

**A CASE STUDY OF THE FACTORS WHICH INHIBIT GRADE 12 LEARNERS'
COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE AT ONGHA SENIOR
SECONDARY SCHOOL IN THE OHANGWENA REGION**

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Abstract

This was a qualitative case study which investigated the factors which make English texts difficult for second language learners of English to understand. A criterion sampling procedure, which stipulates the selection of participants who share the same characteristics, was used. Fifty-eight grade 12 learners and six teachers of content subjects at Ongha Senior Secondary School took part in this study. A comprehension test and interviews were used as research instruments and a thematic technique was used to analyze collected data. The main findings of this study were that learners' difficulty in comprehending English written texts can be attributed to poor knowledge of English language and vocabulary. Recommendations of this study included exposing learners to a variety of unfamiliar words, activating learners' prior knowledge with regard to titles and texts to be read, and making learners aware of complex sentences as well as teaching them how to analyse such sentences.

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The teachers and learners of Ongha Senior Secondary School; it is because of you that I have learned what I know today.

Dedication

To my beloved mother and father

Declarations

I, Leader Hilongwa, declare hereby that this study is a true reflection of my own research, and that this work, or part thereof has not been submitted for a degree in any other institution of higher education.

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List of abbreviations

ESL: English as a Second Language

IGCSE: International General Certificate of Secondary Education

NRP: National Reading Panel

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

During assessment and evaluation of the performance of both grade 11 and 12 learners in English as a Second Language, I have observed that these learners performed poorly in this particular subject. This poor performance pertains to grammatical structures, spelling, speaking, writing and reading comprehension. Although these learners struggle in a number of language areas, as indicated, the focus of this research was on reading comprehension.

According to Grabe (2000, p.1) reading is one of the most important skills in academic setting and it is one of the most complex skills in which to develop strong second language fluency. Unlike with speaking and writing, the reader is not able to control the message or the language used, and unlike with listening there are no opportunities to ask for clarification or additional information. Moreover, in written texts, writers select what to say and how to say it and sometimes redundant information which might give clues to the message being conveyed by the text is omitted (Kitao and Kitao, 1995). Thus, where readers do not understand the texts, they cannot ask the writer questions, and, if the text does not compensate for the loss of information, the writer's intended meaning may not be clear to the readers.

Every year, schools that offer grade 10 and grade 12 receive official Reports on Examinations stating how the grade 12 and 10 have performed in each subject in the November-December national examinations. The grade 12 English question papers, either core or extended, contain reading and directed questions (written texts with questions). Having already observed that the grade 12 learners struggled in this area, I decided to acquaint myself with the Reports on

Examinations. The Reports on Examinations (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009) shared the same conclusions. According to these reports, the standard of the written answers in the November-December examinations in English as a second language was deteriorating, and that was due to the fact that learners lacked interpretation skills. According to the Reports, learners misinterpreted topics, gave irrelevant answers, did not seem to be familiar with the concepts used in topics and often lifted answers from texts when attempting to answer questions. Learners end up giving irrelevant answers because they do not understand what they read. This is because reading comprehension is not an easy task, since it is not a simple matter of recognizing individual words or understanding each individual word as reader's eyes pass over it (Williams, 2008). Reading comprehension is complex, and it is thus not surprising that some individuals have difficulties in this area.

1.2 Statement of the problem

As a second language teacher of English, I have come to realize that teaching English is not an easy task, especially when it is taught by a non- native speaker of English such as myself, and when it is taught to non- native speakers of English such as my learners. Not only do the learners know little about the language and express themselves poorly, but these learners also find it difficult to decode meaning from the simplest texts presented to them.

Learners in my English classes were usually engaged in various activities that required them to read texts and answer questions. Many a time second language learners performed poorly and whenever feedback was given, in addition to spelling mistakes, those same answers were often irrelevant and out of the topic. To me this was an indication that the learners could not interpret what they had read because the understanding of it was lacking. Given this background, the

purpose of this study was to find out why many second language learners of English in my school did not understand English written texts.

1.3 Questions of the study

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What difficulties do second language learners of English have in understanding English written texts?
2. What factors make English written texts difficult to understand by some second language learners of English?
3. What can second language teachers of English do to improve reading comprehension of their second language learners of English?

1.4 Significance of the study

Having insight into what makes English written texts difficult for the second language learners of Ongha Senior Secondary School to understand, other English teachers, policy makers and stakeholders in the education sector will better understand the difficulties which the second language learners of English face. The Ministry of Education might even offer workshops that can be specifically meant to train and equip second language teachers of English with better and effective teaching methods and knowledge that can help solve classroom problems such as the problem of reading comprehension. Moreover, if English teachers familiarize themselves with the findings of this study, learners will also benefit through better and effective approaches that these teachers might employ in their classrooms. Through this anticipated improvement, learners

may also change the negative attitudes they have toward the English language and thus work on improving their reading comprehension.

1.5 Limitation of the study

The intended schedule for data collection was from the 12-23 of July 2010 but due to the tight schedules of the participants, especially the teachers, and extra – mural activities of the learner participants, the data collection was undertaken from the 15 July to 3 August, 2010.

Furthermore, although the actual sample size of the learner participants was sixty, two learners missed the first days and therefore decided not to be part of this study.

1.6 Delimitation of the study

This study was limited to the grade 12 learners and grade 12 teachers of Agriculture, Geography, Business Studies, Physical Science, Biology and English as a Second Language. The grade 12 learners were selected because of their 10 years' school experience, I felt that since they had gone through all the ten grades, they must have observed that there exists a problem in English as a language. These learners were likely to have observed how the previous grade 12 learners had performed in English and how these previous grade 12 learners were also struggling with the English written texts. Similarly, the content subject teachers were selected because they taught the grade 12 learners on a yearly basis. They had taught these grade 12 learners for many years, and most importantly, content subjects are taught and written in English and require learners to comprehend the language used in these content subjects. Thus I felt that a study of both the grade 12 learners and the content subject teachers would generate better results for this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Does a reading comprehension problem really exist? In my view this is a very important question to answer. Reading comprehension is a complex phenomenon which involves different processes for it to be accomplished. The National Reading Panel (NRP) which was set up to assess the status of research based knowledge about reading including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching reading, describes reading comprehension as an important aspect in the development of children's reading skills and therefore their ability to obtain education (National Reading Panel, 2000, p.5). Maria (1990, P.1) describes reading comprehension as a "holistic process of constructing meaning from written text though the interaction of the knowledge the reader brings to the text such as word recognition ability, world knowledge and knowledge of linguistic conventions; the reader's interpretation of the language that the writer used in constructing the text and the situation in which the text is read."

Thompson and Vaughn (2007, p.115) also add that "reading comprehension is an active process of constructing meaning from text and it involves knowing how to read words accurately and automatically assessing previous knowledge, understanding vocabulary and concepts, making inferences and linking key ideas". Finally, according to Shoebottom (2007, p.1) reading comprehension is an extremely important skill as it is an excellent way an individual can improve his/her general English and it is indeed through reading that learners learn much of what they know for their different subjects.

To answer the first question of this introductory paragraph, yes, reading comprehension problems do exist. Why? Are there no studies done to explore the possible causes of reading comprehension problems? If causes are found, why is it up to now reading comprehension problems are still on the increase? Cornoldi and Oakhill (1996) state that over the last 20 years, great efforts have been made to investigate the normal processes of text comprehension. In their view, little interest has been taken in subjects who have comprehension difficulties. According to them, this is regrettable because there is not enough direct information to enable researchers to understand and help children with this problem. Moreover, research does not often take advantage of previous information that has been gathered from children or other subjects in order to reach a better understanding of the nature of written text comprehension (Cornoldi and Oakhill, 1996, p. 158). Cornoldi and Oakhill (1996, p. 158) further write that many standardized tests of reading contain at least one sub-test measuring comprehension.

The above description reflects my own experience in my English classrooms and what I have observed from the findings of this study. When second language learners of English do not perform well in their reading comprehension tests, the blame should not always be placed on comprehension as other contributing factors might be at play. A low score in a comprehension test may be due to problems with recognizing words in a passage, or in other words, unfamiliar vocabulary. The fact remains, however that reading comprehension is the main contributing factor to second language learners' poor performance in English. It is therefore against this background that I decided to contribute to this body of knowledge to at least once again remind all stakeholders in the education fraternity that reading comprehension problems exist and if the problem is not acknowledged, the development of our children's reading skills and their ability to obtain education will always be hampered.

This literature review has explored previous studies and articles on two key issues: what makes English texts difficult to understand by second language learners and what teachers of English can do to help these learners. In the next section, schemata theory and interactive models of reading have been used as guides to help understand the problems associated with reading comprehension.

2.2 The Theoretical framework

Schemata theory has been described as the process by which readers combine their own background knowledge with the information in a text in order to comprehend that text (Stott, 2001, p.1). It has been indicated that if a learner's schemata are inadequate and do not provide an understanding of the incoming data from the text, that learner will have problems processing and understanding the text (Rumelhart, 1977).

