Teachers' Perspectives on Mitigating Barriers to English FAL Comprehension in Primary Schools

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Abstract

English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) plays a central role in primary education within multilingual contexts, yet many learners experience persistent difficulties in reading comprehension. The researchers adopted an interpretive qualitative approach. In this light, data were generated from ten Grade 6 EFAL teachers through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and non-participatory classroom observations. The study was conducted in rural primary schools in the Nquthu circuit, uMzinyathi district in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. The findings revealed that teachers face interconnected challenges, including learners' poor pronunciation and weak phonics skills, limited vocabulary, inadequate professional development opportunities and shortages of EFAL reading resources such as textbooks and dictionaries. These barriers significantly constrain learners' ability to decode texts, construct meaning and engage meaningfully with comprehension activities. Despite these constraints, teachers employed a range of responsive strategies, including reading-aloud techniques, vocabulary games, dictionary use, scaffolding through guided explanation and the incorporation of supplementary reading materials from home. It was recommended that improving EFAL comprehension outcomes requires sustained teacher professional development, adequate resource provision and structured, learner-centred reading pedagogies.

Keywords: English First Additional Language, reading comprehension, primary school teachers, social constructivism

1. Introduction

English has emerged as a global lingua franca, facilitating communication across diverse linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries (Ahtif & Gandhi, 2022). In multilingual societies such as those in Africa, English often serves as the language of instruction and assessment, despite not being the learners' mother tongue. English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners study English as the first language they learn after their home language (Department of Basic Education, 2011). They often experience linguistic and cognitive challenges that make it difficult to develop strong reading comprehension skills. Reading comprehension, in this context, refers to the ability to decode, interpret and derive meaning from written texts by drawing on vocabulary knowledge, background understanding and linguistic proficiency (Shanahan, 2019). Teaching English reading comprehension to FAL learners requires more than language instruction; it demands the development of good reading habits, vocabulary enrichment and independent reading skills. However, research consistently shows that learners from non-dominant linguistic backgrounds or low-income households perform below expected reading levels (Lonigan et al., 2013; Fesi & Mncube, 2021).

Despite the centrality of English in education, learners often have limited exposure to the language outside the classroom, compounded by a weak reading culture at home and insufficient access to reading materials. Teachers, in turn, grapple with systemic challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, and limited professional development opportunities (Em, 2022; Sharma, 2022). These constraints hinder their ability to effectively teach comprehension skills. For instance, in Namibia, Grade 6 learners scored only 23% regionally and 14% nationally in reading comprehension on the National Standardized Achievement Test (NSAT), highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions (Liswaniso, 2023). In South Africa, the results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) indicated that 81% of Grade 4 learners are unable to comprehend written material in any language, which is an increase from 78% recorded in 2016 (Department of Basic Education, 2023). This implies that most learners in primary schools have serious challenges in reading-for-understanding. Furthermore, according to the National Reading Panel Report (2022) (Spaull, 2022) 78% of learners in Grade 4 in South African primary schools cannot read for meaning, and less than 40% of learners in Grade 6 can read and make inferences. While international studies highlight the importance of parental involvement and home literacy practices (Philippe et al., 2022; Tegmark et al., 2022; Dale et al., 2023), such practices remain underdeveloped in many African contexts (Bouaamri et al., 2022). The absence of a robust reading culture and limited opportunities for authentic English language use further impede learners' ability to build vocabulary and comprehend texts effectively.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the challenges teachers face when teaching English FAL comprehension texts in primary schools and the instructional strategies they employ to overcome these barriers. By examining teachers' insights, the research aims to identify

contextually responsive approaches that support both teachers and learners in improving reading comprehension outcomes. The study sought to contribute to the development of effective pedagogical interventions that address the realities of resource-constrained classrooms and promote equitable literacy development in multilingual settings.

1.1 Research Questions

i. What challenges do teachers experience when teaching reading for comprehension in primary schools?

ii. How do teachers address the challenges they encounter when teaching reading for comprehension in primary schools?

2. Literature Review

Teaching English reading comprehension as a First Additional Language (FAL) presents persistent challenges across multilingual and resource-constrained contexts. A growing body of research highlights the linguistic, pedagogical, and systemic barriers that hinder effective instruction, particularly in primary schools. These challenges are compounded by learners limited English proficiency, inadequate exposure to English outside the classroom, and a lack of foundational reading skills. Teachers, in turn, must navigate these constraints while striving to develop learners' comprehension abilities through targeted strategies and adaptive pedagogies.

