ANALYSING FIRST GRADE TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING ENGLISH READING PROFICIENCY IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS IN NAMIBIA

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Abstract/Izvleček
The study aims to analyse how primary school teachers of Grade 1 develop reading skills in multilingual classroom settings in Namibia. A case study approach was adopted to collect data through interviews and classroom observations. The findings reveal that teachers do not model a structured or systematic approach to scaffold learners during reading lessons. They rather rely on the translation method to foster learners' understanding of reading texts in multilingual contexts and rarely use differentiated activities. This calls for new more learner-centred approaches towards developing reading which would allow for more pronounced learners' perspectives of reading in multilingual contexts.

Analiza strategij učiteljev prvih razredov za razvijanje bralne pismenosti v angleščini v večjezičnih razredih v Namibiji
Namen raziskave je analizirati, kako učitelji prvih razredov osnovne šole razvijajo bralno pismenost v večjezičnih okoljih v Namibiji. Uporabili smo pristop študije primera, zbiranje podatkov pa je potekalo s pomočjo intervjujev in opazovanjem pouka. Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da učitelji za razvijanje bralnih zmožnosti ne uporabljajo strukturiranega ali sistematičnega pristopa za podporo učencem pri branju, zanašajo se predvsem na metodo prevajanja in redko uporabljajo diferenciranih dejavnosti. Raziskava kaže na potrebo po novih pristopih k usposabljanju učiteljev, ki pri razvijanju bralnih zmožnosti v ospredje postavljajo na učenca osredotočeno poučevanje in s tem več poudarka na perspektive učencev pri branju v večjezičnih kontekstih.

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Introduction

The migration of citizens from one region to another has become a common phenomenon, especially for economic and social purposes. Namibia, with its different indigenous language communities, is no exception to this worldwide trend. According to the country's language policy (Ministry of Basic Education, Sports, and Culture 2003, p. 4), the language of instruction in grades 1-3 should be the predominant local language. As a result, children struggle to read in their native language and in English (Uwezo, 2016). This situation is attributed to the fact that the linguistic backgrounds of teachers are different from the learners' mother tongue. Furthermore, teachers lack professional knowledge of teaching and learning strategies in multilingual contexts. With the constant movement of people and related classroom dilemmas, the "native speaker" objective of the language policy provision has become redundant within the multilingual context of Namibia.

Most citizens of southern Namibia speak the traditional indigenous languages of the region, which are Khoekhoegowab and Afrikaans. English becomes the medium of instruction from grade 4 onward (Ministry of Basic Education, Art, and Culture, 2016). However, schools are given the possibility to apply for permission from the Ministry of Education to introduce English earlier when parents request English as the medium of instruction in the lower primary cycle (MoBSC, 2003).

Takanishi and Le Menestrel (2017, p. 24) assert that "language, like learning in other domains, is a cultural phenomenon, comprising many interacting influences at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional level". The linguistic background (e.g., Khoekhoegowab, Afrikaans, Oshiwambo, Herero, Rukwangali, and other dialects) influences learners' reading comprehension of English texts in Junior Primary classrooms and puts a strain on both the learner and teacher. Acquiring English language competence involves several aspects, such as expanding vocabulary and reading comprehension. Phonological Awareness (PA) refers to the ability to identify and manipulate phonological segments in spoken words, and Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN) denotes the ability to name serial displays of letters, digits, pictured objects, or colours as quickly as possible (Landerl et al., 2019). Due to limited access to pre-primary education (before Grade 1) and the lack of trained pre-primary teachers, learning to read in Namibia is becoming a significant challenge for the learners. This is especially true when learners from indigenous language communities are taught by teachers whose native language is not English.

When learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds gain access to schools in the //Karas region, they learn to read in the predominant languages which are Afrikaans, Khoekhoegowab, or English. The main purpose of this study is therefore to analyse how first grade teachers develop English reading competencies in a multilingual classroom setting.

