
The Impact of Reading Challenges on Foundation Phase English First Additional Language Learners in O.R. Tambo Inland District: Teachers' Perceptions

Lundi Nomlala¹ and Joseph Baidoo²

¹Humanities and Creative Arts Education Department, Walter Sisulu University, Komani, South Africa

²Department of Mathematics, Science and Technology, Walter Sisulu University, Komani, South Africa

Abstract: This study examines the impact of reading challenges on Foundation Phase English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners in South Africa's O.R. Tambo Inland District. Utilising Vygotsky's constructivist framework, it explores how reading difficulties affect academic progress and confidence in multilingual contexts. Using a qualitative case study design, the research involved N = 15 Foundation Phase teachers who were selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Thematic analysis identified three key findings: learners face significant difficulties with phonological awareness and grapheme recognition when transitioning from their home language to English, reading challenges adversely affect writing skills and overall academic performance, and these difficulties impact learner confidence and classroom engagement. The study highlights the need for improved phonological awareness instruction, scaffolded learning approaches, and culturally responsive assessments. These insights are crucial for educators and policymakers aiming to improve EFAL instruction in multilingual classrooms with limited resources. They underscore the necessity of targeted interventions that consider linguistic and sociocultural factors in early literacy development.

Keywords: Foundation Phase Education; EFAL reading challenges; multilingual literacy; phonological awareness; scaffolded learning

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: jbaidoo@wsu.ac.za

EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 15 December 2024

Revised: 19 June 2025

Accepted: 20 August 2025

Published: 10 September 2025

Copyright:

The Author(s) 2025.

Published by Azure Academic Publishers. This is an open access article distributed under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v7i2.1330>

Introduction

Reading proficiency is a cornerstone of academic success and lifelong learning, yet it remains a significant challenge in many educational contexts worldwide. In developed nations, fewer students struggle with basic reading comprehension than in developing countries (Vaughn et al. 2024; Friedlander, 2013). The challenge becomes particularly acute when considering English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) among learners who must navigate the complexities of literacy acquisition in a language different from their mother tongue (Zano, 2023).

The African context presents unique challenges in EFAL reading development, with multilingual environments often complicating the learning process (Nondabula & Nomlomo, 2023). Recent studies

across sub-Saharan Africa indicate that learners in rural areas face particularly significant obstacles in developing English reading proficiency. Factors such as limited exposure to English content, insufficient learning and teaching resources, and varying teacher preparedness contribute to these challenges (Zickafoose et al., 2024; Omidire, 2020). The reading proficiency is complicated by the diverse languages in many African nations, where English serves as a medium of instruction and provides access to broader educational and economic opportunities. In South Africa, the reading crisis has reached concerning proportions, particularly in the Foundation Phase. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 results showed that 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning in any language (Drucker, 2014). This indicates that only 19% of Grade 4 learners could read competently in any of the 11 official South African languages assessed. Since PIRLS uses a nationally representative sample, this means that out of the 1,127,877 Grade 4 learners in 2021, approximately 914,000 could not understand what they read. Furthermore, South Africa's PIRLS score declined from 320 in 2016 to 288 in 2021 (Mullis et al., 2023).

This crisis is especially pronounced in rural areas such as the O.R. Tambo Inland District, where learners face additional socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and educational inequalities that impact their educational outcomes. The Department of Basic Education's National Reading Strategy for South Africa 2010–2020 acknowledges these challenges and emphasises the urgent need for targeted interventions, particularly in Foundation Phase EFAL contexts (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Despite numerous policy initiatives and interventions, a significant research gap exists in understanding the impact of reading challenges on Foundation Phase EFAL learners from the perspective of teachers who work directly with these learners. While existing studies have examined broad literacy trends and outcomes, more attention should be paid to teachers' perceptions of how reading challenges affect learners' academic progress (Nondabula & Nomlomo, 2023), social development, and future educational prospects, particularly in rural contexts like the O.R. Tambo Inland District. This gap is crucial, as teachers' insights can inform more effective and contextually appropriate interventions. This paper seeks to address this research gap by examining the following question: How do Foundation Phase teachers perceive the impact of reading challenges on EFAL learners in the O.R. Tambo Inland District? Through an in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives, this research aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of reading challenges and their implications for early literacy development in multilingual South African contexts.

Theoretical framework

The literature review examines the multifaceted dimensions affecting reading challenges among Foundation Phase English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners, particularly emphasising the South African context. This review combines current theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence to create a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of reading development in multilingual educational settings. It covers theoretical and practical implications, primarily focusing on the unique challenges encountered in rural areas, particularly in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. Through careful examination of recent research and established theoretical frameworks, this review aims to illuminate the intersections between language acquisition, pedagogical approaches, and sociocultural factors that influence reading development. The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon three complementary perspectives that together provide a thorough framework for examining reading challenges in English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) contexts. Although theories have distinct focuses, they interact synergistically to explain the complex processes involved in acquiring and developing reading skills in a second language.

