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Exploring Grade 1 English Home Language teachers' pedagogical approaches and implementation practices of CAPS in teaching reading

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Abstract

To address systemic literacy deficiencies and pedagogical injustices left over from the apartheid era, the South African Department of Basic Education established the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2012. Empirical data indicates that CAPS has not been able to substantially raise national literacy rates despite these revolutionary goals. Inconsistent pedagogical alignment with the curriculum is identified in the literature as the main factor impeding its effectiveness. The degree to which Grade 1 English Home Language (EHL) teachers' reading instruction complies with CAPS requirements was the focus of this study's investigation of their teaching methods. Three EHL teachers were the participants of the study, which used a qualitative case study design. Structured classroom observations of core reading components, such as group-guided reading, phonics, and shared reading, were used to gather data. The results suggest that the participants successfully incorporated the requirements set forth by CAPS into their reading and phonics lessons. But when it came to classroom engagement, a pedagogical gap was found as there were discrepancies between policy and practice. This was evident in the continued use of teacher-centered instruction. While Grade 1 teachers successfully incorporate CAPS-mandated information into their literacy courses, a persistent "pedagogical gap" in the delivery of that content persists, according to this study, which adds to South African educational research. The study emphasizes that curriculum compliance by itself is not enough to address systemic literacy issues without a fundamental shift in instructional involvement, as seen by the persistence of teacher-centered approaches despite regulatory changes.

Keywords: Reading instruction; CAPS; Phonics teaching; Group guided reading; Shared reading; English Home Language; Teacher implementation

Introduction

Reading is a key component of social and economic life, personal growth (Holden, 2004), as well as community engagement responsibilities. Therefore, reading is a skill that needs to be nurtured as it is the foundation of all further learning. However, the results of national (Annual National Assessments-ANAs) as well as international reading assessments (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study-PIRLS, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021) reveal that many South African learners cannot read with comprehension. To address the reading challenge and other education-related challenges that emanated from apartheid education, the Department of Basic Education introduced the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2012 (DoE, 2011: 2). Although there is growing concern about the reading crisis in South Africa, there is relatively little research examining teachers' implementation of CAPS with regard to teaching reading comprehension in the foundation phase (Dlamini, 2022). According to the Department of Basic Education (2012), CAPS offers a standardised curriculum that guides educators on what to teach and assess in schools across different grades. It aims to close the gap between learners from poor schools and those from well-resourced schooling environments. Despite CAPS's commendable objectives, some studies reveal that CAPS failed to improve the reading challenges of South African learners. For example, de Lange,

Winberg and Dippenaar (2020) argue that CAPS did not improve learners' reading comprehension.

Nevertheless, CAPS remains a critical framework shaping the teaching of reading comprehension (Govender & Hugo, 2018; Weideman, Du Plessis & Steyn, 2017). Specifically, the Foundation Phase Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in South Africa categorizes reading requirements into four distinct areas: shared reading (including shared writing), group-guided reading, paired/independent reading, and phonics (encompassing phonemic awareness) (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The Department of Basic Education mandates that each of these components must be explicitly taught and practised daily. Some studies, such as one conducted by van der Mesch (2023), advocate for the combination of teaching the above-mentioned reading categories. For example, Mesch's study focused on the inclusion of phonics instruction in group guided reading. Mesch (ibid) concluded that the aims of group-guided reading are not achievable when phonics instruction reduces engagement with continuous texts. Therefore, he encouraged teachers to consider the balance between whole-language and phonics-based approaches.

One of CAPS's characteristics is flexibility. Teachers have the freedom to adapt lessons and teaching methods to meet the specific needs and interests of their learners. The flexibility element of CAPS inspired the authors of the current paper to establish how Grade 1 EHL teachers implement CAPS in teaching reading. The findings on the role of teachers in teaching reading in the foundation phase are mixed. The authors view this situation as a gap that needs to be filled. Previous studies have shown that many teachers are not adequately trained in literacy instruction, and many schools do not have adequate resources such as books, computers, and other learning materials (Cekiso, Olifant & Boakye, 2023; Wessels & Saurombe, 2012). Venkelsamy and Hu (2024) conducted a study that focused on teachers as responsible for curriculum implementation and transformation. The results of his study revealed that teachers understood their roles and responsibilities as change agents in their classrooms.

