



EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF IMPLEMENTING GUIDED READING APPROACH TO ENHANCE THE READING PROFICIENCY OF ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

**Esther Molebogeng Thage, Patricia Namayammu Mokgosi,
Jane Tozama Mthembu**

Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa

E-mail: molethage@webmail.co.za, mokgospin@tut.ac.za, mthembujt@tut.ac.za

Abstract

Guided reading (GR) approach has been shown to have positive effect on reading fluency and comprehension. However, most studies on GR have focused on primary schools, specifically the Foundation Phase. Therefore, this study employed the GR approach to examine its possible effects on the reading proficiencies of Grade 9 English Second Language (ESL) learners in Gauteng province. Social and cognitive constructivism underpinned the study, which employed action research to determine the possible effects of implementing GR on the reading proficiencies of a sample of eight Grade 9 ESL learners who were purposively selected to participate in this study. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and reflection cards, oral and written reading tests. Results indicated that GR approach had caused a significant improvement in these learners' reading fluency and comprehension because of collaborative learning and scaffolding. In addition, GR also developed a sense of ownership in their learning, a sense of community and innovative and inquisitive minds. The study recommends that learners who struggle with reading be identified early, and GR intervention strategies be implemented and monitored. Every school needs to have a reading policy and the Education Department should ensure that it is implemented and monitored.

Keywords: *guided reading, reading proficiencies, reading fluency, reading comprehension, second language*

Introduction

Language, literacy and communication are essential to human development and fundamental to life-long learning. Communication in the form of spoken or written words or reading are intrinsic to the ways in which people generally act, think, and feel and language is a fundamental tool for “expression and communication” (Shashkevich, 2019). As stated by Doecke et al., (2014), all learners possess the right to be literate because the ability to read and write empowers people and improves their lives. Reading forms the foundation for further learning, and it is not inborn or cannot be learned naturally from parents or by watching and listening to others. Talley (2017) has maintained that reading is an essential segment of our day-to-day societal pursuit. Therefore, effective reading approaches need to be implemented to teach and improve reading proficiency and to instil the culture of reading in learners.

Reading literacy has been reported to be a challenge both internationally and locally: more than 100 million young people cannot read or write (Howie et al., 2017). According to the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2017), about 56% of the 387 million

primary school learners do not reach the minimum required proficiency for reading due to poor foundation and lack of interest in reading. This is the case with 81% of children in Central Southern Asia and 87 per cent of children in Sub-Saharan Africa, which includes South Africa. Only 7% of European and North American children did not reach the minimum proficiency level in reading. In South Africa, as stated by Taylor (2013) in the 2012 National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) report, “it is widely known that South African schools perform below expectations”. This is a reason for the deficiency in language and reading potential of learners, which are important skills needed for success in schools and tertiary institutions. The report advocates that if poor performance is primarily caused by “ill disciplined” educators, a firm hand is needed from the district levels to reinforce management.

In South Africa, reading in most primary schools has not been as progressive as it should be (Spaull, 2013). The results of an international study of child literacy, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016, indicated the shortcomings in the culture of reading in South Africa. Of the 50 countries surveyed for reading ability among school learners, South Africa came last. The study also found that eight out of 10 South African Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning (Davis, 2017). In the global assessment of the reading skills of 9 and 10-year-olds in 50 countries around the world by PIRLS, South Africa ranked lowest (Spaull, 2017).

The results of the PIRLS 2016 global assessment confirmed that Grades 4 and 5 learners in South Africa are struggling with reading comprehension in their mother tongue, consequently affecting reading competencies in secondary schools. According to a report by Umalusi (South African Examination Body), National Senior Certificate Examinations revealed worrying evidence of Grade 12 learners “being unable to comprehend questions, formulate even short responses to questions and that the extended response questions and essays were poor” (Howie et al., 2017).

In most secondary township schools in Gauteng Province, the general performance of learners is far below the level of performance expected of secondary school learners, including the matric results, due to poor reading skills. This stems from a poor foundation of reading from primary school and a lack of interest in reading and a reading culture amongst learners. Most learners are not accustomed to reading at home and at school. They will not pick up a book and read for leisure and access to leisure books is limited. This is confirmed in the study by Draper and Spaull (2015), who pointed out that “the opportunity of learning to read with fluency, accuracy, prosody and comprehension” is not given to most South African children.

According to these researchers, “whether children are tested in their home language or in English, the results are the same: the vast majority of South African children cannot read for meaning by the end of Grade 4 – even in their home language – and almost a third are still functionally illiterate in English by the end of Grade 6” (Spaull, 2013 cited in Spaull, 2015). As stated by Pretorius and Spaull (2016, p. 5), the learners are not given the foundation of reading at an early age, and this results in poor comprehension skills.

“In terms of the Regulations pertaining to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grades R-12, promulgated on 28 December 2012, a learner may only be retained once in the Further Education and Training Phase in order to prevent the learner from spending more than four years in a phase” (Department of Basic Education, 2017). This means that a learner who fails a grade for the second time cannot be retained in the grade but must be progressed to the next grade (Department of Basic Education, 2012). The biggest challenge is that these learners are progressed to the next grade while lacking the reading skills necessary to acquire knowledge. “Schools have been requested to provide such learners with additional support to address their specific subject deficiencies so that they will be able to cope with the demands of the next grade” (DBE, 2017), but the reality in most schools is that these learners do not get such additional support.

Learning opportunities are finite in many South African township schools because of overcrowding, which limits the likelihood for learners to participate in class, so learners' main activities are copying the text from the chalkboard and reciting it because of lack of teaching and learning resources (Abraham & Barksdale, 2018). According to Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), the extensive poor performance of South African learners on literacy assessments has been well recorded in various documents, for instance the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the international reports of the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). The reports reveal that a vast number of South African learners cannot read for meaning and understanding. This is supported by the results of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) in December 2013 on learners in Grades 1–6 and Grade 9 in Language. Results indicated that learners were unable to read with understanding and therefore had difficulties comprehending, wrote words and sentences that were incoherent, and displayed an inability to make conclusions from the given information in a text, and also had difficulties in spelling frequently used words correctly. The most noticeable weakness was the inability of learners to read with understanding (DBE, 2012).