Language as mediation

Reading is one of the language skills that plays a vital role in language teaching and learning. Vygotsky's (1978) and Bakhtin's (1981) theories point out the reciprocal relationships that are fostered through mediation, the use of cultural artifacts, signs and symbols, and mediating tools such as scaffolding strategies for language learning. These aspects play an important role in ESL, bilingualism, multilingualism, and the assessment of reading. Learning to read can begin from the letter level, word level, or text level. Each starting point has produced approaches to teaching reading that can be used in the foreign language classroom (Suganda, 2016). Both Vygotsky's (1978) and Bakhtin's (1981) theories address perspectives of language as a mediating tool in the discourse of language. Similar to his contemporary Bakhtin (1981), Vygotsky (1978) considers all language, spoken and written, as dialogical rather than monological. According to Morrison et al., (2020), to improve children's development, teachers and others need to provide high quality experiences for all learners. Therefore, English teachers need to have good language skills to provide the main language input for children who may have limited exposure to language outside the classroom. Teachers' ought to possess good interaction skills to use activity-based interactive methods that are most suitable for young learners. Further, teachers need knowledge of English and didactic approaches to provide feedback and rich knowledge of the culture in general to get children interested in learning. Both Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981) believe that dialogue between teacher and learner is very important, as it helps children develop new concepts to think their way to higher level thinking. When learners only recite teachers' speech without having the choice to question or deviate from it, they are denied an opportunity to engage with the learning content at a higher cognitive level.

Acquisition of English as a Second Language (ESL)

In a second language teaching environment, learners should be taught how to use what they already know and understand about language and the world. Second language acquisition is defined as the process of learning a language other than one's

native language either consciously or unconsciously in a controlled or uncontrolled environment to achieve a given level of skills (Deng & Zou, 2016). Developing literacy and teaching reading in a multilingual classroom setting requires planning and concerted teaching efforts to ensure learners' attainment of proficiency. A few variables may affect L2 acquisition success. ESL learners are expected to participate in activities that will help them increase their competency in various language skills. When assigning receptive work, teachers must determine whether learners can read fluently (Collentine, 2016). Furthermore, Gupta (2019) offers suggestions on principles and practices for teaching ESL to young learners. These include making the classroom a friendly place to learn, developing background knowledge and vocabulary to provide an interesting contribution while frequently presenting opportunities for discussion and interaction, and using a variety of teaching methods as well as carrying out ongoing evaluation and assessment. Teachers who engage their learners based on their "funds of knowledge" through instruction by drawing on learners' and community resources have proved to be more successful (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Reading in multilingual settings

Hopewell and Escamilla (2014) acknowledge that bilingual individuals' competence in more than one language allows them to uniquely approach reading from the "totality of what is known and understood across languages" (p. 73). According to Winskel (2010), learning to read in any language is a process of matching the visual symbols or orthography on the page to the sound system or phonology of the spoken language. When learning how to read, the child has to learn to "crack the code" of how a particular language maps onto its orthography. An important concept which offers insights into reading in multilingual settings is 'translanguaging' which has been seen as both a pedagogy and an act of teaching and learning. Baker (2011) defines translanguaging as the process of "making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages (p. 288).", while García and Wei (2014) see the concept as "moving across languages and registers of speech to make meaning" (p.653).

Translanguaging is critical in teaching English language learners within the multilingual context of Namibia in which English language skills are developed while using the pupils' native languages. Namrullah and Nasrullah (2020) affirm that with translanguaging bilinguals have a single integrated linguistic repertoire from which they strategically draw appropriate features to communicate effectively.

Furthermore, translanguaging is accurately adapted to facilitate inference-making strategies in all communicative modes using the learners' mother tongue and English during a reading lesson. According to Vaish and Subhan (2015), translanguaging is not so much an outcome of proficiency but more an attempt at optimal meaning making.

Method

The article presents the results of a qualitative case study. According to Yin (2009), "the purpose of qualitative case studies is not merely to organize data, but to try to identify and gain analytic insight into the dimensions and dynamics of the phenomena being studied. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clear (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, Yin (2009) indicates that "case studies are preferred when "how" and "why" questions are posed" (p. 2). The main research questions are:

1. How do Grade 1 teachers teach English text reading within a multilingual classroom context?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of the challenges when teaching reading to young learners in multilingual settings?

This study engages a bounded case of four schools that cater for pre-primary to grade 7 learners. Ethical Clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria, EC 16/08/01. The Ministry of Education in the //Karas region permitted to conduct the study in schools. The researcher also obtained consent from the principals of participating schools and explained the purpose of the study to both principals and grade 1 teachers.

Participants

A sample of (n=10) teachers from four schools was observed during reading lessons in a Grade 1 classroom. This study used a non-probability or purposive sampling method (Patton, 2002) to select the participants. Purposeful sampling allows the investigator to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2009). The selected participants were therefore Grade 1 primary school teachers who agreed to have their reading lessons observed.

All the ten Grade 1 teachers who participated in the study were female, three had three years of teaching experience, five taught for more than 10 years, and two were close to retirement age and taught for more than 30 years. The majority of teachers, seven (7) studied at the University of Namibia, two at the Institute of Open Learning (IOL), and two obtained their teaching certificates before the country became independent. Seven (7) teachers specialised in Afrikaans, one (1) in Khoekhoegowab, and two (2) in English.

