A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE READING COMPREHENSION OF ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL SCHOOLS IN LIMPOPO PROVINCE

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that the Mini-Dissertation titled *A Comparative Study of the Reading Comprehension of English Second Language Learners between Urban and Rural Schools in Limpopo Province* hereby submitted to the University of Limpopo for the degree of Masters of Arta in English Studies has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other university; that it is my work in design and in execution, and that all material contained herein has been duly acknowledged.

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MBOACHA E   **DATE**

DEDICATION

I dedicate this Mini-dissertation to my late grandmother, Mami Cecilia Meka, my grand-uncle, Pa Bernard Mbiandor; and to all parents who love, care, spend and pray for their children's education and success in life.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores reading comprehension in rural and urban schools. The study was conducted against the background that it takes five to seven years for second language (L2) learners to become proficient in the English language. Generally, learners in rural schools use the mother tongue as the language of schooling. English is introduced only as a medium of instruction at Grade Four, although this is not often implemented or applied. By contrast, in urban schools the medium of instruction is English from as early as Grade R. As a result of this discrepancy in practice, learners in urban and rural schools have different experiences. This study was conducted to gain more insight into the reading comprehension and reading preferences of learners in both rural and urban schools, especially since there is a mismatch between the language policy on paper and the language realities on the ground. Descriptive statistics and analysis of variance was used to measure differences, determine mean scores and analyse tendencies of preferences. The total mean score for reading comprehension obtained by learners from Grade Four Rural (GFR) was 1.48, whereas the mean score for Grade Four Urban (GFU) was 1.92. From these scores, it is evident that the learners from GFR gave comparatively more wrong answers than their counterparts from GFU. Similarly, the results from the Grade Seven learners showed that there was a significant difference in mean scores (or performance) between Grade Seven Rural (GSR) and Grade Seven Urban (GSU) since the mean score for GSR was 1.37, while that for GSU was 2.24. The English language was preferred by the majority of the learners. The results of the study show that learners lack adequate proficiency in English second language to enable them to use it solely and effectively as a medium of instruction and learning. In addition, a low reading comprehension performance was noted, with the majority of the participants scoring below 50%. Recommendations are provided to improve the reading comprehension and performance of the learners.

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction and background to the study

Developments in the field of cognitive psychology have shown that the reading of a text and consequently its understanding cannot be equated to the recording of what is said or to the formation of a picture in the readers' minds (Kintsch, 1977; Kintsch, 1993; Baten & Cornu, 1984; Wilkinson, Bain & Elkins, 1995). On the contrary, readers have to transform what they read in order to keep the substance or the gist of the text which is then stored in memory. Hence, reading cannot simply be defined as the receiving of meaning; on the contrary, understanding a text requires active participation on the part of the reader who needs to organise and evaluate the information they receive while they are reading. In order to comprehend a text, readers must bring forth their prior knowledge stored in memory and relate it to the new information contained in the text (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). An understanding is made possible through this constant confrontation between the reader's knowledge and the text.

Since the construction of meaning is a constant back and forth movement between some specific knowledge stored in the readers' memories, which is brought forth when they are confronted with a specific text, the reader arrives at a two-way relation between actualised schemata and the text. As Baten and Cornu (1984: 190) point out, "on the one hand, there is a top-down movement which is knowledge based and in which the schemata explains the text; on the other hand, there is a bottom-up movement which is text-based and through which the text modifies the schemata". Hence, as schemata are modified through the construction of the text's meaning, reading is conceived as an active process from an interactive point of view.

The comprehension of a text is more difficult if a reader is not fluent in the English second language (Baten, 1981). Therefore, reading comprehension springs up as "a product of the word-level reading skills" (decoding) and "linguistic comprehension" (understanding the meaning), as several studies have shown (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990:128).

This conclusion has generally guided research to focus on and pay more attention to verbal proficiency (speaking) and reading fluency among upcoming readers or readers who are becoming prominent; and it has been the focal point of numerous studies that have examined its adequacy to deal with the complexities of reading comprehension. In this case, the reading process itself involves a more conscious forward and backward movement between short-term and long-term memory and it is through this confrontation that learners are able to comprehend the text.

English second language reading ability is in great demand because of its global appeal, particularly in science, technology and advanced research (Grabe & Stoller, 2002: 1). Although a large body of research has been devoted to exploring the nature of reading (Taguchi, 1997; Donin, Graves & Goyette, 2004), relatively little is known about L2 learners reading comprehension in South Africa. The connections between research and reading comprehension in L2 contexts in South Africa are not well supported because of the multicultural and multilingual diversity in L2 learners and their surroundings (Grabe & Stoller, 2002: 60). In addition, high failure rates and comparatively low levels of learner achievements observed in matric results over the years have been attributed in part to learners' poor English reading comprehension abilities.

A number of studies reveal that reading comprehension is a problem among English second language learners (Rasana, 2002; Carasquillo, Kucer & Abrams, 2004; Mergherbi, Alix & Ehrlich, 2006). This means that learners have to improve their reading proficiency in order to succeed educationally. This study aims at investigating English second language learners' reading comprehension in the intermediate phase in urban and rural schools in the Limpopo Province.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Learners in South African schools experience problems with reading comprehension in English as a second language. Learners should be able to demonstrate higher order thinking such as defining, generalising and hypothesizing (making informed suggestions and decisions) in the home language (L1), but they lack the cognitive

academic language proficiency (CALP) required to carry out higher cognitive operations in English (L2) (Cummins, 1989). The South African Department of Education publicly acknowledged that the English language proficiency of learners is not at the level where it should be (Department of Education, 2008). This has resulted in poor performance, not only in English but also in other content subjects (Howie & Plomb, 2001). Failure rates are associated with learners' inability to comprehend their reading materials. This is reflected in the poor results registered in the country at large and in Limpopo Province in particular (Department of Education, 2008). The urgent need for intervention in language and literacy issues is supported by the International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), a study which was conducted in 2006 and 2010, which positioned South Africa as the last in more than 40 countries. This highlighted the extent of the language concerns and problems in the country.

Learners' low reading performance remains problematic (Coltheart & Prior, 2007; Commeyras & Inyenga, 2007). Learners cannot grasp the abstract levels of reading that allows them explore beyond the words on the page. Bernhardt 1998:9 says that the readers have often been found "to bark the text" that is "saying out words" without making sense of what they read (understanding the meaning). This poor or low reading is severe among learners reading English as a second or additional language especially where the use of English is limited and there are little or no interactions or events in English. These are shown in studies by Matjila and Pretorius (2004), Pretorius and Ribbens (2005) and Pretorius and Mampuru (2007).

There are also numerous concerns about learners' development of basic reading literacy skills at foundation, as noted by Hugo et al. (2005), and this problem spills over to the higher grades, as Lessing and De Witt (2005) have noted. There are also concerns about the acquisition of advanced literacy skills in high school and even concerns about learners' attainment of the academic language skills needed for tertiary education. According to Zimmerman, 2010:1, "Young learners in South Africa are struggling to acquire the reading skills needed for their future academic and occupational progress" (Banda, 2002; Fleisch, 2008; Howie et al., 2007; Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007; Zimmerman, 2010).

