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The Reading Grannies: Modelling How to Teach Reading

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors report on a literacy development intervention in a state, primary farm school in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN), South Africa. Volunteers, who named themselves the "Reading Grannies" were invited by the principal and teachers to model reading in English to learners and teachers who were non-primary speakers of English. The learners were to develop an ear for the language by listening to first language (L1) speakers' pronunciation, tone and expression and the teachers had to improve their teaching from the modelling. The main finding of the study is that the explicit teaching and modelling enabled the learners to understand English better and the teachers appreciated how teaching actively encouraged learners to read and facilitated their understanding of English.

Keywords: Primary school**,** English, reading, volunteers, modelling

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we report on a school-based early grade reading (EGR) intervention in a rural primary school in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN), South

Africa. The intervention modelled how to facilitate IsiZulu-speaking foundation phase (FP) learners' comprehension of English by listening to, amongst other activities, first language speakers reading stories to them. The latter were a group of volunteers we have named The Reading Grannies (RGs) who were invited to the school (by the principal and teachers) to help improve the learners' reading skills and comprehension. We have named the school Farm School in the study.

To address the reading challenges of learners in her school, Mrs. Thandi (pseudonym), the principal, invited the RGs to model reading in English in the classrooms. Her main goal was to expose the teachers to how the RGs adapted their reading to the rural primary school context, and in this way demonstrate how they could build bridges across the learners' language competences. Mrs Thandi believed that the intervention would help the teachers observe and learn what they needed to do when teaching reading in English to facilitate language comprehension and use. The assumption was, firstly, that listening to English stories read by first language (L1) speakers would expose the teachers to, for example, the pronunciation, tone and expression (phonemic awareness) that convey meaning clearly. Secondly, this would help them improve their teaching of English First Additional Language (FAL) and subsequently, improve the learners' proficiency and comprehension.

In South Africa, the medium of instruction/language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in the FP (Grade R to three) is the primary language of the learners. So, in the case of the school in the study, it was isiZulu. In Grade four, it (the LOLT) changes to English and learners are expected to be able to read to learn through it. However, many learners in rural areas seem to encounter the language only in Grade R when they start formal schooling. In general, they had very little or no exposure to reading in English in their homes. Therefore, since they had to understand and learn to use English as FAL and LOLT in Grade four, their teachers who themselves were non-primary speakers of English, had to be assisted by the RGs to develop more confidence and improved ability to implement the FAL curriculum policy.

Research conducted over the past 20 years shows a persistence of "alarmingly low" (Spaull, 2013a, p. 4; Western Cape Department of Education, 2006, p. 4) literacy levels amongst learners in South Africa. International and national tests have also highlighted systemic underperformance as an overriding problem particularly amongst learners from the poorest socio-economic levels in the country. Many are unable to read for meaning (see PIRLS 2016 results in Howie, et al., 2017). Howie et al., (2008, p. 3) have argued that there is a tendency to mask this literacy

problem as a "language proficiency issue" rather than a reading and comprehension problem.

Many learners are not only struggling with literacy skills in their second language (L2) (Pretorius, 2012; Van Rooy & Pretorius, 2013; Pretorius, 2015) but also in their first language (L1). In many provinces, learners continue to perform below expectations with each passing year. For example, the PIRLS test results of 2006 and 2011 indicate that, in particular, Black South African learners who did the test in their L1 fared worst of all (Howie, et al., 2008; Howie et al., 2012). Spaull (2013b, p. 7) has also pointed out that "over 80% of African language speakers in South Africa lack the basic reading skills and strategies to cope with academic tasks" and 29% of grade 4 learners are illiterate (Spaull, 2016). Dreyer & Nel (2003), Klapwijk (2011), Zimmerman & Smit (2014) and Zimmerman (2014) have linked this underperformance to the lack of adequate formal instruction in comprehension skills in the schools and Snilstveit et al. (2016) relate it to ineffective instructional practices that are a key barrier to effective learning. In Snilstviet et al.'s view, teachers spend more time teaching mechanical reading skills and decoding rather than meaning making and comprehension skills (see also Pretorius & Machet, 2004; Verbeek, 2010; Murris, 2014; Prinsloo et al., 2015). Taylor & Taylor (2013, pp.17-18) too, also link this underperformance primarily to the teachers' inadequate professional competence. More recently, the 'Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) Policy Summary Report' (DBE, 2017) has also highlighted learning to read for meaning as one of the biggest developmental challenges facing the country. Specifically, rural schools have been shown to be using "narrow pedagogic techniques" (DBE, 2017, p. 3).

