

Learning activities used for reading literacy instruction in selected Namibian primary schools



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Background: The need to examine teachers' learning activities in reading literacy instruction arises from concerns about reading proficiency levels in the Namibian Junior Primary phase, where reading literacy is a fundamental skill crucial for academic success.

Aim: The study examined the learning activities used for reading literacy instruction in selected Namibian Junior Primary (JP) schools focused on Grade 3 teachers.

Setting: The study was conducted in selected Oshana region JP schools focused in three diverse classroom settings.

Methods: The study used secondary qualitative data that were collected by the Oshana Regional Directorate of Education through interviews and classroom observations to examine the teaching practices Grade 3 teachers were using for reading literacy instruction. The study explores the reading literacy practices of teachers that they have adapted from continuous professional development programs and ministerial policies.

Results: The findings indicate that the participants in this study were utilising a variety of learning activities to enhance reading literacy skills. These activities are phonological activities (phonics, phonological awareness activities, and the Jolly Phonics programme) and interactive activities (shared reading and reading corner activities) for reading literacy instruction.

Conclusion: In conclusion, participants employed a range of methods to enhance reading instruction. They utilised phonological strategies like phonics and the Jolly Phonics programme to develop language skills, alongside interactive practices such as shared reading to improve fluency and foster a love for reading.

Contribution: The findings can inform educational policies, curriculum development, and initial teacher education programmes, ultimately improving reading literacy outcomes for learners in Namibia and beyond.

Keywords: ESL; Grade 3; learning practices; primary school teachers; reading literacy; Namibia.

Introduction

After Namibia gained political independence in 1990, the Ministry of Education introduced a Language Policy in 1992. According to the Language Policy (1992–1996) (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport & Culture 1992), learners in Junior Primary (JP) (Grades 1–3) must be taught in their home language (mother tongue). Additionally, in Namibia, English has a central role to play as a unifying language in the discourse on nation building (Norro 2022). It is therefore critical that learners develop English skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the JP phase. This study focused on reading literacy instruction.

By the end of Grade 3, the last grade in the JP phase, learners should have acquired the necessary skills to be able to read and to learn in Grade 4 and beyond (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MoEAC] 2017a). In Namibia, reading literacy starts in the JP phase (pre-primary to Grade 3). This phase lays the foundation for the development of reading literacy skills and, by Grade 3, learners are expected to have reached a level of proficiency. Emphasis is placed on phonemic awareness, phonics, learning letters and sounds, making letter–sound relations, decoding skills, building vocabulary, and working on fluency and comprehension (Duke, Ward & Pearson 2021). Within the Namibian JP phase, reading literacy encompasses elements including, but not restricted to, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (MoEAC 2015a). In the JP phase, which includes Grades 1–3, the focus is primarily on building foundational reading skills (MoEAC 2015a).

The definition of reading literacy in Namibia is not different from other international definitions. For example, Koyuncu and Firat (2020) define reading literacy as the learner's capacity to comprehend and engage with written texts by decoding words, understanding meanings, grasping context, and interpreting information across diverse reading materials. For Hattan and Lupo (2020), reading literacy entails the concurrent extraction and construction of meaning by learners through active interaction with written language. Namibian researchers like Julius (2020) also refer to the term 'literacy' as being functionally able to read and write, that is, to encode and decode meaning in symbols on a page. The Syllabus¹ for English Second Language for Grades 1–3 (MoEAC 2015a) does not really define reading, but it indicates the five skills to be taught in the Second Language, namely, listening and responding, speaking and communicating, reading and viewing, writing, and language structure. Reading is among the five skills that are taught daily in the Grade 3 classes.

Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (2015a) further outlines reading and viewing competencies which every learner is expected to demonstrate on completion of a phase (Grade 3). These competencies include: (1) demonstration of good reading habits and show eagerness to read in English; (2) apply knowledge of phonics and word study skills to decode words in context; and (3) read aloud with correct pronunciation and sufficient accuracy, fluency, and vocabulary knowledge to support comprehension (MoEAC 2015a).