The primary theoretical lens for understanding the dynamics of reading development in EFAL contexts is Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning (1978). This theory suggests that learning is fundamentally a social process facilitated by cultural and linguistic tools, with language as the primary means of mediating cognitive development. This framework is particularly insightful for Foundation Phase EFAL learners, as it illustrates how reading competencies emerge through the intricate interplay of social interactions, cultural contexts, and linguistic resources. The theory's central concept, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), provides a crucial framework for understanding the developmental space between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guided support. In EFAL reading contexts, the ZPD manifests in multiple dimensions: the gap between oral and written language proficiency, the distance between home language and English reading capabilities, and the space between current and potential reading comprehension levels. Teachers navigate these multiple ZPDs simultaneously, adapting their scaffolding strategies to support learners' progression across these various developmental spaces (Jin, 2022).

Vygotsky's emphasis on mediated learning through cultural tools has relevance in the O.R. Tambo Inland District, where learners must navigate between their indigenous knowledge systems and the demands of in-class English literacy acquisition. The theory helps explain how cultural artefacts, including traditional storytelling practices, can be leveraged as scaffolds for developing English reading competencies. Recent applications of Vygotskian principles in South African classrooms have demonstrated how teachers can effectively use culturally relevant materials and activities as mediational tools to bridge the gap between learners' existing cultural knowledge and new literacy demands (de Souza, 2024). The concept of internalisation, a crucial element of Vygotsky's theory, explains how learners gradually convert social reading experiences into their reading skills. This process is critical in English First Additional Language (EFAL) contexts, where learners must internalise reading strategies and new cultural and linguistic patterns. The theory suggests that successful reading development occurs through a progression from social to individual planes, with learners first experiencing reading practices in social contexts before internalising these as independent capabilities (Pillay, 2024).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises social interaction as central to cognitive development, highlighting the importance of collaborative activities like reading circles and paired reading in EFAL classrooms. These structured peer interactions provide essential social mediation for reading development, a concept refined by subsequent scholars who explore how dialogue scaffolds learning. Recent South African Foundation Phase research confirms that these activities boost reading proficiency and cultural understanding by leveraging diverse linguistic resources (Pillay, 2024; Cloete, 2024). Crucially, Vygotsky viewed language as the primary mediator of thought development. This principle is paramount in multilingual settings, where learners' home language (HL) proficiency fundamentally shapes their EFAL reading development. Scholars like Cummins empirically demonstrate how conceptual knowledge and literacy skills transfer across languages, showing that suppressing the HL impedes cognitive engagement. This directly supports strategic translanguaging in Foundation Phase reading instruction (de Souza, 2024). As Wei and García (2022) theorised, translanguaging empowers learners to deploy their full linguistic repertoire as a psychological tool dynamically. It bridges conceptual gaps and enhances mediation, aligning with Vygotsky's understanding of language and enabling higher cognitive processes.

The profound impact of emotional factors on second language acquisition, as conceptualised in Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, is acutely evident in rural South African English First Additional Language (EFAL) classrooms. Here, limited English exposure amplifies the role of anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation in filtering learners' access to comprehensible input. Research confirms that anxiety surrounding English reading creates a significant affective barrier hindering development (Pillay, 2024; Nondabula & Nomlomo, 2023). Sociocultural pressures stemming from English's perceived prestige and distance from learners' lived experiences often exacerbate this anxiety. While affirming the hypothesis's relevance in multilingual Africa (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019), contemporary research emphasises adaptable strategies to lower the filter. Translanguaging approaches (Makalela, 2022) prove effective by validating learners' full linguistic repertoires and creating inclusive spaces. Furthermore, teacher practices that carefully calibrate input difficulty while nurturing supportive emotional environments are linked to better reading outcomes (Akyol et al., 2021). Crucially, these strategies involve re-envisioning Krashen's comprehensible input by integrating local linguistic and cultural knowledge, resulting in culturally comprehensible input (Englert et al., 2024), directly addressing affective barriers and enhancing acquisition potential.

