

Exploring reading strategies to comprehend reading in Oshikwanyama first language: A case of fifth graders at a combined school in Omusati region, Namibia

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Abstract

This article explored the reading strategies needed to effectively comprehend reading in Oshikwanyama first language by the fifth graders at a combined school in Omusati region. Teaching children to read effectively to gain adequate comprehension is one of the main goals of early education. However, it was observed that the fifth graders for Oshikwanyama first language at a specific combined school in Omusati region found it hard to read and comprehend what they have read. Equally, these learners also found it hard to paraphrase and interpret what they have read, especially when they were asked to summarize the text. Therefore, the study sought to explore strategies needed to effectively improve reading comprehension in Oshikwanyama first language at this school. The population of this study were the fifth graders for Oshikwanyama first language plus their teacher at a combined school in Omusati region. The study employed a case study under the qualitative method using purposive sampling technique. Ten (10) learners and one Oshikwanyama first language teacher were identified and selected to take part in the study. Data was collected through personal observation, interviews and consultation with the Grade five Oshikwanyama first language teacher and selected learners. Data was analysed via tables and emerging themes. The findings of this study indicated that the Oshikwanyama teacher taught Oshikwanyama first language by code-switching and code mixing with English words almost the whole lesson. The teacher's presentations in class were also not indicative of the Oshikwanyama lesson as too many English words and fillers were utilised during teaching. It is concluded that the Oshikwanyama first language is losing its importance in schools especially among children that are raised in urban settings as many prefer English second language. The author therefore recommends that teaching Oshikwanyama first language should be taught with frequent assistance of the subject advisors plus other experts from the region and beyond.

Keywords: *comprehension, English fillers, fluency, paraphrase, Oshikwanyama, first language*

Introduction

The aim of this paper was to explore strategies that could be used to improve reading comprehension in Oshikwanyama first language by fifth graders at a combined school in Omusati region. Reading is one of the four most important skills needed in the mastery of any language. Creswell (2012) argues that without reading or comprehending reading, children struggle to grow academically. Reading or comprehending what is read is therefore the foundation to all academic subjects such as History, Mathematics and Science. Creswell (2012) further argues that the reading skill also influences the child's ability to write. In primary education, children develop the core knowledge of the following reading skills: Reading comprehension - understanding the meaning of a written text. Listening-comprehension/phonemic awareness - being able to identify phonemes and vocabulary - words that children recognise

and be able to understand (Creswell, 2012). However, the author of this study has observed that reading, coupled with comprehension, seem to be a major problem in Oshikwanyama first language as the subject of focus in Grade 5. In one of the grade 5 classes, the author gave a reading comprehension task that tested learners' ability to understand and make meaning of what they read. However, most learners failed the simplest comprehension questions. This simply means if learners cannot make sense of what they are reading, then there is a little of comprehending what they read, not only in Oshikwanyama, but in other school subjects as well. Equally, it seems that many fifth graders may have difficulties in interpreting and answering questions that require critical thinking if their reading skill is compromised.

Keenan (2014) argues that reading comprehension requires both adequate

decoding and oral language comprehension. This would mean that children with Specific Comprehension Deficit (SCD) have adequate decoding but not adequate oral language comprehension. Spencer and Wagner (2017) have applied this simple view of reading framework to identify different types of reading problems in eighth graders and 8-year-old children, respectively. According to this classification system, children with good decoding and good comprehension are adequate readers; children with poor decoding and poor comprehension are poor readers; children with good comprehension and poor decoding meet criteria for dyslexia; and children with good decoding and poor comprehension have SCD. Thus, a mastery of both decoding and language comprehension is necessary for reading proficiency (Spencer & Wagner, 2017). In order to ensure improvement in reading comprehension, the causes of the reading difficulties should be identified and addressed (Keenan, 2014). Therefore, the reading strategies needed to effectively comprehend reading among the fifth graders need to be looked at to help these learners to overcome the reading challenges and prevent difficulties in comprehension as they elevate with schooling.