In order to understand the role of schema availability in ESL reading comprehension, one should draw a distinction between *formal* schemata which include background knowledge of the rhetorical organizational structure of the text and *content* schemata which include background knowledge of the content area of the text (Carrell, 1983). According to Carrell (1988), this means that, one type of schema which a reader needs to possess in order to comprehend a text is background knowledge about rhetorical organization such as differences in the structure of short stories, newspaper articles or expository text types. The other type of schema a reader needs to possess is background knowledge about the content area related to a text, for example information about physics, Black American culture or the political situation in Afghanistan.

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983, p.104) point out that one of the reasons why a particular content schema may fail to exist for a reader is because the schema is culture specific. According to them (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983), implicit cultural content knowledge presupposed by a text and a reader's own cultural background knowledge of content interact to make texts whose content is based on one's own culture easier to read and understand than syntactically and rhetorically equivalent texts based on a less familiar, distant culture. I found this point to be related to what has stated in the Report on the IGCSE Examinations October/November (2006). There was a question in the English as a Second Language examination question paper which expected learners to write about a 'market day'. According to this report, second language learners of English who were not familiar with the concept of a 'market day' did not answer this question correctly because they could not relate to it. This supports the belief that readers' cultures can affect everything from the way they view reading itself, to their understanding of the content, to their understanding of individual concepts (Stott, 2001, p.2). In Carrell's view (1988, p.2) when learners are faced with unfamiliar topics or concepts, some overcompensate for absent schemata by reading in a slow, text-bound manner or making wild guess. These strategies do not help learners understand the topics they are reading, but rather result in comprehension difficulties.

According to Carrell (1984), comprehension difficulties come about because of the ways schemata interact with the text. In the first instance, the text may assume background knowledge that the reader does not possess so this means the reader has no prior knowledge of the topic being discussed. Some readers may have insufficiently developed schemata. This can mean that the reader has a little knowledge about the text and cannot go beyond that knowledge. Also, the text might be poorly presented in such a way that it does not give relevant clues to appropriate

schema; thus, a learner will get lost and may guess the message being conveyed by the text. Similarly, a text may be ambiguously presented; this is when the text invites more than one interpretation of its message. A learner may not know which interpretation to take or in cases where the interpretation is made, it could be the inappropriate one.

Although the notion behind the schemata theory is the activation of background knowledge, Stott (2001, p.5) has noted that schemata activation does not always result in improvements in comprehension. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to fill in absent schemata and activate resident schemata in order to improve second language readers' comprehension. Thus, according to Stott (2001), teachers should take time to verify the usefulness of the activities they use and pay attention to possible schema interference and non activation.

Schema theory research has also shown that the most efficient processing of text is an interactive process, a combination of top-down and bottom-up models (Rumelhart, 1977). According to Carrell (1988, p.101) top-down processing involves the making of predictions about the text based on prior experience or background knowledge, and then checking the text for confirmation or refutation of those predictions. When using the top-down model, readers bring a great deal of knowledge, expectations, assumptions and questions to the text and given a basic understanding of the vocabulary, they continue to read as long as the text confirms their expectation (Goodman, 1967). The top-down school of reading theory also argues that readers fit the text into the knowledge they already possess (e.g. cultural, syntactic, linguistic or historical) then they check back when new unexpected information appears. Bottom-up processing on the other hand, involves decoding individual linguistic units such as graphemes, phonemes and words. In other words, it is about building textual meaning from the smallest units to the largest and then

modifying pre-existing background knowledge and current predictions on the basis of information encountered in the text (Carrell, 1988, p.101). Stanovich (1990) posits that this bottom-up process can become so automatic that readers are not aware of how it operates.

2.3 What makes English texts difficult to understand?

Comprehension is particularly important for English language learners. There is considerable research showing that the foundation skills in reading are acquired by English language learners but there is often a breakdown with reading comprehension. This breakdown may be attributed to many reasons including failure to understand word meanings, inadequate background knowledge, lack of interest in text or a disconnect between instruction, text and learner. All of these can be considered when providing reading comprehension instruction for English language learners.

The meaning that is constructed during reading depends upon the reader, the material that is being read and the reading situation. The reader activates and controls the reading process. This process, according to Richek, Caldwell, Jennings and Lerner (1996), includes the reader's background knowledge, interest, attitude, purpose and ability. According to Richet et al. (1996, p. 9), the reader's ability also plays a part in meaning construction. Students with reading problems often struggle to recognize words and comprehend texts; therefore they have less energy to pay attention to the meaning of what they are reading. Similarly, the more a reader lacks background knowledge about the topic, the more difficult it will be for the reader to understand a text (Chang, 2004; Dickinson and Neuman, 2006; Levine, 1994; Irvin, Lunstrum, Lynch-Brown & Shepherd, 1996). According to Chang (2004, p.168), background knowledge, which can also be referred to as schemata, is vitally important because it promotes reading

comprehension that organizes facts about how the world works. Without adequate background knowledge, reading comprehension suffers.

It has also been noted that interest affects learners' understanding of texts, a factor I have also observed in my classes. There are certain topics that learners would like to read even if they contain unfamiliar words, and this varies between boys and girls. For example, boys often want to read about their favourite local and international soccer players and especially international soccer teams, or about local musicians. Girls, on the other hand, often only like to read love novels and news about musicians they know, whether local or international. It is therefore often difficult to expect these learners to concentrate while reading, especially if the purpose is not assessment. Thus, Benhardt, Kamil, Muaka and Pang (2003) also acknowledge that when choosing books for learners to read, learners' interests should be considered. This is especially important for English second language learners. It is believed that when learners read topics of interest to them, they develop the desire to want to read and the will to read more. Through more reading, learners encounter different words, become familiar with them and get a chance to observe and see how, for instance, a single word can be used in many different contexts to mean many different things.

Vacca (2002, p.3) notes that research conducted in the past ten years revealed that vocabulary knowledge is the single most important factor contributing to reading comprehension. It is however important to note that growth in vocabulary does not occur in the first instance because there are many issues involved. For instance, a learner must develop precision in meaning, a learner must become acquainted with multiple meanings, a learner must learn specific word meanings, a learner must interpret idiomatic expressions and for successful speech and writing

that learner must be able to call to mind the word needed and then apply it correctly (Dechant and Smith, 1997).

Many students may be generally competent in reading but relative to other skills, vocabulary often seems to be their weakest area. The weakness ranges from complete ignorance of words to a narrow knowledge of the words (Shepherd, 1973, p.13). In this regard, Aebersold and Field (1997, p.13) argue that if the number of information words in a text is small and their content is not important to the main message, then these words may not hinder comprehension. However, if many of the key words are unfamiliar, readers may not be able to comprehend the text.

Many researchers (Benhardt, Kamil, Muaka and Pang, 2003, p.12; Chang, 2004, p.154 and Dickinson & Neuman, 2006, p.41) indicated that vocabulary development is crucial to reading comprehension across languages. In a study done by Carlisle, Beeman, Davis and Spharim (1999) as cited in Chang (2004, p.154), it was demonstrated that primary school native Spanish speakers' vocabulary knowledge was a good predictor of their English reading comprehension. Again, a similar study done by Schoonen, vanGelderen, de Glopper, Hulstijn, Simis and Snellings (2003) as cited in Chang (2004, p.154) on Dutch children learning to write in English revealed that eighth graders' writing skills in the two languages (English and Dutch) were highly correlated with one another. The relevance of these two studies to this study is the fact that they highlight the importance of the knowledge of the first language's influence on the development of the second language. This means when a child can read and write in his/her first language (Chang, 2004 and Dickinson & Neuman, 2006) then this child can easily transfer this literacy skills (reading and writing) even vocabulary to the second language to be learned.

The question is, can this conclusion of the first language being the predictor of literacy skills of a second language be generalised to all first languages? The current study was conducted in Namibia, Africa, where more than twenty different languages are spoken many of which are Bantu languages. The languages mentioned above, namely, Spanish and Dutch and even Portuguese and French share cognate words with the English language. A word is a cognate with another if both derive from the same word in an ancestral language. In other words, cognates are words in two languages that share a similar meaning. In my view it is obvious that learners who speak these languages, i.e. Spanish and Dutch once presented with English written texts may not struggle to figure out a few words in the English written texts because their spelling and meaning might be similar to the words in their own languages. In Namibia however, this might not be the case. The first language of the learners who took part in this study was Oshikwanyama, a Bantu language spoken by 99% of the learner population at the school and by 99.9% of all the learners who took part in this study. Oshikwanyama does not share the same origin as English unlike Spanish and Dutch. This is a clear indication of how our second language learners of English in this study may find it difficult to understand English texts and how difficult it is for them to have background knowledge related to the English language because they usually come to school with no knowledge of the English language especially those that did not even go to kindergarten. This is the very point that the schemata theory highlights, namely, the importance of background knowledge related to content to be learned. In this regard, Vaughn (2007, p. 91) argues that although the use of cognates is a useful skill for learning word meanings, it is imperative for educators to keep in mind that cognates are only helpful if the words to be learned are already part of the student's vocabulary and the students have at least some knowledge about the words in their home language. This is an indication that

most of the studies done on reading comprehension targeted mainly speakers of European and Asian languages.