In South Africa, several studies outline the depth of these challenges. Fesi and Mncube (2021) reveal that Grade 4 EFAL teachers struggle to teach reading comprehension due to learners limited English proficiency, often resorting to home language support to scaffold understanding. Chetty (2019) similarly reported that a lack of adequate teaching and learning resources impedes teachers' ability to deliver effective EFAL instruction. Both studies emphasise the need for innovative strategies and resource support to bridge the gap between learner needs and instructional realities. Leboho et al. (2024) further identified specific learner difficulties, such as identifying main ideas and decoding unfamiliar vocabulary. Their study recommends explicit instruction in reading strategies, vocabulary development, and exposure to diverse texts, all of which require well-trained teachers and access to appropriate materials.

Beyond South Africa, regional studies reveal similar patterns. Desta (2020), in Ethiopia, observed that teachers often rely on outdated methods and neglect early reading instruction, resulting in poor comprehension outcomes. Ugwu (2022), in Nigeria, identified systemic issues such as textbook shortages and low learner proficiency, advocating for regular in-service training and improved access to reading materials. These findings reinforce the importance of professional development and resource provision as foundational support for effective EFAL instruction. Internationally, studies from Malaysia and Turkey echo these concerns. Ebadi and Rozainum (2019) found that Malaysian learners struggled with sentence-level comprehension, recommending a stronger emphasis on foundational reading skills. Gundogmus (2018), in Turkey, noted low learner engagement, possibly due to uninspiring materials and ineffective teaching methods. Chua and Sulaiman (2021) identified multiple contributing factors to poor reading outcomes among Malaysian Year 4 learners, including limited vocabulary, insufficient background knowledge, low motivation, and weak reading strategies. They advocate for learner-centered approaches, close observation of reading behaviours, and interactive teaching methods to improve comprehension outcomes.

Collectively, these studies paint a consistent picture, teachers face multifaceted challenges in teaching English FAL comprehension, ranging from linguistic barriers, resource limitations and gaps in pedagogical training and learner engagement. They also highlight the critical role of teacher agency and professional development in overcoming these barriers. This literature provides a compelling rationale for the present study, which seeks to explore teachers' insights into the challenges of teaching English FAL comprehension texts and the strategies they employ to support learner success.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in Social Constructivism, a learning theory developed by Lev Vygotsky, which emphasises the social nature of learning and the importance of interaction in cognitive development. Social Constructivism aligns closely with the pedagogical principles outlined in South Africa's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which advocates for learner-centered, interactive, and scaffolded instruction to support language development (Department of Basic Education, 2011). At the heart of Social Constructivism are two key concepts: Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Scaffolding refers to the temporary support provided by a more knowledgeable other typically a teacher that enables learners to perform tasks they would not be able to accomplish independently (Reiser, 2023). In the context of English First Additional Language (EFAL) reading comprehension, scaffolding may involve modelling reading strategies, guiding learners through complex texts, or facilitating vocabulary development. The ZPD, as defined by Vygotsky (1978), represents the gap between what a learner can do unaided and what they can achieve with appropriate support. Lambright (2024) emphasises that effective instruction occurs within this zone, where learners are challenged just beyond their current capabilities but supported enough to succeed. Applying this framework to EFAL classrooms, teachers act as mediators of meaning, helping learners navigate unfamiliar vocabulary, decode complex sentence structures, and extract meaning from texts. These instructional interactions are not only essential for comprehension but also for fostering learners' confidence and autonomy. As Vygotsky (1978) and Galle, (2026) suggest, learning is most effective when it is socially mediated and contextually grounded. Within this framework, comprehension is understood not as an isolated cognitive skill, but as a socially constructed process in which learners build meaning through guided interaction, dialogue, and strategic support. Therefore, EFAL teachers play a critical role in scaffolding learners' reading development, gradually transferring responsibility to the learners as they build the skills necessary for independent comprehension. This theoretical lens provides a valuable foundation for examining how teachers support reading comprehension in multilingual, resource-constrained classrooms, and it underscores the importance of responsive, interaction-driven pedagogy in overcoming barriers to English FAL literacy.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Methodology

The study employed an interpretive qualitative approach to explore Grade 6 teachers' perspectives on the difficulties they face when teaching reading for comprehension in the Intermediate Phase of English First Additional Language (EFAL). This approach allowed the researchers to gain insights into the teachers' experiences, emotions, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes (Kaur, Kumar, & Noman 2022). It provided rich, detailed accounts and a deeper understanding of their viewpoints regarding the challenges encountered during reading instruction aimed at developing learners' comprehension skills. A multiple-case study design was used to offer a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the issue from the varied perspectives of different participants (Vohra, 2024).