Statement of the problem

It is imperative for learners to know how to read words and phrases aloud with deep understanding of concepts. The education act governing the Namibian schools implies the importance for learners to read frequently and comprehend what they read. However, relatively little is known about whether the reading skill and comprehension problem among fifth graders at the selected school are a result of their oral language deficits. Keenan (2014) argues that although it is possible that the documented deficits in oral language among children account for the observed deficits in reading comprehension, they may only be a contributing factor. Therefore, it seems that many fifth graders at the selected school in Omusati region experience difficulties with reading and comprehension in Oshikwanyama first language especially those who grew up in town. They also seem to find it hard to interpret what they have read using their own words. Reading comprehension seems to be a stumbling block among the fifth graders. Given the above background, it is worth investigating and exploring the causes of poor reading comprehension by the fifth

graders in Oshikwanyama first language at the selected school in Omusati region and determine possible teaching-learning strategies that could be implemented to improve learners' reading comprehension in Oshikwanyama first language. This therefore led to the following research questions:

Research questions

1. What are the causes of poor reading comprehension in Oshikwanyama first language at the selected combined school in Omusati region?
2. What teaching-learning strategies could be utilised for comprehension and mastery of Oshikwanyama first language at the selected school?

Literature review

Reading is not just about extracting meaning from the text but a process of connecting to the information given by the text. Yuill (2009) believes that reading with comprehension is the key justification why learners need to read and understand what the text is about. He argues that reading for comprehension is a complex balance between recognizing printed symbols and interpreting the meaning behind the symbols. Ndlovu (2010) affirms that for an individual to survive in today's world, it is a requirement for them to know how to read with understanding. A reader should understand simple texts i.e., the transportation documents which include travel directions and road instructions, bills and contracts. The effect of not being able to comprehend could be terrible (e.g., instructions on a bottle of medicine or chemical warnings). With the ability to comprehend a text, learners are able not only to live safely and productively, but also develop socially, emotionally and intellectually (Ndlovu, 2010).

Factors contributing to poor reading comprehension among primary school learners

Learners' background knowledge

Background knowledge plays a vital role in reading comprehension. Majority of learners depend on their background knowledge to link what they know to what they read. Snowling and Hulme (2014) maintain that the background knowledge involves the reader's real-world experiences as well as the literal information from what is read. Learners who lack background knowledge or an understanding of their environment usually

find it hard to understand what they read. They encounter new information that they cannot relate to. Keenan (2014) has stated that the readers' background knowledge helps them to understand the content of text and the message conveyed. Learners who do not have a great deal of experience with a specific topic or type of text also do not have a network of ideas in their minds that allow them to make connections with the new information. In most cases, learners can hardly make predictions on what they read as they are not familiar with the content presented to them. It is therefore important that learners explore and familiarise themselves with their environments to ensure adequate mastery of the reading skill in a specific language (Keenan, 2014).

Inappropriate usage of the text content and lack of sufficient vocabulary

Inappropriate text content happens when a teacher gives any reading activity or any reading material to the learners. The words used in the reading text may not be part of the content intended for a certain grade (Massey-garrison, 2010). This might be a hiccup to the learners in question because they could not comprehend the message that the text conveys. Keenan (2014) believes that "the text selection to readers should be able to fit the grade and level of learners to make connections between what they know and what they are reading" (p. 312). This requires that learners either have prior knowledge about the topic or gain some knowledge about it before they begin to read. On the other hand, Wolfe and Woodwyk (2010) maintain that lack of vocabulary could lead to difficulties in reading and comprehension. Sufficient vocabulary is when learners have the collection of new words and if these words are encountered during reading, learners are able to recognise and remember them and what they mean. If learners lack or are not familiar with new words, it prevents them from understanding a text. In order to understand and make meaning from a text, learners need to be able to understand most of the words they read. Additionally, they need to find words that they do not know and read by inferring the meaning of the unknown words (Wolfe & Woodwyk, 2010). In addition, learners must be able to comprehend familiar words and their relationship with other words within a text. Mastering vocabulary includes recognizing a word's part of speech, definition, useful context clues, and how it functions in a sentence.

Enhancing reading comprehension

SQ3R Method

According to Perfetti and Stafura (2014), the SQ3R reading strategy is a technique that has been developed by psychologists and educators in order to provide a more productive and beneficial reading process. SQ3R is a reading comprehension strategy named for its five steps: survey, question, read, recite, and review. This strategy was initiated by Francis P. Robison, an American education philosopher in 1946. It offers a more efficient and active approach to reading and can also be used to better understand what is being read. Under the first step (Survey), learners should resist the temptation to firstly read the book. Instead, they should firstly go through a chapter portrayed in the reading text, subheadings and other features such as figures, tables as well as the introductory and concluding paragraphs. The survey step takes about 3-5 minutes and provides an outline or framework for what will be presented. The reader identifies ideas and formulates questions about the content of the chapter. In the second phase or step (the question), the reader is expected to generate questions about the content of the reading (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). The reader converts headings and subheadings into questions and extracts answers from the content of what is read. In the third strategy (read), the reader uses the reading skill actively. This means reading to answer the questions raised under the 'Q'. The fourth part which is recite allows the reader to try to retrieve what has been learnt in the same manner as reciting or retelling a story to someone. It is important that the reader uses his/her own words to formulate and conceptualise the material. The reader should try to remember major points like headings and subheadings. The last is the review stage where learners reflect on what they have read and give their own impressions of the content of what was read using their own words.

