INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF READING TO LEARN PEDAGOGY TO IMPROVE READING FOR COMPREHENSION IN A SENIOR PHASE CLASS THROUGH SCAFFOLDING: A LITERACY ACCELERATION ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY IN A GRADE 8 ENGLISH FIRST ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE (FAL) CLASS IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICA.

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ABSTRACT

Academic performance among South African learners at any grade is worrisome to the extent that everyday academics and stakeholders are in search of answers to the scourge. Learners in the majority of the grades where reading for meaning is a prerequisite are found wanting. It has become a well-known fact that whenever, South Africa participates in international assessments, South African learners occupy the last bar of the ladder whether it is literacy or numeracy. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to examine how Reading to Learn pedagogy (RtL) can positively impact learners’ literacy development in a South African grade 8 class in a rural school. The pre-test indicated that learners had weak reading skills and after the intervention significant progress was noted in their reading abilities. Learner interviews and journal reflections and learners’ work were data generation tools. Findings were processed and analysed according to themes. Based on the findings, RtL pedagogy posits itself as a worthy intervention for reading problems in the classroom.

Keyword: Reading to Learn, pedagogy, literacy, reading for meaning, assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

The best gift for a child or adult is the ability to read to be functionally literate. Reading is the foundation, followed by reading for meaning where one is able to read the world. This implies that reading goes beyond letter identification and pronunciation but using the word to explain and critic reality. According to Freire, (1985) the act of reading cannot be explained as merely reading words since every act of reading words implies a previous reading of the world and a subsequent rereading of the world. There is a permanent movement back and forth between "reading" reality and reading words - the spoken word too is our reading of the world" (p.19). It is the knowledge of reading the word that is catalytic to our prowess to question the world order. However, there appear to be some sabotage from the education department of South Africa because it is promoting an “uncritical, reproductive educational system, it seems that can get in the way and that reading can become "walking on words" - an empty, technical process” (Freire, 1985, p.18). This is because the focus is on covering the whole syllabus without checking if there is understanding and relatability with context. The system is only interested in ticking all boxes and submits a romanticised report saying everything is on track. Only to be surprised when the learners fail matric or drop out of university. It is against this background that this study sought to investigate the role of Reading to Learn pedagogy in fanning the passion to improve reading for comprehension in a rural grade 8 class in a high school in South Africa. This is a qualitative study action research case study whose focus is on improving a practice. Data generated was qualitatively processed and analysed.

2. BACKGROUND TO STUDY

The issue of poor literacy abilities among South African learners did not emerge recently, but it has been a thorn to the academics and stakeholders concerned about the education of
their children and the future of the country. There are so many interventions that have been put in place but the results are far from convincing. If there are gains noted, they are from former model C schools that have extra financial and human resources because they are privately funded. Marginalised communities especially from rural areas and townships posit the most challenges as captured in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) of 2005, 2011 and 2016 (Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena, & McLeod Palane, 2017). Out of the 50 countries that participated in the study South Africa came last in 2016 (ibid). Despite the results it must be acknowledged that reading in English in South Africa is complex in reality. Learners in South African schools fall prey to “educational policies and practices [which] favour students from backgrounds that are more privileged in social class, race, language or other differences” (Nieto, 2010, p. xiv). The policies are generated and imposed on teachers and parents by the department of basic education in South Africa. However, this comes as no surprise as the department for basic education indirectly confirmed its shortfalls by blaming the teachers. In its 2014 report on why the learners cannot read at appropriate standard and expected of grade level they confirmed that, poor teaching methods are to blame. This is ironic because the department of education stipulates the method of teaching, times and dates that have to be spend on a task and completion time yet teaching of reading is an art that requires teacher autonomy based on what is prevailing among the learners. The departmental approach does not factor in learners with barriers to learning who may need extra time and remedial teaching. As a result of fear of being penalised the teacher focuses on able learners who may be from middle class or who may have been fortunate to receive orientation of the classroom culture. According to Bernstein (1990), “it is often considered that the voice of the working class is the absent voice of pedagogic discourse...” (p. 65). Consequently, Chizwina (2011, p. 2) argues that, “children who learn to read well and who receive good reading instruction stand a better chance of being successful lifelong readers”. These are the same children who will be able to read the world and make inroads in social and economic circles and the marginalised remain relegated to the periphery of the society perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Therefore, this is a message to the authorities to shift from their old practices and employ pedagogies that have proven to bring democracy in the classroom. There is a lot of blame on the apartheid remnants despite the powers that be sponsoring education to the tune of billions, but still, the results are not improving, and because of that I tend to disagree with the apartheid assertion by Pretorius, (2002).