4.2 Target Population and Sampling

The target population refers to the complete group of individuals or items from which a researcher intends to collect data and make generalisations (Willie, 2024). In this study, the target population included all Grade 6 teachers responsible for teaching English First Additional Language (EFAL) in the Intermediate Phase. A sample was selected from this group, consisting of EFAL Grade 6 teachers from a limited number of schools within a specific district.

Purposive sampling is a technique used to select participants based on a specific objective (Kumar, 2014). As Privitera (2024) notes, this method involves choosing individuals who are most likely to provide relevant information to address the research questions. Pfeifer et al., (2023) and Ahmad et al., (2025) add that using a larger purposive sample can enhance the credibility of the study's findings. This approach was well-suited for the current research, as it required participants with the necessary knowledge and experience to offer meaningful insights into the topic. A total of ten Grade 6 EFAL teachers were intentionally selected from ten primary schools located within the Nquthu circuit of the uMzinyathi district in the province of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. These schools were chosen for their proximity to one another and because they represent a rural setting. The selected participants were considered well-positioned to share their experiences and challenges related to teaching reading comprehension in Grade 6 EFAL classrooms.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. English First Additional Language Teachers teaching EFAL were observed while teaching English to grade 6 learners to gain insight in responsive instructional strategies for developing their reading comprehension skills. The semi-structured interview format offered flexibility for the researcher to explore participants' responses in depth (Ruslin et al., 2022), giving the study an interpretive orientation. Such interviews are suitable for qualitative research as they allow participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives freely, yielding rich and meaningful data (Ruslin et al., 2022). Most participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the interview questions, and each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for detailed responses. The interview guide was structured into two sections: to explores the challenges they encountered by teachers when teaching English FAL comprehension text in primary school and responsive strategies they use to overcome these barriers.

According to Kumar (2011) non-participatory observation involves the researcher maintaining a passive role, merely watching and listening to group activities to draw conclusions. Similarly, Fix et al., (2022) describe observation as a means of collecting data by systematically recording behaviours, events, and physical characteristics in their natural contexts. The researcher observed purposefully and systematically as teacher-learner interactions unfolded (Parry et al., 2024 & Smit et al., 2022). This approach enabled identification of challenges teachers experienced and the specific responsive strategies used to enhance reading comprehension skills. Each classroom observation lasted about 45 to 60 minutes and was guided by an observation schedule containing structured questions. The observation tool was organised into two sections: explores the challenges teachers face when teaching English FAL comprehension texts in primary schools and the instructional strategies they employ to overcome these barriers. This structured categorisation enabled the researcher to focus on particular aspects of the lesson, gather detailed and relevant data, and gain a comprehensive understanding of the teaching and learning process.

4.4 Data Analysis

According to Gal (2023) data analysis is often regarded as an "intellectual challenge" involving the interpretation of raw information collected. This process involves organising data into thematic categories (Theys et al., 2020 & Perera, 2023), thus, this study adopted a thematic analysis approach to examine the raw data. Individual face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted and audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. Supplementary notes were also taken to support the recorded data (Braun & Clarke, 2006 & Elise et al., 2025). The recorded interviews were transcribed, and two recurring themes were identified in alignment with the broader research objectives. Thus, as this paper forms part of a larger study, two themes are discussed. These focus on the challenges teachers face when teaching English FAL comprehension texts in primary schools and the instructional strategies they employ to overcome these barriers.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institution where the study was conducted (University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee, Reference number: UZREC 171110-030 PGM 2022/52). Additionally, permission to conduct the research was secured from the KwaZulu Natal Department of Basic Education and principals of the ten schools involved in the study. Subsequently, the teachers' permission was also sought, and they signed consent forms, which were collected for safekeeping. Participants were informed about the confidentiality of their responses, and pseudonyms were used to report the findings of the study.

4.5.1 Trustworthiness Measures

Credibility: Credibility was strengthened by collecting data through both individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Using these two methods allowed the researcher to compare what teachers said during the interviews with what was observed in their classrooms, providing a more accurate and complete understanding of the instructional strategies used to develop learners' reading comprehension.