The current article critiquing teachers' practice in teaching reading comprehension in the foundation phase, encourages teachers to find ways to implement the reading components identified by CAPS. This study examines instructional strategies intended to support reading comprehension and the implementation of CAPS in the South African context. Therefore, this paper gives insight into teacher practices that are in line with CAPS. Little is known about teachers' pedagogical strategies in teaching reading and how they implement CAPS in teaching reading comprehension in the foundation phase. The paper aims to bring on board the views of experienced foundation phase teachers directly involved in teaching the components of reading that adhere to CAPS principles. Specifically, the study focuses on how teachers teach phonics, group-guided reading, and shared reading. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed:

- How do teachers teach shared reading, group guided reading and phonics in line with CAPS?
- What pedagogical approaches do teachers use to teach reading in Grade 1?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is Shulman's (1986, 1987) theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). The foundation of PCK is the idea that successful teaching necessitates a special synthesis of pedagogical competence and topic knowledge rather than just discrete subject-matter expertise. Teachers are able to convert difficult subject matter into pedagogically effective forms that are flexible enough to accommodate students' varied skill levels because to this "interweaving" (Shulman, 1987).

In the early literacy context, PCK is highly specialized based on the particular reading component being taught rather than being a general teaching skill. According to this study, a teacher's PCK shows up differently in each of the following fundamental literacy domains:

Phonics: PCK in phonics calls for the teacher's capacity to choose suitable decoding techniques and foresee typical phonetic misunderstandings. It goes beyond simply understanding letter-sound correspondences. Strong PCK teachers are able to use instructional scaffolding to assist learners in combining sounds to form words because they comprehend the linguistic sequence of phonemic awareness (Loughran, Mulhall & Berry, 2004).

Shared Reading: In this instance, the teacher exemplifies PCK by modelling the "thinking process" of an experienced reader. It entails the deliberate use of bigger texts to illustrate print ideas, understanding techniques, and fluency. To interest the entire class, the teacher's PCK specifies how they strike a balance between the what (the content of the narrative) and the how (the use of signals and predictions) (Shulman, 1986, 1987).

Group Guided Reading: Because it calls for the teacher to differentiate instruction in real time, this component exemplifies a high-level use of PCK. In a small group setting, the teacher must combine their expertise of the reading process with a keen awareness of the individual reading levels of each learner. This entails choosing books that present the "just-right" amount of difficulty and understanding when to step in or stop providing assistance when reading on one's own (Carlson, 1999: 27).

According to Loughran et al. (2004), PCK includes teachers' representation of the material as well as their understanding of the unique challenges that learners encounter. This notion is essential to this study's assessment of teachers' interpretations of the CAPS requirements and the English Home Language curriculum. It enables the researchers to look beyond the obvious "what" is being taught and investigate the professional knowledge that is employed to negotiate the challenges of guided reading, the collaborative nature of shared reading, and the complexity of phonics.

Although the relationship between content and pedagogy was established by Shulman's (1987) groundbreaking conceptualization of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), more recent research has defined PCK as a dynamic, enacted process within certain domains, such as early literacy (Carlson & Daehler, 2019).

By differentiating between a teacher's collective PCK (shared professional knowledge) and their enacted PCK, the particular application of literacy information during classroom instruction, the Refined Consensus Model (RCM) of PCK goes beyond static knowledge categories (Carlson & Daehler, 2019).

This is further defined as Reading-PCK in the context of early grade reading, which calls for teachers to have a thorough understanding of linguistic structures, including syntax, morphology, and phonology, as well as the capacity to translate this information into clear, methodical instruction (Moats, 2020).

According to recent research, effective reading PCK is topic-specific; for example, in order to determine whether a learner's reading difficulties are caused by phonological processing or orthographic mapping, a teacher must possess both the diagnostic PCK and an understanding of the alphabetic principle (Snow, 2021; Liu, 2025). Therefore, the framework in this study sees PCK as the specific ability to manage the intricate cognitive and linguistic demands of foundational reading instruction rather than just as a storehouse of teacher information.

Literature review

Shared Reading

According to Honchell and Schulz (2012), a shared reading approach is a cooperative reading experience in which learners share or participate in reading a text or other reading while receiving support and direction from a teacher. The teacher demonstrates the abilities of gifted readers in this situation, such as reading fluently. According to the CAPS, shared reading should take place during the first fifteen minutes of reading time for most days of the week. Throughout the week, teachers can utilise the same text in several lessons, but each time, they should try something new. According to Al-Dawoideh and Al-Hassan (2023), this shared reading usually consists of large books with enlarged designs and

artwork. Because learners can participate in interactive sessions, the method can provide struggling readers with the necessary support. Additionally, the model can influence reading fluency and word knowledge. Learners can read and understand words during shared reading lessons that they might not be able to read independently if they were not using the shared reading approach.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) are of the view that by discussing the cover, title, and author, the shared reading method presents the main narrative and predictions regarding the story's main plot, which are encouraged and requested by the learners. The authors further advise that using an appropriate tone and inflexion, the teacher read the story to the class. To gauge the learners' level of comprehension, the teacher also poses quick questions. After the story is over, there is time for comments, responses and follow-up activities to be incorporated.