Notwithstanding all the curriculum preparations to enhance reading instruction, February (2019) and Itenge et al. (2022) emphasise that international assessments show that Namibian children are not reading at the expected levels. Namibia is among 15 countries that are members of the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), a body that assesses the performance of learners and teachers in numeracy and literacy and through which the National Standardised Achievement Test (NSAT) was administered to assess Grades 5–7 learners' reading comprehension. Specifically, this test assesses how JP has developed the learners' early reading (MoEAC 2015a). The NSAT reflects the literacy developments obtained in Grades 1–3. The NSAT findings indicate that learners' reading levels in Grade 6 in Namibia are below their grade levels (SACMEQ 2015). Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (2015) tested Namibian primary school learners, identifying poor literacy and numeracy, subsequently recommending that literacy (reading) should be improved in the JP (Grades 1–3).

To address this challenge of poor reading, the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture came up with programmes such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) to diagnose

1. As per Nunan (2004), the variation in using 'syllabus' and 'curriculum' stems from American English and British English differences. In American English, both terms are synonymous. In Namibia, official documents like the Syllabus for English Second Language for Grades 1–3 use 'syllabus'. In this study, 'syllabus/curriculum' are used interchangeably.

reading problems in the JP phase (Grades 1–3). Early Grade Reading Assessment is a one-on-one oral evaluation tool that assesses competence in the essential components of reading (Zuilkowski et al. 2019). United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) (2021) recommended that the MoEAC should develop a manual on how to teach phonics and phonemic awareness, as well as revise the literacy components in the curriculum.

Some of the ministerial policies in education such as the JP Integrated Planning Manual (MoEAC 2015b) Grade 1–3, the MoEAC's Teaching reading and writing: Teacher's manual for English Second Language Grades 1–3 (2017a), and the MoEAC Strategic Plan for 2017–2018 to 2021–2022 (2017b), there is a clear indication that the importance of the building learners' reading literacy in the formative grades is prioritised by the Ministry. These policies emphasise the critical role teachers play in reading literacy instruction and modelling. In fact, the MoEAC (2017a) and MoEAC (2015a) highlight that Grade 3 English as a Second Language (ESL) ought to employ clear and direct teaching methods, while also demonstrating proficient reading techniques. This approach serves as a valuable means of aiding the JP learners to acquire skills in word decoding, grasping vocabulary, forming predictions, posing inquiries, and drawing inferences.

Related to such ministerial policies are studies in the field of reading literacy instruction that place the teachers' beliefs (Anders & Evans 2019; Mante-Estacio & Tupas 2022), and teachers' agency (Wetzel et al. 2019; Xu & Fan 2022) at the centre of learners' reading success. This is to say, reading literacy educational policies fall short when enacted without considering teachers' agency and practical knowledge because these policies often overlook the unique insights and expertise that educators bring to the classroom (Antoniou 2021). Teachers' agency and personal practical knowledge are essential in tailoring instructional approaches to meet the diverse needs of learners, and neglecting these aspects can result in a mismatch between policy goals and effective classroom practices (Mante-Estacio & Tupas 2022). Förster, Kawohl and Souvignier (2018) explain that learners' reading abilities rely heavily on the knowledge, experience, and effectiveness of teachers in their classrooms. Using their personal practical knowledge, ESL teachers use a variety of instructional methods to engage learners and promote reading comprehension (Mante-Estacio & Tupas 2022). Hence, this research explored the way in which three educators applied reading literacy instructional methodologies provided in Ministry policies within their Grade 3 ESL classrooms. We were interested in highlighting how they leveraged their own agency and practical insights to imbue distinct interpretations into various educational policies in Namibia, thereby infusing these practices with significance using Oshana region as a research site.

In 2021, the Oshana Regional Directorate of Education, through its professional development advisory services

collected data with the purpose of informing the Regional Directorate (JP Senior Education Officers, Chief Education Officer, and the Regional Director) of the implementation of the curriculum which emphasises literacy and numeracy in the JP phase. The Oshana Senior Education Officers for JP interviewed and observed teachers and highlighted the learning practices in terms of tasks, exercises, or experiences designed to promote active engagement and facilitate the acquisition of knowledge that Grade 3 English teachers used in reading literacy instruction. This study used this secondary data to examine how three Grade 3 teachers who had been identified by the Directorate as effectively implementing the reading instruction curriculum were adapting it to meet the diverse and contextual needs of their learners. Specifically, the objective of the study was to examine the learning activities that were used by Grade 3 ESL teachers in reading literacy instruction. The study was guided by one research question: What learning activities are used by Grade 3 English teachers in reading literacy instruction?