2.4 How can English teachers help ESL improve text comprehension?

For second language readers, bottom-up and top-down skills and strategies must be developed jointly since they both contribute directly to the successful comprehension of the text (Eskey and Grabe, 1988). This is because (Aebersold and Field, 1997, p.97) readers use both top-down and bottom-up strategies to comprehend a text. The bottom-up strategies provide a linear or sentence by sentence building of comprehension. Top-down strategies on the other hand, aid readers' comprehension of larger pieces of text such as paragraphs or sections. They help readers see how an individual sentence or a group of sentences contribute to the larger meaning. Reading teachers therefore need to develop the ability to analyze top-down and bottom-up components of the reading process. According to Aebersold and Field (1997, p.19), teachers need to first understand how they themselves read, and how their own reading differ from that of their learners, because this is part of their preparation for teaching reading. If teachers begin with their own reading processes and understanding how they operate, they will eventually be able to anticipate the types or processes and potential problems that their students will experience.

Teachers need to ensure that the learner has adequate word and world knowledge to understand the text he/she is reading. Of great importance is to assure students that reading comprehension is sense meaning (Thompson and Vaughn, 2007, p. 114). According to Thompson and Vaughn (2007), teachers can promote this understanding of reading for meaning by ensuring that students understand vocabulary in the passage, by pre-teaching key ideas and background concepts central to understanding the text, and by asking students to reflect on the author's intention, their

own experiences and the meanings derived from the text. Teachers should also consider the backgrounds of students as a starting point to build and link new ideas. This includes demonstrating and highlighting new words so that students can recognize, hear and practise them.

Teachers can help students build their vocabulary and expand their knowledge of word meanings by providing opportunities for them to encounter new words in texts, by repeated exposure to words that expand understanding and by explicitly teaching word meanings (Thompson and Vaughn, 2007, p.88). Teachers can also help learners improve their text comprehension when they carefully select texts or books which relate to children's interests and which are readable (Myers and Burnett, 2004, p.221; Benhardt, Kamil, Muaka and Pang, 2003). According to Benhardt et al. (2003), teachers should guide learners to focus on words and concepts that may be unfamiliar which is indeed important for second language learners of English. Discussion of new words and concepts between the teacher and the learners before a text is read is believed to be helpful because it helps activate prior knowledge and improve comprehension. Myers and Burnett (2004, p.8) also added that interest and background knowledge are related. According to them, people who are interested in a topic will read about it and as they read they increase their background knowledge.

According to the National Reading Panel (2000, p.6), text comprehension is improved when teachers use a combination of reading comprehension techniques such as question answering, question generation and summarization. When students are able to use such techniques successfully, they perform better in recall, answering questions, generating questions and summarizing texts. The National Reading Panel (2000) also found that intensive professional

development is necessary so that teachers can learn to use reading comprehension strategies effectively. Based on the Panel's findings, teachers should receive formal instruction on strategies to teach reading comprehension as early as pre-service.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section describes the methodology used to collect and analyse data.

3.1 Research Design

This is a qualitative case study design. This type of research has been chosen because case studies provide rich descriptions of the real nature of a phenomenon. I used this design because of its particularistic nature so as to gain in-depth understanding and a clear description of the characteristics of the target groups used in this study.

3.2 Population

The population of this study consisted of grade 12 learners of Ongha Senior Secondary School in the Ohangwena region. An English second language teacher and other content subject teachers for grade 12 learners of Agriculture, Geography, Business Studies, Physical Science and Biology were also part of the population of the study.

3.3 Sample

The selection of the sample (teachers and learners) was done through a criterion sampling procedure. This procedure, according to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009), entails selecting all cases that meet a particular set of criteria or have the same characteristics. There were five grade 12 classes with a total of 206 learners. In each class, twelve learners were selected on the basis of their constant poor and good performance in English as a Second Language's written texts. The total of learner participants was therefore sixty. The twelve learners selected from each class were divided into two groups, six learners being those who constantly performed well in

English written texts (reading comprehension activities) and the remaining six being those who constantly performed poorly in English written texts (reading comprehension activities). The six content subject teachers selected as participants for this study were those who taught English as a second language, Geography, Agriculture, Business Studies, Physical Science and Biology. The criterion used to select these content subject teachers was their teaching experience of the grade 12 learners.

3.4 Research instruments

An interview technique was used to collect data from participants. An interview, according to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009, p.370), is a purposeful interaction in which one person obtains information from another. The second language learners of English were first given a comprehension test to assess their reading comprehension abilities. Each learner participant was then interviewed, based on his/her performance in the test. Although this was the case, already prepared structured- interview questions comprising of both open ended and closed questions were also used to obtain important specific information on the nature of learner participants' reading comprehension of English texts. The same instrument was also used to elicit answers from the teacher participants.

3.5 Data collection procedure

After writing a letter to the Educational Director of the Ohangwena region requesting permission to carry out my research at Ongha Senior Secondary School, I was granted the requested permission. The letter stipulated the purpose of the study, explained how the collected data was going to be used, and how it would benefit the school, as well as outlined the provisions I would

make in order to protect the identities of the research participants. As soon as permission was granted, I made appointments with the content subject teachers who were participants of this study. I briefed them about the study and set up dates as to when the interviews were to take place. With regard to the learner participants, I informed them about the study and told them what was expected from them. As the interviews took place I took extensive written notes of the responses of the participants.

3.6 Data analysis

A thematic technique was used to analyse collected data. First, I read through the notes that I had made during the interviews. I constructed meaning from these notes and analysed what the participants, both the learners and the teachers, were communicating. I then went through the answers that the learners gave in the comprehension that they had been given. I took cognisance of the difference in performance between the learners who constantly performed well in reading comprehension activities and the learners who constantly performed poorly in reading comprehension activities. Based on this difference, I then narrated what the results of the comprehension test communicated about reading comprehension difficulties. Lastly, I classified collected data into identified themes by looking at items that appeared more than once.

3.7 Ethical consideration

Before I collected the data, I provided basic information to the participants (teachers and learners) on what 'research' was about. I then briefed them about what this study was about and what I expected from them as participants. I did this so that the participants would know what they were letting themselves in for. I assured them that I had no intention of harming them, especially emotionally, and further added that they were free to withdraw from taking part if they so wished. I also made sure that confidentiality prevailed during and after data collection because I did not disclose their identities and I kept all the information collected from the participants confidential and out of the public eye.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

I interviewed fifty eight grade 12 learners and six teachers teaching grade 12. The teachers were responsible for teaching the following subjects: English as a Second Language, Agriculture, Geography, Business Studies, Physical Science and Biology. Initially, sixty grade 12 learners were the targeted sample for this study, and sixty learners wrote a comprehension test, one of the research instruments used in addition to the interview. However, when it was time for the interview to take place, two learners did not show up therefore the number of the learner participants became fifty eight.

The following is the presentation of the learners responses obtained from the interviews followed by the teachers' responses. Learners answered nine questions which were based on an analysis of their answers to the comprehension test that they wrote. For the comprehension test which was used as a research instrument, learners were expected to read, understand and answer questions based on an English written text. The purpose of the test was to find out how well learner participants, as second language learners of English, understood a written English text and determine what difficulties they encountered. The learners not only had to show, through the comprehension test, whether they understood an English written text, but were also expected to answer questions already set up by me, the researcher, regarding their responses to the comprehension test. These nine questions were aimed at exploring in detail the problems that learners experience when they read English written texts.

4.2 Learners' responses

QUESTION 1

What are your feelings towards the English language?

All fifty eight learners said that they liked English and the following were the main themes that emerged from their responses.

1. Importance of the English language

All learner participants indicated that they liked English because of its importance. This included views such as *English is an official language*, and *it is a language that you cannot do without*.

2. Widespread usage of English

The learners believed that English as a second language is widely spoken, not only in Namibia, but also in the world.

3. Multilingualism

Learners had a positive attitude towards English because it is a second language that must be learned and they felt that in addition to their first language, being able to speak, read and write well in English would be a bonus.

When I analyzed these responses it was clear that none of these learners seemed to have negative feelings towards the English language. These learners felt this way because they were keen to learn English and because of its prestigious status.

Do you understand English texts well? (This was a follow up question.)

Table 1 How well learners understand English texts

Learners' responses	Number of learners	% of learners
Yes	7	12.1
No	5	8.6
Sometimes yes	8	13.8
Sometimes no	13	22.4
Not really	25	43.1
TOTAL	58	100

The answers to this question were “yes”, “no”, “sometimes yes”, “sometimes no” and “not really”. Out of 58 learner participants, the majority of the learners 43.1% indicated that they did not really understand English texts well. From the responses of these learners, the following two themes emerged:

1. Vocabulary

The majority of the learners who indicated that they did not really understand English texts said that according to them, English words were difficult to understand, and furthermore, most texts used '*Bombastic words*'. This was the term the majority of the learner participants used to describe difficult words or unknown words.