According to the Department of Basic Education (2011: 12), each shared reading session should focus on learning concepts related to print, text features, phonics, language patterns, word identification strategies, and comprehension at various levels (e.g., literal, reorganisation, inferential, evaluation, and appreciation questions). Additionally, according to the Department of Basic Education, the first session should be centred on the learners' enjoyment and initial "look" at the text, during which they should provide a personal response. The same text is used in the following session, and the emphasis switches to increased learner participation in the reading with the teacher to improve vocabulary, comprehension, decoding abilities, and text structures (grammar, punctuation, etc).

Segooa and Molise (2024) conducted a recent study on the reading experiences of teachers in FP classrooms and the strategies they used to ensure the success of reading instruction. The findings demonstrated that teachers' classroom strategies did not follow the most recent theories and recommended practices for teaching reading. The findings also demonstrated that this factor has a negative impact on teachers' ability to teach reading using CAPS-recommended reading strategies in general. This is concerning because the introduction already referred to the widespread outcry regarding the poor reading skills of FP learners.

Altamimi and Ogdol (2023) studied the impact of a shared reading approach on enhancing learners' reading comprehension. The results demonstrated that learners' reading comprehension had significantly improved.

A key component of contemporary educational theory is learner-learner interaction, which transforms the classroom from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered setting. Research continuously shows that students obtain deeper cognitive processing and better social results when they engage with one another through debate, collaboration, and peer evaluation (Hirumi, 2002). This engagement is a necessary activity to ensure learning rather than just a social outcome. The ability of learner-to-learner interaction to improve knowledge construction is its main significance. Peer interaction, as opposed to passive listening, forces students to externalize their ideas, which makes their own thinking clearer and aids in identifying knowledge gaps (Hirumi, 2002).

The main obstacle to teaching reading comprehension in resource-constrained settings in South Africa's Foundation Phase is a severe lack of environmental and physical resources (Mhlongo & Chaame. 2025). Mhlongo and Chaame (2025) further argue that teachers are forced to use out-of-date resources or photocopied texts that frequently lack the visual appeal required to engage young learners since many schools, especially those in rural or poor regions, lack functional school libraries and enough age-appropriate graded readers. This sentiment is supported by Daga (2022) who declared that teacher-to-learner ratio in overcrowded classrooms, which sometimes exceeds 1:40, makes it practically impossible for teachers to give each student the individualized attention they need to monitor and encourage their growing literacy skills. In addition to physical limitations, Smit, Preston and Hay (2020) observed that a lack of professional development and pedagogical assistance frequently restricts the learning environment. They further revealed that because they may not have had any training in

explicit comprehension techniques like modelling, scaffolding, or activating prior knowledge, teachers in these contexts sometimes struggle to successfully execute the CAPS curriculum.

Additionally, a large number of students come from "literacy-poor" homes, where parents are unable to encourage reading outside of school hours because of their own socioeconomic or educational obstacles. By failing to grasp reading for meaning by Grade 3, pupils experience a "silent exclusion," a barrier that frequently lasts the entirety of their academic careers due to a combination of institutional resource gaps and a lack of community support.

Therefore, the goal of the current study was to investigate how the chosen teachers teach reading comprehension in the FP by implementing the CAPS recommendations, which include shared reading.

Group Guided Reading

Group Guided Reading (GGR) is a teaching strategy in which a teacher works with a group of learners who read at comparable levels, according to McMillan Education South Africa (2021). Similar to this, the Department of Basic Education (2012) developed GGR, a literacy teaching method in which the teacher spends two 15-minute sessions a day of the week working with a small group of six to ten learners who have very similar reading levels and using levelled texts that correspond to their reading levels. The reading baseline assessment should be conducted twice a year to evaluate each learner's progress during the middle of the year and determine what support they may still require in the future (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010). By using reading ability, teachers can make sure that learners are reading texts at the appropriate level. According to Berry et al. (2020), teaching at the appropriate level is one of the best strategies to raise reading achievement, particularly for struggling learners. Lessons for GGR are designed to fill in the reading gaps found in the reading baseline assessment. The teacher designs the lessons to cover a variety of word-attack techniques that learners can use to overcome obstacles in texts. A key component of this strategy is the "text talk" that takes place between the teacher and the learners (and the learners and each other) (Department of Basic Education, 2012). Other learners engaging in independent activities should not interrupt the teacher during this time.

According to research from the Zenex Foundation (2021), teachers in South Africa are having difficulty implementing GGR, particularly in large, multilingual, and under-resourced classrooms, despite the advantages of GGR in other nations. Research findings in this area, however, are conflicting. The findings of Kitsili and Murray's (2024) study on GGR in South Africa showed that teachers had the pedagogical content knowledge necessary to implement GGR.

