

## **THE CAUSES OF READING DIFFICULTIES IN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS IN BONDAMAKARA CLUSTER. A CASE OF MUDZONGA PRIMARY SCHOOL IN MUTOKO DISTRICT.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study sought to identify the causes of reading difficulties affecting reading English among the rural Grade Six Learners in Bondamakara Cluster in Mutoko District. It followed a mixed research design approach. To obtain a representative sample of the population of primary schools, purposeful sampling was used, selecting two teachers and 70 learners from Mudzonga primary schools from the six schools in the cluster. Both qualitative and quantitative data was obtained from lesson observations and from reading tests, and findings revealed that, inadequate English reading materials, improper teaching methodology and insufficient English language development were causes of reading difficulties in Bondamakara cluster. Lack of English language development was a result of insufficient teacher-learner interactions during the English lessons. The results from the tests indicated that decoding, phonemic awareness, word recognition skills and comprehension might impede reading proficiency in Grade six and although a section of learners proved to have the abilities to read fluently they could not answer satisfactorily the questions based on the text read. The result revealed that 35.71% were unable to read the pseudo words beyond the frustration level, and only 31.43% at the instructional level. The research recommends that schools should make resources available to buy supplementary reading materials for use by learners, and that teachers encourage learners to borrow books from libraries to practice reading independently. Teachers should study English through initiatives like English Language Proficiency Programmes.

**KEY WORDS:** Reading, English Language, literacy, Teacher- Learner Interactions, Comprehension.

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## 1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

At the dawn of its nationhood in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited and adopted English as the official language as well as the Language Of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) in schools. As a requisite skill for all academic achievement, learners should be grounded in reading in their early years of schooling. According to the language policy outlined in the Education Act of 1987, learners in lower primary (Grades 1-3) are to be taught through the mother tongue or the predominant language local language. From the fourth grade up to tertiary learning, English becomes the medium of instruction. Most pupils especially in rural Zimbabwe start schooling having only one primary language of which they are then gradually introduced to reading, writing and speaking English for skills transfer.

A learner who misses a chance of learning to read in the first three years of schooling is likely to be poor in reading throughout school (Lerner, 2000). Poor or low pass rate in the English subject and other English related subjects is a challenge not only to the individuals but the nation at large. Despite efforts put in place to ensure informed teaching of English across the country, challenges in proficiency in language continue to manifest. Factors such as economic, cultural and social standing of individuals play crucial roles in the success of learning of second language such as English. Reading competence is relative to the success of learning English and other subjects where English is the medium of instruction. Reading competence gaps are more evident in rural primary school children. For instance, at Mudzonga Primary School ( a rural day primary school situated some sixteen kilometers to the east of Mutoko Centre along the Harare – Nyamapanda Highway), a total of 60 candidates sat for English and English related subjects (Mathematics and General Paper) in 2014. Their pass rate was 31%. In 2015 the overall pass rate in the same areas was 36%. These statistics indicate a possibility of pupils failing to understand the demands of the examination questions hence suggesting that significant reading competence gaps manifest in rural primary schools. Furthermore, these findings raise questions as to whether the education system is failing to teach learners relevant reading skills at lower grades of education in Zimbabwe. Thus the researcher found it necessary to explore how learners read and identify causes of reading difficulties, focusing on Grade Six learners at Mudzonga Primary School in Bondamakara Cluster (Mutoko District).

## 1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Without adequate reading skills in English (LOLT in all public schools), learners will encounter difficulties with other subjects in the curriculum. The government of Zimbabwe can be credited for carefully designing and crafting of a primary school English syllabus that suits second language learners. However, despite these initiatives, reading competence gaps are still wide in Primary School. Statistics confirm that pupils fail English and English related subjects. The researchers therefore sought to find out the types and causes of reading difficulties experienced by primary school learners (at Mudzonga Primary School) in reading English language in Mutoko District.

## 1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study focuses on the following objectives:

- To identify reading difficulties in rural primary school pupils
- To identify factors contributive to reading failure in rural primary school learners
- To suggest ways of improving reading competence in rural primary school learners.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reading is more or less a cognitive activity. The extent to which individuals learn to read is primarily demonstrated by cognitive theories, one of which relevant to this study is the constructivist theory by Vygotsky(1978), which posits that learners enter school with a sense of efficacy for learning based on personal experience and personal qualities(Schunk and Dale, 2006). This therefore implies to say that the meaning individuals attach to a given text is dependent on their language(s), culture, personal experience and the particular social context under-which the reading phenomenon occurs. It further suggests that if materials intended for learners' reading are not based on their culture and environment, they may contribute to reading difficulties.