The underperformance persists despite the post-apartheid redistribution of resources, curriculum reforms within the education system and the efforts of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to introduce programmes aimed at providing teachers with the support and skills needed to improve Grade 1-6 literacy levels and improve education results. The programmes include:

1. the four-year 'Foundations for Learning Campaign' (DBE, 2008) as a response to national, regional and international studies that showed that South African children lack key skills associated with Literacy and Numeracy. They are unable to read, write and count at expected levels. In response, the campaign focused on improving reading, writing and numeracy skills so that all children could have a solid foundation for learning. It provided clear directives to the national education system on the minimum expectations at each

level of the General Phase of schooling (Gr R-6) to improve learning outcomes in these crucial areas (p.3-4).

2. the 'Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)' (DBE, 2015) was developed in 2006 for use in developing countries and adapted for the South African context in early 2007 by the Department of Education (DOE). It has had a strong influence on education policy in South Africa. While the EGRA is not an intervention or a curriculum its significance for the reported study is that it diagnostically assessed reading skills in the foundation phase (Gr 1-3) to identify reading problems early and put in place interventions that are adapted to learners' needs, particularly those who are struggling (DBE, 2015; Dubeck & Gove, 2015, p. 315). Useful to highlight are the two main principles that underpinned EGRA; namely: 1) that reading is acquired in phases/predictable patterns and 2) most people learn with instruction (Dubeck & Gove, 2015, p. 316). In addition, there are five phases of literacy acquisition that are linked to the subtasks in EGRA namely, pre-alphabetic, partial alphabetic, alphabetic, consolidated-alphabetic and automatic (Dubeck & Gove, 2015, p. 316). The principles and tasks provided useful guidelines for EGR interventions.
3. the 'Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025' (DBE, 2011b) introduced to build on the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS) (DBE, 2011a) and strengthen the management and monitoring of teaching and learning in provinces and schools (DBE, 2011b, p.4). It is important to highlight that the CAPS was introduced to "provide a more structured and sequenced approach to literacy instruction, explicitly articulating pacing, time on task and learning outcomes" (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016, p. 1) while the Action Plan's key goals (Goals 1, 2, 7, 16 and 20) were to improve schooling by focusing on teachers' pedagogic and subject knowledge to enrich education (DBE, 2011c, p. 2-5); to strengthen teaching and learning in schools (DBE, 2011b, p.4), amongst others, those identified through the EGRA of 2006; and to improve schooling by enriching the teaching skills and subject knowledge of participating teachers (DBE, 2011c, p. 2-5). In particular Goals 1 and 16 were relevant to the study as they, respectively, aimed to increase the number of learners in Grade 3 who, by the end of the year, have mastered the minimum language and numeracy competencies for Grade 3 and, improve the professionalism,

teaching skills, subject knowledge and computer literacy of teachers throughout their entire careers

This is the broader context in which we set out to capture both the RGs and teachers' views on the assistance the learners were receiving (from the RGs) to read and understand English texts. We were particularly interested in what the RGs were doing to improve learners' reading and comprehension skills and the potential benefit of their interventions to the teachers. The hope was that the insights provided would help in achieving the Action Plan's goals.

In the paper we reflect on the first stage of the study. It (study) is planned to continue until the end of 2019. Since we wished to explore views on this stage, the study was designed to collect different types of data through lesson observations, focus group discussions and biographical questionnaires. This involved interacting mainly with the teachers and RGs to collect their views on the activities witnessed and resources used in the reading lessons. Of particular interest to us were their viewpoints on the teaching methods and learning support materials they used to facilitate comprehension and meaning making as proposed in the South African curriculum policy (CAPS) for teaching English as FAL in the FP.

In CAPS for the FP, basic reading skills must be firmly established in this level of schooling. Reading for meaning is described as a "foundational skill that is critical in establishing an individual's life-long learning trajectory" (DBE, 2017, p. 2).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning to read as the foundation of educational development

The broad body of research on the acquisition of reading in the early years supports the view that "teaching young children to read is the cornerstone of improving educational outcomes" (Gove and Wetterberg, 2011, p. 1). Early childhood (around age five or six) is said to be the optimal time for children to learn to read and develop the basic reading skills that will promote fluency and proficiency in reading and high literacy rates (Abadzi, 2017, p. 8). Furthermore, if they do not learn to read in the early grades, they are likely to fail in developing high levels of fluency and more advanced cognitive skills needed to progress to "higher levels of schooling" (Graham & Kelly, 2018, p. 3). Therefore, early grade reading interventions provide a useful strategy for developing cognitive skills needed in schooling. An inability to read gives rise to problems of learners falling behind because of being unable to "absorb printed information, follow

written instructions or communicate well in writing" (Gove and Wetterberg, 2011, p. 1).