The teaching time in the intermediate phase (Grade 4–6) as outlined in the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education, 2011) document has an influence on the educational challenges that open the reading 'gap' that hinders progress in the education system (Moodley, 2013, p. 75). The learners spend only five hours a week on English. Out of 27.5 hours' instructional time allocated, 22.5 hours are spent on other learning areas such as mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, home language and life skills.

The Department of Basic Education (2011) document outlines all the learning constituents that have to be covered and the duration of each. In one day's Grade 4 to 6 learning schedule, learners are engaged in a variety of learning areas and activities, leaving very little time to focus on developing the most important skill, which is reading. The fact that reading is not given enough attention opens gaps in reading that will ultimately lead to learning deficits. Learners are to some extent able to decode in their second language but cannot comprehend what they read, resulting in what is termed "barking at print" (Department of Basic Education, 2011). They lack strong reading foundational skills, limited vocabulary, and grammar to give meaning to what they read. The teachers have a mammoth task of exposing the learners to various texts, applying scaffolding and reading strategies, building a sufficient vocabulary, and teaching grammar at the appropriate levels so that reading does not become a problem to them.

Similarly, in the context of the secondary schools where this research was based in Tshwane West, Grade 9 learners are expected to use the reading and comprehension skills mastered in primary school to learn a great deal of new information in content area classes. They are faced with a variety of text sources that contain complex vocabulary and complicated syntax. The Grade 9 syllabus does not have a programme or the resources to help learners who missed on reading skills in primary school and have difficulty in reading and comprehending. A significant number of learners struggle with complicated academic literacy tasks they encounter in their content areas and there is limited time for teaching reading skills.

In response to the challenges, the Gauteng Department of Education has initiated the Read to Lead Campaign to promote the culture of reading in schools by introducing reading clubs and a Drop All and Read campaign which promotes reading for 30 minutes at least once a week. These initiatives are aimed at igniting the passion for reading and inculcating a reading culture, turning learners into proficient readers (DoE, 2017). The challenge is that the programmes do not address reading difficulties and promoting reading with understanding. The researchers identified Guided reading approach as an intervention to address the reading challenges in this context.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) described GR as a small-group instructional context in which a teacher works with groups of learners who display similar reading behaviours and can read

similar levels of text. They assert that by bringing together a small group of learners who are at the same level in their reading development and guiding them to process a text that is aimed on an appropriate level of difficulty will assist in enhancing their reading skills. They learn how to create meaning from the text with support from the teacher. The teacher helps each learner develop strategies for comprehending increasingly challenging texts. Thus, GR builds the process of individual reading and it teaches children how the reading process works (Kouri, et al. 2006; McPherson, 2007; Schwarts, 2005). The learners gain reading confidence from working together, with the help of the teacher.

A guided reading (GR) strategy has the potential to improve the reading proficiency of all learners (Richardson, 2010; National Reading Panel, 2000; Clay, 2005). In the study by Gaffner et al. (2014), foundation phase learners participating in the GR reading clinic achieved progress. In the study by Hansen (2016), GR increased the reading comprehension in average readers. This was confirmed in the study by Heeringa (2017), in which the majority of the participating pre-school learners advanced one to two text levels and developed skills in accuracy, comprehension, and fluency.

Most of the studies conducted on GR focused on improving reading in primary schools and the focus is on reading fluency. More studies on the role played by GR approach to improve reading proficiencies in the secondary schools are needed. It is against the above background that the purpose of this study was to employ the GR approach to improve the reading proficiencies of Grade 9 ESL learners in Tshwane West District.

Theoretical Framework

A review of the literature on the theoretical framework identified constructivism (cognitive) and social constructivism as relevant lenses to guide the implementation of the GR approach for the study. According to IGI Global (2017), the central idea of constructivism is that human learning is constructed and that learners build new knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning. Khadimally (2018) further explained constructivist philosophy, emphasising the importance of social interactions in the construction of knowledge – as individuals interconnect, they create meaning and understanding. This view of learning contrasts with one in which learning is the passive transmission of information from one individual to another. Khadimally (2018) viewed social constructivism as an established educational theory based on the principle that learners and teachers co-construct knowledge through social processes. The idea behind the notion of constructivism is that “individuals live in the world of their subjective experiences – a world where they construct their own meanings” (IGI Global, 2017).

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), teaching models based on the social constructivist perspective stress the necessity for collaboration among all learners and teachers in society. They further assert that a society’s practical knowledge is embedded in relations among teachers, their day-to-day practice, and the society at large. Knowledge and practice cannot be separated. McMahon (1997) asserted that “[s]ocial constructivists view learning as a social process. It does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviours that are shaped by external forces”. He believes “[m]eaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities”.

Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Woolfolk, 2014) asserted that in a constructivist learning theory a zone of proximal development (ZPD) is reached between the student’s current development level “as determined by independent problem solving” and the possible degree of development the learner is capable of achieving with the teacher’s direction as well as collaboration with peers. Vygotsky views the ZPD as an opening between what the learner has learned and has mastered and possible achievement if given support by the teacher. This support can be in the form of scaffolding, where the teacher models learning by giving learners a foundation of

problem solving. Once the learners have grasped the skills of problem solving, he or she steps back, allows them to work on their own, and offers them support where required – just like scaffolding in building (Harr, 2008).

In the context of this research, part of the activities in the pre assessment phases was for learners to look for meanings of words they did not understand and use the words in simple sentences to show that they understand them. This helped in constructing meaning and internalising the information. Researchers acted as facilitators and mediators throughout the research study, giving instructions and strategies and applying scaffolding by supporting them and allowing them to read on their own, using strategies like self-correct if they made mistakes while reading.

Cognitive and social constructivism principles were relevant to this study as effective reading should involve the teacher supporting learners to construct their own knowledge by building on their existing knowledge. In addition, social constructivism was relevant as a lens to our study because it concedes that knowledge develops because of social interaction and language use, where people share ideas and experiences. It is therefore a shared rather than an individual experience.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study was to explore the possible effects of implementing GR approach to enhance the reading proficiencies of Grade 9 ESL learners in secondary schools in Gauteng province, South Africa.