The main problem is corruption and the unwillingness to change and explore new and working pedagogies in sync with the 21st century demands. Basing on the pedagogical gaps, Sanford (2015) proposes that reading comprehension skills and strategies should be taught explicitly. It is against this backdrop that I decided to use the RtL pedagogy as an intervention for reading problems encountered in the classroom. RtL is a combination of strategies that help to accelerate literacy through scaffolding. There are very few countries in the world that have been using RtL as a literacy intervention strategy. It attains an improvement rate of approximately four times more than the expected rate (Rose & Martin, 2012). In the process, it narrows the achievement gap between middleclass (privileged) and working class (marginalized). The achievement gap was observed to be glaring between the classes of students. The historically privileged students had easy access to “discourse” of education, and historically marginalised students had limited access to this in their spaces of learning (Rose & Acevedo, 2006).

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Reading is at the core of educational success and it is the main tool of success in high school. Rose (2010) argues that reading is the, “core mode of learning in high school” (p.4). In line with the above, learners need to understand what they read to fulfil the demands of the curriculum. According to Baker (2008), many learners identified as having reading problems in early grades will continue to exhibit the same traits in later years if no meaningful intervention is carried out. In the same vein, Dewey (1944, p.167) argued that “if we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow”. Contemporary approaches must be used. It is against this backdrop that I sought to investigate the role of RtL pedagogy in improving reading comprehension in a grade 8 rural class in a high school in South Africa.
4. STUDY AIM
The study intends to improve the learners’ ability to read for comprehension thereby improving their ability to read to learn to fulfill the requirements of the high school curriculum and to read the world.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
This study is informed by Vygotsky (1978)’s sociocultural theory based on three main themes; social interaction, the more knowledgeable other and the zone of proximal development. Supporting Vygotsky (1978) is the systemic functional linguistics by Halliday (1985) which is study of the relationship between the language and its functions in social settings. According to systemic linguists, language use is functional and its purpose is to make meanings and these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged. Further, the process of using language is a semiotic process, a process of making meaning by choosing (Eggnis, 2005). Both theorists are addressing what Bernstein, (1996)’s pedagogic discourse of learning identified as disparities in the classroom. Bernstein (1996) argues that the voice of the working class is the absent voice hence Vygotsky and Halliday want to neutralize that by scaffolding and using language as a functional tool. This theory outlines that learning is a social process and all learners can be successful through continuous scaffolding and making use of language in real situations. This theory informs the best approach to teaching learners to learn so that they are all successful through continuous scaffolding and practical language use.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW
The pinnacle of academic success among learners and students is rooted in their reading literacy abilities. Reading literacy is “understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (OECD, 2010, p. 23). Additionally, being literate implies that one has the capacity to “communicate and compute, using printed and written (and visual) materials associated with varying contexts” (Unesco, 2004, p.13). This is the ability by the learners or students to converse with the text. In academic circles, it implies that the learners can respond to questions or carry out a critical analysis of cases presented or summarises a given text.

7. READING LITERACIES IN SOUTH AFRICA
South African learners are facing multiple challenges in literacy abilities. These seem to be caused by insufficiencies in the reading models employed in primary and high schools in South Africa. These results call for transformation in how reading is taught in schools. It appears the prescribed methods such as shared reading, phonic approach, and whole word approach are failing to satisfy the academic demands of learners and students. Therefore, there is call to go back to basics where reading is taught explicitly starting with the letter sound connections and word analysis skills; this should take place in authentic literacy practice sessions and in contexts relatable to learners and students (Unesco, 2004). Additionally, decolonising the curriculum and the way teachers teach is another way to go. Gone are the days when reading was about textbooks where learners would be barking at print that is alien to their being.