Data collection tools

Data were gathered through interviews and an observation checklist. The interview protocol was designed to prompt teachers to reflect on their prior experiences of learning during teacher preparation, assessment, and challenges within a multilingual teaching environment. An observation checklist was derived from previous work on reading (Strauss, 2017) to collect data during reading lessons. A Lickert scale (5 strongly disagree, 4- disagree, 3- neutral, 2- agree, and 1- strongly agree) was used to rate statements related to various aspects of teaching reading in multilingual settings. The interview questionnaire comprised the following questions: Questions (Q) 1-3 derived biographic information about teachers, Q 4 dealt with strategies to enact reading, Q 5-6, strategies used to expand vocabulary, Q 7-8 analysed teachers' training to assess reading, and their current reading assessment approaches, Q 9 solicited views on the teacher training curriculum and language within multilingual contexts, and Q10-11 prompted teachers' feedback on the content of their training in teaching reading.

Data analysis

Interview data were analysed using a thematic approach. The independent variables of the descriptive data included a) gender b) language of instruction, c) years of experience, and d) educational institution. The themes identified from the qualitative data were: (1) strategies to enact reading, (2) strategies to expand vocabulary, (3) assessment of reading, (4) mediating native language when teaching English reading, and (5) in-service training.

Results of the study

Observation results

This section first presents the results of the observations, followed by the teachers' responses in the interviews.

Table 1: Teaching reading *Means and standard deviations of 7 checklist items*

Statement	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. The teacher reads the text first before engaging learners	10	3.7000	1.49443
2. The teacher establishes baseline information, pitch, intonation, etc.	10	4.0000	.94281
3. Formal lessons set aside for reading on the timetable.	10	3.1000	1.85293
4. Learners retell the story in a logical order.	10	5.0000	.00000[a]
5. Reading texts at the individual reader or Grade 1 level.	10	4.5000	1.08012
6. Assessment captures individual reading.	10	4.4000	1.07497

Table 1 shows the highest and lowest scores rated during classroom observations. In Item 3, "Formal lessons set aside for reading on timetable," the difference between the mean and standard deviation is (1.2470) and in Item 1, "The teacher reads the text first before engaging learners," the difference is (2.2056). The lowest ranking, Item 4, "Learners retell the story in a logical order," had the highest mean of 5.0 (SD =0.000) followed by Item 5, "Reading texts at the individual reader or Grade1 level," 4.5 (SD=1.0812) and Item 6, "Assessment captures individual reading," 4.4 (SD=1.0749). These rankings were triangulated with the interview data.

Strategies to teach reading

In the interviews, the teachers were asked which strategies they used to teach English reading in multilingual settings. An analysis of their responses revealed two major categories: strategies to enact individual reading in a multilingual setting and strategies to expand vocabulary.

(1)   Strategies to enact individual reading in a multilingual setting

The teachers were asked what strategies they use to enact English teaching within multilingual settings. Two teachers pointed out that they use translation strategies and mentioned a picture reading strategy to foster meaning-making. Another teacher reported using the phonics approach to literacy development, first introducing sounds and letters in Afrikaans and then in English.

- *I translate from Afrikaans to English.* [T1]

- *Learners understand better when I translate.* [T2]
- *For English reading, I use pictures.* [T4]
- *I start with alphabet knowledge, and single sounds. I do the same letters first in Afrikaans and then in English.* [T3]
  (2) Strategies to develop vocabulary

The analysis of the participants' responses showed that they use a variety of strategies to develop vocabulary in English, such as using word games or different vocabulary tasks. In addition, two teachers mentioned developing vocabulary by using the sight-words approach. The teachers' responses also show that they were aware of the importance of context ('the theme of the week') and the positive effect of participation ('I allow learners to pick a book').

- *I use word games and let learners fill in blanks or match the right word within a sentence.* [T9]
- *Reading vocabulary is based on the reading text of the day.* [T4]
- *I teach sight words according to the theme of the week.* [T8]
- *I let learners fill in blanks or match the right word within a sentence.* [T6]
- *I allow learners to pick a book to improve individual reading skills. With every topic, I start with new words and sight words. In that way, learners expand their vocabulary.* [T8]
- *Sometimes I let the learners watch a video. I chose the topic based on the stories. For example, animals. Then I take out specific words in English or Afrikaans to expand vocabulary.* [T3]

Mediating native language when teaching English reading

An important aspect of teaching reading in multilingual settings is the mediation of their mother tongue/native language and English. One of the strategies mentioned was the use of the learners' mother tongue which was possible when the teacher knew the language. Alternatively, teachers report asking other teachers who speak the pupil's languages for help by using translation. It is also clear from their responses that they sometimes have to use different languages to be able to communicate with the learners. One of the teachers mentioned using visual scaffolds in the form of pictures shown using a projector.