The Monitor Hypothesis, another key component of Krashen's theory, is particularly relevant to EFAL reading instruction. This hypothesis suggests that learned knowledge is a monitor or editor for language output (Pauzan, 2024). This manifests in how learners apply explicit grammar rules and vocabulary knowledge to comprehend texts in reading contexts. However, studies in South African classrooms indicate that over-reliance on monitoring can impede fluent reading development, particularly when learners become too focused on applying formal rules rather than engaging with meaning (Pauzan, 2024; Nondabule & Nomlomo, 2023). This finding has led to recommendations by Englert et al. (2024) for balanced approaches that combine implicit acquisition opportunities with strategic explicit instruction. The Natural Order Hypothesis and Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis further contribute to understanding EFAL reading development. These aspects of Krashen's theory suggest that specific reading skills and strategies develop in predictable sequences and that accurate language acquisition occurs through natural communication rather than formal instruction alone. This understanding has shaped reading instruction methods in multilingual settings, promoting more natural and communicative teaching strategies that match learners' developmental stages. Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (2021) provides a sophisticated theoretical framework for understanding the complex relationship between first language and additional language development in multilingual educational contexts. The theory's central premise, that cognitive and academic language proficiency transfers across languages through a Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP), has profound implications for EFAL reading instruction in South African classrooms. This model challenges the notion that languages are stored separately in the brain, instead proposing that cognitive

and literacy skills developed in one language contribute to a common foundation that supports learning across all languages (Papastefanou, 2024).

The CUP model, often visualised as a dual iceberg, demonstrates how surface features of different languages may appear separate but are supported by shared cognitive processes underneath (Talebi et al., 2024). This understanding is particularly relevant in the O.R. Tambo Inland District context as learners navigate between isiXhosa and English literacy development. The model suggests that reading comprehension strategies, metacognitive skills, and conceptual knowledge developed in isiXhosa can be transferred to English reading tasks, provided appropriate linguistic and contextual support is available. Recent neurological studies (Makalela, 2023 Spaul et al., 2020) provide empirical support for this model, demonstrating the activation of similar brain regions during reading tasks in different languages. Cummins' distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) sheds light on the challenges faced by EFAL (English First Additional Language) learners. While many Foundation Phase learners may quickly develop BICS in English, acquiring CAL, crucial for academic reading comprehension, requires ongoing support and typically takes about 5 to 7 years to develop fully. According to Cummins (2021), this timeline has significant implications for reading instruction and assessment practices, particularly in contexts where English becomes the primary language of instruction before CALP has been adequately developed.

The Threshold Hypothesis, a key component of Cummins' framework, proposes that learners need to attain specific proficiency levels in both their native and an additional language to gain cognitive benefits from bilingualism. Talebi et al. (2024) conducted a study on South African schools, demonstrating that learners who develop age-appropriate literacy skills in isiXhosa before transitioning to English-medium instruction significantly outperform their peers in reading comprehension in both languages. This finding has important implications for language policy and instruction sequencing in Foundation Phase classrooms. Empirical research in South African contexts has consistently validated Cummins' theoretical propositions. A study by Nkomo and Carrim (2024) in a South African school found a strong positive correlation between isiXhosa reading proficiency and subsequent EFAL reading achievement. Similarly, Pillay's (2024) research in rural schools demonstrated that learners with strong mother-tongue literacy skills showed an incredible ability to transfer reading strategies to English texts, particularly in dealing with academic vocabulary and complex text structures.

The implications of Cummins' theory for pedagogical practice are substantial. The research suggests that, rather than viewing isiXhosa and English literacy development as competing processes, teachers should recognise and leverage the interdependence between languages. This understanding has led to developing translanguaging pedagogies strategically using both languages to support reading development. This approach has shown promising results in several O.R. Tambo Inland District schools.

Empirical evidence and current research

Studies have significantly contributed to understanding reading challenges in multilingual South African contexts. Spaul and Pretorius (2019) studied reading comprehension strategies in multilingual classrooms. They found a strong correlation between proficiency in a student's home language and their success in English First Additional Language (EFAL) reading. Their research spans urban and rural South African schools and offers valuable insights into learners' specific challenges in resource-constrained environments. The study's findings emphasise the importance of developing strong foundational reading skills in home language and EFAL contexts. Nkhi's (2024) and Makalela's (2022) studies on translanguaging practices in Foundation Phase classrooms demonstrate how flexible multilingual approaches can enhance reading comprehension. These studies offer practical insights into how teachers can utilise the full linguistic abilities of their students to support reading development. The findings suggest that adopting translanguaging pedagogies can foster more inclusive and effective learning environments for English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners. Sibanda's (2021) research on teacher preparedness for EFAL instruction in rural Eastern Cape schools reveals significant professional development and resource allocation challenges. The findings indicate that inadequate teacher training directly affects the quality of reading instruction, particularly in implementing evidence-based reading strategies. This research underscores the urgent need for improved professional development programs targeting rural teachers.