Luke, Woods & Dooley (2011, p. 158-160) have argued that for rural learners from low-income communities to understand what they read, English reading and comprehension instruction must integrate their cultural and community knowledge. In their view, to avoid a narrow understanding, comprehension instruction must be treated as a cognitive, social and intellectual phenomenon (Ibid., p. 158, 160). Adapting such instruction to the attributes of the learners by drawing on their everyday knowledge, would help them bridge what they already know and understand in a language to what they need to know and understand in English (see also Clay, 1998). For Cummins (1988; 2000), such adaptation would involve drawing on the common underlying proficiencies between the primary (L1) and the second (L2) language.

Cummins (1988, 2000) regards the continuous introduction of new vocabulary and more complex sentence structuring as important to develop proficiency in a language for L2 learners who do not often use academic English outside the classroom. For Snow (1987, 2014) and Spolsky (1987) the decoding of content through contextualisation in concrete ways helps to improve relationally, understanding of a L1 and the target language. Therefore, it was important for the RGs to adapt and develop the reading skills and comprehension of the learners by drawing on their everyday knowledge as examples. Linking what learners already knew and understood in isiZulu to what they needed to know and understand when listening to English had to help build bridges across the two languages. The RGs had to understand that in reading stories in English, the learners' primary language had to be treated as a learning resource of equal status and value as English. Where necessary, isiZulu was to be used as a means of communication to facilitate understanding of the stories. It was thus crucial for the research process to establish the RGs' sensitivity to these ideas. The ways in which they taught reading had to also enrich the learners' knowledge of isiZulu as their L1.

Research on literacy development indicates that reading skills are developed through a combination of methods. Phonological awareness print knowledge and orthographic (writing) knowledge have been identified as three main literacy skills integral to the successful acquisition of a language. For example, Ioannou-Georgiou & Verdugo (2009, p. 1) consider stories an important learning tool that promotes access to "language, content, culture and cognition". Concrete thinking skills, creative and abstract thinking, reasoning and cognitive learning strategies can be

developed as learners are guided through progressively more complex texts while provided with opportunities to practice the target language (Ioannou-Georgiou & Verdugo, 2009, p. 4).

Using stories to advance reading achievement

This model of reading prioritises the active involvement of the reader (Allington, 2002). Stories are seen as encouraging the participation, interaction and communication of learners faced with a new language. Since they are often multimodal with pictures, sounds or songs, they can assist learners to construct and reconstruct knowledge (Gibbons, 2002). The reader is actively involved in thinking about what he/she is doing while reading. Therefore, providing a context within which a new language and content can be introduced to learners in a pleasant, comprehensible and meaningful way (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2001), enables them (learners) to respond verbally or nonverbally when listening to a story being read. They are able to construct knowledge even if their language proficiency is limited because of the interactive nature of reading and the constructive nature of comprehension.

The model supports McNamara's (2007) argument for explicit teaching and modelling of comprehension skills. Teachers model reading and provide support for meaning making rather than assume that meaning resides in the text and readers have to reproduce it. When the former is the case, reading is a sequential process in which a beginner is expected to acquire a set of hierarchically ordered sub-skills that build the ability to comprehend. Mastery of these skills makes readers to be considered experts (Dole et al., 1991). In Nunan's (1991) view, reading in this 'bottom-up' way involves the decoding of written symbols. McCarthy (1999), sees it as an outside-in process in which meaning existing in the text is first interpreted by the reader before being taken in. Readers are not viewed as passive recipients of information.

Writing in relation to South Africa, Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) have highlighted a gap in research on teachers' problems in teaching literacy, in particular, reading comprehension. They are concerned about interventions that provide teachers with lesson planning templates and time management guidelines rather than immersing them "in rich reading practices [and] a clear understanding of reading concepts, reading development and reading methodology" (Ibid., p. 1). The study thus hoped to develop insights that might help in addressing problems in teaching literacy by inviting the RGs to comment on the reading lessons they had designed, explain how they modelled reading and reflect on what they

considered to be the effects on the learners' reading and their interactions with the teachers. We assumed that encouraging RGs to reflect on their reading lessons would reveal the concepts underpinning their teaching practices and the teachers in the rural primary school would, in turn, be exposed to discussions that would help them understand what the RGs' practices were based on in terms of firstly, beliefs/ideas and secondly, how they could use the practices for improving their teaching of English as FAL.