Phonics

According to the Education Endowment Foundation (2021), phonics is a method of teaching certain facets of literacy by helping learners comprehend the connection between written symbols and sounds. The Education Endowment Foundation states that this includes the ability to read written language using sounds or phonemes. The goal is to systematically teach learners how the sounds relate to the graphemes, or written spelling patterns, that represent them. The New Oxford Dictionary offers a similar definition, defining phonics as a technique for teaching reading that involves associating sounds with individual letters or groups of letters in an alphabetic writing system. According to the New Oxford Dictionary, learners who study phonics also learn the sounds connected to the lines and squiggles that make up letters. They also learn how those letters combine to form even more sounds, which collectively influence the words we use to express ourselves. Scientific research has consistently shown that the best method for teaching learners to read is explicit, systematic phonics instruction (Wang, 2017). According to Wang, phonics instruction entails teaching learners how to combine distinct sounds to form a single word (for instance, combining the sounds "k, a, and t" to form "CAT") as well as how individual letter groups produce sounds (for instance, the letter "c" makes the sound "k"). This kind of phonics instruction is frequently known as synthetic phonics, according to Wang (2017).

Reading and phonics instruction are closely related in the South African CAPS

curriculum, with 15 minutes of dedicated phonics instruction per day advised during the school week. The CAPS curriculum states that phonics is a component of the reading domain of word recognition. The South African CAPS curriculum allows teachers and schools to select their own phonics. All that is needed is for the program to facilitate clear and organised instruction across the school.

Methods

Research approach and design

A qualitative research approach was used in this study. According to Bhandari (2022), qualitative research entails gathering and examining non-numerical data (such as text, audio, or video) to comprehend ideas, viewpoints, or experiences. It can be applied to produce new research ideas or to obtain a deeper understanding of an issue. This research approach was judged pertinent since the information was gathered from teachers' experiences English reading instruction practices. A case study design was employed in accordance with the qualitative research methodology. A case study design allows researchers to conduct an in-depth, detailed examination of a phenomenon within its real-world context (Crowe et al., 2011). This was particularly appropriate for this study as it enabled the researchers to observe and analyze how teachers actually implemented CAPS requirements in their natural classroom settings while teaching reading. The design facilitated close observation of teachers' instructional practices, classroom interactions, and teaching methodologies in real time.

Data collection method

Data for this study was gathered by the researchers through observation. According to George (2023), observation is a research method that describes a phenomenon's traits or attributes without the use of quantitative measurements or data. Instead, the observer's subjective interpretation of what they see, hear, smell, taste, or feel forms the basis of the observation.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018), observation is a data collection method involving observing events, behaviour, or physical traits in their natural environment. Because the implementation of the curriculum requirements in teaching reading is intricately tied to the classroom context in which it takes place, using the observation as research method enabled the researchers to capture the complexities of how teachers interpreted and applied CAPS guidelines while considering teachers' instructional practices, classroom dynamics and interactions, learners' needs, and available resources. Each teacher was observed once and the topics that were taught focused on group guided reading, shared reading, and phonics.

In this study, classroom observations were conducted to understand how teachers delivered reading lessons. This approach allowed researchers to directly observe actions and practices, rather than relying on self-reported accounts of these practices. Furthermore, observations provided a more accurate understanding of teachers' behaviours and instructional methods, offering insights beyond what teachers claim to be doing when teaching reading in the classroom. Field notes were used to keep a record of what was observed and heard during data collection.

Research site; research participants and sample size

The study employed purposive sampling to select three Grade 1 English Home Language teachers from three different Western Cape primary schools. The three schools in the Western Cape were selected based on several key factors to ensure the study's comprehensiveness and accuracy. The schools were required to be public primary institutions registered under the South African Schools Act and to follow the CAPS curriculum for Grade 1 English Home Language. To account for geographic diversity, the selected schools were rural-based and situated in similar socioeconomic areas across the province. Additionally, all three schools were conveniently accessible for the researchers to visit and conduct classroom observations. Three teachers were observed across three schools, and one lesson was observed per teacher. The lessons took about 36 minutes each.

The research participants consisted of qualified Foundation Phase teachers who were actively teaching English Home Language to Grade 1 learners at the time of the study. The final sample size comprised three teachers aged between 27 and 45 years old. Two of these teachers held bachelor's degrees in education with a Foundation Phase specialization, while the third teacher had a Diploma in Education with a focus on primary education. The selection of three schools was influenced by the fact that each school had only one Grade 1 classroom available. The specific sample size and selection allowed researchers to conduct in-depth observations of how these teachers implemented CAPS requirements in teaching reading, particularly focusing on shared reading, group guided reading, and phonics instruction.