Dependability: Dependability was achieved by following the same interview guide and classroom observation schedule for all participating EFAL teachers. The data collection process was conducted consistently across the selected schools, ensuring that the study followed a clear and systematic procedure.

Transferability: Transferability was enhanced by providing a detailed description of the study setting, the participating Grade 6 EFAL teachers, and the data collection process. This enables readers to judge whether the findings may be relevant to other schools or similar educational contexts.

Confirmability: Confirmability was ensured by basing the findings on evidence gathered from the interviews and classroom observations rather than the researcher's personal opinions. Direct quotations from teachers and observations made during classroom visits were used to support the interpretation of the findings, allowing the results to reflect the participants' experiences and classroom practices.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Challenges of Teaching Reading for Comprehension

This theme reveals findings from the participants during the individual face-to-face in-depth interviews and non-participatory classroom observation. Findings revealed that most participants faced numerous challenges in developing learners' reading comprehension skills, such as learners' poor pronunciation of words, limited vocabulary of learners, lack of professional development for EFAL teachers, and shortage of EFAL reading resources.

5.1.1 Learners' Poor Pronunciation

Participant B2 reported significant difficulties with learners who struggle to pronounce words accurately: "Yeah, there are a lot of challenges, Sir, I won't lie to you. As I keep on mentioning, … we have struggling learners in our classes and each year it's becoming worse, I don't know why … But the challenges are that learners, [we] have learners who are unable to read the correct pronunciation of words. I think the problem maybe is with the sound, the phonics, right …" This statement clearly shows that Participant B2 encounters persistent challenges with learners who lack adequate phonological awareness and are not sufficiently exposed to English to pronounce even common words correctly. Their inability to pronounce words often suggests not only a lack of familiarity with the vocabulary but also a limited understanding of the text itself. When learners cannot accurately read or sound out words, their comprehension is severely compromised because decoding is a foundational step in reading comprehension.

A similar concern was raised by Participant G7, who highlighted comparable experiences with her learners: "… inability to sound out words, they struggle with correct phonics and then they also ignore punctuation … this may also lead to a lack of understanding, while they are reading. Those are the challenges between me and my learners." Participant G7's reflection reinforces the idea that learners' struggles with phonics and word recognition are deeply rooted issues, possibly stemming from inadequate literacy foundations in earlier grades. These findings are consistent with Social Constructivism, developed by Lev Vygotsky, which emphasises that learners develop literacy skills through guided interaction and support from more knowledgeable others. Learners' difficulties with pronunciation and phonics suggest that they require appropriate scaffolding and collaborative learning opportunities to strengthen their decoding skills and improve reading comprehension. The inability to decode words phonetically and to observe punctuation conventions hinders learners from reading fluently and meaningfully, which in turn disrupts comprehension.

It can therefore be concluded that learners' pronunciation difficulties and weak phonic skills are major obstacles in English First Additional Language (EFAL) learning. When learners cannot identify or pronounce words correctly, their capacity to derive meaning from texts is significantly reduced. The combined insights from Participants B2 and G7 point to a broader systemic issue, specifically a lack of English language immersion and insufficient early phonics instruction which impedes learners' progress in later grades. This problem aligns with the findings of Makiwane-Mazinyo et al., (2017), who observed that teachers often encounter learners unable to read and pronounce words correctly, a challenge that consequently makes it difficult for them to identify the main ideas within texts. In essence, poor pronunciation and phonics skills not only hinder learners' oral reading fluency but also restrict their overall comprehension and engagement with written texts. These challenges underscore the critical need for early phonics intervention and sustained language exposure to strengthen learners' reading competence in EFAL contexts.

5.1.2 Learners' Limited Vocabulary

Participants A1 and D4 expressed comparable experiences regarding learners' limited vocabulary and their struggles with word recognition and self-expression during English lessons. Participant A1 stated: "OK. I do experience challenges of teaching comprehension. … Learners are not fluent in English, for an example, some … they are reading too slowly, their vocabulary is too low. Other learners have difficulty in understanding words and ideas." Similarly, Participant D4 explained: "So we've found that some of them are very slow and some of them are very fast. So, you can't hear that. And another one is difficulty understanding words and ideas, um … the next is limited vocabulary." From

Participant A1's account, it is clear that learners face significant challenges in foundational language skills such as vocabulary development, reading fluency, and comprehension. Both A1 and D4 emphasised that varying reading speeds among learners disrupt the flow of reading skills, often compelling teachers to read aloud instead of engaging learners in active reading. This suggests that limited vocabulary not only impedes comprehension but also constrains classroom interaction and learner participation.