Reading literacy instruction in the Junior Primary phase

In this section, we explore the reading activities implemented in the JP based on the recommendations outlined in the Namibian Ministry of Education's JP phase Integrated Planning Manual (MoEAC 2015b) for Grade 1–3. The focus of the discussion lies on the essential components of reading, with each component serving as a subtheme. According to the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport & Culture (2014) and UNESCO (2021), there are five key components of reading that play a crucial role in developing literacy skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, word decoding (fluency), vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Each component is examined to provide clear definitions and purposes, offering valuable guidance to the reader in terms of the expectations within Grade 3 classrooms, which served as the research site.

Phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is one of the subskills of reading that every learner in the Namibian Foundation phase should master (MoEAC 2017a). Carruth and Bustos (2019) describe phonemic awareness as an understanding that words are made up of individual sounds. Phonemic awareness is often confused with phonics and is part of phonological awareness. Carruth and Bustos (2019) define phonemic awareness as the ability to hear sounds and identify and manipulate individual sound phonemes in spoken syllables and words. This means that learners manipulate 44 phonemes in English Language without being required to read or see the print. Phonemic awareness is the most important step in reading. The MoEAC (2017a) indicates that teachers use phonemic awareness by including sound segmentation. Sound segmentation is the first activity where learners are provided with a word orally and requested to identify the individual sounds or phonemes in the word (Luna & Silvester 2023). For example, in the word 'cat', learners would segment it into /c/ /a/ /t/. The second

activity recommended for teachers is the sound blending where learners are given a series of individual sounds or phonemes and asked to blend them together to form a word (Ehri 2022).

In the third activity, the teachers use rhyming word identification where learners are provided with pairs of words that rhyme (e.g., cat/hat, run/fun) and are requested to identify the rhyming words (MoEAC 2017a). In the fourth activity, JP ESL teachers are asked to use syllable counting where learners are presented with words and asked to clap or count the number of syllables in each word (MoEAC 2021b). For example, for the word 'banana', learners would clap or count three times (/ba/ /na/ /na/) (MoEAC 2017a). The UNESCO (2020) explains that such activities help learners develop phonemic awareness by focusing on the sounds within words. These activities can be implemented in a variety of ways, including whole-class instruction, small group work, or one-on-one interventions, depending on the needs and abilities of the learners (Murphy, Pentimonti & Chow 2023). The overarching aim is that regular practice with phonemic awareness activities can strengthen learners' foundation for reading and spelling (MoEAC 2017a).

Phonics

Phonics is the main pillar of reading (Woore 2022). According to UNESCO (2020), phonics is an approach to reading instruction that involves teaching learners to correlate letters with sounds, so they can decode (also known as 'sounding out') words. Phonics is visual and includes print, while phonological awareness is auditory (MoEAC 2017a). Phonics is important as they help learners to read and write (MoEAC 2017a). There is a specific logic to teaching phonics; when teaching, phonics requires explicit and systematic instruction and must be taught in specific steps (Ehri 2022). Piasta and Hudson (2022) explain that phonics starts with groups of letters that can be put together to make simple words such as s, m, and a vowel, as well as sound–symbol corresponding with single letters, digraphs, and trigraphs. Other activities may include short words from a certain group of letters and text with specific letters. The MoEAC (2017a) also advocates for teaching activities in phonics to follow a bottom-up approach. Woore (2022) further highlights that phonics methods involve teaching letter sounds first which are then blended to form syllables, words, and sentences.

The MoEAC (2017a) recommends that JP ESL teachers focus on developing the connection between letters and their corresponding sounds to support reading and spelling skills in phonics instruction using the activities such as letter-sound matching, word sorting, word building, decoding practice, word manipulation, and reading and writing activities. Letter-sound matching activity introduces learners to using flashcards, letter tiles, or interactive games (Piasta & Hudson 2022). Grade 3 teachers are also encouraged to use word building. This is an activity teachers should use in phonics instruction where they provide learners with a set of

letter tiles or magnetic letters and ask them to construct words by blending individual sounds together (Duke & Mesmer 2019). For example, with the letter tiles 'c', 'a', and 't', learners can build the word 'cat' (MoEAC 2017a). Decoding practice is another activity that allows the teachers to facilitate the reading of passages or books that contain words with specific phonics patterns learners have learnt (Ehri 2022). The purpose is to encourage the learners to apply their knowledge of letter-sound relationships to decode unfamiliar words as they read (MoEAC 2017a).

