




The role of explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies to an English as a second language learner



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Dates:

Received: 02 Sept. 2021
 Accepted: 13 July 2022
 Published: 29 Nov. 2022

How to cite this article:

Elston, A., Tiba, C. & Condyl, J., 2022, 'The role of explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies to an English as a second language learner', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 12(1), a1097. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.1097>

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Background: Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills a learner needs for academic achievement and is something which many South African learners lack. Studies suggest that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies has the potential to improve literacy.

Aim: The aim of this article is to determine the role of explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies to an English as a second language (ESL) learner.

Setting: This study was conducted at a dual-medium quintile 5 primary school in the Western Cape. Quintile 5 are affluent schools (fee-paying schools) which receive less funding from the government. This is a single case study with a Grade 4 ESL learner. The medium of instruction was English.

Methods: This is a qualitative interpretive study in which the researcher used an observation and interview schedules to collect data. Pre- and post-tests were conducted before and after the intervention programme (IP).

Results: It was evident from the findings that the explicit teaching of three reading comprehension strategies and one-on-one interactions and guidance from the teacher enabled the learner, who is in Grade 4, to acquire critical thinking skills. The learner's literacy improved, which boosted her self-confidence.

Conclusion: As the three reading comprehension strategies were constantly and explicitly taught throughout the IP, these collaborative, multitiered approaches began to develop the learner's habit of thinking in a higher-order manner. She began to develop a mindset of critical thinking, even in her second language.

Keywords: comprehension skills; English as a second language; explicit teaching; literacy; self-confidence.

Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills learners need for academic achievement (Pardo 2004), as it enables them to construct meaning from different texts. However, many South African learners lack the ability to read for comprehension. Although fairly dated, this claim is supported by Pretorius and Lephalala (2011), who stated that comprehension skills need urgent attention. More than 100 million young people globally still cannot read (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2017). Nationally in South Africa, there has been a plethora of projects developed in an attempt to raise comprehension levels of learners. An example is 'The Read to Lead' project, which was launched in 2015 with the aim of improving the reading abilities of all South African learners by ensuring that they could read at appropriate levels by 2019 (South African National Department of Basic Education 2015). However, international and national assessments have indicated that learners cannot read for meaning. For example, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016) and results from the annual Western Cape Education Department's Systemic Tests for English Language Learning (from 2013 to 2019) have not shown any significant improvement (Western Cape Education Department [WCED] 2019). In 2016, the PIRLS study, which is conducted every 4 years, showed that 78% of South African learners do not have the basic literacy skills to find 'explicit information within the text or copy information from a text to answer basic questions' (Howie et al. 2017:71). Table 1 shows the 2019 WCED Systemic English Language Test results for Grades 3 and 6 presented by Dr Ronald Cornelissen of the WCED (lecture presentation on 15 May 2019). These results show that since 2015, less than half of the learners in the Western Cape have passed the English language tests, with results consistently between 43.4% and 47.3%. The 2019 English Language results for Grade 3 have been the worst in this 5-year period, yet, interestingly, the Grade 6 results have been the best.

TABLE 1: Western Cape Education Department English language provincial results from 2015 to 2019, indicating the percentages of learners who passed.

Variable	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Grade 3 average %	45.0	45.5	47.3	45.4	44.2
Grade 6 average %	43.4	44.4	43.8	44.0	45.6

WCED, Western Cape Education Department.

The World Development Report (World Bank Report 2018:3) stated that these international and local tests accentuate the 'learning crisis'. As far back as 2007, Parker and Hurry (2007) commented that little time was spent on teaching learners' comprehension strategies. Zimmerman and Smit (2014) supported this statement by saying that many teachers do not maximise occasions to develop the comprehension skills and thinking and reasoning skills of learners, and primary school learners who move to secondary schools are unable to comprehend simple texts. In their studies, Olifant et al. (2021) and Fesi and Mncube (2021) found that teachers do not have the ability to explicitly teach reading comprehension strategies.