In the 2015 Budget Vote Speech, the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga, appealed for South Africa to "become a reading nation!" because "[a] reading nation, is a winning nation". The findings in this study could also be beneficial nationally by explaining a way in which the teaching of English reading could be sustainable and equitable because of being school/teacher driven. Through this exploratory we thus attempted to answer the following questions:

- How did the teachers use the RGs reading instructions and views to broaden their understanding of how they could improve ways in which they taught reading and develop the learners' literacy?
- How did the RGs' reflection on reading lessons serve as a resource to improve the teaching of reading in the FP?
- How this school-led literacy intervention could be used to raise teachers' awareness of what is needed to improve how they taught reading?

RESEARCH METHOD

The Participants

The participants were invited to complete biographical data questionnaires containing 12 items that required information about where they lived, their gender, present or previous occupations (for volunteers) and level of education. The personal profiles were important to establish the professional or other experience that would have enhanced reading ability, learning and the achievement of the learners.

The Reading Grannies (RGs): The 15 RGs volunteers were recruited because they were local and English first-language speakers. They had been reading at Farm School every Monday morning for the past three years (2016 to 2019) excluding the school holidays and exam time. However, not all of them had training in education. Of the 11 who participated in the study, five had teaching diplomas (n=2) and teaching degrees (n=3). Four (n=4) were qualified nurses and two (n=2) had other degrees (one Fine Arts and one Psychology). Their average age was 67 with the youngest 56 and

the oldest 78. Some of the grannies were fluent in isiZulu and this was very helpful in their communication with the learners.

Entry into the school/the site/field was by invitation. When the grannies first arrived at the school, they were introduced to the teachers and learners by the principal. Thereafter, the coordinator of the reading initiative and two other RGs were invited to meet with the principal and the management team (SMT) to discuss the intervention. Mrs Thandi and Mr. Zondi (T7) were to act as critical friends and guided the RGs about what the school needed.

One of the RGs and co-author of the paper was a primary school teacher for many years and considered herself an insider to the general school context. Entering the field with her assistance helped to familiarise the RGs with the school as a context to improve reading in English. They were able to "map the setting", learn about its rules and routines, the spaces and places in which they would be working, meet and establish relationships with the principal and teachers as they negotiated their new role in the school (Barley, 2011, p. 1). Her experience as a teacher also proved valuable in the interactions between the RGs and teachers when seeking clarity about how reading was taught and talked about. She helped settle the RGs in the school and obtain the perspectives, thoughts and beliefs of the teachers about how they taught reading.

In the first two years, reading took place in all the classes from Grade R to Grade 7. However, in 2018 it was agreed that the focus would be on Grade R, the FP (Grade 1-3) and Grade 4 only. The change from IsiZulu to English at Grade 4 necessitated more focused support because of a general concern with the literacy levels of learners. Presently, in 2019, only Grade R-3 are involved in the program so that the RGs can focus on these early grades. Two of the RGs had met with Mrs. Thandi and Mrs. Xaba (the HOD of the FP) earlier that morning at 8h00 to discuss the organization of the program for the year. The excerpt below describes the first day of the RGs in the new school year in 2018.

> It is a misty Monday morning in the little farming town of Green River (pseudonym) in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. A group of women arrives at the local farm school. They are called the Reading Grannies (RGs). There is a ripple of excitement as they get out of their cars and greet each other. They are excited because this is the first reading day of the new school year. Martha, the RG coordinator explains that the reading times have changed. The principal,

> Mrs. Thandi, has told her that the time for the first break has changed to 10h00. This means that reading must now be from 9h00 to 10h00. For the past 2 years, it has been from 9h30 to 10h30 but after the principal and the staff had, a meeting with the circuit manager it was decided to make first break earlier so that the children could eat the hot meal provided free by the school as part of the Department of Education's nutrition programme. Many of the children come to school hungry and need this nutritious meal to learn better. The RGs are very happy to fit in with this new time slot. However, they now only have 30 minutes left to do reading. They quickly gather in their grade groups to discuss how they should handle reading to their respective classes today (Fieldnotes, Monday, 22 January 2018).

The teachers: There are eight teachers at the school and the principal assists with teaching in Grade 2. A teacher, employed by a local NGO, assists with teaching technology using computers. Of the six teachers who participated in the study, the youngest was 34 and the oldest 55. Two had a teaching diploma; two a teaching degree and another two a teaching diploma and teaching degree. Their teaching experience varied between 4 to 30 years with 15 as average.