The constructivist theory shares with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, an assumption that a person's behaviour and environment interact in a reciprocal fashion. The learning to read is

associated to one's social environment. For example some learners learn well when they are in groups, which is in line with recent adoptions by the Zimbabwe education system that learning should be learner centred and interactive. Scholars like Cummins (1976) cited in Baker (2006) subscribe to the view that learning to read in a second language (L2) requires certain competences already achieved in the first language (L1).

## 2.2 ENGLISH IN THE ZIMBABWEAN CURRICULUM

Zimbabwe like any other African country is a multilingual society. It has about sixteen indigenous languages. On its attainment of independence in 1980 the country adopted a colonial language policy that regarded English as the official language to be used in formal settings including education. Shona and Ndebele were national languages to be used in informal settings. However, on realising the role played by mother tongue in teaching and learning, the government amended the policy in 1987 and 1999 in order to utilise and capitalise on the countless advantages of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the early years of school life,(Ndamba,2008). The policy stated that indigenous languages were to be used as medium of instruction from the grade one up to grade three levels in those areas where they are commonly spoken and understood. From grade four, pupils are to learn Shona, Ndebele, Tonga as subject while English becomes medium of instruction. English remains a compulsory subject up to O'level. Gwete and Campbell (2014), maintain that there is no official language policy in pre-school for Zimbabwe. This suggests that a combination of English and national language is used.

## 2.3 ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROBLEMS AND READING DIFFICULTIES

According to Pang, Muaka, Benhard and Michael (2003), real progress on reading depends on oral language development. This observation therefore suggests that children learn to read by associating the written form with speech. For children to know how to read they must learn the vocabulary, grammar and sound system of the oral language in which the reading takes place. Dickson and Neumann (2006) also see a connection between oral language and early reading. Therefore, prior oral knowledge of English language might be one factor contributing to reading competence gaps experienced by rural learners in Mutoko District.

The developmental independence hypothesis postulated by Cummins (2000) suggests that a child's second language competences are partly dependent on the level competence already achieved in the first language. This draws supports Baker (2006) who argues that bilingual students draw some language from their first language when performing reading. Cummins (2000) further asserts that once the reading ability has been acquired in first language, it is available for use in the second language. It implies therefore that if the first language is poor it will prove difficult for skills to be transferred to second language. In the same breadth, the Nativist theory proposed by Ellis (2000) confirms that learners' inputs conform to their internalised view of what constitute the L2 system. They simplify learning task by forming a hypotheses based on the knowledge process of their L1.

It is observable that the majority of children in Mutoko district speak Budga as their primary language. However, when they start school they are taught Zezuru (Standard Shona) as the L1 and subsequently English as a second language. Although Budga share similar lexical features with Shona, they are quite different in numerous linguistic terms. This would suggest poor transfer of reading skills. In view of this, Cummins (2000) posits, "the threshold theory" which suggests a linguistic level for a child to reach in the prone language and so avoid the negative consequences of the L2. The concern of this research is to question whether at the grade six level, learners in Mutoko Rural District have acquired relevant skills in reading Shona (standard) which is not principally their L1, to scaffold reading in English

Rumelhalt (1980) schema theory highlights the limited amount of cognitive energy available for use in processing a readers cognitive energy is focused on decoding and combining the meaning of the word, then in the eyes of Scott(2001), schema theory is vital in helping learners use their mental store during learning. In the same vein, Bruner's (2000), schemata theory helps learners to determine how to interpret the task to be learned, how to understand the information and what the learner acquires.

Snow, Buns and Gunffin (1998) observe types of risk factors that contribute to low levels of academic achievements among L2 learners. The trio identified factors of risk to language development including socio-economic status (poverty conditions), cultural differences between

school and home (regarding education values and expectations), socio-political factors (including past and continuing discrimination and low perceived opportunity for schooling) and school quality. The factors identified could be the source for poor reading habits displayed by rural primary school learners in Mutoko district since English to them is an L2.

It is therefore imperative that language teachers detect the learners' reading problem either in order to avoid other life problems associated with reading. Reading problem needs also to be detected in time before it becomes a hindrance to reading development. In their conclusion Snow et al (1998) argues that low English proficiency among learners for whom it is not at L1 is a strong indication that the child is at risk of reading difficulty. With regards to L2, Cater and Nunan (2003) point out that reading achievement is a widespread problem when learners are instructed or tested in their home languages. However, they further indicate that linguistic differences are not solely responsible for the high degree of reading difficulties faced by children, but that there are a host of other factors.