Word manipulation is a phonics activity where Grade 3 learners manipulate words by changing specific letters or sounds to create new words. For example, starting with the word 'cat', learners can change the initial sound to create words like 'bat', 'sat', or 'mat' (MoEAC 2017a). Lastly, the reading and writing activities comprise a learning activity that incorporates phonics skills into reading and writing activities. In this activity, learners write sentences or short stories using words that contain specific phonics patterns. They are encouraged to read their written work aloud to practise decoding and fluency. The phonics instruction activities help learners to develop phonics skills, which are essential for decoding and encoding words during reading and spelling (MoEAC 2017a). By providing regular practice and reinforcement, learners can build a strong foundation in phonics, which supports their overall reading literacy.

Fluency

Reading activities involve fluency as a crucial subskill of reading. This means learners develop fluency when they can automatically decode print (Van Bergen, Vasalampi & Torppa 2021). Zaman (2020) states that fluency should be taught using an interactive approach whereby fluency can develop, for example during the reading of vocabulary lists and short sentences. Fluency can be also called accurate reading, where a learner is expected to read with speed and pronounce words correctly in a text (Aşıkcan & Saban 2021). The MoEAC (2017a) recommends that Grade 3 ESL teachers use the following learning activities as part of their fluency instruction: reading aloud, choral reading, echo reading, repeated reading, and sight word practice.

Firstly, reading aloud refers to a fluency activity that allows the teachers or proficient readers to model fluent reading by reading aloud to the whole class (Young et al. 2019). While reading, the emphasis is on expression, intonation, and pacing, helping learners to develop a sense of fluent reading (Zaman 2020). Secondly, choral reading can also be used where learners read a text aloud together as a group, synchronising their voices.

Choral reading improves rhythm, pacing, and overall fluency (Bessette 2020). Thirdly, Grade 3 ESL teachers are also encouraged to use echo reading, an activity where the teacher or proficient reader reads a sentence or paragraph, and then other learners echo or repeat it (MoEAC 2017a). This activity

is meant for learners practice phrasing, intonation, and expression (Bessette 2020). Repeated readings are also used in Grade 3 reading classes where learners read a short text multiple times to build fluency. Learners can read alone, with a partner, or in small groups (Van Bergen et al. 2021). Repeated readings enhance word recognition, automaticity, and speed (Bessette 2020). Lastly, the Grade 3 ESL teachers are encouraged to use sight word practice, where flashcards, word games, or interactive activities are used to reinforce sight word recognition and automaticity (Ehri 2020). Overall, the fluency activities support the Grade 3 learners in becoming more confident, expressive, and efficient readers (MoEAC 2017a).

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the foundation of fluency and comprehension (Bright 2021). Vocabulary is the unit of speech or writing needed to convey a message in written or spoken form (Chamba & Ramirez-Avila 2021). Vocabulary activities in reading literacy instruction aim to enhance learners' word knowledge, comprehension, and overall reading abilities (Bright 2021). The MoEAC (2017a) recommends that the ESL Grade 3 teachers use the following vocabulary activities as part of their reading instruction: context clues, word maps, word association, word sort, word journals, and vocabulary extension activities.

Firstly, Grade 3 learners use context clues where they are taught how to use context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words (MoEAC 2017a; Woore 2022). Secondly, teachers also make use of word maps where learners make use of graphic organisers, such as word maps or semantic webs, to help them explore the meanings, synonyms, antonyms, and related words of new vocabulary (MoAEC 2017b). This visual representation supports deeper understanding of word relationships (Masrai 2019). Thirdly, the teachers are meant to use word association activity where they provide learners with a list of vocabulary words and ask them to brainstorm associations, synonyms, or related words. This activity helps learners make connections and expand their word knowledge (Bright 2021). Fourthly, in the Grade 3 reading class, a word sort activity is employed (MoEAC 2017a). This activity presents learners with a group of words and prompts them to categorise or sort these words based on specific criteria (Puimège & Peters 2019). These criteria can include word meaning, part of speech, or word structure (MoEAC 2017a). The word sort activity helps learners develop word relationships and deepen their understanding of word features (Elleman & Oslund 2019).

