

Developing Reading Skills Through Semantic Proficiency: A Case of Learners with Mild Hearing Impairment in a South African Mainstream School

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a study that examined the teaching strategies employed to teach English semantics to enhance the reading skills of learners with mild hearing impairment included in mainstream classrooms in a South African public school. The learners were to be assisted to understand the meaning of words, improve their reading ability, and develop the literacy skills needed to make their learning successful. The study aimed to investigate how semantic proficiency contributes to the reading skills of learners with mild hearing impairment and to determine what teaching strategies teachers employ to teach semantics in inclusive settings. A quantitative case study design was adopted. The study involved two teachers and 13 grade 8 learners with a hearing impairment. A systematic sampling technique was used to select suitable participants. The data were collected through classroom observations and unstructured interviews. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. The study found that the teachers believed that exposure to understanding the meaning of words would encourage reluctant learners to read more. To a large extent, the teachers embraced the significance of adopting different teaching strategies to teach semantics, for example, repeated reading. Learners participated actively during the activities and in most instances responded positively to the questions posed by the teachers. This was demonstrated by the learners' understanding of the words that they encountered. The conclusion drawn from the study is that the teachers comprehended the significance of understanding words and reading them fluently.

Keywords: hearing impairment; learners; reading; semantics; teaching strategies

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Introduction

The South African education system requires learners to be proficient in writing and reading English as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT). The Department of Education (DoE) emphasised that learners should have adequate exposure to the English language through processes such as communicating using the language and reading (DoE 2011, 11). The DoE (2011, 26) pointed out that reading potentially develops learners' sensitivity to the special use of the language, including semantic awareness. Senior phase (grades 7, 8, and 9) learners are expected to effectively engage with the English language by, among others, listening, writing, and reading (DoE 2011, 14). Therefore, reading is of paramount importance as a way of acquiring language and developing literacy skills. Janks (2019, 561) emphasised the importance of reading even if the learners may not comprehend the meaning of words. They note that this practice helps students to retain words and with regular instruction and guidance, semantic awareness and comprehension of language should follow.

In the South African context, learners with mild hearing impairment are included in mainstream classrooms. However, they do not bring a wealth of language to the reading process. They may face difficulties using cues such as semantics to construct meaning during the reading process. Moreover, they may have limited vocabulary. However, Janks (2019, 562) believes that reading performs the purpose in the acquisition of language for both learners with hearing impairment and their hearing peers. Furthermore, Janks (2019, 562) asserted that reading should underpin the development of language and literacy skills. Still, Silvestri and Wang (2018, 421) argued for a paradigm shift in viewing learners with hearing impairment as linguistically different from their hearing counterparts. In their view, the teachers must instead identify and use visually based strategies for literacy development as opposed to those based on sound, which he argues is the weakest pathway of accessing language for this population (Silvestri and Wang 2018, 422). Trezek and Mayer (2019, 216) concur and pointed out that phonic-based reading activities supported by visual phonics for learners with hearing impairment can lead to a marked improvement in their reading skills.

Trezek and Mayer (2019, 216) reported that learners with hearing impairment can learn to read through similar strategies of instruction used for their hearing peers. The authors further claimed that total communication, in which a sign-supported English language method is used for teaching reading to students with hearing impairment is important. Alanazi (2021, 192) described total communication as a form of classroom communication for learners with hearing impairment that uses a combination of both spoken and sign language.

According to Luckner and Cooke (2010, 38), students with hearing impairment utilise many forms of communication, including sign language. For learners with hearing impairment whose first language is sign language, reading ability is developed by comparing print with what the instructor interprets in sign language. However, sign language does not make the task of reading for learners with hearing impairment any

easier as it lacks congruence with the linguistic structure of written English. In addition, proficiency in reading is associated with a fully developed primary language, which is often a challenge for learners with hearing impairment. Marschark et al. (2016, 9) argued that reading difficulties associated with learners with hearing impairment emerge because of impoverished early language experience. According to Agrawal et al. (2021, 7), acquiring good language skills is not adequate because these learners need to know first how to map between language and print to comprehend the meaning of words to develop reading skills.

The study aimed to answer the following two key questions:

- How does semantic proficiency contribute to reading skills for learners with mild hearing impairment?
- What strategies do teachers employ to augment an understanding of semantics in an inclusive classroom?