2. Text

The learners also indicated that sometimes it is difficult to understand the messages that texts are trying to convey.

Responses from the learners who indicated that they sometimes did not understand English written texts (22.4%) reflected the same themes as follows:

1. Vocabulary

Again, these learners indicated that sometimes the texts had difficult words which were not familiar.

2. Text

These learners indicated that sometimes they did not understand English written texts when the title of the text was difficult, the title was not familiar, the context had difficult words and/or when there was no background knowledge to relate to.

Some learners (8.6%) clearly said that they did not understand English texts because of *difficult words in texts* and some said because of *complicated English*. 13.8% of the learners indicated that they understood English written texts only sometimes, and only 12.1% of the learners said that they did understand English written texts. This was because of:

1. Vocabulary

These learners understood texts when they contained no difficult words or when everyday words which were understandable were used or when simple English was used with simple words that these learners knew well.

2. Text

These learners indicated that they understood texts specifically when they read the texts that they loved, when the text title was interesting to them, when the text had familiar words or when the content related to what these learners already knew.

It is interesting to note here that the most prominent cause of text difficulty is vocabulary and the nature of the texts to be read. If new unfamiliar words appear in texts then they obviously hinder learners' comprehension. Similarly, when the text is not familiar to the learners, or if is not interesting or loved by the learners (as some learners have put it) then all these can affect the way the learners will comprehend the text. Johnson (1982) has indicated that a text on a familiar topic is better recalled by ESL readers than a similar text on an unfamiliar topic.

QUESTION 2

If you always perform well in reading comprehension activities such as this one, what strategies do you use to help you understand the texts?

The question referred the comprehension test, which was given to all fifty eight learners, but was only answered by learners who constantly performed well in reading comprehension activities.

The following strategies were the most commonly mentioned:

1. Key words

I have observed that the majority of the learners in my English classes resorted to using this strategy of looking for key words, either in the text or in the questions. According to these learners key words are those words that appear in both the text and the question. However, the question was, whether these learners really knew what key words are. What these learners did not seem to realise was that sometimes synonyms are used when referring to the same item. Therefore, if learners lack this knowledge of synonyms, the use of key word strategy may not be beneficial to them. Adequate knowledge of the meaning of words is really needed if learners are to use this strategy effectively.

2. Text approach

Some learners indicated that they first read the text to find out what it was about so that they could better understand the questions. Other learners indicated that they first read the title of the text to get insight into what the text would be about. Researchers such as Aebersold and Field (1997, p.87) suggest that previewing the title is a good idea since it can help learners predict or anticipate the context of the text. In my view these strategies can be effective, but if misinterpretation of text or title occurs, comprehension of the text will be affected too.

3. Text question approach

One of the strategies that learners appeared to use most frequently was to read the question first to find out what it required from the text. In my opinion this strategy is not always completely effective because synonyms are sometimes used in those questions. The issue of concern here is there may be too many unfamiliar words in a text, so if a

synonym is used in a question, learners will still find it difficult to match the word in the question with the one mentioned in the text. Again this takes us back to the notion that a question will not be well answered when complete comprehension of both the question and the text has not taken place.

4. Guessing strategy

Learners said that they frequently guessed answers when they did not understand texts. This strategy is clearly not desirable for use in a comprehension activity, and for as long as our ESL readers continue use this strategy, their performance in English comprehension written activities will always be low.

QUESTION 3

I have noticed that now and then you struggle to give correct answers to reading and directed writing activities. What could be the problem?

This question was directed to those twenty nine learners who constantly performed poorly in reading comprehension activities. Two themes emerged from the learners responses:

1. Vocabulary

The learners who performed poorly in reading comprehension activities' responses stated that the texts that they had to work on very often contained many unfamiliar words. This problem was made worse because these readers spent a great deal of time trying to figure

out what the unfamiliar words in the text meant. Eskey and Grabe (1988) support the notion that poor readers are word bound. When they are faced with unfamiliar vocabulary they keep rereading the paragraphs in which the unfamiliar words appear. According to the top-down model of reading, these learners do not know how to use context to facilitate comprehension.

2. Comprehension

Lack of text and question comprehension was also mentioned by learners as being a contributing factor. Learners indicated that they did not always understand what texts and questions were about.

QUESTION 4

From this specific activity, which specific questions did you not understand well? Why is that the case?

Table 2 Specific text questions learners did not understand well

Type of Learner	Question B	Question D	Number of learners	% of learners
Good performers	1	1	2	6.9
Poor performers	8	6	14	48.2

This question was posed to all the learners. From the table above, it can be seen that out of the 29 learners who constantly performed well, only two learners indicated that there were questions that they did not understand from the reading comprehension activity that they had done.

Similarly, of the 29 learners who constantly performed poorly in reading comprehension activities, 14 indicated that there were also questions that they did not understand in the reading comprehension activity. The questions the learners did not understand were Question B which asked what it means to seek asylum in another country and Question D which asked, where the majority of refugees fled to. These learners indicated that they could not understand these two questions because of two unfamiliar words; the word *asylum* mentioned in Question B and the word *flee* mentioned in question D. The remaining 27 learners from the group of those who constantly performed well and the 15 learners from the group of learners who constantly performed poorly indicated that they had not encountered questions that they did not understand.

QUESTION 5

You have performed well in this activity, how did you work out the answers?

Table 3 Learners' reading comprehension test scores

Type of Learner	Score	
	9/9	8/9
Good Performers	6	8
Poor Performers	1	3
Total	7	11

This question targeted all the learners from the two groups, those who constantly performed well and those who constantly performed poorly in reading comprehension activities. Table 3 shows the number of learners who scored 9/9 and 8/9 respectively. These are the learners who did not really struggle to give correct answers, since they knew which answers to take from the text and were not confused by the words 'flee' and 'asylum'.

It is imperative to take note here that the learners who constantly performed well in reading comprehension activities performed well in the reading comprehension activity that they completed for this study. According to the responses of these learners when I interviewed them, this was because the text was familiar, and even though unfamiliar words appeared in the text, they did not prevent these learners from giving correct answers. The learners gave several reasons why the text was understandable: the content matter of the text was familiar; the text was about what happens around "us"; the text was easy; the questions were specific; the text concentrated on one theme.

The remaining learners, who were not targeted by this question, were those who scored below eight points. Their weaker performance was not the result of comprehension problems alone but other factors played a role too. For example, these learners could not write the answers correctly, in other words their sentences were not properly formulated and thus they were penalised. These learners also experienced difficulties in making longer sentences shorter which often led them to give shorter answers without key words (for example omitting the subject of the sentences or leaving out important action words). These learners also had difficulty in structuring proper, correct answers so as to answer the questions asked. For example, question (a) of the comprehension test asked, "According to the article, why do people become refugees?"

Give two reasons". Some of the learners answered," *They are fleeing before persecution during periods of political or religious....*" the answer being cut short. From the observation that I carried out, it appears that some of the learners who answered this way were not really sure of which answer to give.

QUESTION 6

Did you find this passage difficult to read? What exactly was difficult?

All fifty eight learners indicated that the text was not difficult to read because of:

- *The text talks about what we hear everyday – ‘refugee’.*
- *We have studied refugees in History.*
- *Text is familiar.*

QUESTION 7

Did you encounter any difficult words in this text which may have interfered with your understanding of the text? If there were difficult words, what did you do when you could not understand them?

Table 4 Difficult words that learners encountered in the comprehension test text

Type of Learner	Difficult words		Any interference	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Good Performers	7	22	5	24
Poor Performers	8	21	6	23
Total	15	43	11	47

All fifty eight learners had to answer this question. Out of the 29 of those who constantly performed well in reading comprehension activities, seven indicated that they had encountered difficult words in the reading comprehension test. The remaining 22 learners from this group said that they had not encountered any difficult words. In contrast, eight learners from the group of those who constantly performed poorly said that they had encountered difficult words, whereas 21 indicated that they had not encountered difficult words. Learners were also asked to state whether there were specific words that interfered with their understanding of the text. A total of 11 learners said “yes” including five of those who constantly performed well and six of those who constantly performed poorly. However, 47 learners said “no”. The last question that these learners were asked was what they did if they encountered difficult words that they could not understand. The seven learners who constantly performed well had the following to say:

- *I ignored reading with understanding.*
- *I didn't have a clue so I just picked up answers.*
- *I used other words to help me understand others.*
- *I connected unknown words with other words.*

From the information above, it appears that wrong strategies and right strategies were again used. Some good performers indicated that when they encountered difficult words they could no longer read the text with understanding. They simply picked out sentences as answers. It

appeared that if learners resorted to this kind of strategy, it was because they were desperate to give answers and at the same time frustrated because they did not know what the difficult words meant. There was, however, a better strategy that these learners employed, namely, connecting unknown words with other known words. This strategy appeared to be helpful, especially if learners read the full sentence where an unknown word was found or even, the entire paragraph.