Additionally, Zimmerman and Smit's (2016) examination of digital literacy interventions in rural schools provides promising evidence for the effectiveness of technology-enhanced reading instruction. However, their study highlights the digital divide affecting many rural areas, including the O.R. Tambo Inland District. Their findings suggest the need for context-appropriate interventions considering both technological limitations and pedagogical opportunities in rural settings. Next, we summarise the key research gaps identified in the literature on reading challenges in rural South African contexts. They highlight three main areas that require further investigation: the limited exploration of teachers' perspectives, the under-examined influence of sociocultural

factors on EFAL reading development, and the lack of evidence-based intervention strategies tailored to rural settings. By outlining these gaps, the figure below establishes the foundation for the current study's focus and indicates the direction for subsequent analysis.

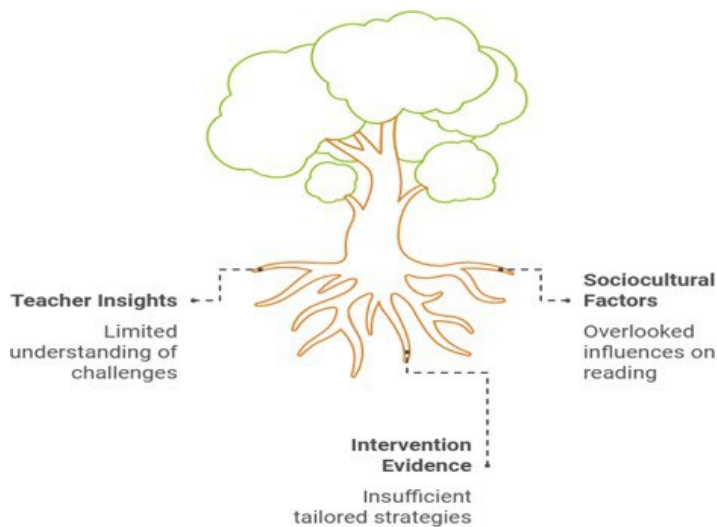


Figure 1. Research gaps in reading challenges

Figure 1 depicts three critical research gaps that warrant further investigation. First, limited research explicitly examines teachers' perceptions of reading challenges in rural South African contexts, particularly in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. Second, while existing studies provide valuable insights into general reading challenges, more research needs to be done on the intersection of sociocultural factors and EFAL reading development in the Foundation Phase. Third, there needs to be more empirical evidence on effective intervention strategies tailored to rural EFAL contexts. These gaps in the literature highlight the importance of the current study, which aims to enhance our understanding of reading challenges from the perspective of Foundation Phase teachers in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. This study offers a unique opportunity to connect theoretical knowledge with practical classroom experiences by focusing on teachers' perceptions. This connection may lead to more effective interventions and policy recommendations for similar contexts.

Methods

This qualitative case study investigated EFAL reading challenges in Foundation Phase classrooms within the O.R. Tambo Inland District of South Africa. The study employed purposive sampling to select 15 Foundation Phase teachers (Grades 1–3) from public schools, ensuring representation across different grades and varying levels of teaching experience. Selection criteria included a minimum of three years of EFAL teaching experience, a current Foundation Phase teaching position, and willingness to participate in interviews and classroom observations. Data collection occurred over four months and comprised three primary instruments: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Individual interviews lasting approximately 30 min explored teachers' experiences with EFAL reading instruction, challenges encountered, and adaptive strategies employed. These interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and conducted in English, with provisions for isiXhosa clarification when needed, with the expertise of the first author.

Classroom observations, conducted twice per teacher during EFAL reading lessons, utilised a structured observation schedule focusing on instructional practices, learner engagement, and teaching resource utilisation. Document analysis examined lesson plans, reading materials, and assessment records to triangulate interview and observational data. Data analysis followed Naeem et al. (2023) thematic analysis framework, beginning with verbatim transcription of interviews and systematic coding of all data sources. Initial codes were grouped into themes through an iterative process of comparison and refinement. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in teaching challenges, pedagogical approaches, and contextual factors affecting EFAL reading development. Quality assurance measures included member checking of interview transcripts, peer debriefing during theme development, and maintenance of a detailed audit trail. Ethical considerations encompass informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional approval was obtained from the Walter Sisulu University ethics committee with the Protocol Number 2024/FEDREC/2237. The study's theoretical framework guided the data collection and analysis, which integrates Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory, and Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis. This framework examined how social, linguistic, and pedagogical factors influence EFAL reading development in multilingual rural contexts.

Data presentation and interpretation

The data's thematic analysis revealed four major themes related to EFAL reading challenges in Foundation Phase classrooms, as illustrated in Figure 2, the thematic network diagram. Each theme emerged from a careful analysis of participant responses and classroom observations. The thematic analysis of EFAL reading challenges in Foundation Phase classrooms revealed four major themes: inability to read and write, poor academic performance, language interference, and lack of confidence. These themes highlight the cyclical relationship between reading and writing deficiencies, the struggle with basic reading comprehension affecting academic performance, the impact of mother tongue interference on phonemic awareness, and the significant effect of reading challenges on learner confidence and participation. The interconnected nature of these challenges reveals a complex web of educational, linguistic, and psychosocial factors that require a holistic intervention approach to simultaneously target linguistic competence, build confidence, and create supportive learning environments.