### 3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The interpretive qualitative research approach was regarded as most suitable to realise the aim of this study, that is, to investigate the causes of reading difficulties among the rural primary school learners. It seeks to produce descriptive analysis that emphasises deep understanding of social phenomena (Crewell & Plan-Clark 2007). The qualitative method of observation was used to gain insight into the English teaching and general environment of Grad Six classrooms at a selected primary school. At the same time a positivist quantitative approach (Holborn & Haralambos, 2000) was used for gathering quantitative data. The combination of research designs for collecting and analysing data allowed the researcher to gain a more comprehensive insight into the problem under study.

### 3.2 RESEARCH POPULATION AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

In this study the population comprised of 400 Grade Six learners and teachers in Bondamakara Cluster in Mutoko District with a total of six schools. This research used a representative sample (from the research population) of seventy Grade Six learners and two teachers (full time classroom practitioners) of Mudzonga Primary School. The purposive sampling technique was

employed to select the Grade Six class based on a revelation by Grade Seven analyses which indicated reading difficulties.

### 3.5 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

For the ultimate purpose of finding out the causes of reading difficulties among rural primary school learners in Bondamakara Cluster, the researcher used the observation and reading tests as his data collection instruments. According to Williams (2004) data collection is a process of capturing facts, information and figures based on the characteristic and nature of the research problem. This section therefore presents the way in which data was collected.

#### 3.5.1 Observation

For the purpose of this study, non-participant overt observation was used in that the researchers did not become involved in the activities of the group, but were passive observers who watched and listened to the group activities in order to collect data from the observations. In other words, the researchers adopted an overt non-participant observation where the subjects are informed that they are under study.

### 3.8 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis were employed. Qualitative data obtained from observations were subjected to content analysis which according to Gall et al (2007) is a method that involves comparing, contrasting and categorizing data in order to draw meaning from it. The researchers grouped data according to predetermined themes and looked for consistencies and differences to make comparisons and contrasts. This was to organise ideas that emerged from the data to make a well informed assessment of the causes of reading difficulties observable in rural Grade Six learners in Bondamakara Cluster.

The quantitative data obtained from the achievement tests were analysed using the descriptive statistical techniques to organise or summarise numerical data. The researcher arranged the quantitative data into tables and percentages to indicate key findings of this study.

## DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

#### 4.1 FINDINGS FROM OBSERVATIONS

Observations were used in this study of investigating the causes of reading difficulties in rural primary school learners in Bondamakara Cluster. The researchers focused on the following classroom factors: classroom physical-environment; classroom psychosocial-environment; approaches and techniques of teaching reading in English; and the teacher- learners' oral interactions during the lesson. Teachers' preparation to make use of reading materials, reading modeling and the general classroom environment were also observed. No classroom overcrowding was noted in any of the two participating classes, however, the researchers observed that there were insufficient English reading materials in all of the schools in this study.

##### 4.2.1 CLASSROOM PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The following aspects characterised the physical environment of the classrooms

###### 4.2.1.1 CLASS COMPOSITION

The two classes in this study consisted of mixed ability learners of both sexes. Class X had 35 Grade 6 learners (20 girls and 15boys) whilst class Y had 35 Grade 6 learners (18 girls and 17 boys). In total, 70 Grade 6 learners of Mudzonga Primary School participated in this study

The classroom arrangements were in line with the learner centred paradigm (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education). In both classes learners were seated in small groups of fours. There weren't enough good desks for learners in both classes. The general classroom environments in both classes were not appealing. A few teacher made wall charts with sight words were hung to the wall to encourage learners in English reading

###### 4.2.1.2 THE READING CORNER

In both classes no reading corners were found. The absence of reading corners in both classes seems to have deprived learners of an opportunity to practise independent reading. According to de Debat (2008), reading corners are of utmost importance in developing English reading skills in learners, as they tell them the school values and encourages independent reading. Reading corners are established with the prime purpose of boosting learners' interest in reading (de Debat, 2008). Without reading corners, it was observed that in Bondamakara Cluster learners only had reading chances offered by the teachers during lessons.



Classes X and Y also lacked reading materials, notably readers. English readers were shared between three or four learners when reading. In none of the two classes were the learners allowed to take books home, which denied them an opportunity to practise reading after school hours.