The eight learners who constantly performed poorly had the following to say:

- *I guessed.*
- *I just read past through the difficult words.*
- *I tried to find out what other words in the text mean.*

The learners who constantly performed poorly used a guessing strategy to understand difficult words. Other learners said that they read past the difficult words, which is the same as ignoring the difficult words in the text. What these learners did not seem to realise was that some of these difficult words might be key words or subjects of the sentences that they should read and understand. Obviously when this happens, it is very difficult to expect a correct answer because from the outset, the main key word was apparently not taken into consideration.

QUESTION 8

Do you ever try to translate English written texts into your own language in order to understand what you are reading? If yes, does this strategy help you?

Table 5 Translation of English text into the mother tongue

Do you translate?	Good Performers	Poor Performers
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Yes	8	21
No	21	8
Total	29	29

Table 5 above clearly shows that the majority of learners who constantly performed well in reading comprehension activities did not translate texts into their mother tongue in order to understand English written texts. From the group of those who constantly performed poorly in reading comprehension activities very few said that they did not translate English written texts into their mother tongue, while 21 of them used the translation strategy. The 29 learners who said that they did translate in order to understand English texts said they used this strategy because of the following reasons:

- *To understand texts.*
- *When the questions are difficult.*
- *To understand troubling sentences.*
- *To help understand difficult words.*
- *To understand texts better.*
- *To understand words that I don't understand.*
- *To understand words in sentences that I don't understand.*
- *To understand questions.*
- *When the text is easy and understandable.*

The other 29 learners who did not translate English texts into their mother tongue gave the following reasons:

- *Translation is difficult, sometimes it does not make sense.*
- *How can you translate something you don't already know especially difficult words.*

- *Translation is confusing; vernacular may change the meaning of the English sentence.*
- *Vernacular gives many meanings.*
- *To avoid misunderstanding of the text.*
- *Why should I translate something I don't understand?*
- *It is time consuming, you already don't know the meaning of the English word so you can't translate something you don't understand.*
- *I don't focus on the meaning of words as long as I know what the text is about.*
- *Translation is automatic, the moment I read I understand.*
- *There is always words you don't understand.*
- *Some English words mean many things, the meaning I know in vernacular may not be the same one the English word is talking about.*
- *Translation makes you depend of vernacular.*
- *Some words in English don't have specific meanings in vernacular.*
- *Time consuming, you think a lot about a word and you may not even understand a text in vernacular the language you understand well so there is no point.*
- *I don't know how to use it.*
- *I know some words in Oshiwambo and some not, some I know in English and some not. If I don't know both meanings in both languages I'll not be able to translate.*
- *Difficult words in English are difficult to translate.*
- *Words I don't understand I just leave.*
- *There is no use, it changes meaning of text in English and it is a waste of time.*
- *If I don't understand a word in English no way will I understand it in vernacular.*
- *English sentences mean different things in vernacular.*

Although some learners have indicated that they did not translate, both the good performers and the poor performers concluded that translation did not always work. What is of interest here is when some of the learners indicated themselves that you cannot translate something you already do not understand and from what I have noted in the these learners' responses that they gave me in the interviews, learners mostly tried to translate the difficult words they did not know.

QUESTION 9

Is there anything else you can tell me about what makes reading English difficult for you?

This section is not presented in themes because I wanted the readers to see other various factors that make English as a Second Language difficult. I thought anyone of these answers was unique and communicated something important that readers might be interested in. The learners had the following to say:

- *Sometimes we memorize passed question papers and therefore interpret questions based on memorized information.*
- *Some learners don't read instructions, learners start to answer questions without reading the texts.*
- *Learners don't get enough time to read texts.*
- *Texts are dominated by unfamiliar words.*
- *Teachers don't give many activities for learners to get used to and to be familiar with new and difficult words.*
- *Learners read without understanding.*
- *Learners are often stressed just to hear it's time for English.*

- *Texts written in smaller letters which are difficult to read.*
- *Learners don't concentrate when reading English texts.*
- *Learners are nervous to engage in English activities and we are often afraid to make mistakes.*
- *Some learners believe that English is difficult and no matter what they will fail.*
- *Some learners cannot read.*
- *Some learners don't like to read, we just go through the text.*
- *Some English texts are not interesting to read, we just look for answers.*
- *Some learners misinterpret and misunderstand texts.*
- *Vocabulary is not understandable.*
- *Content is sometimes unfamiliar, never heard before.*
- *Learners don't practice enough using the English language, speaking and reading.*
- *Learners don't read story books.*
- *Lack of material i.e. story books.*
- *English as a subject is not taken seriously.*
- *Learners read without a purpose, they read in order to finish.*
- *Learners don't understand English.*
- *Learners find it difficult to read.*
- *Learners are afraid to read.*
- *English language makes the content difficult.*
- *Learners have negative attitudes towards English.*
- *Learners lack the interest whenever they read English texts.*
- *Texts are too long, it takes time to complete reading them.*

- *Learners rely more on general information and interpret the text from what they know.*
- *We rush.*
- *We read without understanding what the questions want.*
- *We believe English is difficult and get stressed.*

4.3 The teachers' responses

The five content subject teachers and the English as a Second Language teacher were interviewed orally and they had to answer seven open ended questions while I wrote down their responses. These teachers were selected because I felt that since they taught the grade 12 learners on a daily basis, and had taught these subjects for many years and the fact that content subjects were taught and written in English, these teachers could help solicit better results for this study.

Table 6 Biographical data of content subject teachers and the English as a Second Language teacher

Teacher	Subject	Teaching Secondary level	Teaching subject
1	English	3 years	8 years
2	Agriculture	6 years	6 years
3	Geography	10 years	10 years
4	Business Studies	4 years	4 years
5	Physical Science	7 years	10 years
6	Biology	10 years	10 years

The reason for asking biographical information was merely to understand the background of the teaching experiences that these content subject teachers had in the subjects they taught. The

results indicated that all six teachers had experience in teaching at secondary level. Three of these teachers were more experienced than others because they had taught their subjects for ten years. The responses of the teacher participants with regard to each question were as follows:

QUESTION 1

During teaching, do you think your learners struggle to read to understand the content being taught?

All five content subject teachers and the English as a Second Language teacher agreed that grade 12 learners struggled to read and understand written material of their subjects. A follow up question was: *Why do the learners struggle?*

The teachers' responses:

- English teacher: - Learners lack the general understanding of the English language.
 - Learners have poor reading skills; they don't know how to read.
 - Learners are unable to express themselves in English.
- Agriculture teacher: -Learners' background in English is poor.
- Geography teacher: The problem is learners don't understand English. (An example given by the teacher) A test was given and the word 'demarcate' appeared in one of the

questions. The learners failed to understand this word because they had never come across this word before so some even ignored the whole question.

- Business Studies' teacher: Learners do not know English. They only read content in order to memorize. Sometimes learners do not understand words used, different words make learners not to master the content.

- Physical Science teacher: - Learners have a problem of understanding the subject itself.

-Learners cannot read.

- Biology teacher: - Learners have problems understanding the subject content.

The responses above revolved around two major concerns raised by the content subject teachers. The first one was that learners struggled to read to understand their subjects, second, learners had a poor background in English as a language; some did not understand English well, some could not express themselves in English and some could not read in English.

QUESTION 2

What difficulties do your learners seem to have when reading in order to understand the subject content?

- English teacher: Learners have a poor general understanding of the English language and poor reading skills.
- Agriculture teacher: Learners generalize content, if they are familiar with a single word and understand it they will generalize it in any context in which that word may appear. Most learners do not read to understand what is being said because they lack the understanding of most words used in the subject. Learners therefore interpret sentences the way they think they know them.
- Geography teacher: - Learners lack reading skills. Learners do not read to understand. Example, if a case study is used whereby learners are expected to answer questions, a learner will simply read the first question. If that learner finds a familiar word in the question, she/he will search no further. When she/he goes back to read the case study s/he will simply skim through the text looking for the familiar word she/he saw mentioned in the question. Once she/he spots it, she/he copies the whole sentence without even reading to understand what the sentence is about.
- Business Studies' teacher: Case studies are normally used in this subject. The problem is that learners don't want to read them. If they do read anything, it is often only a few sentences. Learners only want to apply what they know.

- Physical Science teacher: Learners are poor in English.
- Biology teacher: Learners find it difficult to understand the subject content.

The teachers' responses above clearly show that in their opinion, grade 12 learners faced difficulties when they tried to read and understand. These difficulties included, learners not understanding English and not having good reading skills. Teachers said that learners generalized content and applied what they knew even in situations where this was not necessary, and that was because they did not understand the subject content.

QUESTION 3

When your learners do not give correct answers to questions asked, what do you think is the cause?

- English teacher: - They don't understand the question.
- Agriculture teacher: -Questions may not be well structured.
 - Questions are not at the level of the learners understanding.
 - Learners may not have studied.
 - Learners don't understand the topic or the question.

- Geography teacher: - Learners misinterpret questions.

-Learners memorize the content.

-Learners are too quick to answer questions
- Business Studies teacher:-Sometimes questions are structured in ways that are confusing.

-Learners don't understand questions.

-Sometimes difficult words appear in questions.

-Some questions are too long, confusing and contain key questions such as list, describe, explain, evaluate or analyze.

