

# Challenges in Teaching English Home Language Comprehension in the Foundation Phase

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*This paper explores the pedagogical, contextual, and systemic challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers in teaching English Home Language (HL) comprehension in multilingual South African classrooms. Using qualitative data from a case study in the King Cetshwayo District, the research highlights obstacles such as policy ambiguity, limited teacher training in comprehension strategies, resource shortages, and low parental involvement. The study draws on Schema Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory to interpret how these challenges shape instructional practice. Findings reveal that teachers navigate competing demands between curriculum expectations and learners' linguistic realities, often with minimal institutional support. The paper argues that effective comprehension instruction requires alignment between teacher preparation, curriculum design, and language policy. Recommendations are offered for strengthening teacher development, multilingual resource creation, and parental engagement in literacy education.*

**Key words:** *Foundation Phase; English Home Language; Multilingual classrooms; Comprehension teaching; Teacher challenges; South Africa*

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## 1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is central to literacy and learning, yet it remains one of the most persistent educational challenges in South Africa. Despite curriculum reforms and national reading campaigns, large-scale assessments such as **PIRLS 2021** show that most learners still cannot read for meaning by the end of Grade 4 (Howie et al., 2023). This literacy crisis is rooted in multiple factors, including inadequate teacher preparation, curriculum overload, and linguistic mismatches between the language of instruction and learners' home languages (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Heugh, 2021). In the Foundation Phase, teachers are tasked with introducing English HL comprehension in contexts where learners may have limited exposure to the language outside school. These conditions demand nuanced pedagogical strategies and systemic support. However, teachers often report facing obstacles that hinder their ability to teach comprehension effectively (Mudzielwana, 2019; Nkosi, 2021). The problem is exacerbated by the policy–practice gap: while the **Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP)** promotes multilingualism, classroom realities reflect persistent English dominance and insufficient mother-tongue support (Nomlomo, 2020). Teachers thus operate in a complex environment that simultaneously demands policy compliance, linguistic inclusion, and performance accountability. This paper investigates the key challenges Foundation Phase teachers encounter when teaching English HL comprehension and analyzes how these challenges influence instructional quality and learner outcomes.

The guiding question is:

**What challenges do Foundation Phase teachers face in teaching English Home Language comprehension in multilingual classrooms?**

Sub-questions include:

1. What pedagogical and contextual barriers affect comprehension instruction?
2. How do language policies and resource constraints shape classroom practice?
3. What forms of support could enhance teachers' capacity to teach comprehension effectively?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The study is framed by **Schema Theory** (Rumelhart, 1980) and **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory** (1978), which together provide a lens to analyse the cognitive and sociocultural dimensions of the identified challenges.

### 2.1 Schema Theory

Schema Theory posits that comprehension depends on the activation of prior knowledge structures (schemata) that interact with new textual information (Anderson, 1984). When learners' home languages and experiences are

excluded from instruction, schema activation becomes limited, undermining comprehension. Teachers in multilingual classrooms face the challenge of connecting English texts to learners' existing schemata, especially when materials are culturally or linguistically distant (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988).

## 2.2 Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that learning occurs through social interaction and guided participation within the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**. Teachers require institutional and policy support to scaffold learning effectively. In resource-constrained contexts, the absence of teaching aids, peer collaboration, and parental support disrupts scaffolding opportunities. By combining these frameworks, the study interprets teachers' challenges not as individual failures but as systemic barriers that impede the cognitive and social mediation necessary for comprehension development.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 The State of Comprehension in South Africa

South Africa's literacy outcomes remain among the lowest globally. PIRLS (2021) reported that 81% of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning (Howie et al., 2023). Scholars attribute this crisis to weak reading instruction, poor comprehension strategy training, and limited exposure to print-rich environments (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Zimmerman, 2020). Foundation Phase teachers thus confront immense pressure to deliver literacy outcomes under difficult conditions.

### 3.2 Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Research shows that many teachers lack specialised training in comprehension instruction (Mudzzielwana, 2019). Teacher education programmes often emphasise phonics and decoding but neglect comprehension processes such as inference, prediction, and synthesis (Zimmerman, 2020). Continuous professional development (CPD) initiatives, though present, tend to be short-term and theoretical, with limited classroom application (Nkosi, 2021). The result is a workforce inadequately prepared to address comprehension deficits.

### 3.3 Curriculum and Policy Constraints

The **Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)** provides limited guidance on comprehension pedagogy (DBE, 2022). Teachers report that time pressures and assessment demands reduce opportunities for extended reading discussions (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). Moreover, while LiEP encourages mother-tongue instruction, implementation is inconsistent due to a lack of bilingual materials and parental preference for English-medium education (Heugh, 2021; Nomlomo, 2020). These contradictions place teachers at the crossroads of policy ideals and practical constraints.