Although a large body of research has been devoted to exploring the nature of reading (Donin, Graves & Goyette, 2004; Rasana, 2006; Taguchi, Gorsuch & Sasamoto, 2006), relatively not very much is known about the relationship between L1 and L2 reading strategies, especially in South Africa (Hoffmann et al., 2010). The connections between research and reading instruction in L2 contexts are not well supported because of the huge diversity in the L2 learners and their surroundings (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Moreover, there is no consensus on L2 reading research and there is minimal empirical data on fundamental issues at stake. Thus, small scale research projects must be carried out to strengthen connections between research assertions and effective teaching for better comprehension and success.

In addition, even though research conducted in the past 20 years has focused on the readers and how they inter use and transfer skills from their L1 to their target language, little is known has been revealed about the approaches or skills used by bilingual or multilingual readers in the developing world. Although studies on reading difficulties and challenges conducted in countries such as Eritrea (Asfaha et al., 2009), Zambia (William, 1996) and South Africa (Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007; Pretorius & Currin, 2010; Makalela, 2010; Makalela, 2012) have provided some insights into the reading problems of learners, but more work still needs be done in the areas of reading literacy and development. Some parts of Africa are under-researched and research based theories to inform and guide the teaching of reading and reading comprehension in primary school is limited.

The language of instruction is also another area of concern. In rural schools, mother tongue is used up to Grade Four where English is introduced as a medium of instruction but not often applied. On the other hand, in urban schools the medium of instruction is English from as early as Grade R. Meanwhile, all the learners are expected to start using reading as a tool for learning after four years of schooling when they are approximately nine years of age (Mullis et al., 2006). In South Africa, the intermediate phase is the transition from learning to read to reading to learn, but for various reasons learners may not be able to read and comprehend texts as would be expected of them as this stage of their education.

As a result of the problems outlined above, learners in urban and rural schools experience different challenges in terms of reading comprehension. Therefore, there is a need for more empirical data from research so that positive and fundamental changes in the curriculum, language policies and in class interventions could be made.

1.3. Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate English second language learners' reading comprehension in the intermediate phase (Grades Four and Seven) in urban and rural schools in Limpopo Province.

1.4. Objectives of the study

This study has three objectives:

- To assess the learners' ability to recall, infer, predict and summarise in English second language in urban and rural schools in Limpopo Province,
- To compare the learners' performance in reading comprehension in Grade Four and Seven in the urban and rural schools, and
- To determine the learners' reading preferences in English second language in the urban and rural schools.

1.5. Research questions

In order to assess and compare the reading comprehension of learners in urban and rural schools in Limpopo Province, the study has the following research questions:

- Do the learners have the ability to recall, infer, predict, and summarise in English second language in urban and rural schools?
- Do the learners' performance in reading comprehension in Grade Four and Grade Seven show a significant difference between the urban and the rural schools?
- What are the learners' reading preferences in English second language in the urban and rural schools?

1.6. Definition of key terms

It is important to provide the working definitions of the concepts used in this study. These definitions will clarify the reader and avoid confusion or misunderstanding.

The following terms are explained as used in this study: Rural, Urban, Grade, Reading, Comprehension, Strategy, Recall, Inference, Predict, Summarising, Preference, First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), and English Language Learner (ELL).

Reading

Jackson and Coltheart (2001) see reading as a cognitive activity accomplished by mental information which changes as the reader becomes more practised and skilled. According to Bernhardt (1998; 2005), reading is not a single skill but a combination of many skills and processes in which a reader interacts with print to find both meaning and pleasure from the written words. Teaching learners to read with comprehension is a prerequisite to successful learning at school. Learning to read takes effort and learners who see the value of reading in their personal activities are more likely to work hard than those who fail to see the benefit (Burns, Roe & Ross, 1992).

Comprehension

It is an act of understanding what is read, the ability to gather meaning from printed symbols. Reading comprehension is a process of translating signs and symbols into meanings and incorporating the new information into existing cognitive and effective structures (Carretti & De Beni, 2006). According to the Texas Educational Agency (2002), for comprehension to be attained, three main elements must interact. Firstly, there should be a text (passage), a person who attempts to make sense of that text and the result of the action.

Therefore, reading comprehension is complex, multifaceted and requires the reader to be an active participant (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001). When a learner reads, it projects them into unfamiliar environments, beyond their experiences, times and cultures, to gain understanding and comprehend. In this study, reading comprehension is defined as the level of understanding of a text that comes from the interaction between the words that are written on a page and how they trigger knowledge outside the text to construct meaning by interpretation.

Strategy

Strategy is a skilful action put in place to achieve a desired goal or outcome. It refers to thoughts patterns, ideas, insights, expertise and perceptions that provide guidance or direction in the use of specific actions to reach a particular end. It is a general framework shaped by intended motives (Robert, 1999). For the purpose of this study, strategies are the different things or ways in which learners do or use to understand any text which they read or answer questions asked. These could be steps in identifying words, patterns in finding the main points and make connections around the text.

Inference

Irwin (1991:81) views inference "as the process of using one's own prior knowledge or experiences and the context that the writer uses to infer the intended meaning of the author." By this, the author is referring to the process of producing new mental representations on the basis of previously held representations. Inference is at work not only in conceptual thinking, but also in perception, and it is a basic ingredient of any cognitive system (Kersten, Mamassian & Yuille, 2004). Inferences are strong suggestions guessed or made to get meaning or deeper understanding through what is not written but based on other interactions and social behaviour. As readers, we are often asked to reach the mind of the writer in order to make inferences about what the author wants us to understand. That is, using cues in the text to get the full meaning (Kintsch, 1998; Johnson-Laird, 2006). Therefore, making inferences means getting the ultimate meaning by reading "between the lines"; the ability to connect information from the text and relate it to background knowledge to make suggestions and draw plausible conclusions.

Recall

Recall is the remembering of information read and stored in the brain; it is performing a cognitive task – information processing (Snowling & Hulmes, 2007). When people read or hear something, that information is stored in the brain for short and long time lapse. Logical informational recalling determines the people, things and general content of given events. These enable readers to appreciate who is doing what, to whom and where. Recalling therefore helps readers to answer the questions who, what, where, and when. When learners understand what they read, they are able to

recall without stress (Kurland, 2010). In this study, the researcher is interested in the ability of the participants to locate necessary answers from the given text based on their understanding of the text and their ability to decipher mistakes in the text.

Prediction

It is one of the strategies that demonstrate the "ability of readers to get meaning from a text by making informed predictions" (Gillet & Temple, 1994:136). Good readers use prediction to suggest what will occur by connecting their existing knowledge to new information from a text as they read. They are able to identify causes, effects, main ideas, and facts/opinions to envisage the end. Before reading, they may use what they know about an author/text to foretell. In this study, prediction is understood as the ability to envisage or foretell what is going to happen next in a text.

Summarising

This strategy according to the Texas Educational Agency (2002: 9) involves the ability of readers to "pull together or synthesize information in a text so as to explain in their own words what the text is about". Summarising is an important strategy because it can enable readers to recall text quickly. It can also make readers more aware of what is important in a text and of how ideas are related (Honig, Diamond & Gutlohn, 2000; Texas Educational Agency 2002). In this study, summarising is the ability to identify main ideas in a text and to shorten the text, not by giving a word-for-word shorter version but by connecting and synthesizing events in the text or identifying the factors that stand out in a character's actions and behaviour.

