
Teachers' Views on Teaching Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) in Grade 5 Classrooms in Zambia

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of the study was to establish the teachers' views on teaching oral reading fluency in grade 5. The research objective was 'What are the teachers' views on teaching oral reading fluency in grade 5?' A phenomenological research design was used in this study because the research question called for interaction with the participants in their environment. The study sampled six schools, two schools each from Kitwe, Lusaka, and Livingstone towns of Zambia. From these schools, 12 grade 5 teachers were purposively sampled in the study. In this study, grade 5 teachers who were teaching language were interviewed in the selected primary schools in Zambia. The study found that teachers held a view that Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) is a skill that can only be taught in lower primary grades (1-4) and not in upper primary grades (5-6). Teachers have the content knowledge of ORF but lack the pedagogical knowledge to teach fluency to Grade 5 learners. Teachers acknowledge the importance of ORF but deny its power on struggling learners in Grade 5 classrooms. Therefore, non-teaching of oral reading fluency in Grade 5 might be an explanation to why learners still face challenges comprehending what they read in the Zambian primary schools. It was then recommended that teachers should ensure they teach ORF to enable learners to become fluent in reading whilst in primary schools.*

KEYWORDS: oral reading fluency, grade five, teachers

INTRODUCTION

Teachers have their own understanding of the pedagogy they have to use in delivering their lessons in schools and this influences their opinions on how best they have to teach a given linguistic component. Other scholars have argued that teaching techniques must allow for the active involvement and participation of learners in the learning process. Teachers should structure their classes to facilitate this active learner role (Nyimbili, Namuyamba and Chakanika, 2018). In primary schools, teachers teaching different language components like phonemic awareness, reading, comprehension and fluency according to the way the syllabus prescribes in the Zambian system.

It should be noted that the most important school-related factor in student learning is teaching (Schwartz, 2009). Husbands & Pearce (2011) emphasised that effective pedagogies depend on behaviour (what teachers do), knowledge and understanding (what teachers know) and beliefs (why teachers act as they do. Samosa (2021) argued that pedagogical innovation may serve as a steppingstone to ameliorate students' poor reading comprehension, attitude, and engagement. This is the skill which is paramount to the acquisition of the reading fluency.

It has been observed that fluency was once the “neglected reading goal” (Allington, 1983) but today this view is no longer the case because there has been an increased interest in developing fluency and research findings confirming the guided reading approaches in developing comprehension (Stahl, Flanigan & Mc, 2020). Otherwise, teachers' views obtained in this study differs with literature (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2018; NICHD, 2000; Rasinski, 2004) who regard ORF as a foundational literacy skill and an essential component of comprehension and that deficiency in this foundational aspect of reading prevents learners from adequately comprehending texts.

Most scholars have come to accept that reading fluency is essential in literacy development because the reader must possess the ability to accurately and automatically decode words to read sentences in a text (Rasinski, 2006). Therefore, fluency has been a focus of elementary reading instruction for decades, and recent research suggests that it is also a significant variable in secondary students' reading and overall academic development (Chard, 2012; Rasinski et al., 2005; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Thompson, 2011; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009).

Despite teachers being trained from different colleges and universities, their teaching and assessment of language ought to be uniform. The way we assess fluency and the way we teach fluency should be connected to comprehension because emerging empirical evidence shows a strong correlation between teachers' knowledge of essential components of the reading process and classroom practice, and students' reading performance (Binks-Cantrell et al., 2012).

There are many challenges that can make teachers fail to teach components like fluency in schools. Hudson et al., (2005) state that lack of pedagogic knowledge by teachers may result in failure to develop the ability to recognise or decode words correctly, and to read connected text quickly and accurately with expression. Other scholars also support the suggestion that fluency is considered the bridge between word recognition and comprehension (Armbruster et al., 2001; Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Walczyk & Griffith-Ross, 2007). Therefore, a comprehensive reading programme should integrate reading assessments that measure students' skills at the beginning of the programme (Rasinski, 2004; Tindal et al., 2016) to help teachers determine the fluency instruction that works best for the learners' needs and abilities.

The ability to read for meaning and pleasure is arguably the most important skill children learn in primary school (Clark & Rumbold, 2016). Reading has been identified as an important gateway to personal development, and to social, economic, and civic life (Holden, 2004). It allows us to learn about other people, about history and social studies, the language arts, science, mathematics, and the other content subjects that must be mastered in school (Lyon, 1997). Zambia, through the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) also recognises literacy and reading as important skill that is basically at the heart of a student's ability to learn and succeed in school and beyond (MoGE, 2006).