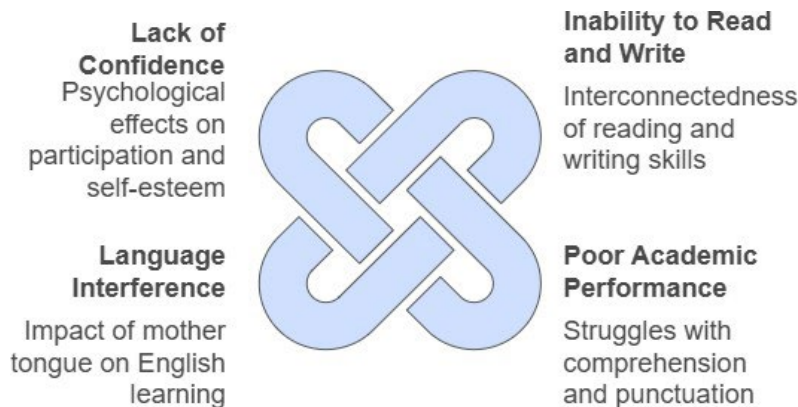


Figure 2. Emerging themes on EFAL Reading challenges.

Inability to read and write

This theme emerged as a fundamental challenge, highlighted by Teacher A, H and O's observation: "When a learner cannot read a word, it means that learner cannot write that word, the problem in reading makes a problem in writing." This quote highlights the interconnected relationship between reading and writing skills, indicating that deficiencies in one area directly influence the other. This finding reveals a cyclical relationship between reading and writing abilities, which impacts overall literacy development.

Poor academic performance

Teacher K and B's comment in code-switched language reveals challenges with basic reading comprehension: "Umzekelo xa befunda u 'WOW!' bamfunda kanje 'WOW' abayihoyi la exclamation mark" [Translation: For example, when reading 'WOW!' the learners just read 'WOW' ignoring the exclamation mark]. This observation highlights how learners struggle with punctuation marks, affecting their ability to interpret and convey meaning accurately in their reading.

Language interference

The researchers' observation provides insight into the challenges of dual-language learning: "We have observed a learner who was unable to write a word because he had confused the sound A in IsiXhosa and the sound U in English." This finding demonstrates how mother tongue interference affects English literacy acquisition, particularly phonemic awareness and sound discrimination.

Lack of confidence

Teacher C, M and N's reflection reveal the psychological impact of reading challenges: "Learners who cannot read tend to be shy; the inability to read makes them lack confidence. That is why I prefer group guided reading before I go to Individual." This quote illuminates the affective dimension of reading challenges, showing how reading difficulties impact learner participation and self-esteem. The interconnected nature of EFAL reading challenges in Foundation Phase classrooms reveals a complex web of educational, linguistic, and psychosocial factors that influence one another, as shown in Figure 2. As evidenced by Teacher A, H and O's observation about the reading-writing connection, fundamental literacy skills are inextricably linked, where deficiencies in one area cascade into others, creating compound learning barriers. This interconnectedness is further complicated by the linguistic dynamics observed in the classroom, where mother tongue interference, as documented in the confusion between isiXhosa and English phonemes, impacts technical reading ability and influences learners' confidence and classroom participation (Englert et al., 2024).

Teacher M, N and C's insight about shy learners preferring group reading illuminates how these challenges create a self-reinforcing cycle: reading difficulties lead to reduced confidence, limiting participation in learning activities, further impeding reading development. The manifestation of poor academic performance, evidenced by Teacher B and K's observation about punctuation comprehension, demonstrates how these challenges extend beyond basic literacy to affect overall academic achievement (Papastefanou, 2024). This intricate interplay of factors suggests that effective intervention cannot address these challenges in isolation but must adopt a holistic approach that simultaneously targets linguistic competence, builds confidence, and creates supportive learning environments (Pillay, 2024). The lived experiences of teachers and learners, captured through their direct quotations, underscore the need for interventions that recognise and respond to both the technical and affective dimensions of EFAL reading development while acknowledging the cultural and linguistic resources learners bring to the classroom.

Discussion

The findings of this study on EFAL reading challenges in Foundation Phase classrooms reveal complex interconnections between cognitive development, sociocultural factors, and pedagogical practices, which can be comprehensively understood through Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theoretical framework and contemporary research on multilingual education (Alkhudiry, 2022; Newman & Latifi, 2021). This discussion integrates empirical findings with theoretical perspectives and current literature to offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges and their implications for educational practice. The connection between reading skills and cognitive development is a key finding in our study, aligning with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning. The observation that "When a learner cannot read a word, it means that learner cannot write that word" exemplifies what Nkhi (2024) and Cummins (2021) describe as the interdependence hypothesis in bilingual education, where cognitive academic language proficiency transfers across languages. This finding resonates with recent research by Spaul et al. (2020), who demonstrated that early reading difficulties in South African classrooms often manifest as compound learning barriers affecting academic development. The reciprocal relationship between reading and writing abilities in EFAL contexts supports what de Souza (2024) terms biliteracy development, where skills in one language can support learning in another, provided appropriate scaffolding is in place.