Depriving learners access to books and/or sharing them in groups of three or four was observed as a possible cause of reading difficulties in Grade 6 language learners in Bondamakara Cluster. The researchers also observed that the Grade 6 “Step In New Primary English” was the only textbook used by the school in this study (Mudzonga Primary School). Lack of reading skills in English observed might be caused by the school not having ordered a variety of textbooks to be used by learners, or the coffers of the school being insufficient to buy an additional set of books. To Lerner (2000), reading is a continuous skill, and one that constantly improves with practice, so without practice, reading skills in Bondamakara Cluster will not improve. Learners require exposure to a variety of English reading materials in order to avoid rote reading and boredom with the one English reading title in use.

#### 4.2.1.3 TEACHER-LEARNER RATIO

The official teacher-learner ratio of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Primary Level is 1:40 learners per class. The enrolment numbers of Grade 6 classrooms in this study were lower, at 35 learners apiece. By virtue this would mean that teachers had more room to attend to learners individual reading needs as they were manning classes smaller than expected standard. However, the researcher observed lack of learner participation in the two classrooms. For example, in class X only a few learners were engaged with the teacher, and their attention to the lesson was minimal. The learners in class Y were on-task most of the time during the observations. The teacher tried to engage the learners during the English lesson, which might have helped in the development of their abilities to read English. It was observed however, that the teacher in class X tended to spend more teaching time on class control than in class Y, thus reducing the time available for instruction. The researcher also observed that in these classes learners’ individual reading needs were not often addressed, resulting in poor development of reading in English.

#### 4.2.2 CLASSROOM PSYCHOSOCIAL-ENVIRONMENT

Classroom rules that learners were expected to follow were found in class Y. Throughout the lesson in class Y, the teacher reminded learners to stick to the set rules. For example, during the lesson, learners had to answer questions in an orderly manner, not shouting. The teacher exercised her power to ensure discipline and orderly behaviour in the class. After learners read a text the teacher asked: “*Who was given a birthday present?*” to which a section of learners shouted the answer. The teacher insisted: “*Is that the way we answer the questions?*” Learners realised that they were expected to be given chances to respond to questions: “*Yes Chido! Would you give us the correct answer?*” A second learner was given a chance and gave a correct answer.

“*Thank you! That is good*”, the teacher commended. The response of the teacher created a strong positive relationship with learners, and they were socially supported. In both classes, learners were sitting in small groups of three to four. In class Y, interactions and teamwork were much easier during the lessons than in class X. The teacher in class Y was not stationed in one place, but moved around attending to individual learners’ reading needs. In class X the teacher sat in front of the class as learners read the text aloud. However, all the learners were treated similarly, irrespective of their abilities.

#### 4.2.3 APPROACHES TO TEACHING READING ENGLISH TO GRADE 6

The two Grade 6 teachers observed were all Diploma in Education (Pre-service) graduates, specialised in the primary school education. In both classrooms the prescribed book, *Step In New Primary English* was used. The main methods used to teach reading English were phonics and sentence and word method. Less attention was placed on the use of the whole-language approach. Both teachers used the same strategy of teaching reading English, based on decoding and comprehension questions. According to Moats and Foorman (2003), teaching strategies have great significance on learning to read, thus, teachers in Bondamakara Cluster should be encouraged to use a teaching approach that is best for their learners to develop reading skills. In this case, learners with reading difficulties should be taught using a systematic teaching of phonics. This is an approach by which a teacher directs his/her teaching from synthetic to analytical phonics. With synthetic phonic (part-to-whole), learners are taught to sound and blend

the sequential letter sounds. The sounds are learned in isolation and blended together. In analytic (whole-to-part), a phonic element is identified from a set of words in which each word contains the particular sound to be studied.

According to the Grade 6 syllabus, learners must be able to read fluently prepared and unprepared factual and fiction texts. Reading fluency can be developed if learners are explicitly taught the decoding skills. Levine (1994) argues that learners should be helped to map the letter-sound code from the onset, however in class X the phonic method was used to teach English reading, with decoding as the main emphasis. In class Y the teacher made an extra effort by integrating the phonic and sentence and word method. This teacher used words from the text read to form jumbled sentences as a means of developing vocabulary. On language development, the teacher in class Y emphasised grammar use, using multiple tasks to teach English reading skills and helping learners to develop appropriate grammar.