For more than thirty years now, primary schools in Zambia have been experiencing low literacy levels leading to low achievement levels (Banda & Mwanza, 2017). The Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESVTEE) through the Examination Council of Zambia (ECZ) has been conducting the National Assessment Survey (NAS) of Learning Achievement at the Grade 5 level of education since 1999. The 2014 Zambia National Assessment (NAS) on Grade 5 learning achievements, like all other surveys, confirmed low achievement levels among learners nationwide and attributed the low achievement levels to a lack of comprehension ability among most learners (MoGE, 2014). The low comprehension ability in reading also affected the comprehension in other learning areas leading to poor performance in almost all the subject areas. Most Zambian studies have stated that Zambian children in schools have challenges in acquiring reading fluency while teachers fail to teach the language component (Tambulukani, 2012). The research gap that this study filled was the teachers' views on teaching oral reading fluency in Grade 5 classrooms.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to establish the teachers' views on teaching oral reading fluency in grade 5.

Research question

- i. What are the teachers' views on teaching oral reading fluency in grade 5?

Significance of the study

Findings may also help teachers to understand the right instructions learners require to improve reading fluency and eventually successful reading, comprehension. Findings may stimulate further research into other components that help sustain learners' reading fluency skills which can be included in literacy instruction. Findings may also be used by universities and colleges of education in training would-be teachers.

METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological research design was used in this study because the research question called for interaction with the participants in their environment. The study sampled two schools from Kitwe, Lusaka, and Livingstone towns of Zambia. From these schools, 12

grade 5 teachers were purposively sampled in the study. In this study, grade 5 teachers who were teaching language were interviewed in the selected primary schools in Zambia. In doing so, interviews with the teacher in this study were characterized by such a collaborative relationship since the researcher was participating and offering his views regarding issues the participants were raising and was not focused just on transferring the opinions of the participants. Teachers in this study were expected to answer questions on their views on teaching oral reading fluency in Grade 5 classrooms. Data was analysed thematically by sorting and arranging the data in themes under which verbatims were presented after careful selection. The views of the participants have been presented using pseudo names of only mentioning teachers, instead of their names.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results in this study are an indication that teachers have basic knowledge about ORF. They have the dictionary meaning of fluency and they acknowledge its importance, but they deny its power on struggling learners in grade 5 classrooms by not teaching it. One teacher said:

This is the ability to read with speed, correct and proper expression, to effortlessly translate letters to sounds and sounds to words.

Teachers have content knowledge of what ORF is and they understand its importance in reading, but they lack deep pedagogical understanding of how it is taught, when it is taught, and how it is assessed. One of the teachers outrightly said:

I don't teach oral reading fluency, so how can I indicate the importance of it? They teach it in grades 1,2,3 and 4.

They lack the deep understanding that pedagogy is the vehicle that develops the skills of ORF and that it can be taught even to Grade 5 learners in primary schools of Zambia. From the answers given during interviews, we can tell that teachers also understand that oral reading fluency is an activity that entails reading aloud, observing punctuations, and showing expressions while reading. One participant explained by saying,

It helps learners to acquire knowledge of pronouncing words correctly and learn the skill of reading fluently in public and in school. The thought should be flowing as a child reads.

They also understand that oral reading fluency is a measure that addresses accuracy and involves a learner reading smoothly and correctly with less effort or the ability to effortlessly translate letters to sound words, but they fail to translate this knowledge into how it can be taught to learners. Evidence on the importance of pedagogy is summarised by Schwartz (2009) who concluded that 'the most important school-related factor in student learning is teaching. This means that teachers' pedagogic knowledge plays an important

role in the learning process of learners. This is in line with Husbands & Pearce (2011) who emphasised that effective pedagogies depend on behavior (what teachers do), knowledge and understanding (what teachers know), and beliefs (why teachers act as they do). Effective pedagogies embed assessment for learning. Literature considers pedagogy as the method and practice of teaching that can help and guide with instructions used. This is supported by Samosa (2021) who said pedagogical innovation may serve as a stepping stone to facilitate students' poor reading comprehension, attitude, and engagement. This implies that teachers with pedagogic knowledge would utilize their knowledge to help interact in scaffolding collaborative learning approaches in reading sessions to improve learners' academic performance. The other implication is that, since pedagogy refers to all levels of teaching, from nursery and primary, all the way up to higher education, oral reading fluency also has its own pedagogy to be taught at primary school or even secondary school where learners struggle with reading. Fluency was once the "neglected reading goal" (Allington, 1983). Still, today this view is no longer the case because there has been an increased interest in developing fluency and research findings confirming the guided reading approaches in developing comprehension (Stahl, Flanigan & Mc, 2020).