This research addressed the following questions:

- *What are the possible effects of guided reading approach on the reading proficiencies of Grade 9 ESL learners in secondary schools in Gauteng province, South Africa?*

In order to address the above question, the following specific objectives were identified:

- *To determine the standard of Grade 9 ESL learners' current reading proficiencies in English language.*
- *To implement the Guided Reading intervention programme and determine its possible effects in enhancing learners' reading proficiencies of Grade 9 ESL learners.*

Research Methodology

General Background

The study adopted an action research design located under the pragmatic paradigm mainly because it allows for the researchers in taking action to bring a solution. Action research in the pragmatic view of thinking encompasses three phases such as pre-assessment, where the researcher perceives or observes the world and its action possibilities and considers different courses of action. The second phase is the interventive action, where the researcher takes action to improve the situation. The researcher also monitors and evaluates the situation. The third phase is a post-assessment, when the researcher perceives and assesses the outcome of the interventive action (Goldkuhl, 2012).

Therefore, the action research process in this research adapted the stages as suggested above. Firstly, participants' reading deficiencies were identified, and secondly the GR approach intervention was planned and implemented, finally the possible effect of the GR reading intervention on participant's reading proficiencies was determined. -

Research Sample

Purposive sampling was used to select the learners as participants for this study. Grade 9 ESL learners who had performed poorly in English with an average percentage of 32% and who were struggling with reading were selected as a sample for this research. The sample comprised eight learners, all in Grade 9. Learners were selected from a multicultural and religious school in a township. According to the system in South Africa, the school is classified as a no-fee paying school where learners depend on the school feeding scheme.

Participants' Background

Participating learners were between the ages of 13 and 15 years old. Two learners (B and D) in the group did not pass Grade 8 but were progressed to Grade 9 because they met the progression requirements, which means they had failed English only but were not repeating Grade 8 and therefore were condoned to Grade 9. Two learners (F and G) were repeating Grade 9 because they had failed English and two other subjects. One had repeated Grade 8 and therefore progressed to Grade 9 because, according to the progression policy, learners cannot be progressed twice in a phase (Grades 7–9).

In terms of languages, none of these learners used English at home, so English was their second language. They only encountered written or spoken English at school. English served as their Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT). Unfortunately, all these learners used indigenous languages at home and only came into contact with English, especially formal written English, at school. This becomes a barrier in learning because learners have to grasp the concepts, analyse, interpret and sometimes apply them in real-life situations through the medium of English. This causes noun disorientation and delay in learning.

According to ethical procedures, before data are collected, official permission should be sought by the researcher to gain access to the site and the participants (De Vos et al., 2003). For this study researchers sought for and obtained permission from the Department of Education conduct research in the secondary school described. The participants were informed about the study, and they participated on a voluntary basis. The required permissions were granted from the participants' parents and guardians. The university where the researchers were based, at the time of conducting their research, granted ethical clearance for the study.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected in all the three phases of this research. In the pre assessment phase data were collected through oral and written reading standardized tests developed by the South African Department of Education which the researchers adapted for this research. The tests were given to colleagues who are experts in the applied languages and reading to review for content validity. The oral reading test assessed learners' level of reading aloud, fluency, and comprehension, summarising and re-telling the story in their own words and giving meaning to the text. The written test was standardised, and questions ranged from low order to high order questions based on Bloom's taxonomy. Semi-structured interviews. The tests were used in the Pre assessment phase to establish the learners' current reading and comprehension levels before the GR intervention could be employed.

In the intervention phase data were collected through reading checklist, reflection cards and field notes from researchers' observations. The objective was to determine the role Guided reading plays in improving learners' reading proficiencies. Researchers listened to learners as they were reading, using the reading checklist to collect data on their fluency and comprehension levels so that the reading gaps, weaknesses and strengths can be identified to make improvements.

The oral and written reading tests including semi-structured interviews, were used in the post assessment phase after the implementation of the GR intervention. Similar to the pre assessment phase, the oral and written reading tests were adapted and also reviewed for content validity. The data collection instruments in this phase aimed to determine the possible effect of GR on participants' reading proficiencies.

Reading Texts and Materials

Researchers chose content, stories and texts that would be interesting and relatable to the learners and avoided fictitious stories to get them more interested in reading. Researchers did not want them to "imagine" the stories while reading as though they were not happening in real life. According to Smith (2014), "stories are an integral part of who we are as people". The stories chosen for this intervention and the rationale behind the choice are described as follows:

An extract from the book by Mamphela Ramphele: *Steering by the Stars*. Researchers used this extract for pre-assessment comprehension because the story is about South African families, school, communities, and society at large. It covers issues such as being different, not being accepted in communities, class boundaries and corporal punishment. The story serves as a voice to young South Africans, especially from townships; so, the assumption was that the story would be of great interest to the learners, and they would relate easily to it.

100 most commonly used English words (DoE, 2015). This is a valuable list of words to learn that will boost the learners' English vocabulary and assist them with writing and reading and understanding and differentiating between these words, and also classifying them according to different categories or parts of speech. These words comprise about half of all written texts, so they are valuable in English. Mastering these words would also assist learners to read faster, fluently and with more understanding. This list was chosen because if learners are acquainted with them, they will be able to recognise the words instantly in any book or text and then have more time to focus on the words they are not familiar with. This study *aimed to establish the possible effects of guided reading on the reading fluency and comprehension of Grade 9 ESL learners* and mastering these words would have a profound effect on their reading proficiencies in English.

THRASS phonics chart is a programme that is a blueprint to teach learners, especially beginner readers. It comprises 44 speech sounds or phonemes used in English, 24 consonants and 20 vowels, together with their key spelling words belonging to the same family of words (Ritchie & Davies, 2018). Instead of learners learning 26 alphabets, they learn these sounds, which teach key phonics and spellings, ultimately reinforcing reading proficiencies. Researchers used the THRASS phonics chart to bridge the reading gap, as these learners were never taught English sounds or phonics in Grade 1. They learned indigenous language sounds, which are different from English sounds.