#### 4.2.4 TEACHER-LEARNERS INTERACTIONS

It was observed that in both classes the teachers failed to explore the prior knowledge of learners at the beginning of their lessons. They all employed the reading aloud strategy to teach reading English. Noticeably, in class X, while learners were reading the focus of the teacher was on diagnosing their reading difficulties in word identification and word recognition. The teacher in class Y exemplified this by giving jumbled words from which learners could form sentences, which was not followed by the teacher in class X. In all classrooms, English was used as the main language of instruction, however teachers code-switched frequently. In class X the teacher code-switched more often for control purposes, for example, /sekuti/, /hatitii/ translated as “*Let me say.*” These occurred if the teacher was not satisfied with the learners’ behaviour in class.

#### 4.2.5 CLASSROOM INTERACTION AND LEARNERS’ GENDER

In class X more girls than boys participated in reading. The teacher in class Y tried to point to learners at random, whether raising their hand or not but the participation level between girls and boys was not the same. In class X, boys responded more often if the teacher’s attention was directed at them, and less often if there was no effective management in the classroom. The boys’ attention in the lessons in class X were characterised by an on- and off-task behaviour,

wasting more valuable time expected of learners to engage the reading materials. Such a situation, in which learners are not fully engaged in the classroom activities, might exacerbate the difficulties of reading in English

#### 4.4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study to investigate the causes of reading difficulties in rural primary school learners was prompted by the many learners in Mutoko District, Bondamakara Cluster in particular, who have experienced difficulties in reading English (MoPSE). Baker (2006) acknowledges that the reading process is a function of the individual's ecological system, including cognitive, linguistic and cultural background. In line with this, teachers should appreciate the child's linguistic and cultural background in order to make potential contributions aimed at improving learners' reading. According to Dickinson and Neumann (2006), reading difficulties are major problems that may have a negative bearing on learners throughout school. Lerner (2000) cautions that the causes of reading difficulties are stemmed from a variety of issues, of which some are not easily diagnosed or understood by teachers. However, she suggests that effective instructions to remediate reading difficulties where they persisted should be given. Reading difficulties, such as lack of comprehension, can be easily identified in learners, but often teachers ignore its development. Instead, teachers will pay more attention to fluency.

As expounded by Almasi (2003), adequate initial instructions require that children use reading to obtain meaning from print; have frequent opportunity to read and exposure to frequent, regular spelling-sound relationships; learn about the nature of the alphabetic writing system; and understand the structure of the spoken words. Almasi (2003) concludes that disruption of these developments increases the opportunity that reading will be delayed. This was the case for the 12 (17.14%) learners who stumbled to read the sight words and 29 (41.43%) who struggled with pseudo words. In Bondamakara Cluster, learners are not exposed to a variety of English reading books as schools do not have libraries. Step In New Primary English was the only book available for reading by Grade 6 learners at Mudzonga Primary School, which made reading practice very difficult.

In spite of the above findings the researcher also identified persistent obstacles to reading among the Grade 6 learners in Bondamakara Cluster. First, learners experienced difficulties in understanding and using the alphabetical principle that affected decoding. This stemmed from unsound teaching methods applied by teachers. The researcher suggests that a systematic teaching of phonics would have the most impact on learners in this study. Second, an overriding obstacle was the lack of knowledge that English writing represents spoken words, that is, learners' inability to transfer the comprehension skill of reading to spoken language.

These above findings are supported by those of Dickinson and Neumann (2006), who suggests many factors that may contribute to reading difficulties among L2 learners, including understanding how sounds are represented alphabetically, sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency, and background knowledge and vocabulary needed to render written texts comprehensible.

The reading difficulties identified during the observation sessions and the reading tests in this study were decoding and lack of word recognition abilities, reversal of words, substitution, insertion, omission, English language problems, teacher factors, school environment, and lack of comprehension of materials read by the learners. The research observed that one of the causes of reading difficulties can be attributed to lack of reading practice among learners, due to shortage of reading materials in schools.

The findings of this study are in stark contrast with the basic competencies contained in the Grade 6 syllabus, meaning that many learners are fallen behind in the Grade 6 basic competencies (MoPSE).

#### 4.4.1. FACTORS AFFECTING READING PROFICIENCY OF GRADE 6 LEARNERS IN BONDAMAKARA CLUSTER

Factors affecting reading proficiency of Grade 6 learners of Bondamakara Cluster which were observed during the reading test include the following.