These results also suggest that teachers have a misconception about fluency being taught only as a foundation course in lower primary schools. Other teachers indicated that they had no idea when oral reading fluency is introduced. One Participant said, "*I have no idea*". Significantly, teachers' views obtained in this study differ from the literature (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2018; NICHD, 2000; Rasinski, 2004) who regard ORF as a foundational literacy skill and an essential component of comprehension and that deficiency in this foundational aspect of reading prevents learners from adequately comprehending texts. Reading fluency is essential in literacy development because the reader must possess the ability to accurately and automatically decode words to read sentences in a text (Rasinski, 2006). When the reader does not read fluently the voice does not sound natural. According to Ehri's theory of stages of reading development, if fluency problems are not addressed in the early grades, problems will likely hinder learners' educational progress in subsequent years.

It was established in the study that fluent readers read connected text accurately, at a natural rate, and with appropriate prosody. Fluency has been a focus of elementary reading instruction for decades, and recent research suggests that it is also a significant variable in secondary students' reading and overall academic development (Chard, 2012; Rasinski et al., 2005; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Thompson, 2011; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Therefore, non-teaching of ORF in Grade 5 might be an explanation to why learners still face challenges comprehending what they read. Fluency does not stand on itself but works in connection with other skills and all aspects of fluency should be connected to comprehension (assessment and instruction). Therefore, lack of knowledge on assessment of ORF by teachers may be an indication why teachers fail to come up with appropriate instructions necessary to promote reading fluency among learners in grade 5. The way we assess fluency and the way we teach fluency should be connected to comprehension

because emerging empirical evidence shows a strong correlation between teachers' knowledge of essential components of the reading process and classroom practice, and students' reading performance (Binks-Cantrell et al., 2012).

The study established that since learners in primary schools of Zambia "learn to read" in local familiar languages at the lower primary school level (1-4), they should also be taught to "read to learn" with fluency at the upper primary level (5-7) in the English language. One participant said:

fluency can be taught better if we engage learners in teaching them to learn to read and them read to learn at an earlier stage only if they can read fluently.

These findings are supported by Hudson et al., (2005) who state that lack of pedagogic knowledge by teachers may result in failure to develop the ability to recognise or decode words correctly and to read connected text quickly and accurately with expression. Other scholars also support the suggestion that fluency is considered as the bridge between word recognition and comprehension (Armbruster et al., 2001; Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Walczyk & Griffith-Ross, 2007). Therefore, ORF must be acknowledged at every educational level, and it should be regarded as a crucial component and a tool for academic success.

The study found that learners need to attain a certain fluency level to succeed in their reading development for successful reading. One participant said.

We ask questions as they are reading the story and when they finish reading, we ask them questions, then they answer comprehension questions in their exercise books, or we give them homework sometimes.

This may be attained through assessment of ORF as this may be a reliable way that would help teachers distinguish between fluent and non-fluent readers and inform instruction. One possible reason for poor comprehension abilities among most learners could be due to teachers' failure to assess oral reading fluency and failure to implement clear reading fluency instructions. Therefore, a comprehensive reading programme should integrate reading assessments that measure students' skills at the beginning of the programme (Rasinski, 2004; Tindal et al., 2016) to help teachers determine the fluency instruction that works best for the learners' needs and abilities. Through this study, teachers have been presented with different pedagogic approaches, practices, and strategies that can be used to teach and assess oral reading fluency in grade 5 classrooms and in the entire primary school. This argument is supported by Moats who said, "Give teachers the Knowledge they need to make an impact on every young learner (Moats, 2020:2).

CONCLUSION

Teachers do not teach ORF in Grade 5 classrooms. In their view, ORF is a skill that can only be taught in lower primary grades (1-4) and not in upper primary grades (5-6). Teachers have the content knowledge of ORF but lack the pedagogical knowledge to teach fluency to Grade 5 learners. Teachers acknowledge the importance of ORF but deny its power on struggling learners in Grade 5 classrooms. Therefore, non-teaching of oral reading fluency in Grade 5 might be an explanation for why learners still face challenges comprehending what they read. They know what ORF is and that its importance but lack pedagogical knowledge of how to teach it and support struggling readers in grade 5 classrooms in upper primary grades.

Recommendations

The study recommended that Grade 5 teachers need to learn and understand the pedagogical practices involved in teaching oral reading fluency and must understand the role that assessment plays in developing learners' fluency so that they can choose appropriate texts for fluency practice at the right level for each learner. This will help them to enhance the teaching of oral fluency in primary schools in Zambia.

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