

Strategies Foundation Phase Teachers Use to Teach English HL Comprehension Skills

Mtshali Zanele Ellen

South African classrooms are characterised by rich linguistic diversity, presenting challenges for teaching English Home Language (HL) comprehension in the Foundation Phase. This study investigates strategies employed by teachers to develop English HL comprehension skills among learners from diverse language backgrounds. Drawing on a qualitative case study in the King Cetshwayo District, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to explore teachers' pedagogical practices. Guided by Schema Theory and Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, the study situates comprehension instruction within sociocultural and cognitive frameworks. Findings indicate that teachers utilise multimodal, scaffolded strategies, including phonological awareness, phonics instruction, specially designed reading materials, repetition, games, and songs to support comprehension. However, the consistency and depth of these strategies are often limited by resource constraints and policy ambiguity. The study concludes that contextually responsive, language-affirming teaching practices are essential for bridging comprehension gaps in multilingual Foundation Phase classrooms. Recommendations emphasise targeted professional development and curriculum enhancement to strengthen teachers' instructional effectiveness.

Key words: *Foundation Phase, English Home Language, Comprehension Strategies, Multilingual Classrooms, Schema Theory, Social Constructivism, South Africa, Teacher Professional Development*

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1. Introduction

Reading comprehension forms the cornerstone of early literacy and educational success. In the South African context, the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3) represents a critical stage in the development of learners' cognitive and linguistic abilities. However, comprehension levels among South African learners remain alarmingly low, with national assessments consistently highlighting poor reading-for-meaning outcomes (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023). The challenge is compounded in multilingual classrooms, where English often functions as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), despite being a second or even third language for many learners (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019).

Foundation Phase teachers thus play a pivotal role in mediating comprehension through adaptive, inclusive strategies that account for linguistic diversity. The multilingual nature of South African classrooms requires teachers to balance the development of English proficiency with affirmation of learners' home languages and cultural identities (Heugh, 2021). Within this complex environment, the teaching of English HL comprehension becomes both a linguistic and a sociocultural task.

This paper aims to explore the strategies employed by Foundation Phase teachers to enhance English HL comprehension among learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. It seeks to identify, interpret, and theorise classroom practices that effectively bridge learners' home languages with English comprehension skills. The analysis draws from qualitative data collected through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and document reviews, as presented in the author's doctoral study.

The study's central question is:

What strategies do Foundation Phase teachers employ to teach English HL comprehension skills to linguistically diverse learners?

The sub-questions include:

1. Which pedagogical strategies are most frequently employed in comprehension instruction?

2. How do teachers adapt these strategies to support learners' linguistic and cultural diversity?
3. What factors influence the effectiveness of these strategies in Foundation Phase classrooms?

By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to ongoing discourse on language pedagogy, curriculum transformation, and multilingual education in South Africa.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by **Schema Theory** (Rumelhart, 1980) and **Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory** (1978), both of which offer complementary perspectives on the cognitive and sociocultural processes involved in comprehension.

2.1 Schema Theory

Schema Theory posits that comprehension occurs when new information is integrated with a learner's existing mental frameworks or "schemata" (Anderson, 1984). Learners interpret texts based on prior knowledge, experience, and context. Within multilingual classrooms, teachers can activate background knowledge through familiar stories, culturally relevant examples, and home-language connections (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988). Activating schemata enables learners to connect meaning with words, thereby enhancing comprehension.

In the Foundation Phase, schema activation can take place through picture reading, storytelling, and contextual cues that bridge home experiences with English texts. Teachers who consciously draw on learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds facilitate deeper engagement and understanding.

2.2 Vygotsky's Social Constructivism

Vygotsky's theory emphasises the social nature of learning and the central role of interaction, language, and scaffolding within the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this view, learning occurs most effectively when teachers provide guided support that enables learners to perform tasks slightly beyond their independent capabilities. In comprehension instruction, scaffolding occurs through shared reading, guided questioning, modelling, and feedback.

By merging Schema Theory with Social Constructivism, the study provides a dual lens: schema activation explains the cognitive integration of new language input, while Vygotsky's framework contextualises the social mediation that supports comprehension. Together, they form a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how teachers design and implement comprehension strategies.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Reading Comprehension in the Foundation Phase

Reading comprehension involves decoding, vocabulary development, and higher-order thinking processes that enable learners to make meaning from text (Snow, 2018). In the Foundation Phase, comprehension is not an isolated skill but an integrated component of early literacy development (Mudzielwana, 2019). The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2021) found that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, reflecting a systemic literacy crisis (Howie et al., 2022).

Teachers face multiple challenges in developing comprehension skills, including insufficient training, lack of resources, and linguistic misalignment between learners' home languages and English as LoLT (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Heugh, 2021). These factors demand creative, context-sensitive strategies that transcend rote learning and decoding.