There is need to employ contemporary approaches to developing literacy that are democratic. Therefore, educators are required to be analytical personalities and adapt ideas from literacy development research that is contemporary, valid and proven to inform practice (Unesco, 2004). Besides, implementing other researchers’ ideas they need to carry out their own reflections so that they are innovative in their own practices to improve the progressing literacy pedagogy (ibid). However, this may be defeated by the system adopted in South Africa of pacing of topics, time prescription, and workbooks which incapacitate the innovativeness of teachers. The danger being paused by the controlling nature of the South African system is making learning devoid of context and situations. It must be noted that literacy development “does not take place naturally but it occurs in social contexts, usually those of schooling … in interaction with language aware teachers” (Droga & Humphrey, 2003, p.3). If teachers are provided with a syllabus, and are then allowed to be innovative, the situation may improve. Literacy development hinges upon social contexts. It has the following functions; experiential, interpersonal and textual function. According to (Droga & Humphrey, 2003), “experiential function is the way we use language to represent our experience of the world” (p.1). In
this way the learners are reading the world because they are using words to relate to the context (Freire, 1985). They are able to explain what is happening, who are the participants in the act, and the reasons behind that act. Further, (ibid) “interpersonal function is the way we use language to interact with others” (p.1). Language becomes a tool for interaction, exchanging ideas on various issues and it exposes how the communicants are related through language. This is made possible if teachers are granted opportunities to create situations that allow for situational language use. In the process, learners learn how to express roles, relationships and feelings. Again, (ibid) “textual function is the way we use language to create well organised and cohesive texts, both spoken and written” (p.1). This is expressed through the diverse ways and channels of communication. However, the skills highlighted above seem to be given cosmetic less attention in the class because of how the curriculum is structured in South Africa.

The manner in which the department of education is managing the pedagogical approaches for literacy development is leaving a lot to be desired. They lean more on progressive approaches in the name of learner centredness. Consequently, the learners who are weak and non-readers are left behind. Teachers are remote controlled because all teaching processes are timed and programmed. Teachers cannot exercise continuous scaffolding because they are encouraged to be away from the learners. Failure to rich a certain target will lead to a demand for an explanation from authorities. Instead of teaching the learners how to read they work with those that are able and the rest fall by the way side.

8. LITERACY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

Literacy development is not a one way lane but it is multiple in its approach depending on the grade and the level of the learners. The commonly used approaches are: direct approach, immersion, synthetic approach and whole language, book flood or extensive reading, among many. They are not stand alone approaches but permeate into each other through application. According to (Rosenshine, 2008) direct instruction is teacher directed through demonstrations and modelling. Various skills of reading such as pronunciation, reading speed and the illustration of use of other writing tools is demonstrated. Secondly, the immersion approach directs the learning process through the target language (Mol and Bus (2011). In the case of South Africa learners are expected to be fluent and literary functional in English hence from grade 4 up to university learning is through English. Thirdly, the whole language approach “is a method of teaching reading and writing that emphasizes learning whole words and phrases by encountering them in meaningful contexts rather than by phonics exercises https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/whole%20language.

However, this approach can only work if the learners are well grounded in their abilities to read. In a context like South Africa, a number of learners may be left behind because their literacy skills are compromised from the foundation phase. The fourth approach common in the classes is book flood or extensive reading. Through extensive reading “learners are given the time, encouragement and materials to read pleasurably, at their own levels, as many books as they can, without pressure of testing for marks” (Davis, 1995, p. 329). This process can yield the desired results if all learners in the class are readers. It does not work when the learners’ reading skills are compromised or are not perfected. Many learners in South African rural schools and townships are victims of poor word attack and usage hence their ability to independently read is limited (Elley, 2000). Despite these approaches connecting with each other, they leave gaps in between those gaps are transferred to the learners. It is on the basis of such that I argue that the use of RtL can be the panacea to addressing these literacy challenges because of its capacity to seal all the literacy gaps. The discussion below illuminates how RtL can be the solution through how it is implemented in grade 8 class.