Semantics and Reading Development

Semantics provides a framework for examining language use or reading. Its (semantics) representations allow effective meaning retrieval and thus lead to successful reading comprehension (Nouwens et al. 2018, 597). The process may be both a driver of, and an outcome of, increasing reading skills (Cain et al. 2004, 31). For this reason, Nouwens et al. (2018, 579) described semantics and reading comprehension as inextricably linked. The ability to decode or identify and pronounce words depends on semantic knowledge and knowing what words mean (semantics) has a major and direct effect on knowing what any specific passage means.

In Miller's (2000, 436) view, reading ability and comprehension are mainly the result of two essential actions, namely the bottom-up and top-down processing of text. Bottom-up processing comprises the coding, recognition, and syntactic processing of word-based knowledge to carry meaning. Top-down processing, on the other hand, denotes the initiation of preceding knowledge to build up expectations, which develop word identification and aid text interpretation (see also Kelly 1995, 318). The attainment of skills underlying the efficient application of these processes is required for reading comprehension.

According to Daniel et al. (2022, 265), the triangle theory of reading implies that reading proficiency pivots reciprocally on three elements, namely phonological knowledge, orthographic knowledge, and semantic knowledge. The practice of learning to read involves understanding the connection between orthographic and phonological knowledge and eventually developing the capability to link orthographic knowledge and semantic knowledge. Supporting this view, Kendeou et al. (2014, 10) argued that reading comprehension depends on the implementation and incorporation of many

cognitive processes. To comprehend a sentence, one must visually process the different words, recognise and access their phonological, orthographic, and semantic representations, and link these representations to create an understanding of the core meaning of the sentence (see also Gernsbacher and Kaschak 2013, 466). Alanazi (2021, 194) argued that semantic competence is not only concerned with understanding “natural” words but also with how a word may be formed from two distinct words, for example, whiteboard.

This understanding of lexical semantics forms the basis for understanding compound words such as grandmother. Lexical semantics is a form of semantics that is involved with linguistic sub-units such as suffixes and prefixes. Alanazi (2021, 195) contends that when learners can recognise lexical units such as suffixes and prefixes, they face fewer challenges in approaching text, particularly during reading. Modern theories of lexical semantics stem from the insights of Saussure (1983, 59). He argued that word meaning cannot be understood in isolation from relations with other semantically related words as this unit of semantics is also concerned with words that have similar meanings, for example, pole, meaning a rod and the north pole. Therefore, one way of teaching lexical semantics is through a dictionary. As pointed out by, for example, Murphy (2019, 70), using different dictionaries to map out the meaning boundaries of specific words and comparing the uses of such words to their dictionary definitions to establish their meaning in different contexts expands learners’ semantic base. This presumption is made because learners who read more potentially have higher lexical semantic growth (Stanovich 1986, 360). Thus, the challenge for the reader is to determine the meaning associated with the novel words encountered. In this context, Duff (2015, 20) argued that the reader’s understanding of a text is likely to rely on the richness of the reader’s lexical semantics.

Generally, learning novel words consists of mapping lexical semantics and orthographic and phonological representations. At this stage, the learner needs to develop the ability to associate the orthographic form of the word with its semantic representation to establish the meaning (Duff 2015, 27). There are several reading frameworks for the understanding of lexical semantics. One such framework is the reading systems framework proposed by Perfetti and Stafura (2014, 22). The system assumes that understanding lexical semantics is underpinned by an interaction between processes of reading such as word identification and meaning retrieval. Therefore, the overall understanding of text is not only associated with competence in lexical semantics; proficiency in logical semantics is also invaluable.

Logical semantics includes small function words including pronouns such as *him*, *she*, and *they* and quantifiers such as *many*, *all*, and *small* to understand a sentence (Morrill 2011, 58). Some authors, for example, Gernsbacher and Kaschak (2013, 468), have argued that understanding the meaning of a sentence comprises processing all the words that constitute such a sentence.

