



Reading as a Tool for Enhancing English Second Language Learning of Ordinary Level Learners in Namibian Secondary Schools

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v4i1.834>

Received:

03/02/2022

Accepted:

23/03/2022

Keywords:

English as a second language; Ordinary Level; Namibia; reading

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the contribution of reading towards English as Second Language learning at Ordinary Level in Namibian senior secondary schools. A qualitative methodology was used for the study, carried out through a case study investigation, which involved secondary school teachers and learners who were randomly selected. Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis yielded key themes on the role of reading in ESL, namely; reading experience and the use of textbooks to enhance reading. The findings indicate that reading is not developed as a culture for the majority of OL learners. As is the case with Higher Level, there are no prescribed reading materials for OL. The researchers argue that Namibians have not yet adopted reading as part of their culture, ultimately contributing immensely to the high failure rate of learners. The study recommends that concerted efforts need to be made to instill the love of reading in OL learners for them to reach the same level as HL learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is used as a language of communication and as medium of instruction in Namibian schools from Grade 4 to tertiary level. Despite the extensive use of English, the teaching of English remains a challenge to most language teachers in Namibia (Ipinge, 2013). Namibia adopted English as an official language and the language of instruction post-independence in 1990. Before 1990, learning took place through the mediums of Afrikaans as lingua franca and native languages, such as Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama, Otjiherero, Silozi and Rukwangali (Murray, 2013). Therefore, English was used minimal alongside prevalent language such as Afrikaans. This explains why teachers have not only been less exposed to the English language, but also to reading texts in English (Al-Saga et al., 2021).

The reason for the above is that the language of education and that was mostly used for communication was Afrikaans and not English. Therefore, it made sense for the government to primarily expose its teachers to reading texts in Afrikaans before independence. Reading texts in Namibian schools may have existed prior to independence but was likely to have been in languages other than English. Because teachers were less exposed to reading in English, it is possible that they failed to introduce learners to English reading texts, contributing to learners not developing a love of reading and a poor reading culture in general. As a result of less exposure to reading, teachers also became hesitant to expose learners to reading as a result of their lack of confidence in their knowledge and preparation to teach reading competencies, teachers' beliefs that reading skills cannot be related to content teaching, and teachers' confusion of reading-to-learn and learning-to-read, perceiving reading instruction as basic skills instruction (Ancheta, 2022). More than thirty years after independence, the situation has not yet improved significantly. There is still not a strong reading culture in Namibian schools. Even in the mother tongues, storybooks are virtually unavailable, and outside the classroom, reading opportunities are limited, with libraries hosting only old books (Cunningham, & Stanovich, 2003; Töttemeyer, Kirchner & Alexander, 2014; Akut & Abejuela, 2020).

There has so far not been any significant improvement in examination outcomes pertaining to English, especially for Ordinary Level (OL) learners. Based on the statistics from the Ministry of Education, the performance of learners in English at secondary level in Namibia is declining (MoE, 2015). This has been attributed to the use of English as a medium of instruction across the curriculum (Nkandi, 2015). This is indicated by the high failure rate in English in Grade 10 and 12 external examinations (MoE, 2015). The high failure rate is a sign of learners not having been exposed adequately to proper teaching of English skills, as other subject areas are also examined using English language.

Many English second language (ESL) learners in Namibia, particularly from rural schools, have difficulty expressing themselves in English (Hilongwa, 2011; Töttemeyer et al., 2014). The lack of English proficiency might be attributed to the fact that learners are reading less and concentrate only on reading prescribed textbooks to pass examinations, a situation that has created poor reading habits, poor language coordination and expression, and poor academic performance. The aforementioned hamper academic success and learners' creativity in various aspects of life (Töttemeyer et al., 2014; Peishi, 2014; Stein & Newfield, 2006).