### 3.4 Resource Limitations

Additionally, the digital divide limits the integration of ICT-based reading tools that could otherwise enhance comprehension assessment and engagement (Cekiso & Monyai, 2022).

### 3.5 Parental and Community Involvement

Parental involvement in literacy learning remains low in many South African communities (Mudzzielwana, 2019). Socioeconomic challenges, low parental literacy levels, and language mismatches between home and school contribute to this problem. Teachers believe that limited home support undermines classroom reading efforts, especially for learners whose exposure to English is confined to school (Nomlomo, 2020). However, community-based reading programmes have shown promise in bridging this gap (Janks, 2023), suggesting that systemic collaboration can mitigate isolation in literacy teaching.

### 3.6 Summary of the Literature

The literature paints a multifaceted picture of the challenges in teaching comprehension: inadequate teacher preparation, conflicting policies, limited resources, and weak home-school linkages. Addressing these issues requires not only pedagogical innovation but also systemic reform and community partnership.

## 4. Research Paradigm and Design

This study was located within an **interpretivist qualitative paradigm**. The interpretive approach was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore teachers' subjective experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities in teaching comprehension. Interpretivism assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and that meaning is derived from individuals' interactions with their environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A **case study design** was employed to allow for a rich, in-depth examination of teachers' challenges within a real-world setting (Yin, 2018). The research site was a multilingual primary school in the King Cetshwayo District, KwaZulu-Natal, serving learners whose home languages included isiZulu, isiXhosa, and English.

### 4.1 Participants and Sampling

Four Grade 1 English HL teachers were purposively selected. They were chosen based on their experience teaching English in linguistically diverse classrooms. Participants' teaching experience ranged from five to twenty years. Their professional qualifications included diplomas and bachelor's degrees in education.

### 4.2 Data Collection Methods

Three data collection methods were used:

1. **Semi-structured interviews** captured teachers' experiences and perceptions of the challenges they face in teaching comprehension.
2. **Classroom observations** provided first-hand insights into instructional practices, resource usage, and learner interaction.
3. **Document analysis** examined lesson plans, learner reading materials, and policy documents (CAPS and LiEP) to contextualise teacher practices.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Basic Education. Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were observed throughout.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using **Braun and Clarke's (2019)** thematic analysis. The process involved six phases: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme refinement, theme naming, and reporting. Emerging themes were compared across interviews, observations, and documents for triangulation. Credibility was enhanced through member checking and peer debriefing, ensuring that findings reflected participants' perspectives accurately.

## 5. Presentation of Data

Policy and curriculum ambiguity continue to undermine the effective teaching of English Home Language comprehension in multilingual classrooms. Teachers often face uncertainty in interpreting the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), particularly regarding the integration of comprehension within broader literacy outcomes. This confusion results in inconsistent instructional practices and fragmented assessment approaches. Furthermore, insufficient teacher training in comprehension strategies limits educators' ability to employ evidence-based methods such as inferential questioning, scaffolding, and differentiated instruction. Many teachers rely on surface-level activities that emphasise decoding rather than deep understanding. The situation is compounded by the lack of culturally relevant learning materials, which alienates learners whose linguistic and cultural experiences are not reflected in the texts they read. This disconnection weakens learners' engagement and comprehension development. Limited parental involvement and inadequate home support further constrain learners' exposure to reading practices beyond the classroom, especially in communities with low literacy levels. Finally, overcrowded classrooms and heavy workload pressures reduce teachers' capacity to provide individualised feedback or sustained comprehension support, thereby perpetuating shallow learning outcomes and widening the achievement gap.

### 5.1 Policy and Curriculum Ambiguity

Teachers expressed uncertainty about how to implement the **Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP)** within an English HL framework. One teacher commented:

"The policy says to use the home language, but parents want English. We are caught in between."

This tension between policy intent and community expectation created confusion and inconsistency in language use during comprehension lessons. Teachers felt that the **CAPS** document offered limited guidance on comprehension teaching and too much focus on assessment and phonics.

### 5.2 Insufficient Teacher Training

All participants indicated that their initial teacher education programmes emphasised phonics and decoding but offered little instruction on comprehension pedagogy. One teacher noted:

"We know how to teach them to sound words, but not how to make them understand the story."

Professional development workshops, where available, were short and theoretical, failing to provide practical classroom strategies.

### 5.3 Lack of Culturally Relevant Materials

Teachers struggled with textbooks and readers that did not reflect learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They reported that many comprehension passages contained unfamiliar contexts, which limited learners' schema activation. To compensate, some teachers created handmade "special reading books" with local stories and images.

### 5.4 Limited Parental Involvement

Teachers perceived low parental literacy and limited home engagement with reading as significant barriers. Many learners were not read to at home, and parents viewed literacy development as the school's sole responsibility. Teachers lamented the lack of community support structures such as reading clubs or after-school programmes.