- *I use their mother tongue or ask teachers who can speak their languages to translate.* [T6]
- *I can speak Khoekhoegowab. Therefore, I teach a few words at a time. Say the word in Khoekhoegowab, then Afrikaans, and then English. This is very difficult. One can only translate to English when there are many more language varieties.* [T5]

- *I use pictures with the letter names. The projector in my class is of great help to show the words in English.* [T2]

Training for teaching reading

The participating teachers all reported to have taken the Jolly Phonics training offered by the Ministry of Education Arts and Culture in 2022. They expressed the belief that teachers, especially novice teachers, should take part in in-service training. One of the participants also pointed to the necessity of parental involvement in support of reading development at home.

- *All Junior Primary teachers must get in-service training.* [T4]
- *When learners move up to the next grade, the teachers confuse them again after we have worked hard to get them on a specific level. Awareness must be raised so that parents can support their children to read at home. Learners do not have the support at home to improve their literacy.* [T7]

Discussion of the findings

The data presented in this study offers some valuable insights into the strategies of teaching reading and the teachers' strategies of navigating between languages in the multilingual settings of Namibia. Following the question, how do grade 1 teachers teach English text reading within a multilingual classroom context, the main findings of the interviews and observations are presented. The results of lesson observations show that participating teachers used a whole-class didactic approach without engaging learners in key reading processes. Without real cognitive involvement, reading for meaning is hindered, unrewarding reading experiences multiply, and practice is avoided or merely tolerated (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Teachers have not modelled reading, and limited baseline information, such as pitch, intonation, and assessment of reading was done during classroom practice. The results of the study also indicate the strategies used by teachers to teach reading and expanding vocabulary to promote reading proficiency. Making meaning from text reading is a constant consideration for teachers in multilingual contexts. Some teachers translate from Afrikaans to English, or Khoekoegowab to Afrikaans, and then to English for learners to make meaning of reading text. For the participating teachers, finding common ground with the learners during text reading may be the key consideration. Other participating teachers use pictures or recap alphabet

knowledge as teaching strategies to enact reading. According to Scarborough (2001), there is an established association between oral vocabulary and word reading such that children with larger oral vocabularies also tend to be better readers.

In a comparative study, Strauss and Bipath (2020) reveal that whilst writing and reading words one by one or using flashcards to unveil new vocabulary, learners had the opportunity to match and read these words. Therefore, reading to young learners has some benefits including supporting the acquisition of new vocabulary and expanding sight word growth. The results show that teachers used word games, sight word drilling, filling blanks within a sentence, and listening to stories as strategies to teach vocabulary. The results suggest that teachers were not trained in assessing reading. While the participating teachers generally realised the importance of assessment, they were not able to describe how assessment data may assist in improving reading proficiency. Without an assessment of reading, teachers may be unable to provide learning support or differentiate reading teaching. Using suitable and appropriate assessment strategies, specific reading challenges can be identified and apt teaching and learning approaches can be used to assist teachers diagnose learners' prob–lems to design more effective teaching strategies. Morrison, Woika and Breffni (2020) indicate that formative assessment guides teachers' decision making about future instruction and provide feedback to learners to improve their performance. Concerning training in teaching reading, all the teachers reported having participated in in-service training to teach English phonics in Grade 1. As Garcia & Weiss, (2019) emphasise, educator quality can be improved through effective professional learning. Teachers also found it challenging to enhance reading without parents' support at home. In multilingual classrooms, learners are at different levels of reading proficiency. Strauss and Bipath (2020) recommended intervention measures to improve children's emergent language and literacy de–velopment within preschool and Grade 1 classrooms. Parents who participated in the study (ibid.) liked reading. However, little evidence that they did read to children was reported.

Conclusion

The study attempted to identify Grade 1 teachers' didactic approaches to developing English literacy and reading skills in multilingual classroom environments. The results suggest that teachers use a variety of strategies to teach reading and mediation

between different languages, often resorting to translation. It has also been observed that the participants were not trained in reading assessment procedures. In addition, it has been argued that home reading interventions may positively impact children's reading. Therefore, this study calls for exploring

how teachers can be trained to develop effective reading and reading assessment strategies in multilingual contexts.

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