constructing understanding.

DROP OFF EVERYTHING AND READ

The interviewed participants noted that drop-off and reading are strategies they use to enhance reading skills in their grade 4 classes. They responded as follows:

Every day, I instruct my Grade Four learners to put down everything and read anything they want to read; I am using this strategy to instill a culture of reading. (Teacher A)

Our learners need someone who will care for them, as they are coming from grade 3. I use the DEAR strategy so that they become accustomed to reading any text that is put in front of them. (Teacher B)

These learners always want to be challenged, so I tell them to set everything aside and read; this strategy is slowly but surely helping my learners improve their reading skills. (Teacher G).

The responses of teachers revealed that they firmly believe in a DEAR strategy to enhance reading skills in rural grade 4 learners. Teachers have proposed the DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) method as a potential strategy to enhance the reading skills of fourth-grade learners. Using this strategy, teachers tell learners to stop whatever they are doing and read for ten minutes. Teachers believe that DEAR can help learners develop their reading skills, particularly when they can select the books they want to read. Furthermore, giving learners a book or article to read can help them comprehend the subjects of future lessons on a deeper level. This strategy aligns with Mathew's (2021) point of view, highlighting the usefulness of DEAR in motivating students to set aside time for reading and successfully incorporate literacy into their daily lives. It is essential to remember that not every learner will benefit from DEAR, as some may find it challenging to use. Under such circumstances, substitutes such as the Read Aloud method proposed by Hasbrouck (2016) might be considered to meet the various learning requirements of learners in Grade Four. These tactics aim to create an environment that fosters learners' improvement in their reading abilities.

LEARNERS TO BE GROUPED ACCORDING TO THEIR PERFORMANCE

The participants highlighted grouping learners according to their performance as a strategy to enhance reading skills.

A good strategy that works for me is to have my learners sit in groups, pairing them with others of the same reading capacity so that they know which level they belong to. This helps them to pull up their socks and are always willing to take the next step. (Teacher B).

I have learners in my Grade Four class who often struggle with reading lessons. I then decided to group them according to their performance in reading. The reason for that is that I don't want them to feel as if they are left out. For instance, if the struggling learners are in a group, I know that I need to adjust my teaching approach; by doing so, I avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. (Teacher C).

What I can say is that learners are not the same; some are quick to grasp concepts, while others take time to understand them. Hence, I formed reading groups for them, allowing me to attend all of them; this helps accommodate the different learning styles of the learners. (Teacher J)

The findings confirm that teachers recognise the diversity of learner abilities and reject a one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction. Their proposed strategy involves grouping learners by performance level, enabling targeted support for those struggling while effectively managing classroom diversity. This practice aligns with the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT, 2022), which emphasises the purposeful grouping of students to enhance instructional focus and meet distinct learning needs. To optimise this approach, teachers employ varied group interactions—including pair work, open discussions, and individual tasks—tailored to specific activity goals and learner profiles. By customising instruction in this way, educators can systematically address individual skill levels and improve reading development across the entire classroom.

VARIOUS TEACHING STRATEGIES AND STYLES

The participants argue that learners learn differently, and therefore, there should be no single focus on a particular teaching method when teaching reading skills.

I employ different methods when teaching reading skills; I cannot use the same teaching style for all learners. That is my strategy to approach reading lessons. (Teacher D)

I teach my learners to predict the text; I activate their prior knowledge, and I have them repeat the reading of the exact text. By employing these different strategies, I aim for them to become fluent readers. (Teacher I)

I introduce my learners to skimming, scanning, intensive reading, and the use of cohesive devices so that they are good readers. Taking them into different stages of reading helps me as the teacher. (Teacher G)