Although the sample size appears small, it was appropriate for the case study design, as it allowed for a detailed, qualitative analysis of teaching practices in real classroom settings (Yin, 2018). This approach is consistent with the case study methodology, which emphasizes in-depth exploration of a phenomenon within its natural context (Creswell, 2013).

Data analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis. According to Vaismoradi and Snelgrove (2019), thematic analysis is a versatile and practical research tool that offers a comprehensive and in-depth explanation of the data. The data was analysed using Maree's (2016) thematic analysis guidelines. After familiarising themselves with the data through several readings, the researchers created broad categories for classifying and coding the answers. During the coding process, each individual response was given a numerical code that denoted a category or group of related responses (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This procedure is consistent with thematic analysis approaches, which entail finding, examining, and summarising themes or patterns in the data (Nowell et al. 2017). The researchers increased the validity and credibility of the results by adhering to these guidelines, which guaranteed a methodical and exacting approach to data analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Data analysis focused on what teachers were doing in comparison to what the curriculum requirement dictate them to do. The researchers, who are also qualified teachers, also used their experience with current pedagogy in teaching shared reading, guided group reading, and phonics. This knowledge of the current reading instruction approaches helped them interpret and analyse the teachers' classroom practices.

Ethical considerations

This study received ethical clearance from the Department of Education, and all participants gave written informed consent in accordance with Connelly's (2014) recommendations. Both in paper and during in-person classroom visits, researchers provided participants with a clear explanation of the study's objectives. Participants were then given the opportunity to ask questions or follow up by email. Teachers and principals were made aware that participation was completely voluntary and that they could leave at any moment without incurring any fees. By employing pseudonyms and leaving out school names, the study guaranteed complete secrecy and anonymity to preserve participant privacy. Participants were also told that there would be no cash compensation and no damage associated with the study.

Results

This section focuses on the presentation and analysis of findings. As already mentioned, three Grade 1 English HL teachers were observed. The first lesson observed was taught by T1 in school A. The lesson focused on shared reading.

Lesson 1: Shared Reading – T1

With adherence to community of practice T1 started her lesson by inviting learners to sit on the mat for all of them to see. She presented a big book titled "On the Sand" by Roderick Hunt and Alex Brychta.

Teacher 1 asked the learners to identify parts of the book, like the front cover, back cover, and spine. The emphasis was more on the spine. T1 asked learners to bend and feel their backs and look for a spine. She asked about the purpose of the spine, and one learner replied that it helps

them to stand up straight. Teacher 1 made a comparison between the human spine and the book spine. She further asked them why they thought the book had a spine. The answer was that the spine keeps papers together. The book spine also helps the book to stand up straight. The teacher asked the learners to look at the front page of the book and tell her what they saw, answers: boy and a girl, dad. T1 asked how learners knew it was a dad. The learners answered that the man had hair on his body and the characters were on a beach. T1 asked what learners usually do on the beach. The answer was that on the beach, people usually swim and have picnics. Pointing at the title, Teacher1 asked what it was called. Learners answered, "title," and the book title is "On the Sand". She also asked them why they thought the book was titled on the sand. One learner answered that it was because the children were playing on the sand and making sandcastles. She asked what is the person who writes a book?

The teacher read first and then asked the learners to read after her. She then asked them to predict what was happening in the story. The learners were challenged to think deeply about the events of the story. For instance, there was a go-cart in the story, and she asked them to look intensely at the go-cart and answer what made them think it was running fast. The learners struggled to identify, but the teacher was patient with them until they recognised the bubbles and smoke from the cart. The learners were also asked to summarise the story, which they remarkably did. T1 was patient with them and probed them to think deeply about the story. Learners were also asked to identify nouns in the story. Names like sand, bag, ice cream, bottle, toy. "Don't you think there was also a place mentioned in the story?", T1 asked. "Beach," the learners answered. T1 also asked if learners enjoyed the story, to which they agreed. The learners were asked to quietly return to their desks.