Maru by Bessie Head: Grade 9 Reader: Bessie Head is an established African author. *Maru* is about prejudice in the African communities. It is about love against racial and tribal prejudice, where people have difficulty accepting a Masarwa woman – as they are considered the lowest class group in the society, and therefore viewed as outcasts. Researchers thought they would relate with being treated differently, as it might be an issue, they might encounter in one way or another.

Procedures

Guided reading sessions were facilitated within the 24-week period to improve learners' reading proficiencies. During the implementation each participating learner was provided with relevant texts and resources to be used throughout the entire project. GR sessions took place

during the week, three times a week in the classroom. The processes followed are explained as follows:

Introductory stage: At the beginning of every session, learners were welcomed. The purpose for the specific day was outlined and explained as well as the reading strategy to focus on. The text to be used on that day was introduced, took a picture-walk with learners; looked at the picture and allowed them to tell what they see and think about the picture, and predict what might happen in the story. Researchers then observed them while they were reading, took notes and identified their strengths and weaknesses.

Reading stage: Researchers allowed learners to read silently to get what the story is about, then prompted them to pay special attention to the title, what it means, and while reading trying to infer so that they could get a deeper understanding of the text. After five minutes learners are asked to read individually. While they were reading, researchers took notes on how they were reading, encouraging them to self-correct if they made mistakes. If they could not self-correct, they are guided or given the correct pronunciation.

They read independently and applied the comprehension strategy. Researchers coached learners individually while they made predictions, reading and re-telling the story and focusing on new vocabulary. Learners were prompted to read silently and visualise the characters and how they relate to each other, as well as the setting and conflict in the text. Learners then individually read aloud. As they were reading, researchers asked them questions about the characters, their relationships, where the events were taking place and possible conflict.

Concluding stage: A conversation about reading is started, and learners are asked factual, inferential and critical questions regarding the text. I also diagnosed, followed up on confusion, prompted as needed for discussion. In order for learners to reflect on their reading, researchers gathered them in groups and prompted them to name the characters, their roles in the story, what they liked about them, and where the events took place. For learners who did not understand the story, researchers explained to ensure they followed the events and were not confused.

Data Analysis

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2015), data analysis is a spiral that is ideally applicable to a wide range of qualitative studies. In using this view, data were examined, read more than once, and the following steps were followed:

- organised data collected from every learner as they read.
- skimmed the entire data more than once to get a sense of trends in reading by learners.
- identified and categorised the reading groups according to reading levels
- amalgamated and summarised the data for the readers, to combine and form a whole analysis.

Data from the interviews, field notes from observations and reflection cards also followed the steps as described above. For quantitative data the reading rating checklist and assessment rubric for reading were used for the marking of the oral test and a memorandum was used for assessing written comprehension. The scripts were examined intensively when marked to discover how participants answered and whether they used “own words” when answering the questions to demonstrate understanding. This included their vocabulary knowledge and application, language structures and conventions. Data were presented numerically.

Pseudonyms were used in place of learners’ names. Participating learners were coded as Learner A, Learner B, Learner C, Learner D, Learner E, Learner F, Learner G, Learner and H, Learner. The results are presented in the next sections.

Research Results

When learners' current reading proficiencies prior the GR intervention were determined, the research results exposed the current negative situation regarding the proficiencies of these learners. The results of learners' scores in the oral and written reading test before the GR intervention are presented and described in Table 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1
Learners' (scoresheet) Oral Reading Test

Learner	Fluency		Character identification		Summarising		Re-tell a story	
	Level		Level		Level		Level	
A	1	Not achieved	2	Partly achieved	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved
B	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved
C	2	Partly achieved	2	Partly achieved	2	Partly achieved	1	Not achieved
D	3	Good	2	Partly achieved	2	Partly achieved	2	Partly achieved
E	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved
F	2	Partly achieved	2	Partly achieved	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved
G	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved	1	Not achieved	2	Not achieved
H	2	Not achieved	1	Not achieved	2	Not achieved	1	Not achieved

As noted in the table above, in the pre assessment phase before the intervention Learner A obtained level 1 for fluency, which means he did not achieve the reading competency. He lacked reading skills, his eyes were glued to the text when reading, he struggled to pronounce, i.e., pronounced "aquatic" as "aguatic", meaning he confused letters "q" and "g", resorted to swallowing words instead of pronouncing them. He tried to sound some words first before pronouncing them. He obtained 2, which is partly achieved, for character identification. He could not explain what an aquatic mammal is but could remember how they communicate.

Learner B obtained level 1 for fluency, meaning he did not achieve the reading competency. He read fast, monotonously, without varying the pitch of his voice, he did not put emphasis on some words and did not consider punctuation. He mispronounced words and did not self-correct when mispronouncing. He could not answer the question "how do dolphins swim?" which is stated clearly in the passage, because he read fast and did not think about what he was reading.

Prior the GR intervention Learner C obtained level 2 for fluency, which implies partly achieved on the rating scale. Her pace of reading was acceptable, meaning not too fast or too slow. She tried to sound out the words correctly but swallowed some if not sure of how to pronounce them. She could not answer some comprehension questions, i.e., "how do dolphins communicate?" even though it was stated in the comprehension passage. She wanted to go back to the passage to search for the answer.

In the pre assessment phase Learner D obtained 3 for fluency, which implies that her reading level was acceptable, but there was room for improvement. She tried to read with expression and attended to punctuation marks. The learner was able to answer, “what is a mammal?” and was able to give examples of other mammals. She was also able to give her opinion about dolphins. She thought “they are great creatures”.

Learner E obtained level 1 for reading, which implies the learner lacked reading skills, battled with pronouncing most words, like “intellect, aquatic, acrobatic”. She was unable to respond to the text in her own words, and therefore could not re-tell the story. She was unable to answer comprehension questions, i.e., “what are carnivores?” She became nervous when I asked questions and asked if she could go through the text again.

In the pre assessment phase Learner F scored level 2 for fluency, meaning she partly achieved on the rating scale. She read well but did not put emphasis on some words, especially if she was unsure how to pronounce a word, i.e., “whistle, frequently, aquatic”. She had an idea of the type of creature in the text (a dolphin) but could not summarise the passage in her own words. When I asked her to summarise, she wanted to read again.