The emergence of language interference between isiXhosa and English phonemes as a significant challenge aligns with what Sibanda (2021) describe as the complex interplay between learner identity and language acquisition. This phenomenon is further elaborated by Kim (2024), who argues that concurrently introducing multiple languages in early education requires careful consideration of learners' cognitive development stages. Our findings support Makalela's (2022) studies on the importance of translanguaging practices in South African classrooms, where teachers strategically use learners' home language resources to support English acquisition. The study's learner confidence and social interaction findings align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept. The preference for "Group guided reading before Individual" reflects what Jin (2022) describes as the "high challenge, high support" paradigm essential for effective second language literacy development. This approach is supported by recent research from Makalela (2022), who found that collaborative learning strategies in multilingual South African classrooms significantly enhance linguistic competence and learner confidence. Our study's environmental and pedagogical challenges, particularly regarding resource constraints and classroom management, echo what Akyol et al. (2021) describe as the "pedagogical challenge" in South African education. These findings align with Pillay's (2024) analysis of systemic challenges in South African primary education, particularly in implementing theoretically sound practices within resource-constrained environments. Our research supports Spaul and Pretorius's (2019) argument that effective reading instruction requires theoretical understanding and practical resources to implement research-based strategies effectively.

Integrating our findings with Vygotsky's theoretical framework and contemporary research suggests several critical implications. First, as Spaul and Pretorius (2019) argued, teacher development programs must incorporate theoretical understanding and practical strategies for managing multilingual classrooms. Second, the findings support Kim's (2024) call for culturally responsive pedagogies that acknowledge and build upon learners' existing linguistic resources. Finally, our research aligns with Nondabula and Nomlomo's (2023) emphasis on systemic support structures that enable teachers to implement theoretically sound practices in challenging contexts. The relationship between reading challenges and academic performance, as evidenced in our study, supports what Pillay (2024) terms the "reading-to-learn barrier" in South African education. This finding aligns with international research by Cummins (2021) on the role of academic language proficiency in educational success. The observation that learners struggle with punctuation and comprehension reflects what Jin (2022) describes as the multiple dimensions of literacy development in additional language contexts. Based on the analysis of our study through Vygotsky's constructivist lens, the key finding reveals that EFAL reading challenges in the Foundation Phase manifest as a complex interplay between cognitive development, sociocultural factors, and pedagogical practices, where reading difficulties create a cascading effect on writing ability,

academic performance, and learner confidence, particularly in multilingual South African contexts where the concurrent introduction of home language and English creates additional learning barriers that require targeted interventions and support systems.

The findings of this study have important implications for teaching practices in Foundation Phase English as First Additional Language (EFAL) classrooms in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. Both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence support these implications. They are particularly relevant given the complex linguistic landscape of South African education and the various challenges identified in our research. The study suggests a comprehensive approach to addressing reading challenges, focusing on three key areas: enhanced instruction in phonological awareness, scaffolded learning approaches, and thorough assessment strategies.

Enhanced phonological awareness instruction

The critical need for enhanced phonological awareness instruction emerges as a primary implication, particularly in managing the interference between isiXhosa and English phonemes. Spaul and Pretorius (2019) argue that explicit instruction in cross-linguistic phonological awareness is essential for successfully developing biliteracy. This approach requires teachers to implement structured phonics programs that address the challenges of transitioning between African languages and English. Cummins' (2021) concept of "translanguaging pedagogies" provides a valuable framework for building on learners' existing linguistic resources. Teachers should develop systematic approaches to phoneme recognition, blending, and segmentation that acknowledge and utilise learners' home language knowledge. This includes explicit instruction in sound-symbol relationships, regular practice with phonemic awareness activities, and targeted interventions for learners struggling with specific phonological elements.

Scaffolded learning approaches

Scaffolded learning approaches are important in education and align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Pauzan's (2024) "high challenge, high support" instructional framework provides a practical guide for implementing these strategies. Teachers should create reading activities that gradually progress from group work to individual reading, ensuring appropriate support is available at each stage. This includes developing systematic vocabulary instruction in both languages, designing structured writing activities that enhance reading comprehension, and offering interactive learning experiences to build students' confidence. The scaffolding process must be dynamic, adjusting support levels based on the learners' progress. This approach enables teachers to maintain high expectations while providing the necessary support structures for student success.