Essentially, logical semantics is a broad linguistic unit that involves not only pronouns and quantifiers, but it is also concerned with prepositions such as *above*, *across*, *below*, *on*, and *of*. Khuziakmetov and Steinberg (2016, 1877) argued for fostering learner awareness of the different elements of logical semantics to reinforce it. In their view, selecting the words from the passage and grouping them according to these elements can further strengthen the understanding of quantifiers, pronouns and prepositions in a text. For Morrill (2011, 184), comprehension results from a combination of reading processes rather than a consequence of a specific reading process. Morrill argued that proficiency in literacy skills creates mental constructions of writing that are formed by knowledge of semantics. For instance, as children are exposed to new words that are not used in daily discussions through print and story reading (Dickinson and Porche 2011, 870), the activities foreground their vocabulary development as novice readers and, with a reasonable command of semantics, they can benefit and develop language more fully from the accumulated awareness of word meaning (Kelly 1996, 320). Moreover, Babudoh (2014, 54) argued that proficiency in semantics improves reading ability. Furthermore, when competence in any of these key processes is deficient, the contribution of other processes to reading comprehension may be adversely affected (*ibid.*).

Problem Statement

Literature published after the democratic dispensation in South Africa highlights exclusionary practices for learners with disabilities in schools; hence, de Graaff (2014, 3) emphasises the need for a paradigm shift to overcome barriers and create a welcoming environment for all learners. The support provided by the Department of Education in curriculum access for learners with mild hearing impairment in mainstream classrooms is inadequate (Molapisi 2022, 3). However, the White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy (DoE 1997, 6) describes education as an essential aspect of the human rights that are enshrined in the constitution. Penn and Reagan (1994, 319) discuss syntactic features within South African sign language and argue that the features contribute little to semantic and syntactic skills for these learners.

In short, studies on inclusive education that deal specifically with the semantic challenges of learners with hearing impairment who are taught alongside their hearing peers are still at an infant stage (Delage and Tuller 2007, 1310). Little is known about the educational support and experiences of, for example, South African learners with mild hearing impairment who are enrolled in mainstream public schools. Therefore, it was important to examine how reading ability could be developed through proficiency in understating the meaning of words (semantics), specifically for learners with mild hearing impairment who ordinarily use auditory-oral modes of communication and are included in mainstream classrooms. English is used as an LoLT in many schools. However, as argued by Alqahtani (2020, 26), these learners often face difficulties in expressing themselves in writing and orally because of poorly developed semantic skills. As a result, their reading proficiency is also delayed. These learners have to be

proficient in the language to succeed academically. As Babudoh (2014, 50) argues, when semantics is adequately acquired, learners will easily deal with texts.

Research Methodology

This study aimed to examine the strategies employed by teachers to teach English semantics to learners with mild hearing impairment in mainstream classrooms. Thus, the study needed a research design that would facilitate a comprehensive investigation of these aspects during the lessons. To fully document the teachers' actions regarding the use of the teaching strategies and how the learners responded, the study adopted a qualitative case study design. According to Merriam (2002, 37), a qualitative study design allows researchers to understand situations in their natural settings. This study design facilitated data collection within the context where the activity took place (Zainal 2017, 1). The design helped to analyse the teachers' actions during and after data collection. The objective was to identify similarities and differences and form themes that were used to present the data. Thus, the design was suitable for examining the teaching strategies employed by the teachers to teach semantics to learners with mild hearing impairment.

The school was in Soweto, a township in Gauteng province. It was the only school in the district that had a significant number of learners with mild hearing impairment. This made it a distinctive context (Hancock et al. 2021, 45) for documenting satisfactorily the teaching of English semantics to learners with hearing impairment taught alongside their hearing peers. The school was selected as the research site based on the availability of learners with mild hearing impairment and teachers with more than two years' experience teaching these learners. As Lanza (2008, 76) argued, selecting the best site for research has a direct impact on the study and credibility of the findings. The school had 103 learners with a hearing impairment.

Sampling Within the School

During the sampling process, familiarity with the targeted school's culture was essential. It was important to understand generally how the school operates during lessons. To identify the learners and teachers suitable for the study, a systematic sampling technique (see Berndt 2020, 225) was adopted. According to Bellhouse (2014), a systematic sample is obtained by selecting a random start near the beginning of the population list and then selecting equally spaced units thereafter.