Reading and comprehension is a vital skill that needs to be taught explicitly within the Foundation Phase (FP), as it is a skill that will be carried through the learners' entire schooling and professional careers. Spaull (2015) stated that in the FP, the focus is on 'learning to read', while in the Intermediate Phase there is a shift to 'reading to learn'. Learners in the intervention programme (IP) need to be able to confidently and accurately draw meaning from comprehending texts and offer well-thought-through arguments. If these learners struggle to read and comprehend, they are at an immediate academic disadvantage (Kirby 2007), and they will subsequently battle to catch up to their peers academically (Spaull 2015).

The subsequent lack of ability to answer simple questions could be related to learners not being able to read independently and understand the text at grade level (Howie et al. 2017). This could attest to the 'fourth grade slump' that describes the difficulties learners face when moving from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' (Stahl 2016). In addition, learners in Grade 4 switched from mother tongue to learning in English, a language that they are not proficient in (Fesi & Mncube 2021). Treptow, Burns and McComas (2007:159) clarified three levels of literacy learning, namely 'independent' level, 'instructional' level and 'frustration' level. They claim tasks that provide too little challenge or too much challenge were referred to as being at the independent or frustration level. Where learners are learning at their optimal level, this is regarded as 'instructional' level.

This study evolved out of the researcher's concern for the learner, LG (a pseudonym), who had been in her Grade 2 class for 2 subsequent years. At the time of conducting this study, LG was in Grade 4, yet continued experiencing literacy challenges, as she could not read for meaning. The aim of this study was to investigate the role that explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies had on an English as a

second language (ESL) learner. Fesi and Mncube (2021) pointed out that:

[E]xposing learners to reading strategies will equip them for success when faced with any reading and writing tasks. Learners will be able to feel more prepared to engage in more rigorous reading tasks as self-efficacy and interest in reading will be enhanced. (p. 7)

This study seeks to answer the question: how does explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies impact an ESL learner? Although this is a single case study (LG), the intention was not for the findings to be generalised, as contexts are different, but rather to provide deeper understanding about the role explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies had on an ESL learner. Another aim was to confirm the suggestion of other researchers such as Muzammil and Suhono (2019), Boakye (2021), Schmidt, Condry and Tiba (2021) and Suroto (2021) that explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies could improve literacy.

Overview of literature review

Three areas of research informed this literature review, namely reading comprehension skills and the ESL learner; the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and comprehension skills; and finally, an exploration into the role that explicit teaching plays within comprehension.

Reading comprehension skills and the English as a second language learner

Comprehension is the process of acquiring meaning from and bringing meaning to a text (Bojovic 2010); it is how we understand and interpret information. The skill of comprehension is a complex process that involves decoding the written word, building reading fluency (Kuhn 2004), making connections to the text based on background knowledge (Pardo 2004) and being able to reason with the text (Howie et al. 2017).

Decoding is the act of reading words by using the knowledge of letter-sound relationships (Van Wingerden et al. 2017). A learner must be able to automatically decode words (Pardo 2004) in order to read fluently and to focus on the act of comprehension instead of the act of reading. Once they can read the text easily, they are presumably able to understand and connect to the text. Connection-making involves the process of relating pieces of information together, some existing in the learners' memory or experiences and others coming from the text (Kirby 2007). In order to connect to a text, learners should be able to draw conclusions about what they have read and provide reasons for these conclusions (Van Wingerden et al. 2017).

Critical thinking in reading is a necessary attribute when developing a learner's ability to understand texts. Thamrin, Margana and Widodo (2019:2) stated that critical reading 'requires the students to focus their attention much more closely on certain parts of a written text, holding other

information in mind'. Higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, reflection (linking texts to the lives of the readers), evaluation and making judgements based on their opinion and life experiences are necessary in order to develop a deeper meaning of a text. Prior knowledge helps learners connect to texts, and when learners are able to emotionally connect and imagine themselves in the texts, it means they understand the author's meaning. Older learners develop these critical thinking skills in a more abstract manner (Thamrin et al. 2019:2). A learner who is learning in an additional language may struggle to engage with the text because of a misunderstanding that can occur through the process of decoding, fluency, connections and reasoning. As recorded in the PIRLS report 2016 (Howie et al. 2017), only 24% of learners who took the test in English attended English-speaking schools and spoke English as the main language at home. This highlights the fact that many learners (76%) are learning in their second language and are not performing to the same level as those who speak the same language at home. The low literacy rate has been attributed to the transition from mother tongue (Grades R-3) to English as a language of learning and teaching (LOLT) from Grade 4 onwards (Fesi & Mncube 2021).