These observations are consistent with Abualzain's (2020) findings in Saudi Arabia, which revealed that learners' limited vocabulary was a key factor underlying comprehension challenges in multi-level classrooms. Similarly, in the present context, inadequate vocabulary knowledge prevents learners from fully grasping textual meaning, disrupting their overall reading development. Therefore, the experiences of Participants A1 and D4 highlight how limited vocabulary and uneven reading fluency significantly constrain learners' comprehension abilities in English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) classrooms. These findings are supported by Social Constructivism, developed by Lev Vygotsky, which views learning as a social process that occurs through interaction, dialogue, and guided support. Learners' limited vocabulary highlights the importance of teacher scaffolding and collaborative classroom activities that help learners expand their language skills and improve their understanding of reading texts. Addressing these gaps requires intentional vocabulary instruction, differentiated reading activities, and early intervention strategies to ensure that all learners acquire the linguistic foundation necessary for meaningful comprehension and academic progress.

5.1.3 Lack of Professional Development for EFAL Teachers

Other challenges identified in the study is the lack of professional development opportunities for EFAL teachers. The findings reveal that teachers have limited access to continuing professional development programmes, particularly those focusing on strategies for teaching reading for comprehension skills in the intermediate phase learning. Participants A1, C3, and E5 expressed shared concerns regarding the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) failure to provide sufficient developmental workshops tailored to EFAL needs. Participant A1 stated: 'So … the challenges that I am facing as an educator is that the government lacks educator training, specifically in reading comprehension … that is what is needed for us.' Likewise, Teacher C3 highlighted: 'So there is no workshop that is specifically for teaching reading … hmm, what are the things or strategies that you can use in order to teach reading for comprehension to learners.' Similarly, Teacher E5 reinforced this view: 'We also don't receive orientation workshops or new strategies of teaching reading for comprehension … we need these workshops.' From Participant A1's comment, it is apparent that the DBE's insufficient support in organising targeted training workshops on reading comprehension leaves EFAL teachers underprepared to address learners' reading difficulties effectively. Participants C3 and E5's remarks further demonstrate their eagerness to acquire new strategies and teaching methods that could enhance their classroom practice. Their reflections reveal a genuine professional desire for capacity-building initiatives that can equip them with effective, research-based approaches to foster reading comprehension among learners.

These findings echo Makiwane-Mazinyo's et al., (2017) assertion that teachers often struggle with ineffective teaching strategies, and further align with Nanah et al. (2018), who noted that EFAL teachers' use of ineffective comprehension methods stems largely from a lack of adequate training. The consistent call from Participants A1, C3, and E5 underscores the urgent need for structured professional development programmes that focus on reading pedagogy. Such initiatives would not only enhance teachers' confidence and competence but also directly improve learners' comprehension outcomes.

Based on the above, it is evident that the absence of ongoing professional development for EFAL teachers represents a critical barrier to effective reading instruction. Equipping teachers with the necessary skills, strategies, and support systems is essential if learners are to develop strong reading comprehension abilities. The findings clearly highlight that investing in teachers' continuous professional growth is indispensable to improving literacy outcomes in EFAL classrooms.

5.1.4 Shortage of EFAL Reading Resources

Participants J10 and F6 expressed similar concerns regarding the shortage of essential EFAL reading resources, such as textbooks and dictionaries, which negatively affects their ability to teach reading comprehension effectively. Participant J10 explained: '… also here in our school, we do not have enough textbooks. Most of learners in my class, they share textbooks.' Likewise, Participant F6 stated: 'And the other thing in my school is that now we have a limited number of dictionaries, so all learners don't get a chance to use them.' Participant J10's remark highlights the severe lack of reading materials in EFAL classrooms, which constrains both teaching and learning. The shortage of textbooks means that learners cannot engage in independent reading or follow lessons effectively, as sharing limits access and reduces opportunities for practice. Similarly, from Participant F6's account, it is evident that the scarcity of dictionaries prevents learners from engaging in essential word-learning and vocabulary-building exercises. This lack of access undermines their ability to expand their vocabulary, improve spelling accuracy, and develop word recognition skills all of which are crucial components of reading for comprehension skills.