3.2 Multilingualism and the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT)

South Africa's Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) advocates additive bilingualism, where learners' home languages serve as the foundation for additional language acquisition (DBE, 2022). However, in practice, English dominates as the LoLT from as early as Grade 3, often to the detriment of comprehension and cognitive development (Nomlomo, 2020). Scholars argue that effective comprehension instruction in multilingual classrooms should leverage translanguaging and home-language resources (Heugh, 2021; Madiba, 2023). Translanguaging allows learners to use all their linguistic repertoires to make sense of text, thus bridging the gap between home and school literacy practices.

3.3 Teaching Strategies for Comprehension

Several studies identify effective strategies for comprehension development. These include phonological awareness, phonics instruction, shared reading, guided reading, vocabulary enrichment, and the use of multimodal resources (Zimmerman, 2020; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). Phonological awareness forms the basis of decoding and reading fluency, while comprehension emerges through interaction with text meaning (Adams, 2021). Guided reading allows differentiation and scaffolded support for learners at varying literacy levels. In multilingual contexts, strategies such as Total Physical Response (TPR), song-based learning, and picture storytelling are particularly valuable (Chimbanda & Katua, 2022). These methods use auditory, visual, and kinesthetic cues to support meaning-making, especially among English Additional Language (EAL) learners.

3.4 Teacher Agency and Pedagogical Adaptation

Teacher agency refers to the capacity of teachers to make contextually informed decisions about pedagogy (Priestley et al., 2015). In South African multilingual classrooms, teacher agency manifests in creatively adapting curriculum content to meet learners' linguistic needs (Sibanda, 2020). For instance, teachers may design "special reading books" containing local vocabulary and images to enhance relevance and comprehension (Mtshali, 2024).

However, research shows inconsistencies in the application of comprehension strategies (Nkosi, 2021). Teachers with limited professional development in literacy instruction often rely on repetition and rote learning, which may build decoding fluency but not deeper understanding (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Therefore, comprehension pedagogy must integrate cognitive, linguistic, and cultural scaffolds.

3.5 Summary of the Literature

The reviewed literature underscores that an interplay of linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors shapes comprehension in the Foundation Phase. Teachers serve as mediators between curriculum expectations and learners lived linguistic realities. Yet, there remains a paucity of empirical research on how teachers strategically navigate this multilingual terrain, especially within the South African context. This study addresses that gap by documenting and analysing specific teacher strategies used to foster English HL comprehension among linguistically diverse learners.

4. Research Paradigm and Design

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative paradigm, as the research sought to understand teachers' experiences, perceptions, and classroom practices within their natural settings. The interpretive paradigm values subjective meaning-making, recognising that teaching strategies are socially constructed and context-dependent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach was suitable because it enabled an in-depth exploration of how teachers interpret and enact comprehension pedagogy in linguistically diverse classrooms. A case study design was used to allow for detailed contextual analysis (Yin, 2018). The study focused on a single primary school in the King Cetshwayo District, KwaZulu-Natal, representing a multilingual and socio-economically diverse learner population. Case studies are effective in examining bounded systems, such as a specific school or classroom environment, to generate rich, holistic insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.1 Participants and Sampling

Four Foundation Phase teachers participated in the study. They were purposively selected based on their experience teaching English Home Language in Grade 1 and their exposure to multilingual classrooms. All participants were qualified educators with professional teaching diplomas and between five and twenty years of teaching experience.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

Three methods were used: Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences in teaching comprehension. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' strategies, beliefs, and challenges, allowing participants to articulate their personal and professional perspectives in depth. Classroom observations complemented the interviews by providing direct insights into teachers' actual instructional practices, learner engagement, and classroom interactions. These observations offered valuable evidence of how teachers implemented comprehension strategies within real teaching contexts. In addition, document analysis was undertaken to examine lesson plans, learners' reading materials, and key policy documents such as the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)* and the *Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP)*. This triangulated approach ensured that data from different sources were corroborated, thereby enhancing the validity and richness of the study's findings.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Basic Education. Informed consent was secured from participants, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

4.3 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme review, definition, and report writing. Themes were derived inductively from teachers' narratives and classroom observations. Triangulation ensured trustworthiness by comparing findings from different data sources (interviews, observations, documents). Member checking and peer debriefing enhanced the credibility and dependability of the analysis.

5. Presentation of Data

The data were organised around five emergent themes corresponding to the strategies teachers used to enhance English HL comprehension:

1. Phonological Awareness
2. Phonics Instruction
3. Special Reading Books
4. Repetition and Pronunciation Drills
5. Games, Puzzles, and Songs

Teachers' classroom practices illustrated how these strategies were operationalised and adapted for learners with varying levels of English proficiency. Observations showed that lessons typically began with phonemic awareness activities, followed by guided reading and vocabulary reinforcement.

For instance, *Teacher A* began a reading lesson by clapping syllables in learners' names before reading aloud. *Teacher B* used a "special reading book" created from magazine pictures and simple English sentences. *Teacher C* integrated songs and rhymes to reinforce vocabulary and comprehension. These methods demonstrate an awareness of multimodal learning needs and a desire to make reading interactive and contextualised.

6. Findings

6.1 Phonological Awareness

Teachers emphasised phonological awareness as a foundational skill for comprehension. Daily routines included rhyming, syllable segmentation, and sound matching. These activities prepared learners for phonics and decoding.