9. READING TO LEARN

RtL was developed in Australia to help the indigenous learners improve their literacy skills. It was also found to be responsive to the needs of the working class children and marginalised by reducing the achievement gaps among the middle-class and working class children in South Africa (Rose & Martin, 2012). This is achieved through the scaffolding interaction cycle displayed below.
**The cycle of Reading to Learn (Rose, 2005, p. 147)**

Identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using

Stage 1: It was discovered that learners in South Africa could not engage critically with academic texts hence the need to prepare them before reading (UNESCO, 2011). This situation may have been worsened by the lack of a reading culture from their homes or non-availability of reading materials. This resulted in preparation before reading where the teacher sequences the story for learners to get the idea of the passage. In the process the teacher dilutes the language to enable access by all learners. Although the teacher is leading, learners are involved through suggesting alternative vocabulary to what may be given in the text and responding to a number of questions from the teacher.

Stage 2, In detailed reading, learners read sentence by sentence with the teacher modelling and helping by giving cues to give meaning to words in sentences, this improves learners’ vocabulary and comprehension (Block & Israel, 2005). Learners practice pronunciation, punctuation and voice projection. Learners get to understand paragraphs, sentences and words. This stage embraces the three stages that are preparing, identifying and elaborating. It forms the heart of scaffolding developmental processes of reading because the learners are assisted to navigate ways that enable them to make meaning out of text.

In stage 3: This is when learners manipulate sentences on cardboard strips or any other usable material to practice sentence construction and spelling among other things or make notes from factual texts or any texts provided.

Stage 4: In line with (Rose & Martin, 2012) “the aim of Rewriting is to guide learners to appropriate the language resources of accomplished authors in their own writing” (p.162). Learners create a new story, with new characters, setting and events but similar in nature to the story exercised. The activity is done in small groups or as a class.

Stage 5 is Individual reconstruction; learners individually write the story using the same words as in the joint reconstruction stage.

Stage 6 is Independent writing; learners are given a new task and write as individuals. The task is assessed.

10. METHODOLOGY

The study intends to improve learners’ comprehension abilities through the mixed method research approach. There is more to
mixed methods than just collecting quanti-qualitative data for example “observations, interviews, surveys and diagnostic tests were used. It involves the intentional collection of both quantitative and qualitative data and the combination of the strengths of each to answer research questions” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p.34). Data was presented both qualitatively and quantitatively to improve validity. Action research was the preferred choice of style the main focus is to improve a practice and to enable teachers to be change agents (Hensen, 1996). Additionally, purposive sampling of research participants was chosen because of certain characteristics (Paton, 1990). These characteristics enabled the researcher to answer the research question. In my case, the grade 8 class was chosen because I aimed to giving an in-depth understanding of the challenges encountered in reading at this grade and highlight how the RtL pedagogy can be helpful as an intervention strategy. The high, medium and low achievements groupings were meant to provide data that was representative of different learner capabilities. Purposive sampling hinges on the judgement and choices of the researcher. Data generated was processed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Codes were used for different participants and tools.

11. FINDINGS

On reading comprehension and creative writing pre-tests learners scored low marks in the tasks; 6 out of 10 and 7 out of 10 scored below 50% respectively. There was a significant improvement in the post-tests; 7 out of 10 in reading comprehension task and 8 out of 10 in the creative writing task scored above 50%. Figure 2 below represents the learner percentage scores.

12. LEARNER BACKGROUND

Learner questionnaires (LQ2&LQ3) responses reveal that the majority of learners live and attend school in low socio-economic environments. Five live in the township and four in rural areas and all 10 attended township and rural schools. Similarly, learners from rural areas and small towns had the least scores in the 2016 PIRLS assessment (Howie et al., 2017). Block and Israel (2015) earlier asserted that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have limited vocabulary limiting their reading successes. This still showed less improvement. Along the same line, 7 out of 10 learners pointed out that they do not have anyone to help them with reading at home. The same views were illuminated by (Machet & Tiemenmsa (2009) who argued that parents from disadvantaged communities have little or no capacity to assist their children with reading.

13. WRITING

Written pre-test results revealed that learners had poor writing skills as noted in my journal reflection, “most learners could not construct proper sentences, those who did were incoherent” (RJ). In another entry I noted, “some learners seem not to have understood the topic, their stories were out of topic” (RJ). On the post-test writing I noted, “learners’ writing has improved sentences are better structured, and stick to the topic, they seem better prepared” (RJ). One learner stated in an interview, “when I read the story before it is easy to write the essay, I use big words from the story” (LJR3). Mataka, (2017) affirmed that “a learner’s
ability to read is often reflected in the learner’s ability to write independent work…” (p. 33).