K-W-L approach

Ndlovu (2010) maintains that the "K-W-L approach" is an instructional chart on reading strategies used to guide learners when reading a specific text. This approach activates the readers' background knowledge and is completely a learner centred approach. The 'K' in this approach is for learners to brainstorm on what they know about a topic (K=know). This step needs to be completed before the reading and the information read is recorded in the K

column of a K-W-L chart. The teacher makes sure that all questions that are set for this approach are readily available for learners to brainstorm on the particular idea that needs to be taken care of in the class. The questions help learners to be driven to think in specific directions that will lead them to the first step of brainstorming (Ndlovu, 2010). The next column 'W' is where learners have to list what they want to learn about the topic during the reading. Learners should then generate a list of questions about what they want to know about the topic (W=want to know). This step is also completed before the reading commences. The teacher comes prepared with his/her own set of questions that will link learners' questions to the idea in the text. This should be done so that learners do not lose the flow of the text as well as the purpose of the activity. The third column, 'L', is for what the learners have learned from the reading (L=learnt). The new information that they have learned is recorded in the L column of the K-W-L chart. This helps learners to come up with their own creative ideas and analysis. The teacher asks learners to identify the differences in given answers and what they have found interesting. In the end, the teacher helps learners to consult other sources with answers not given in the text.

Summarising what has been read

Summarising in general is about finding the key ideas of the text. Pimperton and Nation (2014) affirm that summarising does not only improve students' ability to summarise texts and give the overall ideas portrayed in the text, but also their overall comprehension of the text content" (p. 221). Therefore, summarising allows learners to discover gaps in their understanding or misconceptions as well as validate their key understandings. The best way that learners can summarise what they have read is to begin with listing the main ideas and underlining the most important points mentioned in the reading text. They then combine those ideas and put them in order before they begin to summarise what they have read. Summarising builds comprehension and reduces confusion of content during reading. It is important that learners are trained on how to pick out main points when reading different texts and to process information they read with the goal of breaking down the content into efficient pieces.

Research methodology

This research was mainly a case study of two

grade 5 classes at a combined school in Omusati region. The researcher employed the qualitative method to collect data from the sample to provide an in-depth investigation of the research topic. The qualitative method is best suitable for this topic because the author aimed to gather in-depth strategies that could help the grade five learners to improve their reading comprehension in Oshikwanyama first language. The targeted population of the study was the fifth graders of Oshikwanyama first language and their Oshikwanyama first language teacher at the selected combined school in Omusati region. Purposive sampling was used to select ten (10) grade 5 learners who were slightly fluent in reading and comprehending Oshikwanyama first language in grade 5. Five (5) learners were from Grade 5A inclusive of two girls and three boys and the other five (5) learners from Grade 5B comprising three girls and two boys. Purposive sampling was also applied to select one teacher to represent the two classes. The study collected data through classroom observation (where learners were given a short comprehension text to read, and answer given comprehension questions) plus a short interview (where selected participants were asked to give their general knowledge on difficulties related to reading and comprehension in Oshikwanyama first language. The results were analysed via tables and emerging themes.

Findings

The findings, both from the observation and semi-structured interview are presented in this section through emerging themes.

Presentation of the semi-structured interview data: Teachers interview

Difficulties encountered during reading comprehension

The first interview question explored comprehension difficulties that the teacher experiences from learners in Oshikwanyama reading comprehension lessons. In her response, the following three reading comprehension difficulties are often encountered: Lack of reading skills among learners, Pronunciation and insufficient vocabulary in Oshakwanyama first language. She has highlighted that: "Some learners do not know how to read yet. They hardly understand a given text and end up failing the comprehension questions that are asked during post reading activities". Secondly, she has

clearly indicated that *most learners have difficulties differentiating between certain sounds like 'nd' and 'd', 'mb' and 'b', 'sh' and 's', 'dj' and 'ndj', 'ng' and 'g' or pronouncing words containing letters like 'ngh', 'ngw', 'nhw', ndjw*".