The Grade 3 teachers are also encouraged to use the word journals where their learners keep a vocabulary journal where they record new words they encounter during reading (MoEAC 2017a). Learners can write the word, its definition, a sentence using the word, and any related information. The word journal activity promotes ownership of vocabulary learning and encourages independent word exploration (Van

Bergen et al. 2021). In reading lessons, vocabulary extension activities are employed to motivate learners to incorporate newly acquired words into their speaking and writing (Bergström, Norberg & Nordlund 2022). The teacher assigns tasks that require learners to apply vocabulary words in meaningful contexts, such as creating stories, participating in oral discussion, or writing descriptive paragraphs (Bergström et al. 2022). Puimège and Peters (2019) state that such vocabulary activities foster word awareness, deepen comprehension, and support learners' overall reading literacy. It is essential to provide regular exposure to new words, reinforce vocabulary learning, and encourage learners to use acquired vocabulary in various contexts (Bergström et al. 2022).

Comprehension

Comprehension is the ultimate purpose of reading (Young et al. 2019). According to UNESCO (2020), comprehension is the ability to understand the text. Elleman and Oslund (2019) also state that comprehension is the product of efficient decoding by reading isolated words quickly and accurately and with linguistic comprehension. Comprehension activities for reading literacy are designed to help learners understand and make meaning of the text they read (UNESCO 2020). The MoEAC (2017a) recommends that the Grade 3 ESL teachers use the following comprehension activities to aid effective reading: reciprocal teaching, story maps, think aloud, questioning, visualising, summarising, predicting, and graphic organisers. These learning activities are designed to scaffold the learner's pre-reading, during reading, and post reading stages (Mežek et al. 2022).

The teachers use the reciprocal teaching activity when they divide the Grade 3 learners into small groups and assign them specific roles, such as a summariser, a questioner, a clarifier, and a predictor. Each learner takes turns leading the group discussion using their assigned role to facilitate comprehension (Ali & Razali 2019). In the story maps activity, graphic organisers, such as story maps or story pyramids are used to help learners to analyse story elements, including characters, setting, problem, events, and a resolution. This activity enhances learners' understanding of the story's structure and sequence (Ali & Razali 2019). The Grade 3 teachers also model the thinking process by reading a passage aloud and sharing their thoughts, connections, and questions as they read, using an activity called think aloud. This strategy helps learners develop metacognitive skills and become aware of comprehension strategies (Ali & Razali 2019). With the questioning activity, the learners are encouraged to ask questions before, during, and after reading. This activity promotes active engagement and helps learners monitor their understanding of the text (MoEAC 2017a). In the summarising activity, the learners after reading a passage are asked to summarise the main ideas or key events in their own words. This activity helps learners identify the essential information and strengthens their comprehension skills (Brevik 2019).

Prediction in the pre-reading stage of the lesson encourages learners to make estimates about the story's outcome, characters' actions, or upcoming events based on the information they have gathered while reading. This activity fosters active engagement and critical thinking (Hwang & Duke 2020). Through the visualising activity, the Grade 3 teacher guides the learners to create mental images of the text as they read. The teachers encourage them to draw or describe what they visualise to enhance comprehension and engagement with the text (MoEAC 2017a). Related to the visualising activity is the graphic organisers where a variety of graphic organisers, such as Venn diagrams, concept maps, or the Know, Want to Know and Learned (KWL) charts are used to help learners to organise and visualise information, make predictions, and monitor their comprehension (MoAEC 2017a). These comprehension activities promote active reading, critical thinking, and deeper understanding of the text. It is essential to provide learners with regular opportunities to practise these strategies and support them in developing their reading comprehension skills (Hwang & Duke 2020).

Research methods and design

An interpretivist paradigm was chosen for the study as it emphasises understanding and contextual interpretation (Nieuwenhuis 2019). Given the focus on exploring the complexities of instructional practices, the interpretivist paradigm provides a holistic framework to capture the nuanced meanings and cultural influences inherent in the teaching methods used (Nieuwenhuis 2019). Aligned to the interpretivist tradition, a qualitative exploratory case study was conducted. The study was guided by one research question: What learning activities are used by Grade 3 English teachers in reading literacy instruction? According to Patnaik and Pandey (2019), exploratory case studies have the purpose of identifying questions for a subsequent study. An exploratory case study typically attempts to answer a 'what' question (Patnaik & Pandey 2019) and this aligns with this study's inquiry focus. The study used an exploratory case study to unpack the learning activities that are used in Grade 3 ESL.

Participants

The participants in the study were three Grade 3 teachers. The teachers were purposively selected by the Oshana Regional Directorate of Education for their reputation in the region as effective reading literacy teachers. To ensure the teachers' privacy, their pseudonyms, namely, Teacher X, Y, and Z are used. Table 1 captures the profiles of the teachers who were sampled.