The technique was adopted for the study primarily for its convenience and simplicity. First, the process involved drawing up a sampling frame of all the senior phase classes/grades as the target population. The classes were listed and selected in multiples of two. In the initial stage of the sampling process, the senior phase and further education and training (FET) became the target population because of the years of exposure to English language content, particularly semantics. Learners in these grades were expected to communicate more effectively using various modes than those in

lower grades (DoE 2011, 26). The study focused on four grades (8, 10, 11, and 12) and out of the six classes, three classes (grades 8, 10, and 12) were selected systematically in multiples of two.

After meeting with the school's deputy principal, we indicated to him that we had gone through the year plans for the target grades and highlighted our intention to work with grade 8 learners. Based on the material covered at this level, learners in this grade were likely to provide rich data on the teaching and learning of semantics. Grade 8 also marks the commencement of high school in South Africa. The learners in grades 7 and 9 were not suitable participants for the study. Grade 7 was not considered for the study because its syllabus and year plan did not include semantics. Grade 9 had already dealt with the content a year earlier. Grades 10, 11, and 12 fall within the FET category. Two teachers with at least two years' experience in teaching English to learners with hearing impairment participated in the study. Their constant contact with these learners and the experience they had gained over the years made them appropriate informants. As such, they were knowledgeable and reliable in exposing the culture of teaching in the school in which the research was conducted (Thomas 2022, 3).

Data Collection Tools

This study adopted direct observation to observe the strategies employed by teachers to teach reading through semantic competence to all learners, including those with mild hearing impairment. The observations provided opportunities to examine a phenomenon in its natural setting and assess it (FitzGerald and Mills 2022, 3). Observations were used on aspects such as learning and teaching activities, how learning materials were used for the learning environment, and interactions between participants. Observations are made to provide contextual information to frame the evaluation and make sense of the data collected using other methods (FitzGerald and Mills 2022). Furthermore, observations were conducted to develop insights into contexts and learn about sensitive issues that the participants may be unwilling to discuss. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct classroom observation to help the researchers to understand the importance of suspending judgement so that they can see the behaviour in the actions of participants.

In the classroom, observations provided access to teaching and learning processes and allowed us to record and analyse the kind of classroom culture observed (Frank 1999, 3803). A schedule focusing on the strategies used by the teachers in language lessons to help learners develop reading skills through semantic proficiency was used when observing lessons. We made observational notes on the lessons, the classroom as context, and experiences observed in the classroom setting.

Data Management and Analysis

One of the most important aspects of data management and analysis is to be true to the participants; it is their experience the researcher is aiming to unearth, interpret, and report on for others to read and learn from (Tully 2014, 31). Muzari et al. (2022, 18)

have argued that data management and analysis involve immersing oneself in the data to identify patterns whilst being sensitive to inconsistencies to generate new concepts. The study used content analysis and thick descriptions (see Younas et al. 2023, 9) to account for field experiences and to make explicit the patterns of interactions observed in the classroom and put them into codes. The study employed detection and involved such processes as transcribing, coding, categorising, forming themes, and explaining the experiences of participants (Freeman 2014, 27). This form of qualitative analysis assisted us in pinpointing and recording patterns and interpreting data.

From the data collected through observations, codes were identified, patterns noted, and themes formed to structure the presentation, analysis, and discussion of the findings. In this study, textual data such as observation notes were perused systematically, and ideas were chunked and correlated. Once the ideas were identified/coded for easy sorting, they were categorised to uncover trends from which themes that facilitated analysis emerged. It is in this sense that the range of processes and procedures through which the qualitative data was managed and interpreted helped to develop insights from classroom observations.

To establish the reliability and validity of the results, the study triangulated the data collection by using a combination of methodological approaches. For example, the study employed member checking to validate the data. In member checking, the participants were given the interpretation report to check the authenticity and validity of the work.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are a key component of research. They involve respecting the autonomy, decision making, and dignity of the participants. Participants should therefore be made aware of ethical issues that may emerge from their interaction with the researcher (Ramos 1989, 59). Against this backdrop, ethical clearance was acquired from the relevant authorities in the faculty of education at the University of Johannesburg. An introductory letter detailing the purpose and intent of the research was submitted to the DoE. Once permission had been received, this introductory letter was sent to the school from which data would be collected. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. We ensured that trust and quality social interaction existed by allowing the participants to raise and discuss their concerns regarding participation and we explained to them that participation was voluntary.