Analysis of Lesson 1: Shared reading

By utilizing a "Big Book" with expanded text and graphics to encourage whole-class involvement, the lesson complies with the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) criteria for Shared Reading. It specifically covers the required Concepts of Print and Text Features, which are fundamental literacy abilities for Grade 1 and include recognizing the front cover, spine, and title. The teacher switched from the "known" (the human spine) to the "unknown" (the book spine), appropriately implementing the Gradual Release of Responsibility approach. The CAPS objective of engaging learners' prior knowledge to improve comprehension is directly supported by the usage of title-based and visual cue-based prediction. Before interacting with learners, the teacher used Model Reading to show fluency and linguistic qualities in accordance with CAPS criteria for Reading and Writing Focus Time. The National Curriculum Statement's Active and Critical Learning principle, which places an emphasis on problem-solving over rote memorization, is consistent with the pedagogical movement toward guided discovery. This shift from rote learning to learner-centred approaches is supported by Hoadley (2028). By asking learners to locate nouns in the text, the class incorporated language structures and conventions. Post-reading summarization and the need for textual proof were used to evaluate comprehension, making sure learners went beyond a cursory grasp to produce a personal response as needed by the curriculum. The minimal learner-to-learner interaction (such as "turn and talk") is a lost opportunity for social-constructivist development, even though the session complied with technical CAPS standards. Peer debate should be more prevalent in future classes to further support the CAPS goal of developing independent, communicative thinkers.

Lesson 2: Phonics: 'ch' sound – T2

The second lesson was on Jolly Phonics, and the class was doing the /ch/ sound in group two of the Jolly Phonics. The teacher had c and h in separate flash cards and asked what sound each letter make. She then put them together and told them that when two separate sounds are put together to make one sound, it is called a digraph. She demonstrated to the learners the sound made by ***/ch/,*** *and they repeated the sound after her. Learners were told to look at the big picture of a train in the story titled "Choo-Choo" presented in front of them. T2 asked learners to tell her what was in the picture. The teacher asked why they said it was a train, and they also compared the train to*

*the go-cart in the previous story. Things like smoke and wheels were identified by the learners. Other elements in the picture were children and church, with the /**ch/** sound.*

*The teacher read the story and asked the learners to make their own imaginations of what they were hearing. Learners were lined up, boys on the other side and girls on the other. T2 stood in front of them and demonstrated what she expected them to do. A song was played, and learners were asked to move their arms on the sides as if they were driving the train while making the **ch-ch** sound. Learners had to say each word as the teacher flashed it.*

After the exciting game, the teacher did the "I flash, you tell me what it is" word task, flashcards with words like: all, you, here, I, me and said (mentioned that it was a tricky one) but if they can remember they did on Friday and one learner remembered the word.

*The teacher then proceeded to the next word game:" I say, you say. I do you do." Here, the teacher asked learners to give her words with the /**ch/** sound. One learner gave the word 'chip' and they all had to say the word after the teacher ch- i -p and she also did the arm blending and twisted her index finger/ forefinger and middle finger to show a diagraph /ch/ and index finger for **i** and **p.** Other words mentioned by the learners were chick and church (they asked what they noticed with the two words, how many diagraphs were in the words and the answer was two (/**ch/** and **/ck/ & /ch** /and/**ch/).** The teacher asked how many sounds in the word church and learners said four sounds.*

*The teacher used the whiteboard and wrote chat and asked learners to remove the t- sound and put a p- sound to make **chap** and asked them to sound the word. She then asked them to remove the a- sound from the word ch**a**p and put the i- sound to make the word ch**i**p. The learners were told to take their workbooks and pencils and any colour of a crayon (to mark) for a five-word spelling task. There were learners who did not have pencils and the teacher gave them. The words were chat, chip, chin, church, and chick. "You Wait until I do, and you do"! learners were told to wait for the teacher before marking the spelling words. Sound out the words together and then mark. The words were displayed on the whiteboard so the learners could write the correct word next to an incorrect one. After the learners finished marking, they had to put totals, and the teacher and assistant teacher were going around. When they were all done, the learners were told to turn over to a new page of their workbooks. The teacher gave them a sentence to write: The chip is on my chin. Learners were told to be mindful of punctuation marks, e.g., they were reminded not to forget where capital letters and full stops are put. They were also told not to erase anything but cross the word if it was wrong. The teacher led the class in marking the sentence, and learners used crayons to mark. They started by marking T (capital letter), checking each word, and marking the full stop separately. Most learners got the sentences right.*

Analysis of Lesson 2: Phonics

Teacher 2 (T2) used a clear and methodical approach to teaching phonics in accordance with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). High-frequency phonemes, such the /ch/ digraph, were given priority when the teacher used Direct Instruction to provide a sequenced set of letter-sound pairings. To guarantee conceptual clarity, the instruction was given in clear, understandable language. This result is in line with Archer and Hughes' (2011) work on explicit instruction, which highlights the need for foundational literacy training to use conceptual clarity and plain, understandable language in order to guarantee that students understand challenging phonemic tasks. Additionally, the addition of phonemic manipulation tasks, more especially, sound replacement (e.g., chip to chap) showed an emphasis on improving learners' semantic awareness and decoding abilities. This result is consistent with Joubert et al. (2015), who define phonological awareness as sound awareness and state that certain tasks, such as sound manipulation (adding, deleting, or replacing sounds), are crucial for the development of these abilities. In keeping with the CAPS objective to connect handwriting and phonics, T2 combined orthographic transcription and auditory recognition. This was made operational by:

• The grapheme-phoneme relationship was reinforced by a focused spelling test consisting of five words: chat, chip, chin, church, and chick.