Data generation and analysis

In this study, secondary data were obtained from the Oshana Region Education, Arts, and Culture Directorate, which gathered information through non-participant observations. Data were collected by the Senior Education Officers for JP. The data collection involved non-participant observations

and individual interviews. Consequently, the observations and interview transcripts as well as field notes from the Senior Education Officers for JP constituted the main data sources for this study. Cohen et al. (2018) state that secondary data draw from data that were originally collected for a different purpose or use pre-existing data, sometimes from the same researcher but usually collected by someone else. In this study, the data from Regional Performance Analysis conducted in 2021 (MoEAC 2021a) were analysed. The data were collected with the intention of sharing them with educational stakeholders in the Oshana region at the annual education conference to showcase effective learning practices used in reading literacy instruction. The data were also taken from the Professional Development School Visit Report for 2021 (MoEAC 2021b) which were collected with the purpose of informing the Regional Directorate (JP Senior Education Officers, Chief Education Officer, and the Regional Director) of the implementation of the curriculum with emphasis to literacy and numeracy teaching in the JP phase. The data for our analysis were taken from non-participant observations conducted by the JP Senior Education Officers. These officers recorded their observations in the form of detailed field notes. In our presentation of the findings, we incorporated the verbatim descriptions from the observing officers' field notes. The semi-structured interviews were also conducted by the officers and documented in transcripts. The officers conducted semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed, and we retained the participants' words verbatim from these transcripts in the findings section.

The data were also aimed at informing the region about the intervention strategies required to improve reading literacy in the JP phase. Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes in textual data. We analysed the data by following steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading them. Secondly, we coded the data by highlighting interesting or relevant portions of the data, such as words, phrases, or sentences. The best step was to generate initial themes from the coded data and look for patterns, connections, or recurring ideas. We then reviewed and analysed the themes that resulted from the previous steps.

To establish the trustworthiness of the secondary qualitative data, triangulation techniques were utilised (Lemon & Hayes 2020). In this study, triangulation involved the incorporation of multiple sources, including the Regional Performance Analysis conducted in 2021 and the Professional Development School Visit Report for the same year. Each of these data sets was originally collected for distinct purposes, as explained in the preceding paragraphs. The data sets were combined and analysed together to address our research question effectively (Lemon & Hayes 2020).

Ethical considerations

The ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Rhodes University, Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (ref no. 2022-5566-6681). In this study, to address the ethical concerns of the participants, steps were taken to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity of their written responses. Cohen et al. (2018) describe confidentiality as not disclosing information obtained from the participants in any way that might identify that individual or might enable the individual to be identified. Confidentiality was ensured by handling the information from the Performance Analysis and Professional Development Report with care and keeping the document safe. Anonymity means that information pertaining to participants should in no way reveal their identity (Cohen et al. 2018). Anonymity was assured by using pseudonyms for the schools and the teachers involved.

Results

The data obtained from the observation transcripts and the observer's notes from the Oshana Region Education, Arts and Culture Directorate were organised to examine the learning activities used by Grade 3 English teachers in teaching reading literacy. Table 2 provides the details of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis.

Phonological activities

From the analysis of the transcripts, the Grade 3 ESL teachers were using phonological activities as a way of teaching reading. In Grade 3, these learning activities were found to be assisting the learners to build on their existing phonological skills acquired in Grade 2. The findings show that the Grade 3 ESL teachers sampled in the report were using different phonological activities in their reading lessons. Theme 1 includes three subthemes, namely, phonics activities for teaching reading literacy, phonological awareness activities for teaching reading literacy, and the Jolly Phonics programme for teaching reading literacy. The teachers sampled expressed the belief that the utilisation of phonological activities, specifically phonics and phonological awareness exercises, was effectively meeting the goals of the Jolly Phonics programme. This misconception regarding the objectives and activities of the Jolly Phonics programme reflects what Patel et al. (2022:78) refer to as '... evidence of consistent implementation'.

Teacher X used phonics as a learning activity during reading lessons. Phonics activities entail teaching learners to sound out a letter as a single sound or in a word; in other words, knowing the relationship between letters and sounds. From the findings, Teacher X was blending the letters to make a word when trying to assist learners with reading difficulties. The reports indicate this as a strength as follows:

TABLE 1: Profile of Grade 3 teachers profiled in the secondary data.