Learner G scored level 1 for fluency; that is, the learner needed attention; reading skills were lacking. She mumbled when reading. Researchers battled to hear what she was reading. She could not answer comprehension questions. The learner was asked a question, i.e., “what are dolphins, what are carnivores? What is your opinion about dolphins?” She scored level 2 for re-telling the story because she tried to re-tell the story but not in a coherent way.

In the pre assessment phase Learner H obtained level 2 for fluency, which means partly achieved on the rating score. She had a good recognition for sound but read too fast and paid no attention to punctuation marks. She did not pause, even for a comma or full stop. She scored 2 for summarising, because she attempted to summarise but omitted some important facts.

Table 2
Learners’ (score sheet) Written Test

Learner	Mark obtained out of 40 (Total)	Learner %	Levels	Level descriptors	Group Average
A	12	30	2	Partly achieved	32%
B	11	28	1	Not achieved	
C	18	45	3	Moderate achievement	
D	9	23	1	Not achieved	
E	11	28	1	Not achieved	
F	17	43	3	Moderate achievement	
G	8	20	1	Not achieved	
H	16	40	3	Moderate achievement	

Learner A scored 12 out of a total of 40 (30%), rating level 2 on the coding system, which implies elementary achievement or partly achieved. The learner experienced challenges with phoneme awareness, understanding the text, i.e., comprehension, and answering language

questions, i.e., “changing sentences to past tense” – the learner was not aware that “are” becomes “were” when changing a sentence from present to past tense, i.e., “children are (were) disciplined from a young”.

Learner B scored 11 out of a total of 40 (28%), rating level 1, meaning not achieved. The learner answered the first four comprehension questions, got only two correct and did not attempt to answer the rest. He found it hard to decode some words; hence they did not have meaning to him. The learner did not know the language structures, i.e., changing sentences to past tense, pronouns, and the degrees of comparisons.

Learner C obtained 18 out of a total of 40 (45%), rating 3, meaning moderate achievement. The learner had a challenge with summarising and interpreting information in her own words. She resorted to copying the sentences with keywords to the questions. She obtained 3 out of 20 for the first section of the test, which tested comprehension.

Learner D scored 9 out of a total of 40 (23%), rating level 1, implying the learner did not achieve. The learner had a problem with understanding the text. She copied the sentences verbatim that she thought could be possible answers, i.e., question 1 on the sample test. She was unable to answer by interpreting and analysing. She had a problem also with language structures, summarising and retelling the story using her own words.

Learner E scored 11 out of 40 (28%), rating level 1, which implies not achieved; she needed attention. She experienced challenges with assimilating information, understanding and interpreting, and using own words. She also struggled with questions like “give your opinion”, summarising, abbreviations, and visual literacy.

Learner F obtained 17 out of a total of 40 (43%), rating level 3 on the rating scale, meaning moderate achievement. There was room for improvement for her. She had trouble with understanding the text, visual literacy, and punctuation.

Learner G obtained 8 out of a total of 40 (20%), rating level 1 on the rating scale, indicating that she needed attention. The learner obtained 1 out of 20 marks for the section on comprehension. She had serious difficulty in reading on her own, understanding the text, interpreting and analysing it, putting meaning to it and answering the questions. Instead of answering the questions using her own words to show comprehension, she copied sentences from the passage verbatim that she thought had possible answers.

Learner H scored 13 out of 40 (33%), rating level 2 on the rating scale, indicating elementary achievement or partly achieved. The learner’s difficulty was in synthesising the information, interpretation, and comprehension.

It is clear from the results above that there was a serious problem regarding learners’ reading proficiencies. The results indicated reading fluency and comprehension to be the major challenge of the participating learners in this study. Guided Reading intervention should improve reading fluency and comprehension.

Reflection Cards and Observations

In determining the possible effects of GR in enhancing the reading proficiencies of the Grade 9 ESL learners, evidence collected from the reflection cards and observations indicated a significant improvement in learners’ reading proficiencies. Evidence pointed to the fact that GR developed learners’ reading proficiencies in this study through collaboration and reciprocal learning. Through interacting with one another they communicated and learnt from one another, leading to the improvement of their reading vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Below are some examples of the extracts from learners’ reflection cards and researchers’ observation notes during the GR sessions.

Extract from observations and reflection cards

*GR made a great improvement in the reading proficiencies in all areas; especially fluency and comprehension and the general attitude towards reading.
It is clear from the learners' reflections that they are much more positive towards reading. They indicated that they had a passion for reading;*

"I feel confident because I can classify parts of speech"
"I feel good because I could select words referring to time"
"I learned the difference between nouns and verbs, and how they relate"
"I didn't know the difference between using "a" and "the", I used them randomly, now I know the difference".
"I learned the modal verbs "can. Will, could and would".
"I enjoyed working in a group classifying the words on a chart"
"I enjoyed reading all 100 words within a minute and the group clapped hands for me".
"I learned the difference between synonyms and antonyms"
"I liked being involved in discussions it helps me to and when we were being encouraged by our teacher."
"I like it when we read and practice reading together, I learn to read words well from my friends and they learn something from me in return"

Oral Reading Test

The results from the oral test after the implementation of the intervention revealed that GR made significant improvement in the reading proficiencies of ESL Grade 9 learners. The results are summarised in Table 3 followed by a brief description.

Table 3
Results of Oral Reading Test in the Post Assessment Phase

Learner	Fluency		Character identification		Summarising		Re-tell a story	
	Level		Level		Level		Level	
A	3	Good	5	Outstanding/ Excellent	3	Good	3	Good
B	3	Good	3	Good	3	Good	3	Good
C	2	Partly achieved	4	Skilful	4	Skilful	3	Good
D	4	Skilful	5	Outstanding/ Excellent	3	Good	4	Skilful
E	3	Good	4	Skilful	3	Good	3	Good
F	4	Skilful	4	Skilful	5		4	Skilful
G	3	Good	4	Skilful	3	Good	3	Good
H	5	Outstanding/ Excellent	5	Outstanding/ Excellent	4	Skilful	5	Outstanding/ Excellent

The results revealed that the GR intervention made significant improvement in the reading proficiencies of ESL Grade 9 learners. It can be noted that before the implementation of GR intervention, the reading.