The school

The school: Farm School (pseudonym) was founded in the 1950s as two separate farm schools that combined in 1995. Generous funding used to build the new school came from a bequest in a trust earmarked for educating rural children, particularly those who came from socio-economically disadvantaged homes in the area. The school serves children who live in the area mainly with parents working on the surrounding commercial farms (vegetables, dairy and maize). Another group of children resided in two nearby townships. The townships are overcrowded and some of the children's carers are unemployed, medically unfit or addicted to alcohol or drugs. Service delivery strikes affect transport and school attendance.

Presently there are 280 learners at the school. They are mainly isiZulu primary language speakers. Most parents were unable to pay school fees or contribute towards fundraising efforts. Over time, the school's funding from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has proved insufficient to upgrade the classrooms and other school facilities. It is a print-poor environment and there is a shortage of teaching and learning

resources especially good reading books. This became more evident when visiting the school over the past two years. The classrooms needed repair and teaching/learning resources. The hope was that, despite these conditions, the RGs would provide the needed support for teachers at this crucial level of learners' literacy development so that they could become independent and successful readers.

The school is non-fee paying and categorized as Quintile One (Q1). Q1 schools are historically disadvantaged schools (HDSs) and are often under-resourced. The RGs raised funds to improve the school's infrastructure and purchase classroom equipment – desks and chairs, toys and other teaching learning support materials required to stimulate and enrich learning. These contributions helped to build trust between the staff and the volunteers over the past two to three years.

Data Collection

In accordance with ethical research practices written consent was obtained from the principal, the teachers, the parents/guardians/caregivers of the learners and the reading volunteers. The nature and scope of the study was explained, and they were asked to complete informed consent forms. Pseudonyms or codes were used to protect their identities and that of the school.

Increasingly researchers and policymakers in South Africa are focusing on identifying successful instructional interventions that are evidence-based (DBE, 2017, p.2). However, in this study, instead, an exploratory case study was used to provide insights about how to improve instruction through the RGs and teacher-driven initiatives. Lesson observations, focus group discussions and classroom artefacts were used to collect data.

Lesson observations were used in grades R-4 to capture how the RGs read stories to the learners and used prompts to motivate them to want to read. Special attention was paid to the behaviour of the grannies and teachers as it occurred during lessons (Creswell, 2012). Field notes were used to record what was witnessed. The observations were followed by focus group discussions with the RGs and teachers responsible for the grades to obtain their views on the reading instructions. A semi-structured interview schedule of questions on teaching how to read for meaning in general and, specifically, how the RGs and teachers understood the reading lessons given and witnessed was also used. The questions addressed issues that the literature, international evaluations and the school identified as important for improving reading. It was important for both the RGS and

teachers to indicate whether the approaches were useful for dealing with the learners' reading and literacy problems. The RGs were encouraged to explain their experiences of the reading lessons. The discussions with them focused on planning for the reading, what they taught, the approaches they used and their thoughts on whether learners developed the required reading skills. The discussions were held at venues selected by participants e.g. coffee shops to provide them with an environment in which they could speak freely and individually reflect on and explain their experiences of the reading lessons.

When engaging with the school principal and teachers, we asked them to first, identify the learners' needs and, second, how they thought the RGs addressed these needs. In cases where their explanations were not understood, as Brockman (2011) suggests, we assisted them to reflect by posing open ended questions that started with, for example, 'What can you say about the reading lessons you provided?' to encourage them to explain their views and help us co-construct the meaning of what they expressed.

Both discussions were audio recorded. However, we were unable to match the data collected from the teachers and RGS because first, their teaching was driven by different factors, namely; the school curriculum policy requirements for the teachers and, in a more general sense, the priority of the RGs, namely, to ensure that children developed an ear and understood English as spoken by a first language speaker. The RGs believed that once these language competences were developed, the learners would more easily be able to fulfil the outcomes stipulated by the policy. Therefore, the result was that although both the teachers and RGS were involved in developing the English language skills of the learners, when they spoke about these skills they underscored different aspects.

RESULTS

In the classroom observations, we witnessed that generally, in the reading sessions, the learners were encouraged to identify certain features of the story e.g., characters, setting etc. and answer questions about the stories. English words were often repeated and linked to the isiZulu ones. Songs, poems, nursery rhymes, art and craft activities were used to get learners to speak English. The RGs who could play a musical instrument would use it in their lessons to encourage learners to sing and dance. Here is an example of a Grade R lesson that describes how 'Mary' (RG1) taught how to read using actions, rhymes, songs and a story before a drawing activity.