School	Teacher	Grade	Qualification	Teaching experience (years)
School 1	Teacher X	3	Bachelor of Education (Honours) Pre-Primary and Lower Primary	5
School 2	Teacher Y	3	Basic Education Teacher's Diploma (BETD)	20
School 3	Teacher Z	3	Bachelor of Education (Honours) Pre-Primary and Lower Primary	11

TABLE 2: Emerging themes and sub-themes from data analysis.

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Phonological activities	Sub-theme 1.1: Phonics activities for teaching reading literacy
	Sub-theme 1.2: Phonological awareness activities for teaching reading literacy
	Sub-theme 1.3: Jolly Phonics programmes for teaching reading literacy
Theme 2: Interactive reading activities	Sub-theme 2.1: Shared reading activities for teaching reading literacy
	Sub-theme 2.2: Reading corner activities for teaching reading literacy

'... teacher provided the learning support to struggling learners by giving them a blend of letters to read on the chalkboard.' (Observer 3)

The report's findings also show that learners' activity books contained evidence of phonics such as the construction of high-frequency words. While, Teacher Y highlighted that for him:

'phonological awareness refers to his ability to work with sounds in a spoken language.' (Interview transcript, p. 17)

For both Teacher Y and X, phonological awareness began developing before the learners come to Grade 3, meaning that they should have already acquired pre-literacy skills. One teacher explained that:

'... such awareness is the starting point for decoding, blending and ultimately whole word reading.' (Teacher Z)

All the teachers in this study indicated that phonological awareness activities included the following: clap and count the syllables in words (Teacher X, Y & Z), identify and substitute rhyming words in rhymes and songs (Teacher X & Z), distinguish between short and long vowel sounds in multi-syllabic words (Teacher X, Y & Z), as well as identify beginning, middle, and end sounds (phonemes) in single-syllable words (Teacher Z). The findings indicate that the teachers were using phonological awareness activities to recognise and create repetitions of initial sounds in a sentence during the ESL lesson.

Thirdly, the Grade 3 ESL teachers were using the Jolly Phonics and Jolly Grammar programme as a strategy to address poor performance in the foundation phase. Teacher Z stated that the Jolly Phonics programme comprises 'Jolly Phonics which starts in Grade 1, Jolly Grammar 1 which is presented in Grade 2 and Jolly Grammar 2 in Grade 3' (Interview transcript, p. 21). The Jolly Phonics programme was piloted in Oshana in 2017 and is a special initiative of the Directorate to improve literacy (reading and writing) among JP learners. Most of the Grade 3 teachers in the Oshana region were trained on Jolly Grammar 2 in the year 2021 and again on both the Jolly Phonics and Jolly Grammar 2 at the beginning of 2022. In addition, A teacher explained that:

'Jolly Grammar involved language structure [*grammar*] and spelling [*alternative spelling*].' (Teacher Y).

'The spelling activities are like the reading and viewing activities in the curriculum. This also involves blending tricky words, initial and final consonant blends, magic 'e' words, consonant

doubling, alternative spelling groups, and sound formation.' (Teacher Y)

Interactive reading literacy activities

The findings also highlighted that the three participants were using interactive reading literacy activities. These are engaging activities that may also refer to learning from one another. The teacher provides these activities with the purpose of learners discussing them with and learning from their peers. Interactive reading literacy activities in this study include shared reading, reading corner activities, and vocabulary activities. The findings indicate that all teachers in this study were using shared reading. a teacher explained that shared reading activities:

'... are activities that occur when learners share a text or a book to scaffold reading.' (Teacher Y)

Another teacher highlighted that:

'[D]uring the shared reading, learners work in groups and are guided by the teacher'. When doing shared reading, learners can preview a text by looking at the title and picture to predict the story before reading. Learners also answer questions about the text after they have finished reading the story to show their comprehension.' (Teacher Z).

For Teacher X, shared reading meant the use of group work and pair work to read a story.

All the teachers had reading corner activities as part of their pedagogical practices. For Teacher X and Y, the reading corner activities entailed reserving a corner for the classroom for the purpose of teaching learners reading in English and any other language. For Teacher Z, the reading corner was in the back of the classroom while Teacher Y and X had it on the side of their classrooms. One teacher explained that:

'the reading corner helped learners to start reading incidentally and to do independent reading.' (Teacher Y)

In Teacher X's class, the reading corner included wall displays including charts of the alphabet, sight words and picture words, as well as flashcards and learners' own handwritten work said observer 2.