Results

In analysing the teachers' pedagogical practices, it was crucial to establish how they accommodated the different hearing capabilities of their learners when teaching reading through semantic proficiency. Therefore, the data collected highlighted that the curriculum processes and activities that the teachers used prioritised reading as a cornerstone of English language development. The teachers viewed reading proficiency

as crucial to grasping the essence of semantics in English. They believed that the more the learners read, the better they would recognise words, understand their meaning in a sentence, and be able to use them to construct meaningful sentences.

The lessons presented below provide evidence of how the understanding of the meaning of words (semantics) was used to promote reading fluency.

Teacher A explained the rules of engagement and expectations that were also written clearly on the charts that were pinned next to the whiteboard at the front of the classroom as follows:

The purpose of today's lesson is to introduce you to several words so that you search for their meanings and develop fluency in reading them. We first have a storybook that we will read.

Each learner read the storybook silently and after 10 minutes, the lesson continued as indicated below:

Teacher: What is happening in the story?

Learner 2: Two people are in the car, father and child.

Learner 5: They are at the shops.

Learner 7: They entered a shop to buy tyres for the car.

Teacher: Thank you. Now I will introduce you to some key words in the story that I need you to practice.

During the lesson, the learners were encouraged to identify some words and explain their meanings to their peers. The teacher encouraged peer assistance for the learners to help one another search for the meaning of words. They mostly used a dictionary to search for the meaning of words. As the lesson continued, the teacher used flash cards to introduce more words from the story, wrote them on the whiteboard, and asked the learners to read them aloud. Examples of the words were *restaurant*, *menu*, and *queue*.

In the post-lesson conversation, when the teacher was asked to explain the purpose of reading and understanding the meaning of words, she responded as follows:

Reading in this way is often of great value, especially if the learners are not enthusiastic readers. Knowing the meaning of words, especially, keeps the interest of all learners alive.

The explanation highlighted the importance of understanding the meaning of words to facilitate reading proficiency. The lesson indicated that the teacher believed that only when what is read is understood will there be interest to continue reading. To further consolidate the understanding of the meaning of words to enhance reading fluency, in one lesson observed, she gave examples of words with underlined suffixes and prefixes on the whiteboard. This was after explaining that a prefix comes at the beginning of the word and a suffix at the end of the word. The following are examples of such words:

impossible and *misjudge*. She wrote more words on the whiteboard and requested learners to underline the suffixes and circle the prefixes. The following are examples: *rudeness* and *fellowship*.

Learners with hearing impairment appeared to face more challenges in identifying the words with prefixes and suffixes than their hearing peers, for example, *statement*, most likely because they were unfamiliar with the words. However, the teacher intervened to assist with the meaning of words that presented challenges to the learners.

Asked to reflect on the lesson during the post-lesson discussion, Teacher A made the following comment:

This is important because learners first have to have an understanding of the root words before adding the prefixes and suffixes. Primarily, the prefixes and suffixes change the meaning of words and are crucial in literacy development.

In this response, Teacher A seemed to assume that once learners could identify prefixes and suffixes, they had grasped how these lexical units changed the meaning of the root words. It was interesting to witness how she emphasised the importance of sounding both the suffixes and prefixes. Although the ability to sound the units was crucial for the learners with hearing impairment to properly hear sounds such as *mis*, it is fair to conclude that without also grasping how the additions changed how the word sounded when compared with the root word, at a basic level, the teacher's strategy could facilitate reading fluency without word comprehension.

To further reinforce what occurred in the previous lesson, learners were made to individually read texts obtained from magazines and set books to familiarise themselves with the words in the texts and read them fluently. They read to each other aloud and while doing so, they were encouraged to help one another recognise and sound words that had been read, for example, *behaviour*, *jump*, and *grandmother*, and as they improved in pronunciation, they could recognise the words effortlessly.

Leong (1984, 100) has argued that proficiency in semantic skills is pivotal to reading proficiency. Therefore, as Seuren (2017, 19) argued, mastery of semantics is central to how learners enhance their reading skills. Revision lessons to establish whether previously used activities were successful is a good example supporting this argument.