Three of these key questions may appear in one question.

Learners don't know how to answer these types of questions.

- Physical Science teacher:-Learners don't follow instructions.

-During teaching they don't master the content.

-Learners don't study on their own to revise to grasp content.

- Biology teacher: - In most cases learners don't understand content.

-Structures of questions sometimes make it difficult for learners to know and understand exactly what the questions want.

In the responses above the content subject teachers and the English as a Second Language teacher indicated that in situations where learners do not give correct answers to questions asked it could be due to the following factors, learners don't understand the content in most cases, they don't understand questions posed to them and according to these teachers this could be because of the words used which can be unfamiliar, the too many key questions in one question for instance. It could also be because of the way the questions are structured which in most cases can be confusing to these learners. This last point relates to what the learners mentioned when they were interviewed. They said that sometimes they did not know how to answer questions because questions were too long.

QUESTION 4

Are there learners who perform exceptionally well in this subject? In which areas, structured questions or multiple choice? What makes them perform better?

Table 7 Learners performance in content subject area

Subject Teacher	Learners perform well	Areas in which learners perform well	What makes them perform better?
English	Yes	Structured questions	General understanding or knowledge of English
Agriculture	Yes	Multiple choice, essay	Understanding of

		questions and short questions	subject content
Geography	Yes	Structured questions	Knowledge of topic Reading skills
Business Studies	Yes	Structured questions	Good in English
Physical Science	Yes	Multiple choice	Memorize content
Biology	Yes	Structured questions	Knowledge of topic

The table above shows that all six teachers indicated that there were indeed learners who performed exceptionally well in their subjects. In schools, different subjects are assessed differently through multiple choice questions, essay questions, short questions and/or case studies, all of which fall under the heading of structured questions especially the last two. In this regard these subject teachers said that the majority of the grade 12s mostly performed better in structured questions compared to multiple choice questions. The teachers further elaborated that these learners performed better mainly because of the following reasons. The English teacher stated that learners who performed well were those who knew the English language already. Learners performed well in Agriculture, Geography and Biology when they understood the subject content or had knowledge of the subject. The Business Studies' teacher shared the same sentiment with the English teacher that learners who performed well were those who understood English better. Lastly, the Physical Science teacher said that learners only performed better when they had memorized the content. I do not think memorization can imply comprehension because some questions test the general understanding of the learners regarding the content learnt.

QUESTION 5

Would you attribute your learners' failure in this subject to the lack of understanding of the English Language?

Table 8 English as a cause of learners' failure in content subjects

Subject Teacher	Failure in subject caused by Lack of understanding of English		
	Yes	No	Sometimes
English	•		
Agriculture	•		
Geography	•		
Business Studies			•
Physical Science			•
Biology			•

From the table above, only the English, Agriculture and Geography teachers believed that their grade 12 learners failed in their subjects because they lacked the understanding of the English language. On the other hand, the Business Studies, Physical Science and Biology teacher thought otherwise. According to these teachers lack of understanding of the English subject was not the only contributing factor of learners' failure. These teachers all said that some of the learners failed because they did not study.

QUESTION 6

If the reason why your learners do not perform better in your subject is because of lack of understanding of the English language used to teach the subject content, what do you do to help your learners understand the subject content better?

- English teacher- I give more reading materials
 - I give a lot of exercises to do
 - I guide them on the Basic English skills e.g. grammar and tenses
- Agriculture teacher-I give them reading tasks in the class and then ask them to tell what they have read BUT sometimes some learners do not understand what they have read. I also try to make sure that during the lesson the content is grasped by breaking the content into steps or change the teaching method. In cases where there are learners who understand I use these learners to teach the others. Most of the time this method works. It could be because they discuss the content in their vernacular. They really get more interested.
- Geography teacher- At the beginning of each chapter I search for key terms and key words. I give these words to the learners so that they can find their meanings. This is so that learners can become familiar with the terms to be used in the chapters. I also give them paragraphs to read during the lesson and I ask them to tell me what they have read. When I write notes on the board for them to copy, sometimes the sentences are wrong. The aim is to see whether they will notice. Sometimes I also give a learner to copy notes on the board for others. It is then up to the rest of the learners to see that there are no

misspelt words, omitted words or wrong sentence structures. Learners should correct themselves.

- Business Studies' teacher- I give them more reading activities especially case studies. If there is a certain word in the case study that they do not understand, I encourage them to ask so that together we can find the meaning of that word.
- Physical Science teacher- I explain fully by using real examples e.g. show learners how a circuit look like, bulbs or come up with real models.
- Biology teacher- I guide learners on how they should study because I've noticed that when they are studying they read page by page and they don't even take notes of important facts. I also give them activities to do in class and we discuss the answers together. I also make them aware of where they are going wrong.

QUESTION 7

Is there anything else you can tell me about what can make subject content difficult for the learners or why you think some learners experience difficulty in understanding the subject?

I decided to ask this question because I wanted to find out if there were other than the English language reasons that contributed to the learners' failure in content subjects. Having said that, I also wanted to know whether English as a language would surface again in these teachers' responses, and if it did, in what way it affected learners' comprehension of subject content. The following themes arose from the teachers' responses:

1. Factors related to learners

The teacher respondents indicated that some of the factors that made content subjects difficult included learners not paying attention when being taught and not grasping content, as well as memorizing subject content. In addition, these teachers said that learners were not confident in using the English language and were afraid of making mistakes.

2. Factors related to teachers

The content subject teachers acknowledged that they did not often encourage learners to use proper English by checking learners' spelling of words, punctuation, or proper sentence structure. They merely checked whether learners wrote the correct information in their answers.

The responses to this question indicated that although factors other than English contributed to making content subjects difficult, English was also included. This is a clear indication that learners have a lot to struggle with on a daily basis in order to understand content subjects. It is also important to note here that the problems these learners experience when they attempt to understand content subjects and those that they experience when they try to learn and understand English as a Second Language are intertwined. Therefore, if content subject teachers do not emphasise correct usage of the language skills, i.e. reading and writing, then learners may not become competent in the use of the English language. Similarly, if English teachers do not strive to develop the learners' language skills, for example, improving their comprehension skills, then there will always be a breakdown in the learners' understanding of the content subjects.

4.4 Learners' performance in reading comprehension test

A total of 58 learner participants wrote a comprehension test in which they were required to answer nine questions based on a text entitled "Refugees". The purpose of the text was to find out how well second language learners of English understood reading comprehension texts and in cases where these learners found the text difficult to understand, then what could be the contributing factor/s? As indicated earlier in the methodology chapter, the sample of the learner participants consisted of two groups of learners, those who constantly performed well and those who constantly performed poorly in reading and directed writing activities. All learners were given the same test. The maximum score of this test was nine.

An analysis of learners' performance revealed that learners who constantly performed well in classroom reading and directed activities performed better in this activity. Out of the 29 learner participants those who constantly performed well in reading and directed writing activities, six scored 9/9, ten scored 8/9, seven scored 7/9, two scored 6/9, four scored 5/9 and only one scored 4/9 respectively. In contrast, out of the 29 learner participants those who constantly performed poorly in reading and directed writing activities, only one learner scored 9/9 in the comprehension test. Three of these learners scored 8/9, six scored 7/9, six scored 6/9, five scored 4/9, two scored 3/9 and one scored 2/9.

Most of the learners who constantly performed well in reading and directed writing activities gave correct well constructed answers compared to the answers which were given by the learners who constantly performed poorly. Some of these learners (good performers), those who scored below nine marks performed this way mainly because their written answers were incorrect. They used their own background knowledge about the topic to answer the questions; this was

because the topic under discussion was already known to these learners. From the group of learners who constantly performed poorly in reading and directed writing activities, the learner who scored 9/9 when asked as to how he got the answers said *“the text was good, unfamiliar words such as traumatic and ethnic occurred but did not interfere with my understanding of the text”*. According to this learner all the questions were also understandable. Most of these poor performers did poorly because of several reasons. Their answers were incorrect, the constructions of some of their sentences were grammatically wrong. Some of the answers were too short with the result that important key words of such sentences were left out. Also, some of the sentences given as answers were totally irrelevant to the questions asked.

In response to interview questions based on the reading comprehension test, learners' responses were as follows: Question 4 asked about the specific questions that the learners (both good performers and poor performers) did not understand well when they were attempting to answer the comprehension test. Both groups indicated that question B and question D were the two specific questions that they did not understand well. Question B read *“What does it mean to seek asylum in another country”?* While Question D was *“Where do the majority of refugees in Africa flee to”?* From the category of good performers, only one learner said that Question B was difficult and again only one learner from this category said Question D was difficult. All in all, only two learners from those who constantly performed well in reading and directed writing activities found questions in the comprehension test difficult. On the other hand among the learners who constantly performed poorly, eight found Question B difficult to understand and six found question D difficult to understand. A total of 14 learners out of the 29 from this category found question B and D difficult. According to these learners (both groups) questions B and D

were difficult to understand because of two unfamiliar words, namely, the word *asylum* mentioned in question B and the word *flee* mentioned in question D.