#### 4.1.1.1 Decoding and word recognition abilities

It was observed that 12 (17.14%) learners reached the frustration level in reading sight words whilst 29 (41.43%) had reached the frustration level in pseudo words. During the reading process it was noted that these learners failed to blend letters to sound out words or to recognise words and letters and the sound they represented. For example instead of reading feet they read foot.

By analysing the English reading skill of most learners in this study it was found that lack of word decoding ability stemmed from faulty recognition and naming of letters of the alphabet. It was also observed that the phonic method was not explicitly presented to these learners as they failed to decode letters to sound the words out. Evident in the example above is that, reading in such a way, learners could not deconstruct words in their sound units. These learners were reading letters in words, rather than the sounds representing the letters. Decoding problems are at the root of most reading difficulties. According to Lerner (2000), decoding creates the foundation on which all other reading skills are built, so the absence of decoding skills in learners, as in this study, impedes word recognition and word attack skills. Levine (1994) writes that the ability to recognise words easily is fundamental to reading with comprehension, and once readers develop fluency in word recognition they can concentrate on the meaning of the text.

The researcher observed that poor decoding skills emanated from wrong teaching methods applied to teaching reading in English. During the observations, teachers did not demonstrate to learners how to break words into unit sounds. Teachers' attention was on correcting the reading miscues committed by learners. To Alderson (2000), the phonic method requires that learners first learn to recognise the letters and the identification of sounds with which they correspond before they can read words, phrases and sentences. Poor word decoding was aggravated by difficulties in segmenting and re-blending component sounds in a word.

Generally, there was lack of awareness of how words were composed in sound units, making it difficult for the Grade 6 learners to break down words in sound component when reading. According to Lerner (2000), decoding of words requires sound teaching methods that help a child to store information in the long-term memory. If the process of teaching reading is well structured then the word configuration can easily be stored in the child's memory and recalled during the reading act.

To remember previous information is largely dependent on how the information had initially been presented (Winkler, 2009, p.84). Children should be given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with letter shapes from the early grades. It was evident from the reading tests that phonic instructions and sight words. This poor practice of decoding skills over the years might have caused delay in the Grade 6 learners reading of English. The researcher observed during the English lesson reading the majority of learners hesitated to read fluently the reading passage, although most words in the selection were sight words.

Both teachers observed used the phonic approach to teach reading. During reading, they aimed at involving recognition of words, and much questioning, however, it was observed that the phonic method was partially practiced by learners as the teacher would concentrated on correcting pronunciation when they were reading aloud.

In this study, it was found that only 28.57% of the Grade 6 learners read the pseudo words independently. A total of 41.43% learners did not read the words well during the reading test, an indication that basic competencies pertaining to the Grade 6 syllabus were not achieved (MoPSE). The root cause of poor reading habits was decoding, which stemmed from lack of reading practice. It was observed that most learners did not have an opportunity to read aloud during reading lessons.

#### 4.1.1.2 English oral language and the socio-cultural background

Learning to read differs from oral skill in that it involves a symbolic system that represents speech. Pang et al. (2003) argue that before children begin to learn to associate the written form with speech they need to learn the vocabulary, grammar and sound system of the oral language. Dickinson and Neumann (2006) also emphasise the link between oral vocabulary and the development of reading skills.

Language is a component of reading with understanding. The 70 learners in this study were all from Budga-speaking families, and English to them was not principally a first language. At school they were taught Shona (Zezuru) as L1 and English as L2. According to Barker (2006), the threshold hypothesis posits a level to reach in a language before introduction of the skills of

another language. The threshold hypothesis might have affected memorizing the English words, had they not been part of the language normally used at home.

According to Levine (1994), reading difficulties may be the result of cultural, peer, and family factors. Levine further suggests that if there is no identifiable reader role model in a child's life the act of reading may fail to offer any potential attraction. As a teacher teaching in the environment in which this study was conducted, the researcher concurs with the above assertions by Levine (1994).

Learners in Bondamakara Cluster struggle with English, and most of them experience one or more of the following multiple risk factors that inhibit reading mastery, namely poorly educated parents, low-income family and community background, and attendance at low-achieving schools. With these multiple risk factors affecting these learners without explicit English reading instruction, a large number will continue to experience reading difficulties. It should be pointed out that learners in Bondamakara Cluster come to school with no proficiency in English from home but speaking the local language(s), therefore it is vital that they be taught the basics of reading in their first language while acquiring oral proficiency in English. Then, the reading skills acquired in the first language might facilitate transfer to English reading.