With the new dispensation in South Africa in 1994 after the demise of apartheid, there was a restructuring of the education system. Through the new Language in Education Policy (South Africa. Department of Education 1997), in acknowledging cultural diversity and promoting multilingualism and respect for all languages, 11 languages in South Africa became official. These languages include Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. The South African Department of Education (1997) stipulated that from Grades R-3, learners should be taught in their mother tongue, and from Grade 4 onwards, learners will choose their language of teaching and learning (English or Afrikaans). The majority of learners prefer English as a language of teaching and learning and communication because of its status internationally. Fesi and Mncube (2021) pointed out that many people view proficiency in English as equal to access to employment, higher education and a better life. Similarly, Bukhari (2022) revealed that students preferred English as a medium of instruction as they believe it maximises students' future and international opportunities. The challenge is that learners who are transitioning are not proficient in English and their mother tongue, which makes it difficult for them to read and write at a Grade 4 level (Fesi & Mncube 2021; Patterson & Gardyne 2022), resulting in underperformance in national and international assessments. As a result of language barriers, many ESL learners do not have the confidence to interact with teachers or in their classrooms because they are afraid of making mistakes (Fatmawati, Haura & Supiani 2020) because of limited vocabulary (Fatmawati et al. 2020; Kashinathan & Aziz 2021). Therefore, when reading strategies are explicitly taught, learners would develop skills needed to become strategic readers, and they will implement these skills when they

encounter texts, thereby boosting their self-confidence and motivation (Boakye 2021).

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement and comprehension skills

Comprehension is classified as a 'reading and viewing' skill within the CAPS document. It is a vital component within the Grade 4 curriculum because the curriculum moves from a 'learning to read' focus in the FP (Grades 1-3) to a 'reading to learn' focus (Spaull 2015) in the IP (Grades 4-6). The CAPS document highlights that comprehension should be explicitly taught in an integrated, communicative way so that all learners have specific, extensive exposure in the LOLT and can become critical in their thinking and reasoning skills, able to achieve meaningful learning from a text (South Africa. National Department of Basic Education 2011).

The CAPS curriculum ensures that learners are exposed to a variety of different genres and purposes of texts. Learners read in a particular way depending on what the purpose for reading is, the learners' background knowledge of the topic and their ability to relate to the text (Howie et al. 2017). This directly affects the level of engagement and understanding that is needed to accurately comprehend the text. Howie et al. (2017) substantiated this by noting that comprehension only occurs when a learner fully engages with the text. Therefore, teachers need to ensure that they often expose learners to various texts so that learners have the opportunity to work with and master the different genres and purpose of the text.

Explicit teaching

A primary goal for early education is to be able to comprehend texts. A large body of research suggests that reading comprehension needs to be explicitly taught in order for learners to become competent readers (Boakye 2015; Guthrie et al. 2004). Explicit teaching is the process of teaching strategies, skills and rules individually and in a logical sequence in order to empower and equip the learner. This is done through explicit explanations, modelling, demonstrating and guided practice (Rupley, Blair & Nichols 2009). In explicit teaching, learners are given ample opportunity to practise and apply the strategy that is being taught, while the teacher monitors the learners' performance and provides immediate feedback that is affirmative, encouraging and corrective in nature (Archer & Hughes 2011). Explicit teaching is an accepted approach to language teaching because it is constructivist in nature (Archer & Hughes 2011) and based on active communication and interaction between the teacher and the learner (Rupley et al. 2009). Explicit teaching further allows for instructional flexibility where the teacher is able to provide developmentally appropriate instruction based on the learners' needs at a specific time (Rupley et al. 2009).

English as a second language learners are prone to reading texts less competently and therefore struggle to comprehend what they are reading (Pretorius & Spaull 2016). Word

recognition, fluency, prior knowledge, vocabulary and self-regulation are some of the issues that hinder comprehension of a text. Struggling readers are more likely to learn these essential reading skills through direct or explicit teaching, whereby the teacher models the correct reading and use of strategies (Rupley et al. 2009). A significant feature of explicit teaching is that there is a gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the learner (Rupley et al. 2009). Once the process has been modelled a few times and the strategy becomes familiar to the learner, they are able to work more independently.