These findings can be explained through Social Constructivism, developed by Lev Vygotsky, which emphasises that learning is enhanced when learners actively engage with learning tools and interact with others in supportive learning environments. The shortage of textbooks and dictionaries limits learners' opportunities to participate in guided reading, collaborative learning, and independent exploration of language, all of which are essential for developing reading comprehension. As a result, inadequate access to these resources reduces the effectiveness of teacher scaffolding and restricts learners' ability to construct meaning from texts.

This observation aligns with Albiladi's (2019) study, which found that a lack of authentic reading materials was a major challenge for teachers striving to develop learners' comprehension skills. McGrath (2013) also underscored that high-quality reading materials are central

to promoting learner engagement and motivation in English as a First Additional Language (FAL) classrooms.

These findings were further substantiated during classroom observations; it was evident that most teachers faced practical challenges consistent with their interview responses. For instance, in Participant G7's class, learners struggled to read fluently and accurately, reading in unison as a whole class rather than individually. They had difficulty pronouncing and recognising words, and their reading pace was noticeably slow for a grade 6 level. Moreover, they were unable to answer comprehension questions effectively, demonstrating limited understanding of the text. Similarly, in Participant E5's class, several learners could not read at all, while others displayed difficulty in pronouncing words or even identifying letters. Such observations reinforce the strong link between inadequate resources and poor literacy outcomes.

Learners who cannot recognize letters or pronounce words accurately are unlikely to grasp the main idea of a passage, let alone comprehend specific details. Their struggles reflect foundational literacy gaps that impede the development of higher-order comprehension skills. These challenges mirror Makiwane-Mazinyo's (2017) findings, which revealed that teachers often confront learners who cannot read or pronounce words correctly, resulting in their inability to master textual content. The shortage of EFAL reading resources, particularly textbooks and dictionaries, emerges as a critical barrier to effective reading instruction and learner comprehension. Addressing these resource deficiencies is therefore essential to improving the quality of EFAL teaching and ensuring that learners develop the reading skills necessary for academic success which includes reading for comprehension.

5.2 Mechanisms to Mitigate Challenges

This theme presents the findings obtained from individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews and non-participatory classroom observations. The data revealed that many EFAL teachers employed a range of instructional strategies to mitigate the challenges they faced when teaching reading for comprehension. These strategies included encouraging correct pronunciation, using the reading-aloud technique, integrating interactive games to enhance vocabulary development, promoting the use of dictionaries, and involving learners by having them bring reading materials from home. Participant A1 described how she used to read aloud as a means of scaffolding learners' pronunciation and comprehension: 'OK, as an educator, I correct them while they are pronouncing words. And also I make sure I read to them [at] medium speed. I also help them to understand words they don't know by explaining and making examples with them.' (A1) It is evident from Participant A1's explanation that she employed reading aloud as a remedial technique aimed at improving learners' pronunciation and overall reading fluency. By modelling correct pronunciation and explaining unfamiliar words with examples, she provided learners with guided support an approach consistent with scaffolding. This aligns with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners progress from assisted to independent performance. Trumbull and Lash (2013) similarly highlight that working within the ZPD helps bridge the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can accomplish with guided support. Thus, Teacher A1's method illustrates the application of scaffolding principles in developing reading for comprehension.

Participants D4 and J10 also reported incorporating the reading-aloud strategy, along with interactive games, to strengthen learners' vocabulary skills. Participant D4 elaborated: 'So, during reading period, we emphasise individual reading aloud, such as Spelling Bee, spelling games, when you are using Scramble with alphabet from A to Z. Where you give them, and you tell them they must come up with words like "grumpiness" or "accommodation". They use it, they work in groups there. And the use of dictionaries so that they will check the meaning and definition of the words, then provide the charts where the word sounds or phonics, like, how these words sound.' (D4). Participant D4 uniquely integrated fun and interactive elements, such as Spelling Bee and Scramble games, into her lessons to enhance learners' spelling, vocabulary, and phonics awarenessall vital components of comprehension. She further reinforced learning by encouraging dictionary use, enabling learners to find definitions and understand word meanings within context. Participant J10 similarly stated: 'I've tried to bring my own dictionaries for them to search difficult English words in the text, and they then see how it is used in the text. I have tried to use this from Grade 4 and 5.' (J10). Through these activities, both teachers promoted active learner engagement and vocabulary growth in enjoyable ways that support comprehension. As Dyers and Abongdia (2015) assert that reading aloud fosters word recognition and deepens understanding. In alignment with social constructivist theory, knowledge is constructed through interaction and exploration. Martin (2003) and Glasersfeld (1998) argue that teachers guide learners through exploratory tasks, allowing them to investigate and draw conclusions collaboratively. The inclusion of group games and word-building tasks thus exemplifies this social and interactive approach to learning, which promotes both engagement and comprehension development.