The reading lesson began with the children lining up in front of the classroom and each child being asked to introduce him/herself. Mary then led them in singing “Head and shoulders, knees and toes” with actions. Afterwards they formed a circle with Mary in the middle and they had to copy her actions and repeat what she was saying: “I am clapping. I am walking. I am running. I am crying. I am hopping." She then asked the learners to take turns and tell others what to do as if they were the teacher. She began the exercise by saying, “Good morning teacher. What are you going to do today?” The first learner said, “I am stretching”. The next one said, “I am marching” and another one said, “I am kicking”. Mary helped them to think about an action and the teacher translated into isiZulu where necessary to promote understanding as this was a Grade R class and some of the learners knew very little English.

After each learner had a turn to be the teacher, s/he had to go down onto the floor and curl up into a ball as if sleeping. Mary then sang the “Sleeping Song” and the learners had to imitate the actions. They had to wake up and jump up and hop, hop, hop and stop! They loved this and jumped with great excitement and enthusiasm.

The next activity was the story of Little Red Riding Hood. They had to sit in rows and Mary began by asking them if they could remember the story and they discussed the picture on the cover. She then began to read, showing them the pictures. The teacher assisted with translations when the learners seemed unsure of the words. Mary asked them to act as if they were in the story, for example, “Knock on the door” and, “Can I come in granny?” or “What big ears you’ve got!” After the story was finished, the learners had to draw a picture. They took their pictures to the teacher so that she could write their names on them. They proudly showed their pictures to Mary who gave them each a big hug and praised their efforts. She then asked them to sit on the carpet to sing the “Goodbye Song”. They had to sing along and do the actions (Lesson Observation Notes, Monday, 7 May 2018). Therefore, in response to the question: ‘How did the teachers use the RGs reading instructions and views to broaden their understanding of how they could improve ways in which they taught reading and develop the learners’ literacy?’, focus group discussions were used to identify orientations in the viewpoints and concerns expressed.

The teachers’ viewpoints

The views of the teachers, specifically, about how the RGs conveyed meaning through reading revealed an appreciation of how they motivated the learners to read. For Mr. Zondi who had participated in 2016

and 2017 “there had been a vast improvement in the learners’ participation in lessons and they were speaking English with more confidence”. Another teacher explained the involvement of the RGs as follows:

> Firstly, the RGs that come to the school, they show love to the learners. Sometimes you’ll see the Grade Rs or Grade 1s touching them … (*finds this very funny and laughs*) (T1, 01 August 2018).

The visits were also very fruitful and promoted the envisaged reciprocal relationship between the teachers and the RGs. The RGs were using a variety of materials to read and the teachers valued the exposure to how play and different resources could be used to convey meaning and repeat how to pronounce words.

Using play and different resources to convey meaning in reading

The teachers explained how they were learning about using play and different resources to convey meaning in reading as follows:

> Also in the FP they teach as the learners play. They do the stories, they do the games … it’s improved the learners’ understanding of English because when they play you’ll hear them putting an English word into their games … So they also use various teaching aids when they are teaching; cards, Big Books. (T1, 01 August 2018).

From her participation and observations, T1 had learnt that it was important when teaching English to use many teaching aids to facilitate understanding and meaning making:

> For me when you are teaching English you need more teaching aids. That will help the learners to see what you are talking about … if they don’t know the bear you make sure and show them what you are talking about. (01 August 2018).

T2 liked the following:

> They also teach them various songs in which they use their bodies.

When they were asked what they thought about making their own lessons fun in the way the reading volunteers did, T2 responded as follows: “very important as that’s how they learn." She continued:

> Like what they did on Monday with those cards (*these were flash cards that had pictures of objects from one to twenty on both sides)* as she *(RG)* pulled it open it split to show the number as words and digits. It was kind of fun but they were also learning at the same time.

However, T1 felt that it was also important for the RGs to see what the educators were expected to do by CAPS:

> I would like us to have a meeting and have our lesson plans and have the RGs here to see what is supposed to be done in class so that when they go into the class they just do what is [in the plan] . Although they help us [and] we see the difference and the change they have made, we would like them to be aware of what is expected of us.