In addition, the teacher has alluded to the fact that that sometimes *"it is difficult for learners to comprehend a specific text because of some difficult terminologies that are used in that specific text which learners hardly understand. The teacher added that: "Failure to teach reading comprehension stages (pre, while, post) as well as the reading strategies to the learners definitely lead to poor comprehension of a text. Without the knowledge of the reading comprehension stages and strategies, learners may find it hard to know what to do when provided with a text. However, if these stages and strategies are frequently taught and practiced, learners will have a clue of what to do, what to look for and how to answer comprehension questions or any other questions asked based on a text. Lack of teaching and learning materials is another cause of poor reading comprehension in Oshikwanyama. Oshikwanyama texts are few. Sometimes a teacher is forced to create their own texts, and this is not effective because the content used is shallow. Teachers mostly just use posters and flipcharts or flashcards, while neglecting the use of models, Oshikwanyama videos and audios. We need to show learners historical things to expose them to their cultural diversity."*

The teacher also indicated that: *"language interference" has made the language of Oshikwanyama to be neglected nowadays as learners are encouraged to speak English at school and only allowed to speak Oshikwanyama during the Oshikwanyama lessons. This practice is degrading the learners' vernacular. Learners are now using English sounds to pronounce Oshikwanyama words.*

Effective teaching-learning strategies to improve reading comprehension skills in Oshikwanyama first language

On improving reading comprehension in Oshikwanyama first language in grade 5, the teacher asserted that: *"Oshikwanyama teachers should use more interesting stories to captivate the learners' attention and interest in reading. They should also set the questions using varieties of question types and following "Blooms Taxonomy" as guide. Different*

reading strategies should be taught to help learners understand the texts and learn how to look for answers to questions asked (E.g. skimming and scanning). Furthermore, teachers should give group work and peer discussions frequently on various texts with the teacher facilitating effectively to make sure that discussions take place. The teachers can also invite language experts to the classroom. Oshikwanyama teachers need to create blogs and groups on social media in order to share ideas and share teaching materials with other teachers country wide.

Presentation of the semi-structured interview data: Learners' interview

Two (2) out of the ten selected learners have indicated that reading comprehension is not always an easy task because: *"Most reading materials provided to them (learners) are too long and boring. They have further added that "there is nothing interesting about them".* The other three (3) participants have indicated that: *"We have difficulties with meanings of words used in texts. Defining those words in the context used is not so easy when you really do not get the gist of what you are reading".* Three participants (3) of the remaining five participants believe that they; *hardly understand some proverbs and idioms used in Oshikwanyama first language and it is hard to link some content to real life situations.* The last two interviewed participants (learners) have affirmed that: *"Some words in Oshikwanyama are extremely difficult to read e.g. 'onhyololola'".* They believe that it is because of the difficult terminologies that they struggle with pronouncing most words especially the 'trigraphs' such as 'onghwaka'. They have added that; *despite the difficult terminologies, we like the language (Oshikwanyama)."*

Learners' feelings toward Oshikwanyama texts

Six (6) learners have indicated that they *disliked reading Oshikwanyama texts*, whereas the other four (4) *liked reading Oshikwanyama*. One of the six learners who disliked Oshikwanyama specifically pointed out that he did not like reading Oshikwanyama because: *"it is a very complicated language in terms of its structure".* The other respondent said she disliked it because she *"uses it on a daily basis as a mother tongue language."* She further has indicated that she *"did not like reading it because she frequently speaks it, so it feels exhausting and boring."* On the other

hand, one of the four learners, with the positive feelings toward Oshikwanyama texts, has indicated that: *“Oshikwanyama is challenging, and the challenging part keeps”* her motivated and fuels her up to keep trying until she improves. She believes that *“it is interesting when reading a novel.”* The other respondent has stated that he liked it because: *“It is his mother tongue and even though he does not understand most of the concepts, he is able to*

express most ideas clearly.” The third respondent positively believes that he *“understands mother-tongue better compared to other languages.”* The other respondent has felt that *“Oshikwanyama”* is his *“vernacular language and he enjoys reading Oshikwanyama stories and everything else written in Oshikwanyama.”*