This technique of modelling and releasing responsibility from the teacher to the learner is similar to Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development (Vygotsky 1978). This technique is mostly used by the teacher to model how to make sense of a text. In Brevik's (2019) study, some teachers used explicit strategies by modelling and using guided practice to develop students' comprehension. Olifant et al. (2020:83) details how modelling should be done by saying that 'the teacher describes the concept, and then models the desired outcome by using visual, auditory, tactile and kinaesthetic instructional techniques while thinking aloud'. To Olifant et al. (2020), when modelling is carried out correctly, there is a high level of learner-teacher interaction.

Theoretical framework

This research study combines pedagogic approaches of Vygotsky's (2011) and Cambourne's (2004) theories of social constructivism and Bandura's (1991) theory of self-efficacy. It is the interlinking and the points of overlap of these three theories that provide the heart of this unique study.

Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development, with a specific focus on the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (1978), underpin this study. Vygotsky's theory promotes constructivism, premising that children's complex, higher-order thinking is developed through social interactions 1978, as quoted in MacBlain (2018:59) that 'occur between the child and the MKO in their lives'. Vygotsky refers to this as cooperative or collaborative dialogue (McLeod 2014), as opposed to direct teaching. In this research project, LG's MKO was the researcher (teacher), as she had a better understanding of how to explicitly teach reading comprehension strategies and attempted to co-construct new knowledge with LG (McLeod 2014). This was carried out by modelling thinking behaviours and providing verbal guidance to LG until she assimilated and accommodated new information and was able to work independently (Vygotsky 2011). The MKO worked within the ZPD, which Vygotsky defined as the:

[D]ifference between what a child can do and achieve on their own versus what a child can do and achieve with the guidance and help given by the skilled MKO. (MacBlain 2018:58)

As this research project focused on LG's engagement with the explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies, referring to Cambourne's 'principles of engagement' was

appropriate (Cambourne 1995, 2004:28). His theory promotes the idea that for learners to engage with their learning, they need to know that they are capable of achieving the learning and that there is a purpose for their learning; they need to learn in an anxiety-free environment and work with someone they respect. This high level of engagement was made possible through LG selecting a theme that she enjoyed reading about, and the teacher selected texts linked to this theme.

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy relates to how an individual judges themselves and that the more motivated the learner is, the better their performance as they engage with texts (Bandura 1991). LG was purposively selected for this research project as she had difficulties reading for meaning. By explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies, it is hoped that LG will acquire skills needed to read for meaning. Hence, LG will believe in her self-efficacy to read any text, even when faced with a difficult task.

Research method

This interpretive study explores the role that explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategy had on an ESL learner. Therefore, a qualitative single case study research design was used for describing and interpreting concepts, while gaining in-depth insights into the phenomenon of explicit teaching (Lambert & Lambert 2012). According to Gaya and Smith (2016:539), a single case study design provides opportunity for 'in-depth analysis and understanding of issues in their natural setting'. By providing evidence from reflective notes made during observation of LG in her natural setting (which is the classroom) and interviews with Grade 3 and Learner with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) teachers, the researcher provides deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. According to Gustafsson (2017), it is better to make a single than a multiple case study when the writer wants to study, for example, a person or a group of people. In the case of this study, the researcher is interested in one ESL learner.

At the time of this research project, LG was a female Grade 4 learner from a dual-medium Quintile 5 primary school in the Western Cape, South Africa. Since 1994, the South African government has categorised all schools using the quintile system for the purpose of allocating financial resources (Ogbonnaya & Awuah 2019:106). Typically, the lowest quintile (1–3) schools are in the more economically disadvantaged areas, are non-fee-paying schools and receive more funding than the Quintile 4 and 5 schools, which are the more privileged and affluent schools. LG's mother tongue is Afrikaans, but the medium of learning and teaching was English. At the time of the research study, there were 27 learners in LG's class, with over 1176 learners in the entire school.

Purposive sampling was used to select the learner under study, as she was an ESL learner. LG was in the researcher's Grade 2 class for 2 subsequent years. At the time of conducting

this study, LG was in Grade 4, could not read for meaning and continued to struggle to answer comprehension questions correctly. Therefore, LG was chosen because she was information-rich (Palinkas et al. 2015). Over the previous 3 years, LG had attended extra classes with the school's LSEN teacher. Both LG's past teacher (Grade 3) and LSEN teacher were interviewed, as they knew of her literacy challenges with answering higher-order comprehension questions.