“When they can hear the sounds, they can read the words more easily,” explained one teacher (Teacher B).

This aligns with the DBE (2023) emphasis on early sound discrimination as essential for reading fluency.

6.2 Phonics Instruction

Phonics instruction featured prominently in all classrooms. Teachers used letter cards, word walls, and sentence-building exercises to link sounds with symbols. However, variation was observed in method and intensity. Some teachers followed CAPS word lists strictly, while others created contextual phonics games to sustain engagement.

6.3 Special Reading Books

Each teacher created or adapted reading books containing culturally relevant images and short texts. These “special reading books” supported schema activation by connecting learners’ home environments with English vocabulary. For instance, one teacher included isiZulu cultural artefacts and local settings in the stories to make meaning relatable.

6.4 Repetition and Pronunciation Drills

Teachers relied on repetition to reinforce pronunciation and recall. While effective for vocabulary retention, this approach sometimes led to mechanical reading rather than comprehension.

6.5 Games, Puzzles, and Songs

Interactive strategies such as songs, rhymes, and word puzzles engaged learners and reduced anxiety associated with English learning. Teachers viewed these methods as inclusive tools for building vocabulary, listening, and recall skills in fun ways.

7. Analysis

The data reveal that teachers in multilingual classrooms employ practical, multimodal strategies that align with cognitive and sociocultural theories of learning.

- **Schema Theory** is reflected in the use of culturally contextual reading materials and picture-based storytelling, which activate prior knowledge and connect new vocabulary to familiar experiences.
- **Social Constructivism** is evident in the collaborative nature of shared reading, guided questioning, and teacher scaffolding within the learners’ ZPD.

Phonological and phonics-based strategies address bottom-up processing, while reading discussions and interactive games promote top-down comprehension. However, the analysis also indicates variability in the depth of strategy application, often influenced by teacher training, resource availability, and time constraints.

8. Discussion

The study supports the argument that comprehension instruction in the Foundation Phase requires an integration of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural scaffolds. Teachers demonstrated agency by adapting official curriculum requirements to meet learners’ linguistic realities. However, systemic gaps persist insufficient training in advanced comprehension strategies, a lack of culturally relevant materials, and limited institutional support. These findings echo prior research indicating that reading pedagogy in South Africa often focuses heavily on decoding at the expense of meaning-making (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Zimmerman, 2020). Teachers’ creative efforts to contextualise learning through multimodal activities illustrate resilience within policy and resource constraints. Furthermore, the inclusion of home-language references through pictures and cultural artefacts embodies the principle of bridging tongues, which fosters inclusion and comprehension (Heugh, 2021; Madiba, 2023).

9. Implications

The findings of this study hold significant implications for teacher education, curriculum development, and policy implementation in the South African Foundation Phase. In teacher education, training institutions should embed comprehensive modules that equip pre-service and in-service teachers with balanced pedagogical competencies in both phonological and comprehension instruction. These modules must also emphasise practical strategies for teaching in multilingual classrooms, enabling teachers to draw effectively on learners’ linguistic resources. Regarding curriculum development, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) require revision to offer explicit guidance on comprehension instruction, as the current emphasis remains largely on phonics and decoding. Such refinement would ensure that comprehension is not treated as a secondary literacy skill but as a central outcome of reading education. Finally, at the policy level, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should prioritise the creation and distribution of bilingual reading materials that reflect the principles of additive bilingualism outlined in the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP). This alignment between teacher preparation, curriculum design, and policy implementation would foster a more inclusive and effective approach to literacy development across diverse linguistic contexts.

10. Recommendations

The study further underscores the need for sustained professional development, resource innovation, collaborative practice, and improved monitoring within the literacy landscape. Continuous professional learning workshops should

be implemented to strengthen teachers' capacity in comprehension instruction, integrating phonological awareness with meaning-based approaches to foster deeper reading understanding. In addition, schools should take an active role in co-developing culturally relevant storybooks that reflect learners' lived experiences, identities, and linguistic backgrounds, thereby promoting inclusivity and engagement. Collaboration among educators is equally vital; establishing teacher communities of practice would enable the sharing of effective comprehension strategies across schools and districts, enhancing collective expertise. Finally, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should embed comprehension-specific indicators within national literacy assessment frameworks to promote accountability and sustained improvement in teaching quality and learner outcomes.

11. Conclusion

This study highlights the innovative strategies Foundation Phase teachers employ to teach English Home Language comprehension within linguistically diverse classrooms. Teachers used phonological awareness, phonics, repetition, and interactive activities to scaffold learning. While these practices foster engagement and basic understanding, further support is needed to deepen inferential comprehension and critical literacy. The study concludes that effective comprehension instruction in multilingual South African contexts depends on teachers' ability to integrate cognitive theory, cultural relevance, and sociolinguistic awareness into their pedagogy. Strengthening teacher preparation, resource availability, and policy alignment will enhance learners' ability to read with understanding and confidence.

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Author Information

Mtshali Zanele Ellen
University of Zululand