The learners were asked to use function words within a text and create correct sentences. According to the lesson plan, the learners were to first read the text, note the highlighted words used in the text, think of alternative words with the same meaning, and use them to create sentences. Thereafter, the sentences were to be shared with the rest of the class by reading them aloud. This created a context for all learners to be participative and as they identified alternative words their semantic base and reading skills were developed. Although aimed at learners with hearing impairment, the activity seemed to also benefit their hearing peers. They participated enthusiastically in the lesson.

In response to the question seeking to establish how semantic proficiency contributes to reading skills for learners with mild hearing impairment in another lesson observed, Teacher A used charts to develop vocabulary and an understanding of semantics. She began the lesson by asking the learners how they learnt new words and explained how to create vocabulary charts that would help them learn content-related vocabulary. The learners were divided into groups of three and each group was requested to create a vocabulary chart based on a particular subject, for example, the office, hospital, or sports. They created the charts and shared them with peers. After doing so, the teacher instructed them to each identify five words from the charts, search for their meanings, and practice reading them. They were requested to use the identified words, read them correctly, and build sentences using the words. The following are examples of some of the sentences formed with identified words:

- Soccer is loved by most people in South Africa.
- I saw a lot of computers in his office.

When asked why she used the strategy, the teacher remarked:

It is important for their reading development. In my view, aspects such as understanding words are key to text comprehension and eventually reading proficiency.

Teacher A's view was consistent with what Majeed (2017, 45) describes as learning that has its foundations in, among others, evaluation, synthesis, and comprehension. She believed that once the learners discovered new vocabulary, they became eager to understand it and use the words, thus expanding their semantic base. Once learners understood the meaning of new words, they developed confidence to read and use the words to produce their own texts.

The same strategies were used by Teacher B. Her lessons are provided below.

In one lesson, Teacher B used shared reading to support word recognition and understanding of word meaning by, for example, sharing, retelling the story, giving meaning to a word/text (semantics) and correcting one another. The strategy also included the use of visuals to encourage learners to actively participate in the lesson.

Before the lesson, Teacher B explained to the researchers that the lesson used shared reading to promote active participation and help the learners develop a greater vocabulary bank and reading ability. She also pointed out that she hoped that the strategy would provide struggling readers with visual support that could help them better understand what they had to read.

Posters, charts, flashcards, pictures, a graphic organiser, and an overhead projector were used to display words. After the learners had settled and prepared themselves for the lesson, the teacher introduced the lesson with the following remarks:

Today our lesson uses a shared-reading activity in which I will read and re-read a storybook aloud and you will also independently read the story. I expect you to make comments and react to the details in the story as we continue.

Teacher (continues): What do you understand by shared reading?

Learner 3: It is when we as learners share a book during reading.

Learner 8: Reading and sharing the story.

Learner 7: When I read a book and give it to my friend to read.

Teacher: Thank you for the answers; but shared reading is when you as learners share the reading of a book while I guide and support you. I will model, indicate, good reading, that is fluent reading with expressions.

Learner 5: What is fluent reading?

Teacher: Reading without stopping many times, where the reader just flows with reading.

Learner 5: Thank you.

Teacher: Today we will read a story and also identify words that rhyme. We know that words rhyme when the last part of a word sounds the same as the last part of another word. I am going to read you this text that has lots of rhyming words in it. I want you to listen out for words that sound the same at the end.

The teacher then displayed the text through the overhead projector and began reading. As she read, she used a pointer to draw attention to the following words: *pick, lick, drip, lip, gave, save*. Thereafter, Teacher B asked the learners to listen carefully for rhyming words and gave each learner a card with a rhyming word from the text written on it. Their task was to say the word and find another person in the classroom with a word that rhymed with theirs, for example, do and you, tree and me. As she re-read the text, she used stress to highlight the rhyming words. As the rhyming words were identified, the teacher noted them on the whiteboard for the students to see them, for example, see/me, mine/vine, lunch/munch. and do/you.

Teacher: Why are we saying the words identified rhyme?

Learner 2: It is because the ends of both words sound the same.

Teacher: Very good. (continues) Look at the ending of the words, what do you notice?

Learner 4: Rhyming words may sound the same, but the word endings are not always spelt the same.