Intervention programme

To determine LG's pre-existing knowledge about comprehension, the researcher conducted a series of pretests with LG for a week, from Monday to Friday after school hours, for between 45 and 60 min, which included seven comprehension passages and questions, beginning from easy Grade 1 passages. They became progressively more complex in content and grammatical structure until LG reached frustration level (Treptow et al. 2007) at the Grade 4 passages. The comprehension passages and questions used for the pretest were nongraded assessments developed by FP teachers who were registered for a course the researcher was studying at a university. Table 2 shows the pretest result.

From the pretests, there was a higher percentage of error in the fourth level of questioning related to evaluating content and textual elements. This type of questioning is described by Thamrin et al. (2019) as the level at which a learner makes judgements based on opinions, prior knowledge and lived experiences. Therefore, the goal for the 6-week IP was primarily to develop this critical thinking skill of 'evaluation' in LG.

The pretest results in Table 2 guided the researcher to identify which comprehension skills were strengths and challenges for LG and allowed her to prepare the IP, which focused on developing LG's comprehension challenges.

The IP took place over 6 weeks on Mondays and Wednesdays after school hours for between 45 and 60 min. The researcher would read each passage aloud and ask LG questions that centred around the PIRLS four levels of questioning. These four levels of questions include focusing on and retrieving explicitly stated information, making straightforward inferences, interpreting and integrating ideas (linking text to world) and evaluating content and textual elements (Howie et al. 2017). It should be observed that the four levels of questioning highlighted by PIRLS were used as a guide when developing questions from texts.

The researcher used three reading comprehension strategies to explicitly teach the ESL learner during the 6-week IP. These strategies included 'my turn, your turn', 'think aloud'

and 'anticipation guides'. The 'my turn, your turn' strategy is used when the teacher and learner take turns to read and connect to the texts, with the teacher going first and modelling the correct way to engage with the text (Nomlomo 2010). The 'my turn, your turn' strategy helped LG to predict text outcomes, make connections from the text to her own life, clarify word meanings, summarise and infer meanings. The 'think aloud' strategy is used primarily by the teacher. During the process of reading, the teacher will actively voice her opinions and concerns regarding the text so that the learner is able to hear her and begin to think critically in the same manner. The teacher role models the process (Fatyela et al. 2021). The 'think aloud' strategy similarly encouraged predictions of word meanings and storyline outcomes, understanding inferences and actively thinking about each sentence as LG read. The 'anticipation guides' strategy is used before reading the texts to gauge a learner's interest in the text (Sari & Sari 2019), encourage learners to activate prior knowledge, anticipate text outcomes and build curiosity about the text topics within a safe environment.

In the quest to teach LG 'evaluating' thinking skills, the researcher focused on critically analysing and considering whole texts, instead of simply reconstructing meaning from the text (Mullis et al. 2011). The focus of each lesson was to allow LG to form her own opinions and assumptions about texts and to discuss the concepts openly with the researcher, encouraging her to become an independent learner.

Knowing that LG is an ESL learner and not proficient in the use of the English language, the researcher provided an environment shaped by positive interactions and learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020:97) that motivated her. The researcher needed to introduce her to activities that would improve her intrinsic motivation, where she began to take responsibility for her own learning. To do this, the researcher invited LG to share with her themes that interested her; she mentioned 'mythical creatures, especially mermaids and fairies'. Hence, all age-relevant texts the researcher used were based on this theme. The researcher also introduced LG to a 'motivation chart', whereby she was invited to reflect on what she had achieved during the lesson or to identify positive acts of learning and write a short sentence to describe it.

Data collection methods

The researcher conducted face-to-face semistructured interviews with the past Grade 3 and LSEN teachers at predetermined times and places. An advantage of using face-to-face semistructured interviews with the past Grade 3 and LSEN teachers was that the researcher was able to create a holistic and in-depth understanding of the comprehension challenges LG faced. A semistructured interview was chosen because the researcher could probe for more information on the participants' experiences (Strydom & Bezuidenhout 2014:188). These interviews took about 30 min each, and they were audio-recorded for verbatim data.