14. COMPREHENSION

Several comments emerged from interviews regarding comprehension. One learner commented, “I did not understand when I’m reading but now I do, I know more words” (LIR5). Another stated, “…now I understand stories…they make me know other things” (LIR10). And: “when sir tells us meanings I understand well” (LIR2). Similar views were stated by Bock & Israel (2005) who posit that teaching vocabulary improves both vocabulary and comprehension. On the post-test comprehension task, I noted in my journal, “learners were able to identify facts from the story showing understanding” (RJ). I also observed that, “learners were able to reconstruct the story using own words showing understanding” (RJ). Teele (2004) acknowledged that the goal of reading is to understand what is read.

15. INSTRUCTION

Upon being asked about how they feel about the new way of teaching learners had this to say; “yes I get to help my friends and we make sentences together” (LIR1). And: “I enjoy, the teacher tells us the story and I understand it…i understand big words and I read them, it’s fun” (LIR3). Another stated, “I do, before I forgot words but now I read many and I know what they mean” (LIR7). On using the RtL, in my journal I noted, “the new strategy has improved listeners’ reading, the majority now respond to questions and can read independently…learners performance in comprehension is improving” (RJ). My views have some similarity with, Chizwina (2011) who argues that learners who are taught to read well are bound to be successful readers.

16. COLLABORATION AND SCAFFOLDING

Most learner responses from the interview questions suggested that collaboration and scaffolding exhibited in the RtL methodology were helpful to them. Various comments emerged from the responses. One learner commented, “I like making sentences and others tell me new sentences” (LIR5). Another commented, “I enjoy when we first write as a group and I write myself, it is easy” (LIR3). Another stated, “The teacher helps us when we write, and other learners help too and we write good stories” (LIR6). Giving summary on lessons observed, I noted in my journal, “learners enjoyed working together and groups got more productive with time. Learners ably supported each other, and I chipped in to help learners in their groups leading to productive collaborative tasks” (RJ). This confirms what Vygotsky (1978) alludes to when he argues that social relations that include able learners and teachers are important in facilitating learning. Furthermore, this is aligned to the notion that small groups used in the RtL methodology help the teacher to assist learners at individual level (Hausheer et al, 2011).

17. ANALYSIS

In line with the emerging findings from the study it is without doubt RtL needs to be included among the contemporary approaches to improving literacy across the curriculum in South Africa. That enables learners flourish and academic results will improve. Besides improving of results the landscape of learning will transform because of the democratic nature of the approach. RtL has the capacity to eliminate the inequalities prevalent in South African classrooms. Despite the short duration (five cycles in three months) the intervention was implemented in my research site positives can be drawn from this exercise. This prompts me to recommend that RtL be tried out in an environment like my research site to teach content subjects for our learners to achieve their academic potential. Besides the current research site, Mataka 2018 did a similar research though longitudinal, in a similar environment for three years with a cohort of learners from grade 10 to 12 in a township school and the matric results were amazing.

18. CONCLUSION

The revelation from the study is that RtL pedagogy, through the six-step scaffolding interaction cycle, does accelerate literacy by equipping learners with skills to read and read for meaning and be better writers. Again, RtL equips teachers with strategies to help learners to read and read for meaning and be better writers. The RtL pedagogy develops learners’ literacy holistically giving passage to disadvantaged learners to achieve their academic potential. The findings also challenge teachers to engage in critical analysis of their teaching strategies and be on the lookout for alternative methods to teach learners effectively, especially those disadvantaged by various socio-economic factors.

19. RECOMMENDATION
RtL must be part of the broader curriculum in the secondary and primary schooling context to advance literacy development.

According to Bruner (1978), “conflict-free coping opportunities need to be made available to all learners, regardless of their level of ability or background, so that they can experience success in learning” (p. 4). Their learning environment must be conducive both academically and socially. The teacher must be friendly and approachable so that learners are free to question, disagree, debate and doubt until proof is availed.

Teachers must be given the autonomy to explore with a wide range of pedagogical approaches to develop literacy.

The characteristics of advanced literacy must be explicitly taught to avoid an “invisible pedagogy” that disadvantages learners who may not have access to such knowledge outside school (Christie, 2002).

REFERENCES