T1 continued and explained the concern about covering the curriculum as follows:

> … but you have to keep in mind that you have to do and done what you've set for the day from what the CAPS expect, then you can use the extra time and expand on the lesson, move and push it to the end of the day. It is possible to finish that about thirty minutes late but you must know … that they will be learning … However, not all our subjects can be like that. If you want to take them out to have a game, you must keep in mind what you want to get from the game. If you say pronunciation, understanding that movement can be used to say the word and move in a certain manner for the meaning of the word; you must also have done the expected work needed for teaching and then set the extra work for the extra time.

But, for T7, it was not a good idea for RGs' lessons to be based on the curriculum policy. He said:

> I have a different view from this one. The grannies are not educators and they never were supposed to come here to be teachers. The main idea for them and us was to interact in English so that they can be able to hear when a person speaks English then they know how to answer. So maybe when they listen to a story this is where I think it is going to advance the learners' understanding of English. If we are strict and focused on the curriculum, it might put or cut off the activity. That is a basic. If what they do is too formal, it might also lose its value because it will be as if they are in the classroom having an equal role with the educators.

Mrs Thandi also found the use of a variety of resources interesting:

> … they play. They even use cards. What I noticed is that one set of cards has multi purposes. They can say colours. In the same set of cards, they can mention shapes I mean they can even count. They also can read the words. They match the picture and the words. That is what I like about it

> because even if they are doing rhymes, they even dramatise, doing actions, using body moves. I like it very much (01 August 2018).

She also highlighted the importance of pronunciation in reading:

> What I learned when I was listening to the RG in my class, I learnt the different ways of pronunciation about how to pronounce tortoise. I used to say tortoys (*shakes her head and laughs*) and when the teacher was talking to the children, I kept quiet [but] at the end, I was imitating her the right way. I was thinking I must not shout this thing because I am saying it wrong. So I was just keeping quiet! (01 August 2018).

Over the past few years, a friendly relationship has developed between the researcher/s, the RGs, the principal and teachers. In response to the question: 'How did the RGs' reflection on reading lessons serve as a resource to improve the teaching of reading in the FP?' they expressed the following views presented below.

The RGs viewpoints

In general, the RGs were keen to know whether their reading promoted interest in reading English and improved the children's understanding of the language. For example, in a FG discussion, two RGs expressed their initial concerns as follows:

> RG6 Most of them did not know their sounds. Not only the English sounds. They did not know their Zulu sounds. So then, we had to start with the alphabet, which is what we have been doing this term. However, they had to learn first the Zulu alphabet and now we are concentrating on the sounds that are different in English to try to and get them to see the difference.
>
> RG5 But I do not know. Are we confusing them by teaching them the English sounds when they are also learning the Zulu sounds? We are learning as we go along … we do not know the correct way of teaching sounds. I mean things like that, the alphabet and how to pronounce them, they are a problem.

SS Would you like to know how to teach them the correct way?

RG5&6 Yes! (emphatically)

Jane (RG2) explained the approach to teaching reading in Grade R as follows:

> We want to keep them busy because they are a very busy little lot. Moreover, they are first year so they do not know anything at all really. So, we start off by telling them to greet us, we have our names on and, they do say "Good morning Mrs X" and "Good morning Mrs Y". They are all sitting down when we go into the classroom. They stand up as soon as we come in say good morning. We start with a story always. "Don't we Mary?" (asks RG1 Mary). (Mary nods her head in agreement). They get very excited about the story. I will say to them, "What shall we do today?" So as I said earlier we show them the books and they say, "Ooooh not that one" and as Mary said they like the familiar ones. They love the familiar stories, love the animal stories. It is always an illustrated book and we show them the pictures. They all sit down in rows and it is very difficult to keep them in rows. They all want to be in the front. They want to be near us. We tell them a story and the teacher translates for us into her language but we do ask them to repeat the English words and the main feature on a page. We ask them to repeat those words. So, they've learnt now that if you pick up a book and it's got a wolf on it they all say "wolf!" (all laugh) and make the wolf sound. It is a story they have liked. We have got to the stage, if we have three or four books, they choose which story they want.

For Mary (RG1) repetition was also very important. She expressed her viewpoint in this way:

> I find they particularly like it when we repeat a book. They love to know that they know the story but are as interested each time, understand it better, express themselves and interact better when they know the story. They benefit more from it. I am

> very aware that particularly some children do not understand English at all and unless you are drawing them in and asking them to do things physically, I find you can lose them. They start bumping or so on. Particularly, I try to make everything physical even if I fall off the chair when it's Goldilocks' chair or whatever … It just keeps everyone's focus better if things are happening not just hearing at this level because they don't understand the words on the page that we're telling them about. I think, for me, mainly it is just doing things with the children and making them aware that a strange person in that room is no threat … it is fun. Because when we first started, some children were actually frightened of us and withdrew away from us… and now they long to touch us and hold our hand, which they did not in the beginning.