TABLE 2: Results of the pretests.

Question types	Pretest percentage of errors
Focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information	14
Make straightforward inferences	43
Interpret and integrate ideas	43
Evaluate content and textual elements	71

During the 6-week IP, the researcher wrote notes on her observation schedule where she informally observed LG's behaviour, her levels of engagement, her levels of dependent versus independent participation, as well as her nonverbal expressions and feelings (Kawulich 2005). The researcher continued to monitor LG's behaviour to avoid pushing her to frustration level (Treptow et al. 2007).

All the data the researcher collected were qualitatively analysed using the inductive approach (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, together with the notes on the researcher's observational schedule. The researcher coded all these evolving issues, which she later converged into themes of smaller meaningful units that related to answering the research question, linking the findings to the theoretical framework and the literature review. The researcher discarded all outlying data (Henning et al. 2004).

The researcher established trustworthiness through piloting both the interview and observation schedules with a colleague at school and her supervisors. The colleague was invited to comment on the wording and structure of the questions. Verbal consent was sought from the colleague by providing her with details of the study and confirming that the information provided would be used to refine questions. Changes such as word choice and sentence clarity were made (Lowe 2007). Having gone through this process, the researcher was more confident that the data obtained would answer the research question, thus adding credibility to the research.

With case studies, 'thick' description of information is recommended so that other researchers can judge the adequacy of information provided and they can use the information to replicate study (Mariotto, Zanni & Salati 2014; ed. Yin 2009). Therefore, data were collected from reflective observational notes, Grade 3 and LSEN teachers' interviews, pre- and post-tests in order to provide holistic information on the phenomenon under study. The researcher also provided 'thick description' of how data were collected, analysed and led to conclusions.

As LG's past class teacher, the researcher knew she needed to be aware of and avoid issues of power and bias (Henning et al. 2004). Therefore, throughout the IP process, the researcher was critically conscious of focusing on constructing LG's knowledge of higher-order comprehension skills. After sending the data to the Grade 3 and LSEN teachers for member checking, they were satisfied with the transcribed data (Reiley 2013).

Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Technology at which the researcher was a registered student (reference number EFEC 63-13/2019), and the WCED granted permission for the study to be conducted at the school. The mother of LG signed the consent form as she was a minor, and the school principal, the LSEN and Grade 3 teachers also signed consent forms. The nature and intention of the study were explicitly explained to all participants, and to ensure

confidentiality and anonymity, the names of all participants were excluded from the research article (eds. Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2008; Henning et al. 2004).

Findings and discussion

This research article aimed to investigate the impact of explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategy to an ESL learner. After inductively analysing the data, the two interview transcripts conducted with the Grade 3 and LSEN teachers, the researcher's reflective observational notes and the reading comprehension pre- and post-test results collected from the learner, the following two themes became evident:

1. Learners acquire critical thinking skills through explicit instruction.
2. Self-confidence development.

Learners acquire critical thinking skills through explicit instruction

The results in Table 3 show that in the pretest, LG had the highest percentage of errors – and in the post-test the lowest – in her 'Evaluate content and textual elements' comprehension skills.

The Grade 3 and LSEN teachers mentioned that LG could respond to questions that required her to retrieve information from the text, but she could not respond to higher-order comprehension questions. Developing 'Evaluate content and textual elements' comprehension skills became the focus of the IP. The researcher supported LG by explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies. For example, during the IP, the researcher used different types of texts. She used pictures with no text and picture books with text. The researcher noticed in her observation schedule: '... there were a lot of pictures as well ... just a picture with no text ...'

Using the 'think aloud' strategy, the researcher was thinking of LG's ZPD (Vygotsky 2011) as she asked her higher-order thinking questions, especially using the skills of inferencing and evaluating. Stahl (2016) and the CAPS (South Africa. NDoE 2011) documents recommend FP teachers to expose their learners to a variety of texts. Olifant et al. (2020) are of the view that teachers are expected to expose learners to a variety of texts and to perform activities with learners that improve their comprehension. By introducing LG in this study to a variety of authentic texts following a theme she enjoyed reading about, she engaged more. LG was learning in an anxiety-free environment as she was given a voice to choose a theme that interested her (Cambourne 1995).

TABLE 3: Pre- and post-test comprehension results.