After the intervention Learner A improved from level 1 in the pre-test to level 3 for fluency, which indicated a great improvement. He portrayed more confidence; though he made minor errors, he was able to self-correct. For character identification he obtained 5. This time he was able to explain how aquatic mammals communicate.

Learner B improved from level 1 to level 3 for fluency, which is a great improvement. He read at an acceptable pace; being mindful of the punctuation marks and expression. He scored 3 for character identification, and he could also re-tell the story. In the post assessment phase Learner C still scored level 2 for fluency, still struggled with sounding out some words but improved a lot on character identification. She could describe what kind of animals dolphins are and how they communicate, and related them with humans. She scored 4, which is adequate.

In the post assessment phase Learner D scored level 4 for fluency and showed growth and adequate achievement. For character identification she achieved level 5, which is substantial. She read with more expression and could explain what mammals are and gave examples.

Learner E scored level 3 for reading fluency; a moderate improvement; displayed confidence in reading, level 4 for character identification and summarising. She could re-tell the story in her own words and gave the characteristics of mammals.

In the post assessment phase Learner F scored level 4 for fluency, an adequate growth; read with expression and emphasis. Level 4 for character and summarising, could describe the dolphins. Learner G scored level 3 for fluency; a moderate achievement; improved reading with more emphasis on sounds. She was able to give other types of mammals, scored level 4 for re-telling the story; and was able to explain the story in a coherent way. Learner H progressed from level 2 to 5 for fluency; showed substantial growth; good sound recognition and pauses for punctuation. She showed a considerable improvement in summarising and re-telling the story.

Written Tests

Results from the written test also indicated the positive effect of GR intervention on the reading proficiencies of participating learners. The written test scores are presented in Table 4 below. The table also shows the scores from the pre assessment phase. The results are described in the subsequent paragraphs.

Table 4
Results of the Written Tests from the Pre and Post Assessment Phases

Learners	Pre test %	Levels pre-test	Level descriptors for pre-test	Group Average	Post-test %	Levels post-tests	Level descriptors for post tests	Group Average
A	30	2	Partly achieved	32%	48	3	Moderate	54%
B	28	1	Not achieved		53	4	Adequate	
C	45	3	Moderate		60	5	Substantial	
D	23	1	Not achieved		43	3	Moderate Achievement	
E	28	1	Not achieved		58	4	Adequate	
F	43	3	Moderate		63	5	Substantial	
G	20	1	Not achieved		50	4	Adequate	
H	40	3	Moderate		58	4	Adequate	

In the pre assessment phase Learner A scored 30%, rating level 2 on the coding system, which implies elementary achievement or partly achieved. The learner experienced challenges with phoneme awareness, understanding the text, i.e., comprehension, and answering language questions, i.e., “changing sentences to past tense” – the learner was not aware that “are” becomes “were” when changing a sentence from present to past tense, i.e., “children are (were) disciplined from a young age”. Learner A scored 48% in the post assessment phase, rating level 3 on the coding system, which implies moderate achievement. The score shows a great improvement in answering questions.

Learner B scored 11 out of a total of 40 (28%), rating level 1, meaning not achieved. The learner answered the first four comprehension questions, got only two correct and did not attempt to answer the rest. He found it hard to decode some words; hence they did not have meaning to him. The learner did not know the language structures, i.e., changing sentences to past tense, pronouns, and the degrees of comparison. In the post assessment phase Learner B scored 53%; rating level 4, meaning adequate achievement. The learner had improved markedly; used own words as far as he could and did not copy the answer like previously.

In the pre assessment phase Learner C obtained 45%, rating 3, meaning moderate achievement. The learner had difficulty with summarising and interpreting information in her own words. She resorted to copying the sentences with keywords to the questions. She obtained 3 out of 20 for the first section of the test, which tested comprehension. In the post assessment phase Learner C obtained 60%; rating level 3, meaning substantial achievement. She interpreted the text and could give her opinion. Language structures: could change sentences to past tense.

Learner D scored in the pre assessment phase, rating level 1, implying the learner did not achieve. The learner had a problem with understanding the text. She copied the sentences verbatim that she thought could be possible answers, i.e., question 1 on the sample test. She was unable to answer by interpreting and analysing. She had a problem also with language structures, summarising and re-telling the story using her own words. In the post assessment phase, Learner D got 43%; rating level 3, implying moderate achievement, with a 20% improvement from the pre-test. She displayed understanding of the comprehension passage and used her own words. Language structures improved as well.

In the pre assessment phase Learner E scored 28), rating level 1, which implies not achieved – she needed attention. She experienced challenges with assimilating information, understanding, and interpreting, and using own words. She also struggled with questions like “give your opinion”, summarising, abbreviations, and visual literacy. In the post assessment phase this learner achieved 58%; rating level 4, which implies adequate achievement. She could interpret the text and was able to give her opinion without copying the text but using her own words.

Learner F obtained 43% in the pre assessment phase, rating level 3 on the rating scale, meaning moderate achievement. There was room for improvement for her. She had trouble with understanding the text, visual literacy, and punctuation. In the post assessment phase this obtained 63%; rating level 5 on the rating scale, meaning substantial achievement. She showed improvement from previous challenges of understanding the text and interpreting visual literacy.

In the pre assessment phase Learner G obtained 20%, rating level 1 on the rating scale, indicating that she needed attention. The learner obtained 1 out of 20 marks for the section on comprehension. She had serious difficulty in reading on her own, understanding the text, interpreting, and analysing it, putting meaning to it and answering the questions. Instead of answering the questions using her own words to show comprehension, she copied sentences from the passage verbatim that she thought had possible answers. In the post assessment phase Learner G got 50%; rating level 4 on the rating scale, which is adequate progress. The learner improved on comprehension skills; was able to answer language questions successfully.

Learner H scored 33% in the pre assessment phase, rating level 2 on the rating scale, indicating elementary achievement or partly achieved. The learner’s difficulty was in synthesising the information, interpretation, and comprehension. In the post assessment phase this learner scored 58%; rating level 4 on the rating scale, indicating adequate achievement. She got the section on pronouns all correct and improved on language structures.