Preference

Preference refers to a feeling of liking or wanting someone or something more than someone or something else. It could be preference for, have a preference, and express a preference or personal preference for someone or something. In this study, preference refers to the liking of either English or Sepedi as the language for teaching and learning.

First Language (L1)

First language is the language that a person is born into and the language that they mostly learn first. It is the language that learners take from home to school (mother

tongue). Learners go to school with some knowledge of their mother tongue. In this study, Sepedi is the first language of all the participants.

Second Language (L2)

The second language or L2 is a language learned after the mother tongue (the first language) is already entrenched in the learner. In this study, English is the second language of the participants and the medium of instruction in the schools from Grade Four upwards.

Grade

It is used in the study to mean class, an indicator of the level in schooling in which a pupil or learner is at a given time, for example, Grade Four and Grade Seven.

Rural

In general, a rural area is a geographic area that is located outside cities or towns and often called "the country," with low population density and large areas of undeveloped land. This is the kind of area where one of the schools chosen for this study is situated.

Urban

An urban area is the region surrounding a city or a town that is developed. In contrast to rural areas where most of the inhabitants are involved in agricultural activities, urban areas provide secular employment for its inhabitants in fields such as manufacturing, transport, engineering, technology and construction. In this study, one of the schools chosen as a research site is located in an urban area.

1.7.   Significance of the study

Looking at the literature available, researchers have shown that many learners are not able to read at grade level or construct meaning in English (Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007; Manyike & Lemmer, 2008). This research is motivated by the need to get a deeper   understanding of this problem in Limpopo Province, particularly in relation to rural and urban primary school learners. It sheds some light on the problems around reading comprehension in English second language in Limpopo Province.

The findings clarify the problems in the field of reading comprehension, while the recommendations provide intervention strategies to improve reading proficiency and therefore reduce reading problems and difficulty at schools and tertiary institutions. The results and findings are helpful to the schools and the Department of Education to improve on policy decisions regarding reading, comprehension and language of instruction in primary education, particularly in the intermediate phase. The study also contributes to the body of knowledge on reading comprehension.

1.8. Outline of the research report

This research report is divided into five chapters, each of which addresses a specific topic. Chapter One provides the orientation of the study, which has been done above. Chapter Two presents the literature review. Chapter Three outlines the methodology employed in the research in both the collection and analysis of data. Chapter Four presents the analysis and interpretation of the data. Finally, Chapter Five states the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study and proposes some recommendations to help improve the reading comprehension of English second language learners in rural and urban schools in Limpopo Province.

1.9. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that there is a need for more studies on reading comprehension to be carried out. Because research cannot be generalised but has to be contextualised, this study focuses on specific schools in Limpopo Province. As shown earlier, little attention has been paid to aspects of reading comprehension such as recall, prediction, inference, and summarising. These issues are of great importance in the promotion of reading literacy among learners. The present study will help to reduce this knowledge gap, thereby increasing empirical data in the field and creating the possibility of further in-depth research.

In the chapter that follows, the researcher undertakes a detailed review of the existing literature on reading comprehension. A variety of books, journal articles and government documents that discusses the reading process, cognition, reading comprehension, and language policy in education in South Africa are reviewed.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the English reading comprehension of Grades Four and Seven learners in an urban and rural school. This chapter presents a review of pertinent literature on reading comprehension in general and the reading comprehension of English second language learners in particular. Before the start of the review proper, the chapter provides a multidimensional definition of terms and then highlights the theoretical model that supports research in bilingual/bi-literate development.

2.2. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency models

Learners' reading comprehension in English second language can be understood within the parameters of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) models proposed by Cummins (1981). Cummins (1981) states that the acquisition of BICS relies heavily on visual cues and social context, and that it takes approximately two years to develop. It is often assumed that once learners have mastered BICS they will academically be able to learn through and in their additional language. Learners need CALP in their additional language to facilitate academic comprehension and resultant success, if the additional language is the medium of instruction. BICS is acquired through language processes of mainly pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical patterns, whereas CALP requires skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation, with the appropriate language processes of semantic and functional meaning.

The learner should be about five to seven years to acquire sufficient CALP to perform well in academic tasks (Cummins, 1981, 1991, 1996; Roseberry-McKibben & Brice, 2000). To acquire BICS and CALP simultaneously within the school situation is emotionally and cognitively demanding on any learner. Cummins (1981)

recommends the early and gradual introduction to English in primary schools in order to allow the learner sufficient time to acquire CALP, which is needed to master the upper primary and secondary syllabus. Cummins (1979) clearly argues that the development of the mother tongue aids a second language learners' academic progress, provided that a high level of proficiency is present in the mother tongue and that the mother tongue has been developed. Cummins (1981, cited in Le Roux, 1993) notes that BICS consist of the visible aspects of language such as pronunciation, basic vocabulary and grammar, which allow pupils to converse fluently in undemanding situations. However, BICS alone are not sufficient for academic success.

In relation to this, Jackson and Coltheart (2001) see reading as a cognitive activity that changes as the reader becomes more practised and skilled. Therefore, there has to be a development on the BICS to attain a higher level of thinking where academic work can be processed. That is why Cummins (1981) defines CALP as the proficiency needed to understand academic concepts and to perform the higher cognitive operations that are required to achieve success in school.

Recent theories on reading comprehension skills advocate metacognition, prior knowledge and active interaction of the reading comprehension skills of the reader with the text to achieve meaning, understanding and comprehension. This comprehension, which needs to develop from the initial skill of basic communication (BICS) to the more advanced ability of academic language proficiency, is of enormous importance. This is because the learner needs to develop a higher order thinking skill for academic learning and understanding.

Learners use their reading skills to improve their study skills and to do analysis of the text in order to form their own interpretations and views. Therefore, reading is not only about recall, but it is also about inference, prediction and summarising. It is also important to note that reading can be used as a means of learning. Bouwer (2004) maintains that readers gain access to knowledge and world incidents by means of reading books, magazines and newspapers, and by surfing the internet. Similar sentiments are echoed by Taverner (1990) and Ngwenya (2004).

Ellis (2002: 24) states that "social factors affect the L2 proficiency attained by different groups of learners". During submersion, L2 learners are taught in a class where L1 is dominant; during immersion L1 learners are taught through the medium of L2 by bilingual teachers in classes where there are only such learners (Ellis, 2004; Nel & Muller, 2010). August and Hakuta (cited in Lapp et al., 2005) explain that during English immersion, the English language learners (ELL) are immersed completely into the English contexts without any support in their home language. This is aimed at developing and improving their English language and literacy skills faster because of more exposure and practice. However, what is the reality out there in terms of urban and rural schools in Limpopo? It will be very "difficult for an ELL to learn a new language" and acquire proficiency in it when they are not receiving enough support in their home language (Nel & Muller 2010:635).

2.3. General trends in reading research

The last few decades of the 21st century have paid much attention to first and second language research, resulting in significant insights on reading and its implications for teaching and learning in the classroom. The research on reading follows certain assumptions on the nature of the reading process where attention is given to the interactive approaches. Clarke and Eilberstein (1977) argue that reading makes use of combinations of identification and interpretation skills. The recognition that reading is an important skill for L2 learners in academic context has led to the need for more research in this area (Carrell, 1989).

Clarke and Eilberstein (1977) outline implications for reading instructions due to it's the psycholinguistic nature. They see reading as an active process where students need to be taught strategies to read more efficiently, and be able to define expectations, infer and make predictions about the text. It is only when a learner can do the above that reading comprehension becomes successful. Goodman (1967) points out that reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game, implying that it is an active and continuous process.