Question 5 of the interview questions asked learners from both categories who had scored 9/9 and 8/9 in the reading comprehension test to say how they worked out their answers. According to learners' responses, few strategies were used. Out of the 16 learners who performed well, nine said that when they were presented with the text, they first read the questions about that text. According to these learners, questions helped them to focus on specific key words mentioned in both the questions and the text. In a way when they read questions first, all they did was to skim and scan the text in search for the specific words these learners saw appear in the questions. Again, out of the 16 learners, four indicated that to be able to answer questions, they first had to read the title of the text. According to these learners, titles helped them get ideas of what the text would be about. Lastly, three learners indicated that they first read the text and then the questions. They wanted to understand the text before they read the questions.

Question 7 asked learners if they had encountered difficult words which may have interfered with their understanding of the comprehension test and if so, how they had dealt with those difficult words. Seven learners from those who constantly performed well in reading and directed activities indicated that they had encountered difficult words in the reading comprehension test. The remaining 22 from this group indicated that they had not encountered difficult words. From the group of those who constantly performed poorly in reading and directed writing activities, eight out of the total 29 learners said that they had encountered difficult words while 21 said the opposite. With regard to the words that might have interfered with these learners understanding, 11 learners including five of those who constantly performed

well and six learners from those who constantly performed poorly agreed that they had encountered words in the reading comprehension which interfered with their understanding.

Altogether 47 learners said that they had not encountered words which interfered with their understanding of the reading comprehension test. Of importance to note here is that all learners (irrespective of which group) seemed to have found the same difficult words namely, *traumatic*, *asylum*, *ethnic*, *persecution*, *upheaval* and *flee*. When these learners were asked to say what they did in order for them to understand the difficult words, the learners who constantly performed well in reading and directed writing activities highlighted the following: Some of them ignored reading the text with understanding and just looked for specific answers, some resorted to just picking out any sentence that they thought held the answer, some used other words in the text to help them understand the difficult words and some connected unknown words with other known words in order to understand the difficult words.

The learners who constantly performed poorly however had completely different strategies. Some guessed the answers when they encountered difficult words, some ignored the difficult words and some tried to find out what other words in the text meant. All 58 learners who participated in this study however indicated that the text in general was not difficult to read because it referred to a concept which these learners already knew, namely “refugees”.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Learners' responses

The issue at hand here is what makes reading comprehension of English texts difficult for learners of English as a Second Language to understand. A language in general is something complicated since one has to speak it, understand it, read it, write in it or one has to be able to do all of these at once. These types of abilities are applicable to a first language, second language or even a third or fourth language of an individual. However, the question is what influences these abilities, and why many second language learners of English do seem not to be more competent in reading comprehension.

The learners who took part in this study had a great deal to say. To begin with, all fifty-eight of them acknowledge having positive feelings towards English as a language. These learners indicated that amidst all other obstacles, English is a language that they wish to be fluent in because it is an important language, it is spoken almost everywhere in the world and it is an official language in Namibia. In my view this is an indication that these second language learners of English would like to be competent and proficient in this language. They wish they could speak, write, read and understand it fluently. It is therefore important to determine what these learners' responses communicate about the difficulties that they experience when dealing with reading and directed writing activities.

First, all 58 learner participants were asked to say how well they understood English texts in general. In total 25 learners (43%) indicated that they did not really understand English texts. These learners further elaborated that in general English texts are usually difficult with

unfamiliar vocabulary and about unfamiliar content or lack of background knowledge of the topics being read. Second, I asked learners to indicate the strategies that they used to help them understand English texts. It is necessary to remember that learners who were targets of this question were those who constantly performed well in reading and directed writing activities as well as those who scored well in the reading comprehension test in this study. The following were the strategies mentioned by the learners:

1. Read questions first

As mentioned earlier, nine learners of those who constantly performed well in reading comprehension activities and in this case those who performed well in the comprehension test used this strategy. According to them it was not necessary to read the text with understanding, what mattered was to simply understand the question and scan through the text to find key words that appeared in the question. With regard to the effectiveness of this strategy, this strategy could help learners answer questions within shorter periods of time and it could be useful especially when the topic under discussion is familiar to the learners. This is because to know what the question requires before reading the text makes it easier for the reader to spot answers to specific questions even though that reader may not fully understand the text. This strategy does not promote reading for comprehension in most cases.

2. Read the text first

Three learners of those who constantly performed well and those who scored well in the comprehension test indicated that reading texts first before the questions or the title helped them understand what the text was about. In my view this strategy can be effective because by the

time the reader comes to read the questions, he/she already has a better chance to answer the questions correctly, having understood what the text is about. However, this can only happen if comprehension has indeed taken place.

3. Read the title first

Of those learners who constantly performed well and those who scored well in the comprehension test, four indicated that reading the title first before the text helped them get an idea of what the entire text was about. According to the learners, titles are short summaries of texts. However, although it is clearly important to know and understand what the text is about problems may arise if misinterpretation of the title occurs. The misinterpretation can easily influence the way the reader reads the text and answers the questions. As a result learners may end up giving incorrect answers to the questions.

Although learners who constantly performed poorly in reading and directed writing activities were not the intended targets of the above question, I was interested to find out from them as to why they always performed poorly. According to these learners, they always found both the texts and questions difficult to understand. They also often did not know many of the words used in the texts. This is an indication that since new texts are usually used each time learners engage in reading comprehension activities, learners never had time to get used to a type of text and know what types of words are used in a specific text. For example, learners should know some of the different vocabulary used in technology texts, medical texts, physics texts or even cultural texts. Krashen (1981) also suggests that teachers should learn to employ 'narrow' reading with their learners. This is reading that is confined to a single topic or to the texts of a single author. It has been observed (Carrell, Devine and Eskey, 1988) that students who read

either about a single topic or the work of a single author found that texts became easier to comprehend after the first few pages. They adjusted to the repeated vocabulary of a particular topic. In my view this is advantageous because there is a chance for the students to learn related vocabulary meanings and to become familiar with it.

All learner participants were asked to whether they ever translated English texts into their mother tongue of Oshiwambo. The majority of the learners who constantly performed well in reading comprehension activities (21 learners) said that they did not translate English texts into their vernacular (mother tongue). These learners believed that translation did not always work because there were always unfamiliar or difficult words in the texts that they did not understand or know. Also, according to these learners, translation was confusing. This is possibly because the meaning of a mother tongue word may not necessarily match the exact word in the English language. Furthermore, a mother tongue word just like an English word can have different meanings, depending on the context in which the word is used thus it can be difficult to find the precise meaning of the English word especially when the topic under discussion or the text to be discussed is unfamiliar to the learners. Some learners also said that translation usually led one to depend on the mother tongue, while others said that they were afraid to translate because they may not develop strategies to look for clues that could help them to understand English texts, and thus they may end up thinking and wasting their time thinking about what difficult, unfamiliar words in English mean in Oshiwambo. Some learners indicated however that they did not know how to translate.

Very few learners (8) of those who constantly performed poorly said that they did not translate English texts into Oshiwambo compared to 21 learners who did. The latter said they translated

texts or words, their troubling sentences or difficult words in order to better understand the texts. Of great concern here is the fact that these learners translated words and sentences they could not even understand in English which would clearly not improve their comprehension. It is a matter of great concern that a large number of learners especially those who are already poor in English comprehension resort to this strategy. The learners who performed well in reading comprehension activities made a good point when they indicated that “*you cannot translate something you already do not understand*”.

The most prominent problems that the learners seemed to face when they engaged in reading and directed writing activities were unfamiliar vocabulary. All learners indicated that new words and unfamiliar title of content to be discussed interfered with texts to be read. Apart from unfamiliar vocabulary and unfamiliar text content, learners also mentioned other factors that affected their reading comprehension. According to these learners, they were sometimes not given enough time to practice using the English language through activities such as speaking and reading. Some believed that English as a language was difficult and thus they were not motivated to try and learn to be fluent in the language. Some of the learners stated that the way they handled texts being read was also a matter of concern. Learners said that most of the time texts were too long so it took them plenty of time to complete reading them, an exercise that they sometimes did not complete, and, time allocated to them to complete the reading task was often less especially during the examination. There was also an issue of learners reading without a purpose. All they wanted was to read to finish. This can be blamed on the learners’ lack of interest in the texts they read. In my view lack of interest comes about when learners read texts with new or unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar content.

5.2 Discussion of teachers' responses

Teachers are the people who stand a great chance of noticing anything that may be wrong with the learners. I think a teacher does not need to have a great deal of teaching experience to reach such conclusions. This is because teachers deal with learners on a daily basis through assessing, teaching and talking with them. They also observe and find strategies to work with their learners either to discipline or to help deliver the content more effectively. Generally we must not forget that in any work environment, colleagues are expected to work together and share ideas to improve their performances for the better. Teachers are no exception, and through getting together they get chances to share problems that they face daily in their classrooms and discuss the performances of their learners.

