

# A TRACER STUDY ON TEACHERS PEDAGOGY AND THE READING SKILLS OF SOME STUDENTS AT JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines teacher classroom practices in developing reading skills in literature classroom at junior secondary level in Botswana. The reading skill is pivotal since it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge in the learning process. The study is qualitative and used classroom observations, interviews, studied students' artefacts and teachers' schemes and records of work. The findings indicate the need for concerted effort on the part of teachers to develop reading skills in the learners. The study recommends the need to reflect on and incorporate effective classroom pedagogy to develop reading skills better in students.*

**Key words:** reading skills, comprehension strategies, teaching practices, learning, junior secondary schools, Botswana

## **Introduction**

Reading is one of the basic skills that drive student learning across the curricula. It is thus imperative to master this skill as early as possible in the process of learning. However, more often than not, students progress through the various stages or levels of (junior secondary) education without having mastered this critical skill, especially with regard to reading English texts. This is a complex phenomenon that emanates from macro-level policy of using English as a medium of instruction in all subjects at junior secondary school with the exception of Setswana. The long-term visions of Botswana, encapsulated in Vision 2016 and Vision 2036, aspire for a nation that is informed and educated. The Millennium Development Goals of 2004 also aim to reduce and/or eradicate illiteracy. Pivotal to the achievement of these magnanimous goals is the ability to read and the consequent ability to comprehend. It thus becomes imperative for teachers to drill and develop this essential skills in the learners especially at elementary levels of education.

## **Background and Objectives of the Study**

This research was a tracer study on problems encountered by Khoe learners when reading texts in English. These Khoe students finished their Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) in a rural village where majority of learners were from the so-called minority ethnic groups, and an insignificant number were from the so-called major ethnic groups in Botswana. They were subsequently admitted at junior secondary school. In an earlier study conducted by Mokibelo and Moumakwa (2005), it was observed that at primary level most students from minority groups experienced considerable problems when they read texts in English. In some or most cases, these problems were aggravated by inappropriate classroom practices by teachers. The current study is a follow-up on this issue, and aims to investigate whether the problems encountered reading texts in English at primary level persisted at junior secondary level and whether there were variations in teaching styles geared towards addressing the problems. The objectives of the study were to explore teaching practices in the reading lessons and investigate the effectiveness of these practices in the lessons.

## **Research Methodology**

Data for the research were collected through class observation, interviews, studying students' artefacts, teachers' scheme books and records of work. The triangulation of instruments for data collection was an effort to eliminate any bias and predisposition or favouritism so as not to influence the information provided (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). Further, data collected were categorised into thematic statements and interpreted systematically.

The sample of the study was six language teachers and 86 students in Forms One, Two and Three. The six languages teachers were important for this study because they taught and gave instructions in the reading class, and their teaching pedagogy in the reading lessons was one of the focuses of the investigation. The study adopted purposive sampling. This is the type of sampling that zones on information-rich cases that are examined in depth. The population of the study is selected because it is believed to be rich in the information sought after (Wiersma, 2000). Purposive sampling is acceptable where cases are selected with specific purposes in mind (Neuman, 2006). It is often used when a researcher wants to identify (a) particular type of case(s) for in-depth analysis. In most cases, the purpose of a study that uses this type of sampling is to get a deeper understanding of the issue being studied and not necessarily to generalize the findings of the research to get a larger population. The researcher must be knowledgeable about characteristics of the participants (or units/items/documents etc.); hence they are selected because of the information they can provide which is important to the study. Forcese and Richer (1970) noted that sampling is used in research because it is economic with the time and money that would otherwise be spent if the whole population were studied. Sampling still generates information that is an accurate representation of the entire population.

### Findings and Discussion of the Findings of the Study

Reading lessons based on a literature text written in English were observed in Form One through to Form Three classes. The novel was *The Amaryllis* by L.C. Dlamini, and the objectives of the lesson given to learners were to *read* the text and to *explain* difficult concepts in the novel. It was not clear as to which objective was for students and which one was for the teachers. The students were asked whether the teacher had given them clear instructions/objectives for the reading lesson. The responses are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Student responses with regard to whether instructions were clear in the reading class**