Table 1: The responses given by the learners

Learners' feelings toward Oshikwanyama texts	
Dislike	6
Like	4

The rate of understanding what is read and causes of poor understanding among Oshikwanyama fifth graders in Omusati region Five of the participants (learners) have indicated that their understanding of what was read was *very poor* whereas the other five (5) indicated an *average understanding*. One of the respondents whose choice was “poor” believes that she hardly understood Oshikwanyama language because she *“feels like she gets the idea of the text and then ends up losing it in the process. “It’s like each paragraph has a main idea”* and this confuses her. The other respondents who have indicated that their language comprehension was very poor said that: *“some words and phrases are hard to understand. “We only read the text once instead of reading it as many times to practice understanding the entire text”. “He also believes that ignorance makes most learners to feel that it is lame to read Oshikwanyama at all times as they speak it at home daily.”* Respondents who indicated an “average understanding of what was read believe that: *“Oshikwanyama is our mother tongue but only understand the best simplified questions based on a specific text that we can relate to”. The participants have further argued that if the written text consists more of idioms and figurative expressions, it becomes difficult for them to extract the meaning from it.”*

Poor reading skills and learners’ academic performance in Oshikwanyama first language Three participants (learners) have indicated that their performance was badly affected because: *“Oshikwanyama is all about understanding what you read”. “You need to understand the texts, the graphs, the poems*

and then the questions being asked”. However, two (2) participants have positively indicated that their performance in Oshikwanyama was not badly affected by the poor reading skills but *“sometimes they confuse certain words and end up affecting their entire comprehension of a specific question.”* The other three said their performances were satisfactory because they have effectively answered the parts that they grasped and ended up scoring good marks. The last two respondents said that: *“Poor reading skills affects their performances negatively because Oshikwanyama requires understanding and not memorisation. They are used to memorising terms in other subjects but for Oshikwanyama, you need to understand concepts to answer questions”*.

Presentation of the observation results for Oshikwanyama Reading Comprehension Lesson

The study found that the teacher hardly presents her lessons in Oshikwanyama first language. She uses frequent English fillers during Oshikwanyama lesson e.g. *“um, uh, well, like owa mona, you know ngaashi.”* Furthermore, the teacher sometimes fails to teach according to the three reading stages (pre, while and post reading phases). Additionally, the teacher hardly provides simplified examples to learners, like reading the first paragraph aloud to show learners what is expected of them during reading comprehension. Moreover, inductive teaching was often used were the teacher spoke frequently for the whole lesson without accommodating peer learning. Thus, the lesson was mostly teacher centred. Reinforcement was hardly done. The teacher did most of the talking throughout the lesson without key

questions prepared during teaching. No formative assessment was practiced. Although the teacher had four lesson objectives as per her lesson plan, she hardly had reinforced them. Additionally, it was observed that the teacher hardly involved the use of prior knowledge. With less attempt made at allowing her learners to restate difficult sentences in their own words, the learners were unable to do so as they could hardly understand the text. With regards to the usage of teaching-learning strategies in the lesson, it was observed that the teacher did not incorporate any teaching-learning strategies in her class that could aid in improving the fifth graders' poor reading comprehension skills. Furthermore, the teacher portrayed less interest in teaching her lessons and this perhaps made the learners to lose interest in the subject.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the Oshikwanyama first language is losing its importance especially among children that are raised in urban settings. Nowadays, the language is hardly spoken compared to back then because of the westernised culture that most Namibian parents have adopted. Moreover, the Oshikwanyama first language texts that are utilised currently were written by our long time ago, so the language that was used back then is difficult to comprehend by the new generation. The unfamiliar vocabulary and a problem of interpreting the meaning of idioms and proverbs in Oshikwanyama first language frequently are some of the hindrances that are prevent appropriate comprehension of Oshikwanyama first language.

Recommendations

It is recommended that teaching Oshikwanyama first language should be done by different teachers with the assistance of other subject experts within the region and beyond. Furthermore, teachers should teach by targeting overall comprehension of the language. Various searches done on reading comprehension (i.e. Massey-Garrison, 2010) reveal that reading comprehension difficulties may stem from an underlying oral language weakness that exists from early childhood, before reading is even taught. It turns out that students with poor reading comprehension understand or comprehend few spoken words in Oshikwanyama first language. To address reading comprehension deficits effectively among these children, it is imperative that

educators may have to use various approaches to teach vocabulary, thinking skills, and comprehension in Oshikwanyama. Furthermore, it is recommended that vocabulary should be taught frequently as learners with poor vocabulary skills comprehend less of what they hear. Therefore, it would be helpful to teach the meaning of new words in Oshikwanyama via using multisensory strategies like graphic organizers, pictures, and mnemonics. This helps learners to improve on comprehending difficult words that they may encounter in written text.

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