Question type	Pretest percentage of error	Post-test percentage of error
Focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information	14	28
Make straightforward inferences	43	28
Interpret and integrate ideas	43	28
Evaluate content and textual elements	71	14

During the IP, while using the 'my turn, your turn' strategy, the researcher supported LG by role modelling and scaffolding how to formulate her own thoughts and opinions by providing a few examples of possible answers to a question. The researcher wrote in her observation schedule: 'I had to give many of my own ideas or discuss my own thoughts...'

Providing explanations, modelling and scaffolding is an integral part of explicit teaching (Rupley et al. 2009). According to Brevik (2019), for students to read competently, they need to be scaffolded. In his study, it was found that students' comprehension was developed through modelling and guided practice. Modelling provided a high level of teacher and learner interaction, according to Olifant et al.'s (2020) study. The process of modelling and scaffolding in this study allowed LG to listen to and see first-hand how the researcher used higher-order thinking skills of analysing and evaluating, and she began to participate in the critical reading processes within this anxiety-free, active communication (Rupley et al. 2009). These social and collaborative dialogues of abstractions such as 'evaluative' thinking skills were made possible by the researcher, MKO (Vygotsky 2011).

The researcher used the strategies of 'my turn, your turn' and 'think aloud', which allowed LG multiple opportunities to practise the skills of summarising with 'varied types of texts' (Parker & Hurry 2007; Rupley et al. 2009). The skill of summarising is regarded as one of the most difficult, but it is an important higher-order comprehension skill (Rupley et al. 2009). One of the activities was to provide LG with three appropriate pictures from the text they had read in the previous lesson. The aim was for LG to write a few sentences about each picture summarising the beginning (picture 1), the middle (picture 2) and the end (picture 3) of the story.

The researcher observed that LG was able to add her own facts to the texts she was reading (texts on fairies). As the IP continued, the researcher observed that LG was beginning to feel more competent and comfortable to add her own thoughts and knowledge to the lessons – she was not only taking in the content of the passage, but she was also able to evaluate the knowledge. The researcher observed that LG disagreed with a certain section of the text and was willing to discuss this difference. LG mentioned that: '... but this is not what another book said about fairies ... it is not the same ...'

This act of comparison within texts shows that LG was beginning to activate her prior knowledge, grapple with the new information and finally apply that knowledge into her schema – a true representation of higher-order thinking skills. LG was flourishing within Cambourne's (2004) four 'principles of engagement'.

Through explicit teaching of the three reading comprehension strategies, 'my turn, your turn', 'think aloud' and the 'anticipation guide', LG acquired critical thinking skills which improved her literacy. According to Olifant et al. (2020:1), 'the major goal of reading comprehension instruction

is to help learners develop knowledge, skills and strategies so that they become strategic readers who read for comprehension'. Literature suggests that explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies will improve learning (Boakye 2021; Muzammil & Suhono 2019; Schmidt et al. 2021; Suroto 2021).

Self-confidence development

Fatmawati et al. (2020) and Kashinathan and Aziz (2021) found that limited vocabulary affected students' confidence to speak English in class. It was observed in this study that LG lacked self-confidence, as she was reluctant to engage with the researcher, and this could be attributed to lack of proficiency in English language, as she is a second language learner. At the beginning of the IP, it was evident that LG was not confident in her comprehension abilities, as she was reluctant to respond to questions, hesitant to provide her own opinions and text-reliant for answers. When she was encouraged to provide an opinion or to voice her thoughts, her answers were limited in detail. This was also observed by the Grade 3 and LSEN teachers. The researcher wrote the following comments in her observation schedule: '... quick to look for the answers ... her opinions ... very, very limited ...'

At the end of each lesson, LG was invited to reflect on her learning that lesson and write a sentence on her 'motivation chart'. When the researcher first introduced LG to this process, she was initially not interested; she was withdrawn and unwilling to accept the positive comments that the researcher suggested. The researcher observed: 'LG made no comment about the chart and looked away'.