Given the reasons above, the researchers explored the role that reading can play in enhancing English second language learning at OL in Namibian secondary schools. We wished

to explore why OL learners lack analytical and critical reading skills that would enable them to learn English from their engagement with the texts they read. The researchers aimed to understand the reasons behind the failure to create a reading culture in the country and to explore possible ways to counter the detrimental effect that the absence of reading has on academic success

1.2. Research question

The study was guided by the following research questions:

This study addressed the following research question: *How can reading enhance English second language learning of ordinary level learners in Namibian schools?* The following sub-questions were addressed:

1. What is the nature of the reading culture for OL learners?
2. How do the curriculum and textbooks model reading for OL learners?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical framework

The study was based on Cummins' (1984) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Caddy (2015) describes BICS as casual communication or conversation while CALP refers to an academic language used for studies. Hirose (2014) clarifies that nowadays ESL learners lack CALP because they have shifted more towards non-standard, non-academic dialects. Although English is the medium of instruction in Namibian schools, most learners fail to obtain the required scores in ESL for university entry. This means that learners do not master the academic and cognitive language required at this level. Most learners struggle to understand what they are reading, and have trouble expressing what they understand in writing. English is not the language learner's use socially at home nor with their peers at school. Many learners can say all the words in a reading passage or can memorize the definitions of vocabulary words, but they still cannot understand the text. CALP is needed if learners are to read different reading texts, write, and answer questions (Caddy, 2015). Learners are unable to meet this requirement and struggle to perform in ESL.

2.2. The importance of reading in the ESL classroom

Asking learners to read stories aloud can develop their speaking, listening and pronunciation skills (Chukuegu & Ogbona, 2013). Zhang (2009) states that reading can be a powerful and motivating source for teaching both speaking and listening skills. Adam and

Babiker (2015) clarify that reading exposes learners to expert writing, which in fact helps them to become better writers. Jacob (2016) maintains that reading texts by different authors introduces learners to different writing styles, and this in turn assists and encourages learners to develop their own writing styles.

Reading is the mode through which language and culture are passed on from generation to generation. Reading English texts can introduce learners to a range of social aspects, not only of the English language, but also of English culture (Razak et al., 2019; Yassin et al., 2022). Zhang (2009) argues that reading can be useful to learners because it helps them to become aware and to learn about social issues.

Nkandi (2015) claims that reading expands the understanding of language in the sense that when learners are asked to examine advanced or non-standard language incidents that happen in reading texts, they readily acknowledge them and become more conscious of language norms and standards,. Yusuf (2011) emphasizes that learners become more productive, critical and adventurous when they start to perceive the richness and variety of the language they are attempting to learn. Chipili (2013) argues that reading and intellectual development can never be separated. Thus, learners are likely to improve their communicative and cultural competence through the richness of authentic texts.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research strategy adopted for this study was a case study investigation that sampled four schools in the Khomas region, Windhoek. Eight stratified randomly selected learners and four ESL OL teachers from four secondary schools participated in the study. Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaires with OL Grade 11 learners and semi-structured interviews with ESL (OL) teachers. The questionnaires were electronically disseminated to two learners, from each of the four participating schools, via email. Learners were chosen according to their level of performance, so the open-ended questionnaires were given to one high performing learner and one low performing learner in ESL per participating class. The open-ended questionnaires enabled ESL learners to reveal their individual reading experiences, because they were free to outline their feelings and describe their reading habits and challenges. The fact that the questionnaires were electronically distributed to learners also gave learners more time to structure their answers. Semi-structured interviews with Grade 11 ESL OL teachers at each participating school were conducted to explore their understanding of the role of reading towards ESL learning. From each of the participating school, one ESL grade 11 teacher was interviewed. Interviewing ESL teachers enabled the researchers to obtain

information on the teachers' experiences of the role of reading in ESL learning in OL classrooms. Before the researchers started the process of data collection, ethical clearance was given from the Executive Director of the ministry of education, art and culture, directors of education for the participating schools, participated schools principals as well as from parents of the participated learners.

The study used thematic analysis to analyze the data. The researchers followed the data analysis steps of Creswell (2014). Firstly, the researchers read and re-read the responses from the open-ended questionnaires. Secondly, the researchers read line by line through the data again and again to get acquainted with the data and comprehend the answers of the participants. Thirdly, from the data, the researchers looked for similar responses, grouped them together and generated codes by using different colours. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into categories and categories were grouped into themes (Creswell, 2014). After reading through all the data, they were coded manually into categories. The researchers looked for themes among categories and presented what they found in descriptive form, which is easier to understand and to infer meaning regarding the contribution of reading to learners' performance in ESL. The same procedure was applied to the data that were gathered through semi-structured interviews.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are presented in two themes that emerged from the raw data and correspond with the study's research questions, namely: the nature of the reading culture for OL learners and curriculum, textbooks and reading at OL. The findings from the study are recapitulated by comparing and contrasting the research results with the literature and theoretical framework pertaining to the role of reading in enhancing ESL learning