Contrary to the arrangement at the lower primary phase, which aims at scaffolding learners' English language proficiency at Grades 1-3, insufficient instruction is likely given in this phase. In Bondamakara Cluster, print materials were lacking and are needed to support the development of English language skills. Further, oral language proficiency in English should be encouraged in order to attain an acceptable level before learners are introduced to formal reading instruction. Once oral proficiency has been achieved, learners will be aware of the sound of words, in the form of phonemic awareness. This awareness will eventually raise the appreciation of how words are spelled.

The transition from oral to formal reading instruction requires models worth emulating by the learners. The mother tongue interference in many Shona dialects is a concern. For example the teacher in class X who points to the 'l' sound in the word /look/ as /ruk/ is not an appropriate



model for learners to emulate. The researcher is not claiming that teachers at this level in Bondamakara Cluster must sound like native English speakers, but they should model sounding relatively close to Standard English.

#### 4.4.1.3 Teacher factors

It was observed that teachers often began the reading instruction without tapping on the learners' prior knowledge to connect previous learning to the new skills. Teachers in this study should have introduced the topic to learners first, before the actual reading commenced. Instead, these teachers introduced the pages where the reading texts were, read the topic sentence and let learners read. An introduction to reading materials at the Grade 6 level requires teachers to discuss vocabulary words so that learners hear how these are read and their meanings.

Preparation of the reading materials is of utmost importance, and as Lerner (2000) writes, learners should be prepared to read with understanding by identifying the main ideas, details, and sequence, and be able to organise patterns. During observations in both classes, teachers concentrated much on decoding and correct pronunciations, but no attention was given to identifying main ideas or details, or to developing comprehension skills. The researcher expected the teachers to pre-read the stories and discuss the purpose of the lesson and the topic of the story that was to be read, so that they would model reading the story to the learners and thereafter discuss the story information using organised questions as a guide. To develop language use, the teacher should prompt learners to identify the theme for the story, so that they would practise applying the generalisation of the theme to their real life experiences. Reading is an extension of oral communication and builds upon listening and speaking skills, hence it requires ample time, a good model (Lerner, 2000) and input from teachers for the learners. If a wrong teaching approach is used with the beginners it discourages their willingness to learn to read in future. Although the responsibility for imparting effective teaching to read lies with the teachers, Moats and Foorman (2003) believe that some teachers lack the capacity to handle all the required reading skills and have not been taught them during their training.

#### 4.4.2 Possible intervention strategy

Early identification of reading difficulties is of utmost importance so that the intervention can take place as early as possible. The intervention strategy suggested in this study is directed at teachers and parents who work with learners with reading difficulties on a daily basis. It includes tips for intervention and remediation. The focus of this intervention strategy is to enhance reading skills and language instructions for Grade 6 learners in Bondamakara Cluster, who have been identified as having difficulties in reading English. The areas identified as the causes of reading difficulties in the Bondamakara Cluster, and that are considered for this intervention are word recognition skills, decoding, comprehension, English language development and teaching methods.

Learners with reading difficulties in Bondamakara Cluster need to be empowered by their teachers, and this intervention strategy should be a joint responsibility of school and parents. The role of parents is to monitor reading progress at home and pass on their recommendations to teachers for implementation. For a successful implementation all teachers at the school should be involved in the intervention for the school to produce learners who can excel academically.

##### 4.4.2.1 Word decoding skill and word recognition strategy

Before beginning the intervention, teachers must assess learners' reading skills, strengths and weaknesses then develop a plan for remediation with the following steps:

- Organise the class in such a way that all learners have access to the books and writing materials so that they can read on their own;
- focus on phonemic awareness and phonics methods in explicit ways, using effective approaches to build decoding fluency;
- engage learners in reading and writing activities that apply phonics to information taught;
- let learners learn the letters and sounds of the alphabet; and
- emphasise the irregular words that learners often see when reading, as these words do not follow the usual letter-sound rules, for example the /a/ in said, are and was.

At home, parents should create an atmosphere that encourages reading, so that children from a young age can appreciate it. Children need to see family members reading and enjoying it. Therefore, they should:

- discuss what was read with the child during spare times;
- provide magazines to facilitate reading;
- let children read the story they know and have enjoyed in the past;
- let young children read with a parent;
- label objects around the home;
- encourage children to read newspapers and magazines, and let them share stories with the rest of the family.

Learning to read is a continuous process, one that develops in the home environment. Therefore, parents should inculcate a love of reading in their children. Teachers should identify the reading needs of their learners as earlier as possible in order to prevent future reading problems.