Comprehensive assessment strategies

Developing comprehensive assessment strategies is a key implication that requires approaches accounting for linguistic and cognitive development. Spaul et al. (2020) emphasise the significance of culturally responsive assessment practices that recognise the complexities of bilingual literacy development. Teachers should use regular diagnostic assessments to monitor reading progress and employ formative assessment techniques that inform instructional planning. These assessments should acknowledge and celebrate learners' linguistic resources across languages, moving beyond traditional monolingual assessment models. This includes creating rubrics for translanguaging practices, implementing portfolio-based assessments that track progress over time, and utilising authentic assessment tasks that reflect real-world literacy practices. The assessment framework should provide meaningful feedback to guide instruction and support learner development while addressing unique challenges and opportunities in multilingual learning environments.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the complex relationship between reading challenges and academic development among Foundation Phase learners of English First Additional Language (EFAL), viewed through the lens of Vygotsky's constructivist theory. The findings indicate that reading difficulties can create a ripple effect on writing ability, academic performance, and learner confidence, particularly in the multilingual context of South Africa. The research highlights three critical areas for consideration. First, the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing abilities suggests the need for integrated literacy approaches. Second, the sociocultural dimensions of language learning emphasise the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies. Finally, the impact of these challenges on academic achievement underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and support systems. These findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on EFAL instruction in South African Foundation Phase classrooms and highlight the necessity for continued research into effective teaching practices that address the unique challenges of multilingual education contexts. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating intervention strategies that integrate theoretical understanding with practical classroom application, especially in resource-constrained environments. This study offers valuable insights into the reading challenges

faced by English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners; however, several limitations should be considered. Although it produces rich descriptive data, the qualitative approach in this study limits the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. This concern is highlighted by Adu and Miles (2023) in their discussion of the scope of the case study methodology. Though enabling detailed analysis, the focus on fifteen Foundation Phase teachers presents limitations in representativeness, reflecting what Naeem et al. (2023) identify as the inherent trade-off between depth and breadth in qualitative research. The study's focus on the O.R. Tambo Inland District means that its findings may only partially reflect the experiences of teachers and learners in other South African contexts. This is especially true for areas with different linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds, which could limit the broader applicability of the research findings across various educational settings.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study examines the impact of reading challenges on Foundation Phase English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners in South Africa's O.R. Tambo Inland District. Thematic analysis identified three key findings: learners face significant difficulties with phonological awareness and grapheme recognition when transitioning from their home language to English, reading challenges adversely affect writing skills and overall academic performance, and these difficulties impact learner confidence and classroom engagement. The study highlights the need for improved phonological awareness instruction, scaffolded learning approaches, and culturally responsive assessments.

Author Contributions: Lundi Nomlala conceptualised the study and wrote a literature review and theoretical framework. Joseph Baidoo worked on data collection and analysis. Both of us worked on the methodology, findings, discussions, recommendations, and conclusion. Both authors have approved the manuscript for publications.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

Funding: There is no funding for this work.

Availability of Data: All relevant data included the data collection section of this article.

References

- Adu, P., & Miles, D. A. (2023). *Dissertation research methods: A step-by-step guide to writing up your research in the social sciences*. Routledge.
- Akyol, H., Temur, M., & Erol, M. (2021). Experiences of primary school with students with reading and writing difficulties. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 17(5), 279–298. <https://doi.org/10.29329/ijpe.2021.375.18>
- Alkhudiry, R. (2022). The Contribution of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory in Mediating L2 Knowledge Co-Construction. Retrieved May 16, 2024, from https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Aagcd%3A2%3A23380658/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholarandid=ebsco%3Aagcd%3A159541701andcrl=candlink_origin=scholar.google.com
- Cloete, T. L. (2024). *Integrating mobile apps to enhance multiliteracy in English language education* [Master's dissertation, University of Pretoria].
- Cummins, J. (2021). *Rethinking the education of multilingual learners: A critical analysis of theoretical concepts*. (Vol. 19). Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data.
- de Souza, B. (2024). Examining the role of education for sustainable development (ESD) in strengthening inclusive education in teacher education: A Vygotskian analysis of change projects from Malawi and Eswatini. *Journal of Education*, 96, 98–116. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i96a06>
- Drucker, K. T. (2014). Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). In *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 5098–5102). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_2282
- Englert, C., Venagli, I., & Kupisch, T. (2024). When multilingualism is more than three: On the nature of gender transfer in L3+ acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 41(2), 263–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02676583241237763>
- Friedlander, E. (2013). Environmental factors associated with early reading achievement in the developing world: A cross-national study. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 57, 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2012.10.006>
- Jin, C. (2022). Maximizing EFL learners' ZPD in inferential reading through computerized-group