Participants C3 and A1 also sought to involve learners by having them bring reading materials from home. Participant C3 explained: 'We ask learners to get whatever material, either newspaper or magazines, and to come in the assembly and also read.' (C3) Similarly, Teacher A1 added: 'I also provide additional work or activities; for example, from the magazines, to expose them in reading comprehension.' (A1) Participant C3's practice of encouraging learners to read aloud during assembly helped to build their confidence and fluency, while Participant A1's use of magazine-based activities exposed learners to diverse reading materials that promoted comprehension skills. Both teachers effectively improvised by using accessible resources from outside the classroom, which not only broadened learners' exposure to reading materials but also fostered a more positive reading culture. As Jabri et al. (2020) note, engaging learners with varied resources enhances their ability to make and verify predictions during reading, strengthening comprehension and critical thinking.

Interestingly, classroom observations confirmed that most teachers indeed implemented the strategies they had discussed during interviews. For example, Participant A1 was observed reading passages aloud to help learners with pronunciation, while Participant I9 used a similar approach to correct mispronunciations. This resonates with Vygotsky's (1978) view that teachers and other knowledgeable individuals play

a crucial role in providing scaffolding, guiding learners toward independent mastery of skills. Additionally, during observations, Participant D4 made effective use of pre-reading strategies by displaying difficult words from the comprehension passage on charts and asking learners to read them aloud before searching for their meanings in dictionaries. This practice familiarised learners with key vocabulary, enhancing their subsequent comprehension of the passage.

Similarly, Participant J10 provided learners with vocabulary lists and meanings from his dictionary, instructing them to record these in their exercise books to strengthen vocabulary retention. Such preparatory activities equip learners with the linguistic tools necessary to understand texts more effectively. However, the observations also revealed that not all teachers demonstrated a wide range of techniques. Some lacked the professional capacity to integrate multiple activities across the stages of reading (pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading). This indicates a need for targeted professional development to help teachers plan and implement a structured reading process. It can be concluded that teachers' systemic training in the use of diverse teaching pedagogies across reading stages could have a potential to substantially advance learners' comprehension skills.

6. Conclusion

This study explores teachers' perspectives on mitigating barriers to english fal comprehension in primary schools. The findings from the interviews and classroom observations reveal that teachers work in challenging conditions that limit learners' ability to develop strong reading comprehension skills. Learners' poor pronunciation, weak phonics skills, and limited vocabulary make it difficult for them to decode words and construct meaning from texts. These challenges are further compounded by inadequate professional development opportunities for teachers and a shortage of essential reading resources such as textbooks and dictionaries. Although these challenges persist, the study found that teachers actively employ a range of strategies to support learners' reading development. Classroom observations showed that teachers used read-aloud activities, vocabulary games, and dictionary exercises, and encouraged learners to bring additional reading materials from home to compensate for limited school resources.

These practices reflect the principles of Social Constructivism, which emphasise learning through interaction, guidance, and teacher support. However, the findings also indicate that these strategies are not consistently implemented across all stages of reading instruction, highlighting the need for more structured teacher support and professional development. The study therefore recommends strengthening phonics instruction in the early grades, providing regular curriculum-focused training for EFAL teachers, increasing the availability of reading resources, and promoting partnerships with libraries, NGOs, and publishers to improve access to quality reading materials. Implementing these measures would create richer literacy environments that support learners in developing stronger reading comprehension skills and achieving better academic outcomes.

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Author contributions

Sifiso Sanele Dludla contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, literature review, and drafting; Samantha Govender provided supervision, conceptual guidance, and critical revision; and Hlengiwe Romualda Mhlongo contributed to editing, and manuscript revision. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Grammarly was used solely for language editing, including checking grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sentence clarity. The authors remain responsible for the manuscript's content, interpretation, arguments, and conclusions.

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