Form	No of students	Yes	No
1	41	16	25
2	24	8	16
3	20	7	13

In a Form One class, 25 out of 41 students said they were not given clear instructions. In Form Two, 16 out of 24 students said instructions needed to be clarified, while in a Form Three class 13 out of 20 students reported that instruction were not clear and needed to be explained further. Paris and Hamilton (2009) recommend explicitness on the part of teachers in their classroom practice for learners to know exactly what is required of them in every lesson. Whenever students are given a reading task, there should be a purpose for that assignment. The purpose should be clear to the learners and should go beyond mere reading of the text and explaining difficult words/concepts. It was important that when learners read a story they should be taught about the setting, classify characters (as major and minor), analyse individual characters, focus on their personality and appearance and deduce the lessons that could be derived from the characters. Students further needed to analyse the plot and identify its four constituents: the problem, the response, the action and the outcome (Koda, 2007). Equally important is the theme that underlies the story. Other reading skills and strategies subsequently come into play: interpreting the theme, predicting, visualising, rereading and many others. It was essential for students to be guided by teachers in the prediction exercise to encourage them to generate speculations and guesses (Koda, 2007). These go a significant extent in cultivating not just the reading skills but critical thinking in the students (Dymock, 2007).

Furthermore, the objectives of the lesson given to students should be within their capabilities. Whereas the students could *read* the text, it was not possible for them to *explain* difficult words/concepts in the novel. Students cannot be required to explain difficult concepts and words, since, by their very nature, the words and concepts are difficult for students at this level and they need assistance in understanding them and the text in general.

The objective of *reading the text* on the part of the student notwithstanding, it was observed that the lecture method dominated the lesson. Students largely remained passive, inactive and silent throughout the lesson while the teacher did most of the talking *and most of the reading*. Interaction between the teacher and students was very limited. There is need for teachers to think outside the box, to create a conducive environment by means of a variety of learning and teaching styles in order to reach the students. Koda (2004) argues that skilled readers do not use strategies in isolation but integrate them. As (Yoon, 2007) points out reading classrooms are complex and cannot be effective in a single method of teaching and reading. For example, when reading a story, answers to subsequent questions can be graphed, analysed according to episodes and story webs can be created. These artwork and drawings may help students comprehend the texts better (Dymock, 2007).

Dymock (2007) further suggests that comprehension strategies should be taught to improve students' comprehension of the text. If learners have acquired good comprehension strategies they will be able to activate prior knowledge, generate questions, answer questions, draw inferences, create mental imagery, identify text structure used by the writer and create summaries (Pressley, 2000; Donovan, 2002). Brown (2008) and McEwan (2004) point out that good readers should make connections, predict, visualize, self-question when confused, construct the gist and enact problem solving strategies. They could use strategies such as guessing, using context or picture clues, reread and resolve problems on their own. In addition, Klapwijk (2015) says that teachers should activate prior knowledge, make predictions, give pre-reading questions, monitor reading and provide different reading techniques. It is the teachers who set reading goals, share personal experiences, contextualise reading, use prior knowledge, emphasise good reading strategies, extend dialogues among participants, prepare students for discussion, cue students to support their interpreting and promote effective teaching and learning in the reading classroom (Brown, 2008).

Comprehension strategies should be taught explicitly and practiced with guidance, using many texts until students have a good understanding of the reading strategies and how to apply them (Pressley, 2002; Block & Pressley, 2002). These strategies could prepare learners to become active and independent readers by integrating them on their own (Brown, 2008). It is vital that these comprehension strategies be mastered at lower levels of education in order for learners to cope with reading at tertiary level. If the foundation is weak, as is the case here, the learning process is bound to crack at some point.

Lack of integration of various teaching pedagogy was observed in scheming and planning for reading lessons. Teachers' schemes of work did not indicate a variety of methods to be used to teach reading skills. Although 'discussion' was written in the scheme book, it was not utilized during the lesson; only the lecture method was used. The scheme of work left out other teaching methods and learning styles. A scheme of work is a guide for a lesson and needs to be detailed, informative and show integration of teaching strategies. This was not

observed in the teachers' scheme books. It is also perhaps important to reflect on teacher training programmes for junior secondary schools to check whether they were adequately capacitated with good knowledge of scheming and planning for reading lessons.

During interviews, students were asked whether they understood better when the teachers read the text rather than when they read the texts themselves. The responses are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Student responses with regard to whether they understood better when the teacher read the text**

Form	No of students	Yes	No	Sometimes
1	41	26	15	0
2	24	12	11	1
3	20	10	10	0

Table 2 shows that the majority of Form One students responded that they understood better when the teacher, rather than the students, read the texts. Most of the students in Forms Two and Three reported that they did not understand the texts when the teacher was reading.