- dynamic assessment (C-GDA). *Cambridge Open Engage*. <https://doi.org/10.33774/coe-2022-cbnsn>
- Kim, S. (2024). 'Ehh? Order through the kiosk? What's that?' Public attitudes towards the excessive anglicisation of commerce in South Korea. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(6), 1922–1937. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2033247>
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Prentice-Hall.
- Makalela, L. (2022). *Not eleven languages: Translanguaging and South African multilingualism in concert*. De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614515067>
- Mullis, I. V. S., Von Davier, M., Foy, P., Fishbein, B., Reynolds, K. A., & Wry, E. (2023). *PIRLS 2021 international results in reading*. Boston College, TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Centre. <https://doi.org/10.6017/lse.tpisc.tr2103.kb5342>
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069231205789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
- Newman, S., & Latifi, A. (2021). Vygotsky, education, and teacher education. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 47(1), 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1831375>
- Nkhi, S. E. (2024). Is pedagogical translanguaging a panacea to the colonial monoglossic language ideology in the classroom? Focus on higher education in Lesotho. *Journal of Education*, 96, 60–77. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i96a04>
- Nkomo, S. A., & Carrim, A. (2024). Where are the wheels coming off? Investigating South African Grade One learners' letter-sound knowledge. *ICERI2024 Proceedings*, 1, 8762–8769. <https://doi.org/10.21125/iceri.2024.2199>
- Nondabula, N., & Nomlomo, V. (2023). Learners' experiences of creative writing in English First Additional Language: Pedagogical implications. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 57(1). <https://doi.org/10.56285/jltVol57iss1a5884>
- Omidire, M. F. (2020). Experiencing language challenges in a rural school: Implications for learners' life aspirations. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(10), 1619–1637. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2019.1660963>
- Papastefanou, T. (2024). Learning to read in the heritage language supports literacy skills in the majority language: Evidence from Greek-English speaking children. In *Heritage Languages and Variation*. Retrieved May 17 2024, from [https://ktisis.cut.ac.cy/bitstream/20.500.14279/34283/1/978-88-6969-800-2-ch-04%20\(1\).pdf](https://ktisis.cut.ac.cy/bitstream/20.500.14279/34283/1/978-88-6969-800-2-ch-04%20(1).pdf)
- Pauzan, P. (2024). Theory in Second Language Acquisition (Recognition of Concepts Toward Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory for Five Main Hypotheses). *Journal on Education*, 6(4), 20876–20888. <https://doi.org/10.31004/joe.v6i4.6210>
- Pillay, P. (2024). Challenges in providing feedback to Grade 4 second language learners: A case study of English teachers in Gauteng's public primary schools. *International Journal of Business Ecosystem and Strategy*, 6(4), 415–425.
- Sibanda, J. (2021). Appreciating the layered and manifest linguistic complexity in mono-multi-lingual STEM classrooms: Challenges and prospects. In A. A. Essien & A. Msimanga (Eds.), *Multilingual education yearbook 2021* (pp. 19–37). Springer Nature.
- Spaull, N., & Pretorius, E. (2019). Still falling at the first hurdle: Examining early grade reading in South Africa. In N. Spaull & J. Jansen (Eds.), *South african schooling: the enigma of inequality* (Vol. 10, pp. 147–168). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18811-5_8
- Spaull, N., Pretorius, E., & Mohohlwane, N. (2020). Investigating the comprehension iceberg: Developing empirical benchmarks for early-grade reading in agglutinating African languages. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 10(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.773>
- Talebi, S. H., Fallahi, J., & Amjadi, A. (2024). Strategic reading comprehension in L2 and L3: Assuming relative interdependence within Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 62(4), 1903–1933. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2022-0085>
- Vaughn, S., Boardman, A., & Klingner, J. K. (2024). *Teaching reading comprehension to students with learning difficulties*. Guilford Publications.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>
- Wei, L., & García, O. (2022). Not a first language but one repertoire: Translanguaging as a decolonizing project. *RELC Journal*, 53(2), 313–324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882221092841>
- Zano, K. (2023). From the teachers' perspectives: resources used in teaching reading comprehension

- to English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners in the FET phase. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(3), 376–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1858979>
- Zickafoose, A., Ilesanmi, O., Diaz-Manrique, M., Adeyemi, A. E., Walumbe, B., Strong, R., Wing-enbach, G., Rodriguez, M. T., & Dooley, K. (2024). Barriers and challenges affecting quality education (Sustainable Development Goal #4) in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030. *Sustainability*, 16(7), 2657. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16072657>
- Zimmerman, L., & Smit, B. (2016). Comprehending the macro through the lens of the micro: The use of PIRLS 2006 findings to inform comparative case studies across the South African achievement scale. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15(1), 1–12.