### 5.5 Overcrowded Classrooms and Workload Pressures

Teachers described large class sizes (often exceeding 45 learners) as detrimental to individualised attention and formative assessment. Administrative workloads further restricted time for differentiated comprehension instruction.

## 6. Findings

The study revealed several interrelated challenges that impede effective comprehension instruction in the Foundation Phase. Policy-practice misalignment emerged as a central issue, creating uncertainty and inconsistency in language use during reading lessons. Teachers often struggled to align classroom practice with curriculum and policy expectations, leading to fragmented instructional approaches. Furthermore, teacher preparation programmes were found to be inadequate in equipping educators with comprehension-specific pedagogical knowledge, limiting their ability to teach higher-order reading skills. The scarcity of appropriate teaching and learning resources further restricted opportunities for learners to engage with contextualised and meaningful reading activities. In addition, low

levels of parental involvement hindered the reinforcement of literacy skills at home, weakening learners' overall comprehension development. Compounding these challenges were overcrowded classrooms and heavy administrative workloads, which reduced the time and attention teachers could devote to individual learner support, ultimately diminishing the overall quality of comprehension instruction. Together, these challenges interact systemically to produce conditions that hinder effective comprehension teaching.

### 7. Analysis

The findings reveal that teachers' challenges are systemic rather than isolated. Using **Schema Theory**, it becomes evident that the absence of culturally and linguistically relevant materials restricts learners' ability to connect prior knowledge with text. Without schema activation, comprehension remains superficial. From a **Vygotskian perspective**, inadequate scaffolding results from structural constraints such as large class sizes, minimal teacher support, and weak professional development. Teachers are incapable of providing guided interaction within learners' **Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD)**. The lack of collaborative peer learning further limits the social construction of meaning. These theoretical insights suggest that teachers' face is not only pedagogical but deeply structural, rooted in policy incoherence, limited institutional support, and social inequities.

### 8. Discussion

The challenges identified align with prior South African research emphasising the systemic nature of literacy difficulties (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Heugh, 2021; Nkosi, 2021). Teachers operate within an environment that demands high literacy outcomes but provides limited scaffolding for teacher capacity-building. Policy ambiguity between LiEP and CAPS perpetuates uncertainty about language use in comprehension instruction. The dominance of English marginalises learners' home languages, contradicting the principles of additive bilingualism (Nomlomo, 2020). Resource scarcity exacerbates inequities: teachers in urban schools with access to libraries and reading programmes perform better than their rural counterparts (Sibanda, 2020). The lack of culturally responsive materials is of limits schema activation but also alienates learners from the content of their reading tasks (Janks, 2023). The findings also echo Mudzielwana's (2019) observation that comprehension pedagogy is undervalued in teacher education. While teachers are skilled in teaching decoding, few possess expertise in facilitating inferential and evaluative comprehension. Consequently, many rely on rote strategies that fail to engage critical thinking.

### 9. Implications

The study's findings highlight several critical implications for literacy development in multilingual contexts. Firstly, teacher education programmes require restructuring to ensure that literacy modules integrate both phonics and comprehension instruction with practical application suited to diverse linguistic environments. Secondly, policy coherence is essential; the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should align the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) to provide explicit guidance on language use during comprehension teaching. Thirdly, the provision of culturally relevant and bilingual reading resources is vital to enhance learners' engagement and understanding. Furthermore, fostering community participation through parental involvement and local reading initiatives can sustain literacy development beyond the classroom. Lastly, systemic support through reduced class sizes and administrative burdens would enable teachers to implement differentiated comprehension instruction effectively, thereby improving literacy outcomes across contexts.

### 10. Recommendations

1. **Integrate comprehensive literacy pedagogy** into teacher training curricula, focusing on comprehension and multilingual instruction.
2. **Provide ongoing, practice-based professional development** that models effective comprehension teaching strategies.
3. **Develop bilingual and culturally contextual readers** in collaboration with local communities and authors.
4. **Implement school–community reading partnerships** to promote literacy beyond the classroom.
5. **Review and streamline policy documents** to ensure coherent guidance on language and comprehension teaching in the Foundation Phase.

### 10. Conclusion

This study concludes that the teaching of English HL comprehension in multilingual South African classrooms is impeded by interconnected challenges, pedagogical, systemic, and sociocultural. Teachers navigate conflicting policy mandates, insufficient training, resource scarcity, and limited community involvement. These constraints restrict the depth of comprehension teaching and contribute to persistent literacy inequities. Improving comprehension outcomes requires an integrated approach that unites teacher education, curriculum reform, and community participation. Addressing these challenges will not only empower teachers but also affirm learners' linguistic identities, creating a more inclusive and effective literacy education system in the Foundation Phase.

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