Following the views of Carasquillo, Kucer and Abrams (2004), researchers support the teaching of reading strategies such as preview reading and formulate questions, self-monitoring, and the use of the imagination in the reading process. Comprehension should therefore be modelled and supported before, during, and after reading by teaching text structure, graphic organizers, cause-and-effect, as well as story mapping with study guides that learners can use.

According to Benson (2005), language is the key not only for communication but also for understanding in the classroom. Despite the multilingual context of many countries, a single language dominates the educational sector. Teaching is through a language that learners do not speak or are having difficulty in learning. Skutnabb-Kangas (2004) refers to this as "submersion" because it is like putting learners under water without any swimming ability, or "playing football without a ball" as described by the title of Pretorius (2006). Learning and teaching becomes complicated, strenuous and difficult.

The L2 should be well planned and systematically taught so that learners can gradually transfer skills from the mother tongue (L1) to the unfamiliar (L2). Bilingual schooling offers significant benefits as reported in academic literature (Baker, 2001; Cummins, 2000). In submersion, students may be able to decode words in the L2 but the construction of meaning from what they read may take years. In an L2 class, cognitive learning and language learning run concurrently. This makes it hard for teachers to identify whether the students' area of difficulties are in understanding the concepts or the language of instruction (Benson, 2005). Simply changing the language of instruction without tackling socio-economic and political issues is not likely to improve the educational services. The results of a study by Fafunwa, Macauley and Sokoya (1989) and Akinnaso (1993) clearly support long-term mother tongue development in the six years of primary schooling in Nigeria. Initiatives like those above have over the years received more attention and support from many agencies interested in educational quality and equity (Sida Report, 2001).

However, before deciding on any model of teaching reading, experimentation is necessary in order to select an appropriate model and type of technical and material

input. Hoven (2003) expresses concerns about the failure of certain models in countries like Niger and Guinea Bissau despite success experienced in the early stages of the implementation of the models. As Alexander (1999) suggests, the bottom-up practices are a good foundation for strong programmes since all stakeholders get to contribute. Thus, groups like Multilingualism Action Group (Heugh, 2003) lobby for a more coherent and grounded language policy and practice in South African schools.

2.4 Reading and comprehension realities in international reading literacy

In 2006 South Africa participated in an international literacy test organised by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).This test is conducted every five years with the participation of 40 countries. Among the over 30,000 Grade Four and Five learners who were assessed, South African learners achieved the lowest average compared to the other countries (PIRLS, 2006). According to Fleisch (2008), the change from L1(Sepedi) instruction in reading, writing and numeracy in the first two to three years of schooling to an L2(English) in Grade Four puts the learners in a precarious situation. They are expected to be proficient in reading across the curriculum which becomes rather problematic and the learners end up having a limited vocabulary of about 500 words and can merely read simple 3-7 word sentences (Fleisch, 2008)

The PIRLS focused on different aspects of learners' reading literacy: (1) processes of comprehension - focussing on and retrieve explicitly stated information; (2) the ability to make straightforward inferences; (3) the ability to examine and evaluate language and textual elements; and also tested the different purposes for reading- the examination of literary experience, the ability to acquire and use information, reading, behaviours and attitudes. The findings revealed that learners are struggling to develop reading and literacy competencies needed for the transition from learning to read to reading to learn (PIRLS, 2006).In addition, the PIRLS report indicates that on average, internationally; teachers allocate 30% of instructional time to language instruction and 20% to reading instruction (Mullis et al., 2007). Teachers' reports in

the South African study reveal that only 10% of Grade Four learners receive reading instruction for more than 6 hours per week, 18% for between three and six hours per week and 72% for less than three hours per week (Mullis et al., 2007). From these data, it becomes clear that South African schools fall far below the international averages in terms of time spent on reading instruction.

Educational achievement and progress are dependent on BICS and CALP. Yet, many scholars have noted that primary school children in South Africa are not acquiring these competencies (Pretorius & Ntuli, 2005; Fleisch, 2007). The PIRLS report indicates that the South African Grade Four learners achieved the lowest mean performance scores in comparison with Grade Four learners from 44 other participating countries. Their mean performances were well below the fixed international mean of 500 points. Clearly, South African Grade Four learners are experiencing difficulties with reading comprehension. Pretorius (2002) explains that this is due to the fact that at this stage these learners have barely mastered reading comprehension skills in the mother tongue, let alone the second language. This situation is made worse by other factors contributing to poor L2 acquisition and academic achievement in rural and township schools. These factors include the lack of access to printed materials, TV and radio, lack of opportunity to hear or speak English (exposure); and poor language teaching just to name but these.

According to Venezky (1984:13), reading usually implies oral reading (BICS) and comprehension (CALP) of a given text, and comprehension is simply assumed if a reader's "pronunciation was correct and natural". Such a belief can lead to unrealistic expectations of the teacher and even parents of the learner. We often hear learners speaking English, but most of them cannot read at grade level. Even with those who can read, the real challenge lies in them understanding what they are reading.

Reading includes decoding and comprehension. Decoding is the more technical aspect of reading activity where written symbols are translated into language.

Pretorius and Ribbens (2005:139) state that "alphabetic skills and phonemic awareness lead to the increasing automaticity of word identification skills on which accurate and fluent decoding is based. Knowing the letters of the alphabet and their different sounds is essential for accurate decoding". Comprehension refers to the overall understanding process of meaning construction within a sentence unit, the adjacent sentences, and across larger units of text to the meaning of the text as a whole.

Casanave (1988:283) also states that "successful reading comprehension depends not only on the readers' ability to access appropriate content and formal schemata, but that it also depends on their ability to monitor what they understand". This author is of the view that instruction in reading should simultaneously attempt to address comprehension. Reading can be said to be effective if the reader is able to read for meaning, remembers content, and read for language learning (decoding, syntax, vocabulary, etc.). As explained by Pretorius and Ribbons (2005:140), "interpretive skills refer to the reader's ability to read between the lines" and not just to interpret the text at surface level. For a reader to successfully comprehend, he/she must try to assess the author's intention. A reader reading with comprehension tries to form a "bigger picture" of the written text, by making use of schemata building to contextualise the text as they can remember from prior knowledge.

According to the Department of Education (2002), 40% of teaching time in the Foundation Phase is allocated to literacy. In the Foundation Phase (Grades One to Three) the learners learn to read the printed word (Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005), while in the Intermediate Phase (Grades Four to Nine) the learners' knowledge of the language and vocabulary expands and the learner starts to use reading as a tool for learning. In other words, reading is done to gain more information on a specific topic or subject. The learners read texts that go beyond their immediate frame of reference and which builds on the knowledge they already possess, thereby expanding their knowledge and frame of reference. Therefore, reading does not simply decoding sounds and letters but the ability to make meaning of a text and be able critique the text. (Janks, 2001). Studies on both first and second language acquisition confirm that those who read more often do better on a wide variety of

tests (Stokes, Krashen & Kartchner 1998, cited in Krashen, 2003). Thus, it can be assumed that reading extensively and widely usually transfers into a good general knowledge and improved vocabulary (Krashen, 2003).