Interviews

In responding to the question of how the GR approach affected their reading proficiencies, all participating learners indicated the positive effect GR had on their reading comprehension. Learners indicated that they could now read with understanding and even their pace in reading had improved. They were able to speak English more often, leading to the improvement in mastering the language. The following comments from learners were noted:

Learner A: *“My reading comprehension is improving”.*

Learner D: *“My pace of reading is getting better”.*

Learner F: *“It helps me to get used to the comprehension, and I get to speak English more often than I did first. It helps to improve my English skill”.*

Learner G: *“A good and fluent reading, and a great pace”.*

Further, the findings revealed that the guided reading approach had improved learners’ use of more the English language, leading them to pass tests in other subjects. Guided reading

also increased learners' self-efficacy. Learners believed that they had the potential to do more and achieve their academic goals. Learners commented as follows:

Learner A: *"I think my comprehension level is good, but I need to improve so I can get higher marks"*.

Learner G: *"My comprehension improved. I really want to pass Grade 9"*.

Learner H: *"When I write a test in other subjects, I pass the tests. Sometimes I do not do well but I will keep reading a lot so I can improve"*.

Learner C: *"I think my comprehension is good because I passed my term tests, though not with so good marks"*.

The findings revealed that the GR approach played a coaching role in improving the reading fluency of the participating learners and assisted them in becoming fluent readers. According to the learners' responses, GR improved their reading, and they were reading English more fluently. It also helped them with pronouncing words properly and increased their vocabulary. GR also played a motivating role in instilling the love and passion for reading books in these learners. The following comments were noted:

Learner C: *"Guided reading helps me to read fluently in English"*.

Learner D: *"It plays a good role to make me love reading books"*

Learner F: *"I am improving English vocabulary"*.

Learner G: *"It can develop passion for books and increase our vocabulary"*.

Learner H: *"It helps me in pronouncing words properly"*.

In addition, the findings indicated that GR played a nurturing role, where learners developed a sense of ownership, community and were introduced to innovative ideas. The participating learners suggested the establishment of a centre where all learners could go to read. They also suggested initiatives where various reading activities could take place and reading competitions where they could participate and showcase their talents. The following comments were noted from learner F G and H respectively:

Learner F: *"By opening a centre for learners to read will help all learners to be good readers"*.

Learner G: *"By having other reading activities and competitions will help us show our talents"*.

Learner H: *"Children can come to the guided reading groups and participate with us"*.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the possible effects of implementing GR approach to enhance the reading proficiencies of Grade 9 ESL learners in secondary schools in Gauteng province, South Africa. In addressing the first objective which was to determine the standard of Grade 9 ESL learners' current reading proficiencies in English language, the results revealed inadequate reading proficiencies particularly the reading fluency and comprehension. The implication is that learners are likely encountering the same challenge when reading alone and have to answer comprehension or test questions. Poor word recognition or word knowledge is a signal of poor comprehension and understanding, which means that a learner would have difficulty with understanding the text and also when learning.

Deficiency in these reading proficiencies was due to learners' low socio-economic status, which contributes significantly to learners' reading and language development. The fact that learners did not read regularly due to a lack of reading books which parents could not afford to buy was a hindrance to their reading development. Another factor is that learners did not have role models at home who encouraged them to read and exposed them to the world of words.

Similarly, research by Akubulilo et al., (2015) in Nigeria and Merga, et al., (2020) in Australia also found socio-economic background as a source of reading deficiency in ESL learners. Learners in these contexts often lack role models to follow. Evidence in this study showed that GR approach can significantly contribute to the reading deficiencies caused by lack of role model learners can imitate to improve proficiencies in reading.

In implementing the Guided Reading intervention programme to determine its possible effects in enhancing learners' reading proficiencies of Grade 9 ESL learners, the findings revealed that GR emphasised learning through modelling during the reading sessions, thus boosting learners' confidence and improving their reading comprehension and language proficiencies. Stutz et al., (2016) affirm that positive partnerships have been found linking teacher modelling, student morale, and increased reading comprehension skills. He further states that by integrating modelling into a well-planned GR lesson, teachers are able to provide a concrete example of what students need to be doing.

In a similar study conducted in America the pre-service teachers used GR approach for learners who were struggling readers and low academic performers. The results showed that learners learned through GR that emphasised modelling and learners improved their literacy and motivational skills (McGrail et al., 2018). The difference is that these learners were in the lower grades.

In addition, the studies on reading challenges found lack of confidence to be one of the factors contributing to poor reading by ESL learners as in the case of the study conducted in Ghana (Mohamed and Amponsah 2018). The study recommended the development of confidence and collaborative reading among learners and teachers in secondary schools. Evidence from GR approach in this study showed its potential to develop the mentioned skills in poor readers.

Congruent with the social constructivist theory, the GR approach allowed researchers an opportunity to play the role of a mediator and a scaffolder of learning throughout the entire reading process. Researchers provided scaffolding at the right time and the right level through the GR approach. GR closed the reading gap in these learners. The social constructivist learning theory also affirms the findings in this study in that it emphasises the important aspect of learners controlling their own learning process and reflecting on their experiences. Learners in this study played a more active role in and accepted more responsibility for their own learning (Cohen, et al., 2007).

Evidence from the GR sessions study showed that GR approach significant improvement in participating learners' reading fluency and comprehension is a result of collaborative learning. The findings correspond with the principles of constructivist learning theory, which advocates collaborative learning. Learners worked collaboratively throughout the programme, learning and socialising. Social constructivists believe society's practical knowledge is firmly fixed in associations among learners, their day-to-day activities in their social context, which is the school and society at large (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Collaboration between learners in the form of reading, discussions, dialogues, exchanging spoken words and ideas helped to close the reading gap. This study was able to show that equal partnership and consistency in the application of GR approach increases chances of struggling learners to improve their reading comprehension and fluency.