Observer 3 noted that Teacher Y's reading corner had a bookshelf containing English storybooks and learners' textbooks, newspapers, and magazines. In Teacher Z's class, the Grade 3 learners were reading with their peers. A teacher explained that in this activity, the learners were:

'paired up and assigned reading buddies. All the reading takes place at the reading corner. They can take turns reading aloud to each other, discussing the stories, and helping one another with unfamiliar words or comprehension. The learners can use whatever language they want when discussing the stories.' (Teacher Y)

Similarly, another teacher also used paired reading at the corner but focused on story maps. She explained that:

'I provide story maps or graphic organizers that allow learners to visually represent the elements of a story, such as characters, setting, problem, and solution. Learners can use these tools to analyse and discuss the books they read.' (Teacher X)

The teachers in this study highlighted that the reading corners created a warm and inviting reading environment which will help the Grade 3 learners develop their reading skills, broaden their literacy experiences, and cultivate a lifelong love for reading.

Discussion

The Grade 3 teachers in this study incorporated various phonological activities, such as phonemic awareness games and phonics instruction, in their teaching methods. By explicitly and implicitly utilising these phonological and phonemic activities, the teachers ensured that learners became more proficient in decoding and spelling words by understanding the sounds of language and the relationships between sounds and letters (Duke & Mesmer 2019; Ehri 2022; Luna & Silvester 2023). The explicit teaching of sound-symbol correspondence and phonics rules supported learners in developing the foundational skills necessary for reading in English (Luna & Silvester 2023). This targeted instruction has been shown to improve learners' ability to accurately decode English words (Murphy et al. 2023).

Moreover, the study indicated that the Grade 3 teachers also employed interactive activities in their reading literacy instruction (Bessette 2020; Ehri 2020; Zaman 2020). Consistent with the findings of Bessette (2020), the participants in this study utilised interactive activities when learners actively engaged in hands-on tasks, such as group discussions, collaborative projects, or interactive read-aloud (Bessette 2020). These interactive activities provided opportunities for learners to interact with the text, ask questions, make predictions, and share their thoughts and ideas, fostering deeper understanding and improving reading comprehension (Zaman 2020).

However, it was observed in our study that the teachers did not strike a balance between explicit reading instruction and the implementation of curricular and prescriptive reading literacy strategies in the classroom. While the phonics approach and interactive activities were utilised, the focus seemed to be more on engaging learners in prescribed reading activities rather than teaching them how to read with comprehension (Luna & Silvester 2023). Furthermore, the teachers did not incorporate culturally relevant reading materials into the curriculum, neglecting stories, books, and texts that reflect the Namibian culture, traditions, and local contexts (Mashinja & Mwanza 2020). Culturally relevant reading materials are known to help learners connect with the content, develop a sense of identity, and take pride in their culture (Mashinja & Mwanza 2020).

Limitations

While secondary data can be a valuable resource in research, there are several limitations to consider when using it in a study focused on reading literacy instruction. Firstly, with secondary data, the researchers have limited control over the data-collection process. We relied on the methods and procedures used by the original data collectors. However, in this study, one of the researchers (removed for review purposes) was part of the data-collection team. Secondly, the data collected aligned perfectly with our specific research objective as we explored the learning activities used for reading literacy instruction by Grade 3 teachers.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the learning practices of selected Grade 3 ESL teachers for reading literacy instruction in Oshana region in Namibia. The study revealed that the selected Grade 3 ESL teachers in the Oshana region employ a variety of learning practices to enhance reading literacy skills among their learners. These practices include the use of phonological and interactive activities. It is important for teachers and policymakers in Namibia to recognise the importance of incorporating phonological and interactive activities in Grade 3 reading instruction. For instance, one approach is to concurrently utilise EGRA to diagnose early literacy issues and implement the Jolly Phonics intervention strategy to promptly address the literacy challenges. The combination of these methods might mean the identification of specific literacy difficulties through the EGRA assessment and then apply the targeted phonics intervention strategy provided by the Jolly Phonics programme. This simultaneous use of assessment and intervention strategies will ensure a more comprehensive and timely response to early literacy problems. In addition, providing professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in implementing these activities can further support effective reading instruction. Additionally, ensuring access to appropriate cultural and linguistic instructional resources, such as phonics materials and interactive reading materials, is essential for the successful implementation of these practices.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

N.G. and N.M. conceived of the presented idea. N.G. sourced all the secondary data and analysed them. N.M. supervised all the findings of this work. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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Data availability

Raw data were generated at Oshana Regional Office. Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from N.G. upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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