2.5 Challenges of reading proficiency

Grade Four learners have special needs and need to be taught to read. This is according to a number of studies that have been carried out in different contexts (Pretorious & Machet, 2004; Theron & Nel, 2005; Makoe, 2007; Hugo, 2007). The reading problems among Grade Four learners are made worse because of their demography, especially for learners in rural areas where poverty, lack of motivation, and limited English proficiency are rife, making some educators to think that learners are incapable of meeting academic standards. Studies by Matjila and Pretorius (2004), Minskoff (2005), Makoe (2007), and Pretorius and Mampuru (2007) have found that many South African schools are not well resourced with libraries and even where these exist, most are without desired books. These limited resources and the general lack of literacy materials in African languages limit learners' opportunity to read even in their mother tongue.

Pretorius and Mampuru (2007) found that only 27% of South African schools have libraries. This poor print environment and the lack of a reading culture make reading a more serious problem (Makoe, 2007; Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007). The language of instruction in the English second language classroom is also problematic. By Grade Four learners must be proficient readers as they now use language across the curriculum (Department of Education, 2002; Pretorius & Machet, 2004; Makoe, 2007; Department of Education, 2008). At some levels, learners superficially appear to have mastered the language but then they lag behind academically (Avalos, 2003). Some educators code switch in an effort to meet the learners' needs, and according to Manyike (2007) these educators are invaluable in assisting learners through the transition.

In the South African school system, there is the early exit level – two years teaching of literature (mother tongue), and late exit level – 40% literature of the time until Grade Six (Manyike, 2007). In this system, L1 and L2 are used concurrently to facilitate understanding, and L1 serves as a bridge to second language. Avalos (2003) explains that learners face reading problems because reading is complex and learners are made to read in L2 when they are still acquiring reading skills in their L1. The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) assumes that learners who are able to read in their L1 will be able to transfer the literacy skills to L2 English (Macdonald, 1990; Heugh, 2007; Manyike & Lemmer, 2008). However, the transition from L1 to English as the only medium of instruction comes sooner for most South African learners before they acquire CALP skills in their L1. In the submersion model, learners are compelled to receive instructions through the medium of L2 which is the language of teaching and learning (LoTL). This is the common approach used in educating African learners in South African schools.

Second language learning comes with a degree of anxiety, which may be one of the reasons why learners fail to master a second language (Manyike, 2007). In South Africa, the submersion tends to be over-emphasised in urban or former model C schools (schools where most educators are white, Indian and Coloured). African learners in these schools have to develop language proficiency in a short period of time to cope in these well-resourced schools, meanwhile the rural schools are still left behind with little progress (Makoe, 2007). Coelho (2004) warns that requiring L2learners to perform at the level beyond their current stage of development in English is futile and leads to frustration and disappointment. Pretorius and Machet (2004) note there is a need for South African schools to have a standardised test in either L1 or L2 for determining whether learners read at their appropriate levels. Coelho (2004) notes that lumping L1 and L2 readers and treated in the same way without any attention being paid to their special needs will only create more challenges.

2.6. Reading performance and the availability of resources in rural schools

Paran and Williams (2007), working under the umbrella of the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), carried out a study in Southern African countries on behalf of UNESCO. Their study revealed that the vast majority of primary school pupils were not able to read adequately in English, which is the sole or dominant language of instruction. This brings to mind the disparity with respect to medium of instruction wherein some schools start using English as the MI at Grade R while others start at Grade Four. However, in Burundi, it was found that in tests of comprehension with year six learners, reading comprehension scores were significantly higher for the Kirundi version than the French version. Also, the Grade Five learners in Malawi primary schools had largely achieved higher reading proficiency in their local language, Chichewa (the language of instruction for years one to four). From this study, it is concluded that once children have learned to read the words on the page, they have automatic access to some meaning but, reading and proper understanding cannot be equated. Though language serves reading, reading does not entail comprehension. Therefore, comprehension strategies should be consciously taught.

In another study, Pretorius and Mampuru (2007) looked at reading and academic performance in high poverty schools in Gauteng, South Africa. The relationship between L1 (Sepedi) and L2 (English) proficiency and reading among Grade Seven learners was examined. During the course of the year, reading intervention programmes were implemented, and factors that predicted academic performance were analysed. Baseline entry and exit reading level were assessed to determine the efficacy of the programmes. Assessments were done to 104 learners at Grade One and Grade Seven levels in Sepedi. There was a pre-test in May and a post test in November. The same tests were given in English and in Sepedi four weeks apart to minimise memory effects. The first test was dictation, followed by a reading test (Inference questions, cloze items, Anaphoric resolution and reading rate test) taken from the textbook currently used in South African schools. The chosen text was also translated into Sepedi. The data was analysed using SPSS. Using the Cronbach alpha model, the reliability scores were taken.

There was correlation and regression to see the relationship between L1 and L2 reading proficiency and language. This study revealed that L2 reading contributed more variance to L1 reading than L1 proficiency. Reading in both languages also contributed significantly to academic performance. However, the study highlights the need for more cross-linguistic reading research in different educational settings.

There is a general agreement that becoming a proficient reader in a second language not an easy task. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) expresses great concern for the enormous cognitive challenge faced by young English language learners (ELLs). Learners must acquire oral and literacy skills in English simultaneously. Some transfer some skills from L1 to L2 English reading. However, this does not make learning to read well in English easy (Birch, 2002). This is because reading involves the use of both "higher level cognitive knowledge", abilities, and learning strategies as well as "low level linguistic knowledge" and processing strategies. Thus, in the elementary grades, ELLs are likely to encounter difficulties with "high" and "low" levels of the reading process, especially as they tackle increasing complex readings. This is affirmed by Droop and Verhoeven (1998, 2003).

Manyike and Lemmer (2010) looked at the performance of ESL learners in different types of rural primary schools. Their focus was on language because it is a crucial means of gaining access to important knowledge and skills. The research question was answered through an inquiry into the English reading performance of Grade Seven ESL learners in different types of primary schools in a rural setting in Limpopo, using standardised testing. The sample comprised Grade Seven learners who were Xitsonga L1 speakers in four selected rural primary schools (n = 140) situated in the Letsitele area of Limpopo Province. There were 31 learners from Forest Primary, 23 learners from Maxima College, 42 learners from Debengeni Primary, and 44 learners from Tsakani Primary. Data were gathered by means of the Reading Performance Test in English (Intermediate Level). The reading performance test was made up of multiple-choice questions and learners were expected to choose the correct answer. The Reading Performance Test in English had two components: comprehension and grammar.

The findings of the study indicate a difference in the grammar and comprehension scores of learners in the respective participating schools as well as a sharp difference in the performance of learners in the different types of schools involved. This suggests that the current use of English as the LoLT does not mean that linguistic capital is equally distributed throughout schools. School type can thus act as an agent of cultural reproduction which influences learner outcomes.

The performance of learners in the tests suggests that these learners still lack adequate proficiency in English to use it effectively as an LoLT for the mastery of academic content in all learning areas. However, a comparison of the learners from the three other schools with those from Maxima College, which was a former Model C school, suggests an even greater lack of English proficiency among the learners from the deep rural schools. The possibility that these learners are able to access academic content in all learning areas through English as the LoLT is doubtful. Thus, it was revealed that the type of school has implications for the acquisition of English language proficiency of ESL learners in a rural setting.