Asked to explain the importance of rhyming words, Teacher B made the following remarks:

It is important for learners to know that some words sound the same, however, they have different meanings.

In the post-lesson conversation, the teacher was asked to explain the importance of shared reading and she commented as follows:

Shared reading is an important technique because it helps build learner confidence by reading out loud and willing to make mistakes in front of their peers. This is important to help learners become strong readers as they also establish the meaning of words.

As suggested by, for example, Girgin (2013), to include learners with hearing impairment in English lessons, several preparations and precautions were required before using shared reading for these learners. For example, it was important for teacher B to choose a suitable book to read that was at the learners' reading level and not too complex to understand.

Discussion

The findings indicate that engagement with texts through understanding the meaning of words facilitates reading competency. In this study, teachers tried not to be the centre of classroom activities and used both individual and group work to encourage communication among the learners. They gave them opportunities to examine and work out the meaning of words individually and in groups. As they did so, they listened and improved their reading. According to Dominguez et al. (2016, 285), the effectiveness of such teaching is closely associated with reading proficiency and the ability to process the semantic and syntactic structure of a text demonstrates the level at which a text is understood. From the observed lessons, it was clear that the teachers preferred using group work and argued that it allowed the learners to engage in reading activities. They demonstrated practically how the meaning of words could be established, which helped to improve the learners' comprehension of words and their reading proficiency. Every learner was involved in classroom discussions and in doing so, they helped one another to look for the meaning of words to enhance their reading ability.

Generally, shared reading and the use of a variety of texts that considered the learners' diverse reading skills provided the learners with opportunities to engage with a wide range of texts. It was evident, for example, that during shared reading activities in which the teacher read texts to learners followed by a question-and-answer session, all learners seemed to participate, discussed and shared ideas. Using a variety of strategies offered all learners opportunities to participate in activities. The evidence supports Newfield's (2011, 30) observation that a classroom that embraces classroom interaction fosters participation by all and is key in improving important aspects such as the understanding of word meaning and reading ability. Based on this viewpoint, it is reasonable to conclude that the actions witnessed in this study, for example, allowing learners to work and read in groups, was an attempt by the teachers to foster a culture of reading.

For reading proficiency, that is, the ability to read fluently and with an understanding of words, activities such as shared reading were used to augment the learners' reading competency. In the teachers' view, reading ability requires a specific level of semantic skills. They argued that the more the learners were exposed to activities that involved semantic proficiency the easier it became for them to read. The teachers allowed the learners to read aloud while others listened and thereafter shared and discussed the contents of what was read. Thus, reading motivated them to assist each other in explaining the meaning of words and reading them fluently.

Concluding Remarks

The teacher participants selected for the study provided important insights regarding the teaching approaches they used to teach semantics to enhance reading ability. The data gathered were valuable in developing insights about the teachers' pedagogical practices crucial to augmenting semantic and reading competency. Although the results cannot be generalised to the South African context because the study was only conducted in Soweto, with a limited number of participants, the evidence that emerged demonstrated that the strategies employed by the teachers, for example, shared reading improved the learners' semantic and reading skills. Generally, the findings indicate that engagement with texts through the understanding of words was significant in improving reading. The activities that were used reinforced a learner-centred approach in which the teachers mostly acted as facilitators. Thus, the results suggest that the understanding of words plays a critical role in comprehending whole texts and overall competency in English language use. Implied in this study is the ability of learners with mild hearing impairment to understand the meaning of words and use them to form meaningful sentences. As such, future studies need to build on semantic proficiency to syntactic formations of text. This is when words are arranged appropriately to create sensible sentences.

Regarding the teaching of semantics to learners with hearing impairment, more emphasis needs to be placed on exposing learners to a wide range of words to improve their reading skills. The reality is that many learners are expected to use the English language for learning. Therefore, it is important to provide ample exposure to different English language words and offer support for these learners to access the curriculum and meet the standards needed. In the future, rigorous research needs to be conducted to identify how strategies confirmed as effective in other contexts could be adopted and used to teach South African learners with a hearing impairment.

Limitations of the Study

Only two teachers participated in the study. As such, the teachers' experiences and classroom pedagogy may not be a true reflection of the wider South African context of schools that include learners with mild hearing impairment.

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