Employing diverse teaching styles is a critical strategy for developing reading skills, allowing learners to engage with texts through multiple avenues. A repertoire of techniques, including prediction, skimming, scanning, and focused reading, enables students to approach texts strategically. For instance, scanning trains learners to locate specific information efficiently (Flores, 2020), while critical reading fosters deeper comprehension of abstract ideas and authorial intent (Bejrajh, 2022). Vygotsky's social constructivism theoretically underpins these methods. Visual aids in picture books act as mediating tools, scaffolding comprehension. The DEAR strategy operates within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), fostering independent reading, while performance-based grouping leverages collaborative learning to enhance student outcomes. Through varied tactics, teachers provide necessary scaffolding, creating a socially rich environment that promotes higher-order thinking and significantly enhances young learners' reading abilities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the strategic approaches identified—using picture books, implementing DEAR, performance-based grouping, and employing varied teaching styles—are perceived by teachers as beneficial for enhancing reading skills in Grade 4 EFAL learners in rural contexts. However, a critical synthesis of these findings reveals that their effectiveness is not inherent but is entirely contingent upon their nuanced implementation and the surrounding support systems. The reliance on picture books, valuable for scaffolding comprehension, risks fostering a dependency on visual cues if not strategically phased out to develop abstract textual analysis. The DEAR strategy, though laudable for promoting a reading culture, can become a passive, unstructured activity if not coupled with metacognitive guidance and access to engaging, level-appropriate texts. Similarly, while performance-based grouping addresses learner diversity, it carries the inherent risk of creating static ability groups that can stigmatise struggling learners and limit their exposure to peer models, potentially reinforcing achievement gaps. Ultimately, the study affirms that the core challenge is not a lack of strategies but the capacity for *strategic differentiation* to adapt and apply these methods responsively within the specific socio-cultural and resource constraints of rural classrooms. The success of these practices is deeply intertwined with systemic factors, including teacher professional development, resource provision, and ongoing instructional support, without which these strategies risk being reduced to superficial interventions rather than transformative pedagogical tools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following:

- **Move Beyond One-Off Workshops:** Instead of generic workshops, implement sustained, job-embedded professional learning communities (PLCs) focus specifically on reading instruction. These PLCs should enable teachers to analyze learner work collaboratively, critique and adapt reading strategies like DEAR and grouping for their specific contexts and develop a shared repertoire of high-impact practices for multilingual learners.
- **Formalise the "Reading Champion" Role:** The introduction of "reading champions" should be a structured intervention, not an informal add-on. These individuals (who could be lead teachers or language specialists) require formal training in literacy coaching to effectively mentor colleagues, model lessons, and lead data-driven discussions about reading progress, thereby building internal capacity within schools.
- **Develop a Reflexive Stance on Grouping:** Teachers should critically reflect on their grouping practices. It is recommended to use flexible, dynamic grouping that changes based on the specific reading task (e.g., mixed-ability groups for discussion, same-ability groups for targeted skill instruction) to avoid the pitfalls of permanent tracking and to promote inclusive learning.
- **Scaffold DEAR with Metacognitive Tools:** To prevent DEAR from being a silent reading time, teachers should actively scaffold it. This can be done by briefly introducing strategies before reading (e.g., "As you read, try to identify the main problem") and

following up with short, structured pair-share discussions or using simple reading journals to hold learners accountable for their comprehension.

FUTURE RESEARCH

To build on this study's findings and address its limitations, future research should pursue more specific and critical lines of inquiry:

- Action Research on Strategic Implementation: A critical area for future research is a formal, collaborative research study where teachers systematically implement and critically reflect on *one* specific strategy (e.g., a scaffolded vs. traditional DEAR approach) over a sustained period. This would generate context-rich, practitioner-informed knowledge on what makes a strategy truly effective in a rural EFAL setting, moving from *what* works to *how and why* it works.
- Longitudinal Study on Grouping Practices: A longitudinal, mixed-methods study is needed to critically investigate the long-term impact of different grouping strategies (static ability grouping vs. dynamic, flexible grouping) on both the reading proficiency *and* the socio-academic self-concept of struggling Grade Four EFAL learners. This would provide crucial evidence to inform more equitable pedagogical decisions.

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