In a related study by Pretorius and Currin (2010) the learners showed more reading comprehension variance in English than they did in their mother tongue. From their findings, a number of factors may contribute to low reading performance such as lack of resources in schools, inappropriate instructional strategies, print-poor environments, overcrowding, and reduced time-on-task (Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007). It also encouraged the learners to expand their reading scope. The project therefore made learners develop more interest in reading and instilled in them an enjoyment of reading. Both Sepedi and English books were bought and loaned to learners with a total collection of 2,500 books completed.

The above project examined the correlation between reading comprehension in L1 and L2 by assessing how the academically good and weak learners differed in their reading abilities in L1 and L2. There was a three year intervention to help the learners first towards the beginning of the year and then again towards the end of each year.

Then, they were evaluated in English and Sepedi twice each year. Even though this effort was made to develop reading comprehension in both languages, the results showed higher mean scores for English than in Sepedi. Sepedi comprehension scored less than 40% while English comprehension reached 47.8% in three years. The conclusion from the study is congruent with the previous one that Grade Seven readers had higher reading proficiency in English than in their mother tongue.

With regards to multilingual societies, language proficiency in the medium of instruction exerts a powerful influence on the outcomes of schooling and life outcomes in general (Ovando & McClaren, 1999). Social and economic privilege is partly constructed on the basis of the languages people know and, conversely, on the basis of the languages some may understand the linguistic capital that they possess or lack (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2006). Using a common LoLT does not mean that linguistic capital is equally distributed throughout a schooling system. Many ESL learners come from homes which seldom provide literacy practices in English. Their acquisition of English proficiency is therefore more dependent on the quality of linguistic resources provided by the teaching staff and the general school and community environment. In rural schools, learners use their L1 as LoLT from Grade One to Grade Three, during which time English is introduced as an additional language. In Grade Four, these learners transfer to English as LoLT and their L1 is taught as an additional language. In rural schools, the typical ESL learner has had little or no contact with English outside the school setting and, more particularly, outside formal English lessons in school.

Following the findings of the studies cited above, factors influencing rural schooling and their implications for learners' accumulation of knowledge and language should be broadly investigated.

According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), almost half of South African learners dwell in rural areas, where educational underachievement is a major component of the lack that disadvantages the learners (HSRC, 2005). Rural learners

frequently attend poorly resourced schools which are often located in isolated areas, with high levels of poverty and unemployment. Rural communities mostly lack access to economic resources, poor employment opportunities, and limited access to community-based resources that are found in urban areas, such as internet cafés, libraries, educational centres and museums (Maynard & Howley, 1997; HRSC, 2005). Furthermore, underachievement is a big component of the cycle of educational disadvantage in under resourced schools which are mostly found in rural areas and townships located in mostly high poverty areas (Human Sciences Research Council, 2005). Most of the parents in these areas are not educated and thus are not able to help the learners or provide the right attitude that they need to succeed. Also present in these areas is a lack of reading culture and very limited school ambiance (Halpen, 2005).

In the same light, a sizeable number of the population does not have books in their homes, which means that primary school learners may not have access to literacy events outside of the school and classroom environment. The differences between the language used as the educational medium and the language spoken at home also add to the difficulties of building a reading culture (Sisulu, 2004). According to Sisulu (2004), reading is not an activity that people engage in during their free time and outside of school; it is often not seen as an empowering skill. While these are the main contributors to the illiteracy situation, they are not the only issue (Sisulu, 2004).

As part of the additional issues, there is also lack of sufficient exposure to English in the broader community as well as the opportunity to practise English. English functions more as of a foreign language in rural areas than as a second language. Even though radio and television provide opportunities to hear English, many learners do not have access to these facilities owing to their high poverty background. Therefore, the classroom remains the main place where the learners speak, read and write English. Lack of school libraries and limited books in places where there are libraries make the problem worse (Chisholm, 2002; Manyike & Lemmer, 2008).

According to Hooper (2005: 11), "There is a gap between what teachers prescribe or provide as reading materials and what learners prefer reading or choose to read". This problem or gap could be as a result of teachers' unfamiliarity with good fiction for learners (teenage fictions). Hooper (2005) also points out that the teachers' knowledge of learning choices are too limited; thus, they are often unable to make recommendations to students to better their reading habits.

The study by Warrican (2006) suggests that the poor academic performance of a learner maybe directly related to their reading behaviour and not to their teacher's language, as is sometimes assumed. Attention should therefore be given to identifying reasons why learners are not reading and also why the school system does not equip them with good reading skills. Warrican's study (2006) found that many books in the library were novels or classics that were popular in reviews in literary magazines. As the study notes, "the school libraries did not even carry magazines" and the students themselves even said that they did not use the library because it had nothing they were eager to read (Warrican, 2006:41). Warrican (2006) therefore recommends that libraries should cater for students with different characteristics and preferences, reading abilities and interests. Reading levels should also be considered, as well as the learners' gender and culture. In addition, students can be involved in selecting interesting reading materials, and time must be provided daily for students to engage in leisure reading activities.

Another area of interest is the habit of parents with regard to reading. Johnson-Smaragdi and Johnson (2006) note that the reason why some learners love reading or turn to books while others do not is complex and complicated. To them, the reason may be related to the home environment and the habit of parents, and even the culture of the place. They note that the television habits of the parents can be a great influence on the children. Often, parents have no reading habits or are even illiterate in some cases, like in rural Limpopo setting. Many parents do not read at all in their spare time while those who do make little or no effort to read more. Thus, the school system is faced with a great challenge not only in promoting reading, but also in helping learners to develop interest by changing their attitudes towards reading (Johnson-Smaragdi & Johnson, 2006).

2.7. Reading strategies

Research in second language reading suggests that learners who use a variety of techniques are able to storage, and retrieval of information easily (Oxford, 1990). Oxford (1990:8) points out that "language learning strategies are specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations". These techniques can be seen as learning strategies, problem-solving, study skills or behaviours which make learning better (Oxford & Crookall, 2009). In the context of second language learning, there is a difference between strategies that make learning effective and efficient; and strategies that improve comprehension. The strategies for comprehension indicate how readers perceive and conceive a task; make sense of what they read, and what they do when they understand is scarce. These are the strategies used by the learner to enhance reading comprehension and avoid failure.

Anderson (2004) points out that, for a reader to be strategic, he or she must know how to successfully apply different useful strategies during the reading process. The research was carried out for the study to investigate differences in strategy used by L2 adult learners while engaged in two reading tasks: reading comprehension test and reading academic texts. The participants were twenty-eight Spanish-speaking university students in an intensive ESL programme the United States. Their English proficiency level ranged from beginner to advanced level. He used a Descriptive Test of Language Skills and a Textbook Reading Profile. Questions were placed in grouped depending on the skill being measured while for the textbook profiling, questions required the participants to use the think-aloud strategies as they answered the questions. The analysis of the data collected showed no single set of processing strategies significantly determined the success on the two reading measures. The skills and strategies used by good and bad readers were basically the same but the high learners used the strategies more efficiently.

Students who use metacognitive strategies, such as comprehension monitoring and reading purpose can adjust their reading rates. A first language study by Paris and Meyers (1981) examined comprehension monitoring and study strategies of good

and poor readers. The study revealed that inadequate readers do not monitor their comprehension as often as the excellent readers and give more wrong answers to comprehension questions and could barely recall the story. The good readers could write notes and summaries related to the text. Most of the good readers used "strategies of asking questions" or "referring to the dictionary" to determine word meaning. Poor readers were stock in trying to pronounce the words. There seemed to be a compensation of cognitive memory and other social strategies.