#### 4.4.2.2 Teachers' approaches to teaching reading

For effective reading intervention in Bondamakara Cluster, the Grade 6 teachers should provide more reading practice with speed and smoothness to learners, so that they meet the reading demands of their Grade. Teachers therefore should do the following:

- First, assess learners to determine the cause(s) of their reading difficulties; if word recognition or word decoding is the source of the problem this should be addressed in addition to reading speed and phrasing.
- Let identified learners with reading difficulties practice reading the same list of words, phrase, or short sentences several times.
- Provide another English reading book rather than Step In New Primary English, and give the learner that independent level text to practice reading. Time the learner and calculate words-correct-per minute frequently. Encourage learners to improve their word-per-minute in regular intervals.
- Grade 6 teachers should also practice joint reading so that the learner matches his/her sound to that of the teacher. Slow down to check his/her reading fluency or speed up to scaffold his/her reading speed.
- Share reading of short texts. First read it to the learner and later let the learner read it back.
- Have the learner practice reading with emotion, such as sadness or excitement, to emphasise expression and intonation.

- To emphasize the use of punctuation, Grade 6 teachers should remind the learners to pause between sentences or phrases.

The ineffective reading strategies are surfaced in this study as contributory factors to reading difficulties among the Grade 6 learners. They can only be prevented if teachers use appropriate teaching approaches that respond to learners' reading needs.

#### 4.4.2.3 Language development

In the absence of English language exposure outside school, such as in Bondamakara Cluster, teachers should be encouraged to make use of the classroom opportunity to develop English oral language in their learners by implementing the following strategies:

- Expose learners to the language-experience method of teaching reading in English. Grade 6 teachers should discuss text characters with their learners, but not simply focus on fluency.
- Let learners write and illustrate language-experience stories that access prior knowledge. Grade 6 learners should write and read their stories aloud in front of the class.
- Let Grade 6 learners visit the library and read their favourite stories to reinforce vocabulary and language patterns.
- Grade 6 teachers in Bondamakara Cluster should develop learners' language through asking questions to promote interactions during story reading.

In conclusion, for any goal to be attained in teaching reading English, learners should be exposed to English language use while at school, as such is often not available at home and in their communities. To develop such exposure, teachers should encourage learners to read stories and discuss them in front of peers in the class.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.0 INTRODUCTION

The preceding section presented and discussed the results of this study investigating the causes of reading difficulties in rural primary school learners in Bondamakara Cluster. In this chapter the summary of the findings as well as the conclusion and recommendations of the study are provided.

## 5.1 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to identify causes of reading difficulties displayed by rural Grade 6 learners in Bondamakara Cluster. The researcher found that the causes of reading difficulties were lack of English language development in learners, lack of English reading materials, insufficient word recognition strategy and lack of comprehension skills. The reason that learners failed to acquire decoding skills was that the teachers lacked the competencies in teaching reading English explicitly. The teachers must possess the requisite specialisation required to teach English as a subject, and reading in particular. It was noted that at Mudzonga Primary School the theoretical approach in teaching reading in English was used. There should be a wider exposure of learners to a variety of reading materials for them to acquire reading competence.

## 5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the findings of the research, the following recommendations are made:

- All schools should have sufficient English reading materials to cater for the reading needs of the learners. The school should continuously provide the necessary teaching materials, such as newly updated books and supplementary reading books.
- Continuous training for teachers should be encouraged to enhance their knowledge and skills in both oral and reading to make them effective teachers on whom learners can model.
- Teachers should be motivated to improve their English through coming out with and engaging in initiatives such as the English Language Proficiency Programs.
- Teachers should encourage independent reading by learners.
- Teachers should set up a library in an area of the classroom to which learners frequently have accesses during the class time. They should display as many books as possible with visible illustrations that attract learners' attention.
- In order to develop vocabulary among the Grade 6 learners, reference books such as dictionaries should be included in their selections. It is also advisable for schools to involve parents in their endeavour to teach learners to read in English.
- Classroom interactions are a vital tool that triggers language development, and ultimately reading skills, therefore teachers should know how to stimulate their learners' involvement in the classrooms. This includes ideas on how to fuel learners' motivation, how to help learners see the

relevance of the topic, and how the techniques used to develop reading skills can increase classroom participation.

- The government should consider reducing the teacher-learner ratio to 1:30 or less, since both classes observed with the teacher-learner ratio beyond 1:30 experienced discipline problems.

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