In contrast to the above results of the study by Maples (2016) which was conducted in a primary school with Grade 5 learners, it was found that GR approach increased the reading comprehension of average readers not the struggling ones. This was due to inconsistencies in the application of the approach. This study evidently showed that GR approach if applied effectively can improve reading proficiencies and entire learning for struggling learners in the secondary schools.

GR improved reading comprehension through scaffolding. Researchers consistently supported learners to master reading skills throughout the reading sessions. Researchers also used the resources and knowledge available to scaffold the reading lessons through modelling, discussion, and questioning (Phillips, 2013). Scaffolding can look like many different things and be used with many different strategies. Scaffolding used in this study took into consideration the ages of the learners, the level of their grade and that they are in a secondary school environment. Most studies have shown the benefits GR approach regarding scaffolding in primary schools. This study showed the potential of GR to support reading in secondary schools.

The results of the study also showed that G approach not only improves reading skills but other skills as well. Results also indicated that GR approach played a developmental role: as learners repeatedly read the reading texts and re-told the stories, they learnt new terminologies. They learnt reflective skills that enabled them to identify their weaknesses and strengths and think about their thought processes. In so doing, they learnt to construct their own knowledge. This is supported by O'Rourke (2017), who states that when "shared reading is incorporated in a daily routine, students hear the teacher's intonation, fluency, pausing, flow, and can ultimately listen to their 'thoughts'", leading to the development of their meta-cognitive thinking skills (O'Rourke, 2017).

GR not only improved learners' reading fluency and comprehension but also developed a sense of ownership in their learning, a sense of community and the development of an innovative mind. The findings from the post-oral and written tests confirmed the significant improvement in the reading fluency and comprehension of all participating learners. The implication is that GR has the potential to improve reading proficiencies of secondary Grade 9 ES.

As indicated earlier, the reading challenge for all learners was fluency and comprehension; being unable to read for meaning and understanding. As a result of the GR intervention, learners showed significant improvement in most of the reading sessions. In general, the findings from all reading sessions indicated consistent improvement for both fluency and comprehension levels of all learners. Learners C and H showed considerable improvement, as it is indicated by the highest rating scores achieved in each session, followed by learners A, D, F and G who displayed adequate achievement, and learners B and E, who showed moderate achievement in reading fluency and comprehension.

Researchers used GR to establish the learners' reading deficit and executed the GR approach with the goal of ameliorating reading deficits and planting a culture of reading in them (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). In reflecting on the findings, researchers are on an opinion that there is sufficient evidence to attest that the GR programme was productive; it yielded positive results. Reading aloud, practising, and drilling the phonics in groups, and creating charts to classify words according to different parts of speech assisted in stimulating the learners' interest and knowledge of the English words and vocabulary, ultimately improving fluency and comprehension. Collaboration is evidence that meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities (McMahon, 1997).

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the possible effects of implementing GR approach to enhance the reading proficiencies of Grade 9 ESL learners in secondary schools in Gauteng province, South Africa. It was indicated that few studies on GR approach in secondary schools existed. Most studies conducted were in the primary schools. Owing to the reading challenges encountered in secondary schools this study was conducted. The evidence presented showed that this study narrowed this gap. Learners developed reflective and metacognitive skills and were able to develop the sense of community and innovative mind in this study. The study also proved that GR can be a tool to effective classroom research by teachers. One of the researchers in this study happened to be a teacher of learners who were participants.

This study furnishes a motivation for the school and ultimately the Tshwane West District to establish measures for identifying learners who are underperforming and cannot read at the level of their grade and for meaning and understanding because they have a problem with reading fluency and comprehension. This study showed the possible effects on the GR approach on the reading fluency and comprehensions of struggling secondary school learners.

If such learners are identified early, they can be given reading intervention timely to address reading deficiencies and enhance their academic performance. The magnitude of improved academic performance will open opportunities for learners to study further and acquire tertiary qualifications. This will minimise the dropout rate in township schools. The country will have fewer young people who are not employed and idle during the day, leading to other social problems like crime and drug or substance abuse, because GR empowers and equips learners with a wealth of wisdom, and turns them into independent readers and later leaders.

Recommendations and Implications

Based on the findings it is recommended that ESL learners be evaluated when they get to high school (Grade 8) by means of a pre-test for oral fluency and a written pre-test for comprehension to identify those who are struggling to read so that intervention strategies can be implemented to address specific reading difficulties. The reading strategies need to be prioritized when teaching language; especially reading to improve reading, and ultimately, education in general. Educators need to ensure learners understand the strategies so that they can use them in all spheres of life. Every school in the District should have a policy on GR. A recommendation is that these policies should not only be given to schools, but implemented, monitored and a follow-up made to ensure the execution of policy to eliminate reading problems. Further research is needed on teachers' knowledge of GR programmes, implementation, assessment, and intervention strategies.

Limitations

Number of participants: This study was limited to eight participants, although it started with twenty, reduced to fifteen, then ultimately to eight because of a lack of commitment and the unavailability of some learners. Only eight were committed and consistent. There should have been more participants to get a greater spectrum of the reading gap and a considerable number of learners taking part in reading activities.

The setting: The backdrop was also limited to one school, one teacher and one district. Other teaching staff, especially language teachers, could have been involved. The principal was not involved in the programme, except giving permission to conduct the research at school. Parents, SGB members and district Senior Education Specialists (SES) were not included because of time constraints and limited budget.

Declaration of Interest

Authors declare no competing interest.

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Esther Molebogeng THAGE, Patricia Namayammu MOKGOSI, Jane Tozama MTHEMBU. Exploring the effects of implementing guided reading approach to enhance the reading proficiency of English second language learners in South Africa

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Esther Molebogeng Thage	MSc, Tshwane University of Technology, Soshanguve North Campus, Aubrey Road, Soshanguve, Pretoria, South Africa. E-mail: molethage@webmail.co.za
Patricia Namayammu Mokgosi (Corresponding author)	PhD, Lecturer, Tshwane University of Technology, Soshanguve North Campus, Aubrey Road, Soshanguve, Pretoria, South Africa. E-mail: mokgosipn@tut.ac.za ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4939-2127
Jane Tozama Mthembu	MSc, Lecturer, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa. E-mail: mthembut@tut.ac.za ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6589-5835