4.1. The Nature of the Reading Culture for OL Learners

The majority of learners could identify the positive role of reading in ESL learning. Five of participants indicated that they loved reading because it helped them to improve their vocabulary and their writing abilities. This was a surprising finding because we had assumed prior to this study that Namibian learners lacked an understanding and love of reading. The researchers' assumption was based on the fact that teachers did not have a good exposure of English, thus, have passed on that weakness to their learners. Contrary to this assumption, the reality was that some learners regarded reading positively. Learners who indicated that they loved reading clearly showed how often and how actively they engaged in active reading

mainly by stating that they read twice or three times a week and they would mainly read novels, or any other book.

Participants who stated that they hated reading pointed out that nobody had told them about the importance of books or reading or motivated them to love reading apart from reading to pass examinations. The perception among the minority of learner participants were that reading was meant for school tasks alone, especially to pass exams and reading for pleasure was not essential. Based on the findings by Snyman (2016) it may be understood that the context and not only the content of the reading material was important in understanding it. A triangular relationship should exist between the reader, the text, and the interaction between the two, which must benefit the reader.

While three of the participants stated that illustrations on the book cover play a fundamental role in motivating them to pick that specific book to read, four of the participants highlighted that an interesting title and the desire to learn new things would make them want to read a book. Three indicated that they only become interested in reading a book when it is recommended by a friend. The relevance of the reading material depended on the context and the learner identifying with it. Indeed, the best judges of what manner of reading material was stimulating and relevant to the learners were the learners themselves.

With regard to the reading exercises that ESL teachers used in their ESL lessons, OL learners highlighted that learners would take turns to read aloud for the whole class. This was done due to the limited number of books. Reading aloud, however, helps learners acquire language skills. Reading aloud also helps learners develop positive associations with books, and a passion for reading (Chipili, 2013). When learners developed a passion for reading, they will likely to read widely and excel within their different subjects.

Regarding the challenges that OL learners encountered regarding reading, the majority of learner participants stated that household chores hinder their desire to read. They explained that after doing these chores they are usually too tired to read. Another challenge mentioned by the participants was a lack of support from parents. Half of the participants indicated that they did not receive reading support from their parents. This challenge is more complex than it seems. One should remember that parents were not necessarily exposed to reading during their own school career, thus they might not understand the importance of reading for their children (Shapaka, 2015). As a result, they do not encourage their children to borrow books from libraries, nor are they willing to buy reading books for their children.

The researchers learnt from various participants how best they thought their schools, teachers, libraries, and parents could develop strategies for engaging learners in reading. One of the significant strategies outlined by the participants was reading clubs. Half of the participants acknowledged that the formation of readers' clubs in their respective schools would motivate learners to read, because they would be able to share their different experiences based on the information they have read. OL and HL learners attending the same reading club might lead to a better understanding of texts because of the interaction between readers (Simataa, 2013). Hence, readers' clubs would expose learners to a variety of reading materials, as well as ideas that they could share with fellow learners or learners from other schools. This might arouse the inquisitiveness to read and make reading a more frequent habit.

ESL teachers felt that Namibian learners failed ESL due to poor reading, and that one of the contributing factors to this, according to the participants is the poor implementation of the Readathon programme. One of the interviewees explained:

Readathon is spearheaded by the library teachers, but not the Department of Languages, so in many schools it is not successful. If it was an activity of a language department, I feel it was to be done in a different way. Also, I believe the Ministry of Education did not clarify exactly how the Readathon was supposed to be done. A number of us did not know what to do. Learners get the reading passages and questions to answer after reading, exactly what they do in class. It is supposed to be done in a creative way, instead of repeating what is already being done in class (T3).

The above provides an indication that Readathon might not be implemented according to the Ministry's purpose. Perhaps there should be follow-up visits at schools to see whether the programme is fully implemented in the way they planned it to be.