It was further observed that, in those occasions when the students read the literature texts and comprehension passages in Form Two and Form Three classes, the teachers kept on interrupting the students to provide explanations for difficult concepts and words. This distracted the students from interacting with the text adequately/efficiently. In most cases the teachers ended up reading the texts and passages for the students, with the result that some students, especially those at the back of the classrooms, started sleeping during the lessons with the teachers not even noticing. Evidently, classroom experience needs to be improved drastically to make it more interactive. Students learn better when they participate in the search for knowledge rather than when they are passive recipients of information. Participation in the classroom can go a long way in off-setting boredom and sleep.

The other observation was that in Form Two and Form Three classes teachers did not use the writing board. Capturing (main) ideas on the board could have crystalized them in the students' memories for easy remembrance. Furthermore, Tamor (2017) opines that classroom teaching and oral directions should be reinforced by teacher-prepared handouts; teachers should encourage students to underline, highlight, or jot key words on the margins when reading. This was lacking during the lesson observed.

During interviews students were further asked what the cause of their reading problems was, and they indicated difficult vocabulary as one of the main causes. Their responses are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Student responses with regard to what the cause of the reading problems was**

<b>Form</b>	<b>Teacher not explaining</b>	<b>English too difficult</b>	<b>Not using dictionary</b>
1 = 41	7	33	1
2 = 24	9	16	1
3 = 20	10	9	1

It can be seen from Table 3 that most of the students across all the Forms thought English was too difficult. This was followed by the report that teachers did not provide needed explanations during reading classes. The lack of dictionary use as a cause of the reading problems scored the least responses. Since this was a tracer study, the problems noted above had also been observed when the same students were at primary school. The students thus had a very weak background to reading texts in English and, evidently, the problem was carried over to the next levels of education. Struggling to read meant that students had very little or no interaction with the texts and hence no comprehension of the information contained in the texts. This could lead to learners becoming academically detached from the classroom (Brozo, 2002) and ultimately dropping out of school. Tamor (2017) further observed that children with reading difficulties often lament about the embarrassment and devastation of having to read with difficulty in front of peers and teachers. Tamor (2017) also noted that if students are not competent readers, they are at risk of experiencing behavioural, social and emotional difficulties as well.

A study of the teachers' scheme books indicated that learners performed poorly in reading tasks as shown in Table 4. Table 4 shows marks for a literature test administered to Form Three students who were not far from writing their examinations.

**Table 4: End of May test marks for Form Three Students (Analysis-Literature)**

<b>Grades</b>	<b>Class B</b>	<b>Class C</b>
A	0	0
B	0	0
C	0	0
D	1	4
E	33	32
Total	34	36
Quality	0%	0%

Table 4 shows that the best performance obtained by students was a D grade, and only five students obtained a D grade. No student obtained A grade, B grade or C grade. The rest of the students in both classes obtained E grade. The results in Table 4 shows that it remains a formidable challenge for teachers to motivate the pupils to read/learn in order to perform better (cf. Tamor, 2017), and of utmost importance is the development of the culture of reading and the integration of varied teaching practices in the classroom. This would contribute immensely towards Botswana becoming a reading nation (Botswana Vision 2016, 2036). Rainville & Jones (2008) state that teachers spend too much time recording the poor performance of students instead of spending time looking for and getting valuable information about each child to inform their teaching. According to Yoon (2007) teachers should build a trusting relationship and accommodate all students academically, socially and culturally.

In studying Form Three exercises books it was observed that reading tasks assigned to students dated back to two years and six months. Furthermore, it was not clear what the teachers were testing/assessing in the reading tasks. Two composition writing assignments had been given to students and there was only one comment at the end of the compositions. There were no letter writing tasks. Unmarked work was also noted. The same observations were noted in the Form Two exercise books. The teachers reported that they had too many students, making it difficult for them to give regular exercises and tutorial work even though the students were just about to complete junior secondary level.

The other problem observed in general was the issue of language barrier in the reading classroom especially where ethnic minority groups were concerned. The issue of language barrier was mentioned by both teachers and students as an issue that thwarts learning. Although this problem was generally overlooked, it needs to be addressed. Going forward, it is important for teachers to apply second language teaching and learning styles to address the language problem.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers are central to the development of the reading skills in the students. Teacher practices in the reading classroom impact on learners academically. If the reading problems are not addressed constructively, effective learning cannot take place. A weak foundation in reading at lower levels has serious implications for learning at higher levels of education. Effective reading skills cannot be successfully achieved if teacher practices in the classroom are not changed or adapted to address the needs of the learners. Transformative learning advocates for change in both the teachers and students, with the teacher as the starting point. Teachers have to assist the learners to transform their perspective towards reading, as the nation aspires to be educated and informed.

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