• Syntactic Use: Learners moved from word-level work to sentence-level building ("The chip is on my chin"), which made it easier to put language rules like capitalization and terminal punctuation into practice.

T2 used interactive gamification (e.g., "You say, I say") to maintain learner engagement and strengthen reading abilities. Through cooperative, low-stakes reinforcement, these techniques support phonological awareness and learner confidence, which is in line with CAPS's recommended multisensory approaches.

The work of Barends and Reddy (2024) is most directly linked to the assertions about interactive gamification (more especially, the "You say, I say" method) and its role in enhancing phonological awareness and learner confidence within the South African CAPS framework. In their 2024 study, Zelda Barends and Chris Reddy make the case for a systematic, evidence-based paradigm of reading instruction in South Africa that integrates pedagogical play rather than the balanced, CAPS-recommended literacy approach. To build unseen routes to literacy, the research focuses on using interactive oral games in conjunction with explicit, systematic phonological awareness training.

Lesson 3: Group Guided Reading – T3

During this period, the pears group was told to sit on the mat while the grapes and strawberry groups were in the care of an assistant teacher and a pre-service teacher who was there for teaching practice. There were nine learners in the group (this was the group that was still struggling with reading). The teacher wanted to give special attention to these learners.

I also joined the pears on the mat to be able to see what was about to happen. In front of each learner was a reading book titled "Jen" There were also flashcards with sight words or practice words (be, we, she, me, he, no, and I. The teacher asked the learners each of these sight words and they would say it together.

There were also clear small plastic bags with one with group 1 sounds ***s a t i p n*** *with green dots/buttons under each sound. They were told to take the sounds out and remember that the dots must be under the sound when they put them down.*

The other bag had sounds from group 2 ***c k e h r m d*** *(red dots) and the 3rd one from group 3* ***g o u l f b*** *(). The learners were asked to form the word 'sun' borrowing words from the three jolly phonics group of sounds. They had to blend the word and later say the word by pressing the buttons as they were saying the word. The second word was hen, and the third was* ***hand,*** *which was built by removing the* ***e*** *in hen and replacing it with the* ***a*** *and* ***d*** *sounds****.*** *Some learners did not get* ***d*** *correctly, so they put b instead. The teacher asked them the difference between the d and* ***b*** *sounds. One learner said that d is the baby with a diaper while b is a man with a big belly.*

The sounds were all put back in the bags, and learners were asked to take the reading books. The teacher started by telling learners on how to handle the book, putting the book in front, turning it from the front, and reading from left to right. She further asked the title of the book, and the learners gave the correct answer. The writing on the first page was "Jen and Bug". Each learner was given a chance to read, and whenever a learner struggled with a word, the teacher would encourage the learner to sound the word until he/she got it correct.

There was one learner who was struggling with reading, he kept on mistaking g with d i.e., bud instead of bug, Teacher helped him with different words. I could see that the learner was relying on the pictures to read the text, but he would say something different from the text written. For instance, Jen was a bee and looking at the bee's wings he said, "Jen was flying, and Bud was flying." The correct text written was "Jen is on a bug."

Analysis of Lesson 3: Group guided reading

Following CAPS guidelines, the teacher (T3) led a guided reading session with a small group of nine learners (within the suggested range of 6–10). An assistant teacher oversaw individual activities for the remainder of the class in order to

preserve the uninterrupted aspect of guided reading that the curriculum demanded. This made it possible to concentrate specifically on the identified population of struggling readers. The role of the assistant teachers and other personnel in the teaching environment has been highlighted by Wium and Louw (2015). In order to assist South African foundation phase teachers in improving reading and numeracy by tackling specific language hurdles, Wium and Louw (2015) created a three-pronged professional development approach that combines training, implementation, and mentorship. According to the study, even in situations with limited resources, this strategy, which encourages cooperation between teachers, teacher assistants and speech-language pathologists, greatly increases teacher competence and confidence.

The CAPS emphasis on social interaction and meaning making during reading was met by the lesson's heavy emphasis on oral communication and dialogue between the teacher and learners. Addressing letter misunderstanding took up a large amount of the lesson. To help learners distinguish between the graphemes, the teacher offered scaffolded guidance. By going over earlier phonetic sounds, T3 applied the idea of activating prior knowledge. By strengthening cognitive connections during instruction, this assisted learners in bridging the gap between previously learned material and the new text.