In the focus group discussions, the RGs also revealed that they would like to improve their performance and align their lessons more closely to the curriculum. In response, one of the authors participating in the intervention who was an experienced teacher at this level, arranged a workshop at the school on the use of educational playing cards to develop perceptual, cognitive, language and social skills and to teach phonics and vocabulary. It was from 11h00 to 13h00 on the day before the third school term commenced and was attended by teachers (n=8) and RGs (n=8). All were actively involved in playing the games and agreed that they had learnt a lot from their participation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The assumption in CAPS (DBE, 2011a), is that learners come into the school with fluency and proficiency in their first language (L1) and a vocabulary of a significant number of words (DBE, 2011a, p. 8) that can serve as a foundation for learning to read and write English as a First Additional Language (FAL) (L2). Teachers are expected to build on this foundation when teaching reading. However, this should not remain at the oratorical level. There should be a balance between teaching mechanical reading skills and explicitly teaching and modelling the comprehension strategies that are needed by learners for meaning making (Pretorius & Machet, 2004; Verbeek, 2010; Murris, 2014; McNamara, 2007). Attention

has to be paid to both the L1 and the FAL as learners are struggling with these skills in their L1 as well (Pretorius, 2012; Van Rooy & Pretorius, 2013; Pretorius, 2015). Therefore, for the reading intervention studied herein to be effective, both the teachers and RGs had to use stories, learning resources and other activities from both English and isiZulu. It was crucial for the RGs to be able to relate the sounds and messages in the stories they read to the learners' primary language.

IsiZulu had to be a resource for learning to read English stories. Although not all involved in education in their previous lives, the RGs seemed aware of the importance of the expected contextualisation when teaching meaning making through reading. Therefore, in response to the question: How this school-led literacy intervention could be used to raise teachers' awareness of what is needed to improve how they taught reading?, the evidence in the study indicates that the RGs were progressively contextualizing reading as their involvement in the school continued. They were consciously assisting the learners to think in both isiZulu and English to make stories easy to follow. Ensuring that the learners saw and heard the words proved useful, in their view, in developing their comprehension of the stories read. Some RGs could use both languages interchangeably when necessary. Otherwise, the teacher was asked to translate so that explanations and instructions could be clear. In addition, many of the books selected had many pictures and little writing and this helped the learners to understand the stories. Mr. Phungila, a principal from a neighbouring township school, had heard about the intervention and the progress of the learners. He commented to one of the authors that he had "heard about the Reading Grannies and was very keen for them to come to his school to help the learners with English".

Snow (1987, 2014) and Spolsky (1987) have argued that decoding content in concrete ways through contextualisation helps to improve students' understanding of their L1 and the target language. As an outside-in process (McCarthy, 1999) through which written symbols (Nunan, 1991) are decoded, it helps to improve thinking in both the L1 and L2 as they are used as resources for learning.

Writing about such transculturation as crucial to open cultural views and practices, Gilroy (1993) has argued against contextually specific attributes being translated into absolute, universal standards for human achievement and viewed as characteristic of a nationality. Instead, he pleads for the recognition of a double consciousness that is necessary for people to fully participate in their own cultures and those encountered. They (people) have to be able to go beyond their bounds into spaces of simply being

human to see what being human really means. If able to do so, their lifestyles will no longer end at the borders of national cultures but go beyond them. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that because of their good intentions, it is possible that the RGs were perhaps, inadvertently striving for this. Therefore, the hope is that as the RGs, teachers and learners continue to cross each other's ethnic borders, the next phase of this reading intervention is likely to have more impact on the reading of these rural children. As they learn to read and use English from the RGS, the racial boundaries will also be dismantled further at a tender age for these children.

IMPLICATIONS

The RGs were able to describe the reading that was occurring in the classrooms, explain the meanings they attached to it and clarify possibilities for developing the learners reading skills and comprehension meaningfully. They could clarify and expand on the work already done by the teachers and they (teachers) expressed an appreciation of the ways RGs were teaching English reading and comprehension skills. Their explicit teaching and modelling of reading and facilitation of meaning making (McNamara, 2007) encouraged learners to be active in learning to read and not passive recipients of information. The hope is that as the intervention continues, more insights will be developed and the teachers in Farm school will develop more expertise and confidence to teach unassisted and further improve the reading and comprehension skills of their learners.

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