4.2. Curriculum, Textbooks and Reading at OL

In this theme, the participants firstly mentioned the influence of the poor curriculum components of teaching, learning, and assessment that emphasised reliance on reading for examination purposes only. The lack of assessment strategies pertaining to reading of different literature genres was also mentioned. Participant teacher 2 (T2) and teacher 3 (T3) explained that they did not expect their learners to read more often because reading was not prescribed in OL syllabus. Due to the omission of prescribed ESL reading texts, teachers opted for reading texts from different sources of their own choice, which were not scaffolded in terms of appropriateness, density, length, or text type. This did not lead to deep reading (Lazutina et al.,

2016), which is a form of purposeful reading that deliberately increases comprehension and language skills. Although the Ministry of Education is aware of the reports on the countrywide state of learners' reading and writing, the curriculum still does not incorporate reading requirements in the ESL OL syllabus.

The main purpose of the syllabus is to outline what should be taught in specific subjects. However, ESL teachers are left with the burden to how best to deal with reading in their lessons, since the OL syllabus does not provide any guidance in this regard. This is a clear indication that a reading culture is not being promoted at OL. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that reading is allocated sufficient time in the syllabus.

T3 explained that even if teachers wanted to pay more attention to reading, there was not enough time to do so because teachers had to concentrate on other tasks, which were crucial in preparation for the examinations, such as the writing of longer pieces. Most ESL teachers indicated that it was a challenge to divide teaching time into components that were examined and those that were not. Therefore, since reading was not an examinable component in OL, a lower priority was placed on it.

Almost all participants highlighted that it was the Ministry of Education's responsibility to develop learners' passion for reading. They all felt that this could only be achieved if reading was to be made part of the OL syllabus

Participants indicated that no textbooks were prescribed for OL, and that this made it difficult to select reading texts to enhance reading. As teachers were required to select their own reading texts from various sources, this raised questions about the uniformity of reading materials used in ESL classes. ESL teachers explained that as no textbooks were prescribed in OL, they were forced to use available textbooks that were not always based on local content. Some of the textbooks used were donated by countries from abroad, mainly from the USA. Volunteer teachers from such countries realized the need for textbooks in ESL and arranged such donations. Although welcome, such books were found to be less than helpful because of the difficult language and unfamiliar content used (Totemeyer et al., 2015; Kirchner & Mostert, 2017). All participants highlighted that there was a need to produce reading materials with familiar content to develop a passion for reading among OL learners.

Teachers, on the other hand, should be passionate about reading, and act as model readers for their learners. Schools should organise reading competitions with attractive prizes for successful competitors, and media institutions should feature in such competitions. These

competitions should not only be presented during the Readathon week but should rather be presented throughout the year (Hambunda, 2014). From the above it is clear that if all stakeholders worked together as a team, learners could develop a passion for reading.

Schools that do not benefit from USA donations use NAMCOL study guides/modules. T2 highlighted that NAMCOL study guides were the only available textbooks of which the numbers were sufficient and also represented the Namibian context. However, few ESL teachers were of the opinion that these NAMCOL study guides were not helpful, as they contained very simple reading passages and activities that were not advanced enough to help learners improve their language skills.

5. CONCLUSION

Effective and focused reading of a variety of texts stimulates and promotes proficiency in language aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and writing, as established with in study. While participants were aware of the benefits reading can provide for ESL learning, a variety of factors hampered their ability to establish a solid foundation for reading, including a lack of reading materials, inappropriate reading materials, inadequate library facilities, and a lack of parental involvement. Furthermore, curriculum was found not to sufficiently promote the reading culture for OL learners. This is because it was found that, firstly, the Namibian education system is more examination oriented and the OL syllabus does not prescribe specific intensive reading materials. In addition, it was established that most of the reading materials used at OL are from imported textbooks, which are mainly procured to support academic achievements of the learners rather than providing interesting reading materials that could encourage learners to read. These imported materials are less importance to language reading because they are written for global markets and did not reflect the needs of the Namibian learners. To foster the development and visibility of a reading culture in Namibian schools, pleasurable reading should be emphasized beginning in the primary school phase, and instructional methods should be more interesting at all levels. This can be done through the establishment of different reading activities, such as reading clubs, classroom libraries, and many more. Once learners realise that they do not have adequate knowledge as they share ideas with their fellow learners through reading activities, they will begin to understand the benefits of reading.

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