Discussion

The results point to a pedagogical agreement with the guided discovery and explicit instruction tenets of CAPS. In the South African context, where learners frequently bridge a gap between home experiences and classroom subject, the teacher's use of prediction tactics and previous knowledge activation acts as a cognitive bridge rather than operating in isolation.

Although the effectiveness of these comprehension tactics has been confirmed by international research (Zahara, 2017; Sumirat et al., 2019), their use in this study underlines a particular South African reality: the teacher serves as the main "knowledge mediator" in a setting with limited resources. In classrooms where learners do not receive basic literacy support at home, the teacher's scaffolding (Lei et al., 2018) becomes the only source of decoding and meaning-making, which explains the observed teacher-dominance.

Lessons were "dominated by teacher support," according to the data. This could be a reaction to the "Literacy Crisis" in the South African setting (PIRLS data indicates that 81% of Grade 4 students cannot read for meaning) (PIRLS, 2021). Because learners have little experience to the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) outside of the classroom, teachers may feel compelled to control the conversation time to demonstrate proper grammar and pronunciation.

Implications

The results show that there is a persistent dependence on teacher-directed approaches that restrict learner-to-learner interaction, even while teachers show strong adherence to curriculum requirements for shared reading, phonics, and group guided reading. This is known as a gap in Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), according to scholarly literature. Teachers may know what to teach, but they do not know how to create a learning-centered environment where learners work as co-creators of knowledge. To address this challenge, it is crucial to shift from a "teaching-centered" paradigm, which emphasizes knowledge transmission, to a "learning-centered" paradigm, where learners learn by doing and talking. While group guided reading and systematic phonics have been shown to dramatically reduce the number of struggling students, their efficacy is increased when learners are encouraged to participate in peer-assisted learning and group discussions. There should be targeted teacher training and professional development. To address the lack of interactive learning, teacher training programs must shift from theoretical compliance to practical, strategy-based support.

For example, balancing pedagogical approaches is recommended. Training should equip teachers to move beyond "oratorical" reading, which focuses solely on fluency and pronunciation, toward instruction for meaning. This includes using think-aloud strategies and frequent predictive questioning.

To increase participation in shared reading, professional development (PD) should implement particular cooperative frameworks like Think-Pair-Share and Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS). Programs must motivate teachers to conduct methodical research on their own methods. According to research, teachers are more open to long-term change when they observe noticeable gains in learners' performance as a result of new practices.

In order to correctly match learners with suitably levelled books, a typical area of uncertainty in classroom implementation, teachers need to be trained in using evaluation tools. The following policy changes are suggested to maintain CAPS's achievements while resolving its shortcomings in interactive instruction: (1) Since current 35-minute sessions frequently prove insufficient for thorough guided reading in large classrooms, current regulations may need to modify time for additional languages. (2) The creation of reading books or library corners in classrooms should be required by policy. These areas serve as tranquil and conducive settings that encourage both solitary and group reading in addition to being used for storage. (3) To accommodate a variety of learning styles, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should give top priority to providing graded, levelled reading materials and "Maths resource kits" (such as posters and flashcards).

The following research-backed initiatives ought to be incorporated into regular classroom activities to improve learner engagement on a large scale: (1) Using phonics-based decoding games and dictation to improve phoneme-grapheme links by appealing to the kinaesthetic, visual, and auditory senses. (2) Changing from passive listening to choral reading, which involves teachers and learners reading aloud together to help less-confident readers feel less anxious. (3) During guided reading, learners can listen to each other in pairs and highlight words that they find difficult. This encourages self-control, proficiency, and encouragement from peers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers of English as a first language (EHL) carry out curriculum requirements in reading instruction. The results show that the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) framework and instructional practices are highly aligned. The teachers' use of scaffolded comprehension techniques, such as asking learners to make predictions to close the gap between new textual information and prior knowledge, was very clear evidence of this alignment. Additionally, teachers were able to abandon providing learners memorized answers by implementing guided discovery and Socratic inquiry, which enabled learners to use textual clues to solve problems on their own.

The curriculum's focus on methodical and explicit phonics was also reflected in the instructional approach to literacy. The participants showed a thorough application of the recommended EHL standards by combining handwriting with phonetic awareness and employing model reading strategies. Learner-to-learner interaction, however, was found to have a substantial educational gap. The observed lessons were primarily teacher-centric and lacked organized chances for learner-to-learner interaction, despite the curriculum's social constructivist inclinations. This implies that there is an urgent need for focused professional development in the Foundation Phase that emphasizes collaborative learning techniques. It is worth noting that these results are context-specific and should be considered as localized insights rather than generally applicable facts due to the qualitative character of the study and the small sample size.

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