A critical point to note is that while many of these studies have examined strategies used by different categories of readers there are still limitations to all the findings. There will always be very subtle but crucial differences between learners and strategy use that should not be overlooked. Every learner is different and must be closely monitored and not labelled.

2.8. Metacognitive awareness and prior knowledge impact on reading comprehension

Metacognitive research looks at learners' knowledge and seeks to find out how learners use of their cognitive resources (Garner, 1987). One's self Knowledge may focus on the ability to rate performance on certain of tasks or the proficiency levels. Metacognitive awareness also involves the 'awareness of whether or not comprehension is occurring' and the ability to apply the correct strategies to give the correct response (Baumann, Jones & Seifert-Kessel, 1993).

In Baker and Brown (1984:355,356) two dimensions of metacognitive are explained: (1) "knowledge of cognition or metacognitive awareness"; and (2) "regulation of cognition" which embodies the reader's knowledge about his or her cognitive resources, and the "compatibility between the reader and the reading situation". Therefore understanding self-awareness, limitations in the use of strategies is very important in determining individual differences and the ability to perform any task (Carrell, 1989). Baker and Brown (1984) point out that the declarative knowledge which is superficial is different from the procedural knowledge (the know how to do

something). If a learner knows that he or she has a particular strategy and uses or practices its usage that knowledge will become very useful unlike just merely knowing . There appears to be a strong relationship between reading strategies used by readers, metacognitive awareness, and reading proficiency. In this light, Second language reading research has shown that less proficient readers to focus on reading by pronouncing words rather constructing meaning. (Garner & Krauss, 1982; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

Proficient readers attempt to determine the meaning of words not understood, monitor text comprehension, easily cite main ideas, and use strategies to remember text (paraphrasing, repetition, making notes, summarising, self-questioning, and so on.). In Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995:51 the good readers "understand relationships between parts of text, recognize text structure" and are able to change reading strategies when comprehension seem unclear, evaluate the text and reflect on necessary process. (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Based on the findings of numerous studies, recent research in the area of reading comprehension has focused on reading-related strategies and strategy-training studies. For the most part, such studies have found that strategy training leads to improved reading performance.

In addition, looking at prior knowledge impact on comprehension, a large body of literature suggests that prior knowledge or learners' background affects reading comprehension. Roller (1990) and Carrell (1987) have explored the interaction of formal and content knowledge as they influence comprehension.

The schema theory is a useful notion for describing how prior knowledge is integrated in memory and used in high-level comprehension processes. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) investigated the usefulness of schema theory and found that activating content information plays a major role in student comprehension and recall of information from a text. Classroom teachers should support comprehension before students read by provoking the use of prior knowledge and experiences related to story theme, setting, and content so that, the learners can build on it. This means that we can go beyond the literal interpretation allowed by competence in the

language to inferences from language that is combined with our knowledge of the world. Thus, the learner requires both the ability to use language and knowledge of the substance to be communicated (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

Clarke and Eilberstein (1977) also propose that students should be taught to read more effectively and efficiently to enable the guess from context, understand purpose and expectation, make inferences and be able to skim ahead to fill in the context, etc.). Moreover, Coady (1979) argues that conceptualization of the reading process requires three components: process strategies, background knowledge and conceptual abilities. Proficient readers are better users of background knowledge. They use only as much textual information as needed for confirming and predicting the information in the text. These implications are similar to those of Clarke and Eilbestein (1977). Context and background knowledge also have a major influence on reading comprehension. A large body of literature has argued that prior knowledge of text-related information strongly affects reading comprehension (Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978; Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

2.9. Decoding ability and time spent on reading comprehension

Mergherbi, Alix and Erhlich (2006) looked at French first and second grade learners' reading comprehension. This study was conducted with learners aged 6–8 years in Grades One and Two. The researchers re-examined Gough and Tunmer's simple view in assessing decoding ability to reading comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). They used both visual and auditory versions of the same test.

Decoding was assessed by means of a non-word reading test and on the basis of reading comprehension scores. Skilled and less skilled comprehension scores were contrasted. Less skilled scores showed relative independence between decoding and reading comprehension. Both the good and the poor decoders showed similar poor performance in both reading and listening to comprehension. However, their sources of difficulties were different. Hierarchical regression analysis computed on the entire sample showed that listening comprehension was a more powerful predictor than decoding ability in both Grades One and Two (Mergherbi, Alix & Erhlich, 2006).

Time spent on reading comprehension in L2 learning is another area investigated by Pichette (2005). He evaluated the relationship between time spent on reading and reading comprehension in a L2. In the study, eighty one (81) French speaking learners of English both beginners and advanced readers reading comprehension were tested in French and English. The results revealed low, non-significant correlation between time spent on reading English and English reading comprehension for low proficiency learners. High proficient learners showed high correlation and moderate significance. This suggests that if L2 reading is to enhance L2 reading development, it may not serve that purpose effectively for low proficient learners whose working memory is still taxed by word decoding processes (Pichette, 2005).

2.10. Recall and inference in reading comprehension

Wilkinson, Elkins and Bain (1995) studied individual differences in story comprehension and recall. The study sought to identify poor readers and characterize weaknesses in their knowledge and use of story structure in comprehension and recall. They used 8-year-old children selected based on factor analysis of scores from three measures of reading ability. These were twenty good readers and sixty poor readers who were sub-divided using eight additional measures of language reading comprehension. This categorisation helped identify specific weaknesses. All children then listened to three stories and retold the stories under free and probe recall conditions.

Comparison between the good and poor readers' recall showed that poor readers displayed reduced sensitivity to story structure, recalled less of the overall story and recalled less information from story grammar categories. As the researchers note, these results provide evidence of "marked heterogeneity in poor readers' story comprehension recall" (Wilkinson, Bain & Elkins, 1995:393).

Yungfang (2006) also carried out a study on the use of immediate recall task as a measure of second language reading comprehension. He examined whether the

requirement of memory biases our understanding of readers' comprehension and if so how. He wanted to see if there will be more evidence of comprehension if readers were simply asked to comprehend and then translate the reading passage without being required to memorize the text. He also examined the role of memory in a reading comprehension assessment task. His study compared L2 readers' performance on the immediate recall protocol (comprehension requiring memory) and the translation (task without the requirement of memory).

Ninety seven college students who were all Mandarin-speaking Chinese participated in Yungfang's study. Their ages ranged from 20 to 22 years. The translation task yielded significantly more evidence of comprehension than the immediate recall task. These results indicate that the requirement of memory in a task hinders the ability of the learners to demonstrate fully their comprehension of the reading passage. The learners' performance in immediate recall and translation tasks were significantly different and spanned the effects of topic and proficiency level (Yungfang, 2006).

Research findings regarding the use of immediate recall as assessment task have been fruitful, but the issue of whether the requirement of memory in the immediate recall task can provide us an accurate understanding of what readers do and do not understand has not been profoundly investigated. However, Kobayashi (2002) points out that readers may not remember all they understand. In his view, comprehension does not necessarily equate with remembering. Another view is that of Alderson (2000: 232) who states that "it might be objected that this is more of a test of memory than of understanding but if the task follows immediately on the reading, this need not be the case".