During the IP, through explicitly teaching higher-order comprehension strategies and one-on-one interactions, the researcher observed that LG was becoming more mindful of her learning, and she was more willing to ask for help; she and the researcher would discuss meanings of words and decode unknown words when she needed it. She was accommodating the new knowledge and becoming more confident in her own cognitive abilities (Vygotsky 2011). She understood that she needed help and knew that the researcher would be willing to assist in a friendly, nonthreatening way. She was becoming more aware of her strengths and realised how to identify and use these to benefit her learning. LG's confidence in her academic skills was slowly improving, and she was able to provide her own ideas to complete her 'motivation chart', even asking if the chart could be made into a particular animal form (a unicorn).

The final act of self-confidence that the researcher observed was during an 'anticipation guide' activity. The LG argued and discussed her point of view on the topic, adding her own knowledge to the discussion. She was demonstrating an ability to evaluate the text and apply it to her world knowledge. The LG had become less text-reliant and was able to provide answers written in her own words to show that she understood what she was reading: '... used original words in her answers ...'.

This act of using her own words in her answers showed that a higher level of understanding had been reached and that she was more comfortable and confident in her understanding of a text. In a study by Boakye (2021), students' self-efficacy and motivation increased when their comprehension improved through explicit teaching of instructional strategies.

Conclusions and recommendations

The purpose of this research study was to explore the role explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies had on an ESL learner. When analysing the pre- and post-test results, it was interesting to note a large improvement in LG's abilities regarding critical thinking skills of 'evaluating content and textual elements'.

LG responded positively to the explicit teaching of the three literacy strategies: 'my turn, your turn', 'think aloud' and the 'anticipation guide'. Through the explicit teaching of these comprehension strategies, where the researcher role modelled and took LG through her ZPD to predict text outcomes, make connections between the text and her lived experiences, clarify word meanings and inferences and summarise passages, the researcher encouraged LG to be curious about her learning and provided a safe space in which LG's voice was considered, as the texts that were used were related to a theme that interested her, which boosted her self-confidence. A safe, well-scaffolded environment was created, where collaborative dialogue was encouraged (Vygotsky 2011) and in which LG began to model her critical thinking processes; she began to emerge as an independent reader.

As the three literacy strategies were constantly used and explicitly taught throughout the 6-week IP, these collaborative, multitiered approaches were beginning to develop LG's habits of thinking in a higher-order manner. She began to develop a mindset of critical thinking, even in her second language. The more motivated LG became, the more her literacy performances began to improve (Bandura 1991). It is important to mention that the majority of ESL learners in Grade 4 are not proficient in English as they have transitioned from mother tongue to English, so they may be reluctant to communicate or interact with the teacher because of limited English vocabularies. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers need to support and guide these learners one-on-one after school hours, explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies until learners become independent readers.

This case study was conducted with a single, purposively selected ESL learner with a specific focus on developing higher-order evaluative thinking skills. It therefore cannot be assumed that the same results would present themselves with all other ESL Grade 4 learners. Although explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies had a positive effect on LG, this study has raised questions as to whether one-on-one interactions played a role in LG acquiring critical thinking skills. Therefore, future studies could look at diverse views by using observational reflective notes and

interviewing a learner on whether the one-on-one interactions or explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies enhanced comprehension skills.

It is recommended that explicit teaching of critical thinking comprehension skills happen early on in a learner's academic career to mitigate any potential gaps in understanding texts. Where necessary, personalised instruction and mentoring should be afforded to learners who need extra support. Intervention programmes can be developed with the learners' interests in mind so that optimum possibilities for engagement can occur. It is important to keep in mind that the texts that are used are at reading grade level and are varied in style, including fiction and nonfiction, taking into account technological opportunities such as audio-visual books.

Given the importance of reading for meaning, it is recommended that the WCED (Provincial Department) should continuously organise programmes that equip teachers with knowledge and skills to explicitly teach reading comprehension strategies to learners. With these, learners may become strategic and independent readers.

Recommendations for further research would be to expand the sample size to a small group of learners to encourage communities of inquiry. Furthermore, the explicit teaching of two comprehension strategies (evaluative and inferencing) instead of just the one would expose learners to more opportunities for learning and enable them to create a deeper understanding of the text.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Dr Matthew Curr, who language-edited this journal article.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

A.E. is the original author of this article, and J.C. and C.T. acted as supervisors.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (ref. no. EFEC 63-13/2019) and the Western Cape Education Department (ref. no. 20190612-5818).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

At the date of submission, this article was an Honours research project.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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