In this study, some of the teachers have taught as long as ten years with the least experienced teacher having taught for four years. What can these teachers say about the problems that their learners face? It is worth taking note that all five content subject teachers (Agriculture, Geography, Business Studies, Biology and Physical Science) and the English teacher agreed that second language learners of English did experience problems in their subjects. Some of these problems may vary but related. To start with, teachers indicated that the most important issue was the English language. Learners lacked the general understanding of the English language. This is a problem because content subjects are written and taught in English and learners are expected to understand the English language used.

According to these teachers, in most cases when learners studied content subjects, they often resorted to memorization and generalization of subject contents. In most instances, if a learner is familiar with a particular word, irrespective of the context where that word is used, the

understanding that a specific learner has about that particular word will be applied to understand the entire text. According to these teachers although the English language is thought to be the first contributing factor to the learners' poor performance in the subject contents, it is not the only one. Factors such as the structure of questions, which often make questions ambiguous, should not be overlooked. Similarly poor performance in content subjects according to the teachers could also mean that learners did not fully grasp the subject content or some did not study.

It is also important to note that although some learners experienced difficulties in understanding the content subjects as well as English as a language subject, there are a few learners who performed well or exceptionally well in their content subject and in English as a language subject. However, these are the learners who already understand English as a language, and also their content subjects. These same learners have good reading skills and most of the time they have knowledge of the topic being discussed.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

As a second language teacher, I have been privileged to work with unique learners. Through assessment of their work in English and directed writing activities, I have come to observe that the majority of them do not perform well in this subject and to be more precise, in reading comprehension. It is against this background that I became interested in finding out why my learners struggled to excel in reading comprehension activities and this was done by attempting to answer the following research questions: What difficulties do second language learners of English have in understanding English written texts? What factors make English texts difficult to understand by some second language learners of English? What can second language teachers of English do to improve reading comprehension of their second language learners? This study revealed a number of factors that are believed to contribute to learners' poor performance in reading comprehension. Lack of general understanding of the English language came out as the most frequently articulated factor. New or unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar texts or lack of background knowledge related to texts was also highlighted. The language structure should not be overlooked; ambiguity in text sentences affects the reading comprehension of learners. Incorrect grammatical structures of learners' sentences and ineffective reading strategies surfaced in this study as contributing factors to the poor performance of learners of English as a Second Language in English in general.

6.2 Recommendations

The findings of this study answer the research questions as well as the overall research topic. I believe that for any goal to be attained, improvements should be made. I therefore recommend that ESL teachers should: (i) always remember to expose their language learners to different unfamiliar words through a variety of texts; (ii) activate learners' prior knowledge through previewing of titles and texts (iii) make learners aware of complex sentences and teach them how to analyze them. In terms of further research, I recommend a study that will inform second language teachers of English of the complex sentence structures that hinder learners from giving well structured answers to comprehension questions.

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APPENDIX A

Learners' Comprehension Test

The Reading Comprehension Test for the learner participants

Read the following text and answer the questions that follow

REFUGEES – UNWELCOME GUESTS

Refugees are people for whom it has become impossible to live in their own countries. Usually they have to leave their countries because they are fleeing before persecution during periods of political or religious upheavals caused by people who have beliefs contrary to theirs. In some cases they belong to a race or social group which is not acceptable to the majority of the population.

These people's lives have often been traumatic before they fled to seek asylum in another country. In some cases they have been tortured, jailed, or separated from family members, or they may fear such treatment and are therefore seeking safety.

Recently there has been an increase in the number of refugees from the so called Third World. This is mostly because of political instability and ethnic intolerance. African countries like Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda are just a few recent examples. Usually 95% of the refugees from such countries will seek asylum from neighbouring countries, many of which may be neither financially strong nor politically peaceful themselves. The recent dilemma of the Rwandan refugees in Zaire is just one example of how desperate the situation is for refugees in Africa. These refugees, who fled in the face of death in their own countries, were killed and abused by Zairian rebels in the very country that gave them asylum.

A small fraction seeks asylum in the Western World. This may be because they have family members there, or there is some kind of traditional connection because of history. In some cases they will go to a specific country because they are part of an international resettlement programme, as was the case with the Vietnamese. In one such programme, in 1970, more than a million Vietnamese were resettled in 65 countries around the world.

It is becoming more difficult for asylum-seekers to resettle in the Western World. Countries in North America and Europe have adopted increasingly restrictive laws and practices to discourage people from seeking asylum in their countries. One of such laws recently implemented in Britain

(the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996) has the effect of withdrawing social security benefits from significant categories of asylum seekers.

This is probably the kind of situation that none of us would want to find ourselves in: not being safe in the country that offers asylum, but at the same time being unwanted in the countries that can offer security.

(From Exambuster Series, ESL)

(a) According to the article, why do people become refugees? Give two reasons.

.....
.....
..... (2)

(b) What does it mean to seek asylum in another country?

..... (1)

(c) Give one reason for the growing numbers of refugees from developing countries.

..... (1)

(d) Where do the majority of refugees in Africa flee to?

..... (1)

(e) Give two reasons why refugees go to the West.

.....
..... (2)

(f) Why is it becoming difficult for asylum seekers to resettle in the Western part of the world?

.....
..... (1)

(g) How does the new restrictive law in Britain affect refugees financially?

.....
..... (1)

APPENDIX B

Learners' interview questions

INTERVIEW GUIDE

To the respondents

Thank you for participating in this important research project.

The purpose of this project is to find out factors that inhibit grade 12 learners' reading comprehension in English as a second language written texts.

Please take note that the information you will provide as well as your identity will be treated as confidential.

LEARNER QUESTIONS

1. How are your feelings towards the English language? Do you understand English texts well?

If yes, what helps you understand the texts?

If no, what hinders you from understanding the texts?

2. You always perform well in reading comprehension activities such as this one, what strategies do you use to help understand the texts?

3. I have noticed that now and then you struggle to give correct answers to reading and directed writing activities. What could be the problem?

4. From this specific activity, which specific questions did you not understand well?

Why is that the case?

5. You have performed well in this activity. How did you work out the answers?

6. Did you find this passage difficult to read? What exactly was difficult?

7. Did you encounter any difficult words in this text which may have interfered with your understanding of the text?

If there were difficult words, what did you do when you could not understand them?

8. Do you ever try to translate English written texts in your own language in order to understand what you are reading?

If yes, does this strategy help you?

If not, why?

9. Is there anything else you can tell me about what makes reading English difficult for you?

APPENDIX C

Teachers' interview questions

INTERVIEW GUIDE

To the respondents

Thank you for participating in this important research project.

The purpose of this project is to find out factors that inhibit grade 12 learners' reading comprehension in English as a second language written texts.

Please take note that the information you will provide as well as your identity will be treated as confidential.

TEACHER QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been teaching at secondary level?
2. How long have you been teaching this subject?
3. During teaching, do you think your learners struggle to read to understand the content being taught?
If yes, why do you think your learners struggle?
4. What difficulties do your learners seem to have when reading in order to understand the subject content?
5. When your learners do not give correct answers to questions asked, what do you think is the cause?
6. Are there some learners who perform exceptionally well in this subject?

If yes, in which areas (Multiple choice/Structured questions) and what makes them perform well?

7. Would you attribute your learners' failure in this subject to the lack of understanding of the English language?

If yes, how is this the case?

If not, what could be other contributing factors?

8. If the reason why your learners do not perform better in your subject is because of lack of understanding of the English language used to teach the subject content, what do you plan to do to help your learners understand the subject content better?

9. Is there anything else you can tell me about what can make subject content difficult to the learners or why you think some learners experience difficulty in understanding the subject?

APPENDIX D

Letter to the Director: Ohangwena Education Region

Ongha Senior Secondary School

Private Bag 2023

Ondangwa

Tel: 065-245400 (w)

245401 (f)

7 July 2010

The Director

Ohangwena Education Region

Ondangwa

Dear Ms Steenkamp

RE: PERMISSION TO CARRYOUT MY Med. STUDY IN YOUR REGION

I hereby write to ask for permission to carryout my study in your education region. I am a final year student of Master of Education in Literacy and Learning, English being the major. This study I intend to undertake aims to serve as a partial fulfilment for my Med. degree which should be completed this academic year 2010.

This is a case study research titled: ***The factors which inhibit grade 12 learners' reading comprehension in English as a second language written texts at Ongha Senior Secondary School.*** I have chosen this region and this school in particular because being a teacher at this respective school, I have noticed that many if not all learners experience difficulties in comprehending English written texts. Thus, I foresee a need to find out the difficulties that these learners have in English as a second language.

The study is planned to kick off from the 12 July 2010 to the 23rd July 2010 early enough before the grade 12 learners commence with their mock examinations. I will employ an interview

schedule to solicit responses from the learners and teachers as participants of this study. The data collected from both the teachers and learners will be treated as confidential.

I am looking forward to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely

Ms Leader Hilongwa

Cc: Ms Teopolina Hamutumwa

Inspector of Ongha Circuit

Mr Wilbard Shitaatala

Acting principal: Ongha SSS

APPENDIX E

Response from the Director: Ohangwena Education Region