Andreassen and Braten (2010) conducted a study that looked at the contribution of recalling ability. Three different multiple choice tests with varied working memory demands formed the questionnaire of the reading comprehension. The participants in the study were 180 Grade Five learners from six schools in the South-eastern part of Norway with a mean age of 10.5 years. The learners had to draw vertical lines between words for the meanings they were able to recall.

The maximum score was arrived at by counting the number of correct word chains that were recognized and decoded by the learners. With regard to the reading comprehension portion, the texts were long and the inferential questions were more than in the decoding section. The learner with a working memory scored higher in responding to questions in the text. The unavailability of a working memory explained the variance in performance. The results revealed that participants found it easier to memorise a few lines than to remember or make sense of a longer paragraph. The conclusion of the study was that when learners are overloaded with reading tasks or confronted with a long test, they become poor performers in recalling information, and this also affects their ability to make inferences.

Inference making is using clues from a text and one's own knowledge and experience to figure out what the writer is trying to say. This connects inferring to other active reading skills such as making predictions. All of this enables learners to focus and make sense of a story or any reading material. Due to the fact that these skills are interconnected and embedded within other activities, they are not taught intentionally or systematically. Inference making research has been pivotal in psycho and text linguistics, and discourse psychology for over thirty years (Gordon & Chan, 1995). Looking at the specific case of reading literacy, text comprehension researchers have been challenged in trying to answer questions about inferences drawn by readers from texts.

As noted earlier, in the past 30 years, research on inference making has been one of the main issues in psycholinguistics, text linguistics and discourse psychology. In terms of text comprehension in particular, it has been very challenging for researchers to ascertain which inferences readers can reliably draw by themselves (Baretta et al., 2009). Unlike listening where one can readily ask for clarification, reading is more complicated and thus the message of the text may not be rightly comprehended. However, there are some paradigms (cued recall, question answering, gaze duration and others) that have been used to study the process of recalling, inferring and predicting.

The ability of young children in recalling and making inferences was investigated by Cain (2010) where he looked at the relation between comprehension skill and inference making. A controlled procedure was used evaluating individual differences in general knowledge. A story was read to the children and their ability to read and make two types of inference was tested. The two types were the ability to be coherent – which is essential for adequate comprehension of text – and the ability to make elaborated inference – getting the deeper meaning from the words represented in the text. There was a strong relation between comprehension skill and inference making ability. The sources of inference failure showed that there were underlying sources of difficulty for both good and poor comprehends.

Inference has been defined as the connections that people establish when they try to interpret texts (Brown, 1994). Therefore, inference and meaning-guessing is the product of contextualization. As such, ESL learners can get the meaning of unknown words using the context in which they appear (Clarke & Nation, 1980; Huckin & Bloch, 1993; Rott, 1999). Hence, training on contextualized meaning-guessing can help ESL students to do without bilingual vocabulary pairs which are inefficient in learning the vocabulary of the English Language. However, context can unfortunately be unhelpful in getting learners through the right meaning of especially new lexicon. Prior research indicates that vague or ambiguous contexts are not conducive to accurate inference of the meaning of new lexicon, not only in the second language but also in the first language (Stein, 1993). Some researchers explain the problem in terms errors or confusions based on contextual clues or insufficiency of learners' proficiency levels (Kroll & Curley, 1988; Stein, 1993). Other factors are the age of learners, their transitive ability, memory load, as well as other lexical problems (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2004).

Haastrup (1991) notes that language learners possibly use three sources of inference: contextual cues, intra-lingua cues and inter-lingual prompts. Contextual cues refer to one or two words in a text or a portion of a sentence containing new words that can aid understanding of certain aspect of text. Intra-lingua cues have to do with the morpho-syntactical and phonological features of the new word for which the learner employs his general knowledge about phonology, orthography,

morphology, word class and collocations to guess the meaning. Inter-lingual prompts relate to a language other than the second language, for example, the learner's first language. Inter-lingual prompts are used by learners when they rely on L1 knowledge or another language they have acquired to guess the meaning of a word in their second language. Previous research has been quite ambivalent as to the advantages of inference and meaning guessing, especially when it comes to long-term retention and recall.

McKoon and Ratcliff (1992) suggest that L2 learners should make fewer use of meaning guessing, so that only a few inferences will be necessary during comprehension. Furthermore, according to Nassaji (2004), many researchers assert that there must be sufficient vocabulary deeply constructed in one's background knowledge (as schemata) in order for L2 learners to make heavy use of inference strategies to guess the meanings of new lexicon in context. In addition, training learners in the use of metacognitive strategies has been shown to be of vital importance in helping learners to make use of inference in context (Prince, 1996). Despite the fact that effective inference and meaning-guessing could help learners generate more inference than individual out-of-context word presentation methods, inference and meaning-guessing rely heavily on both students' extant lexical knowledge, effective recall and memory usage on the one hand and effective prompted schema-stirring on the other. This observation is consistent with prior research findings by Jenkins, Matlock and Slocum (1989) and Nassaji (2004).

According to Snowling and Hulmes (2007), the working memory is a cognitive system tasked to facilitate the storage and processing of information. These authors point out that new association can only be made when words co- exist in the working memory. Thus, they investigated the way learners engage with the text while storing information for later recall. They found that participants make judgments about the meaning of each series of sentences and then attempt to recall the final word. It was discovered that the participants' stimuli rotated mentally as they remember set of words (Snowling & Hulmes, 2007).

In terms of working memory and age, a study was conducted by Alloway et al. (2008). 417 children from different primary schools in England were tested to measure verbal memory. The age of the learners ranged from 5.1 to 11.5 years. Their verbal memory score of 95-115 was selected from the lower memory group and the raw scores were converted into scaled scores (mean=10 and standard deviation=3). The result provided descriptive statistics for verbal and visual working memory assessment. The result of the study confirmed that there was no age effect for automated working memory scale test scores, but in the automated working memory assessment scores, there was increasing memory capacity as children got older. The older a learner is, the bigger his memory capacity.

2.11. Summary writing in reading comprehension

Students do not only have to comprehend and make sense of a passage, but they also have to make interrelationships between the text and the real world simultaneously (Carrell, 1984). They also have to scan the text for significant key points to meet the demands of the writing task. This helps them to come up with a condensed representation of the relevant information from the given passage. Thus, it is important to look at summary writing and what other researchers have found on the subject.

Perin, Keselman and Monopoli (2003) conducted a study on summary writing in college. They found that students had difficulty finding the main points in the text. The students merely looked for certain repeated words or phrases as indicators of the important information, and this is more often misleading. A majority of the students in this study reproduced sentences that were from the test text. There was no significant rephrasing or paraphrasing of the sentences. It was found that students with prior knowledge about the topic they were reading were able to summarize the passage better than those without (Choy & Yee Lee, 2010).

The cognitive demands of summary writing are dependent upon the type of summary to be produced. Guoxing Yu (2008) conducted a study on reading to summarize in English and Chinese. A total of 157 Chinese undergraduates were asked to write

summaries of extended English texts in both Chinese and English. The differential effects on the two languages on summarization were examined and a post summarization questionnaire and interview were used to screen the students' perceptions of these differential effects. The use of different languages had a significant effect on both summarization processes and products. The Chinese summaries were longer and rated consistently poorer than English summaries. However, Chinese was a better measure of students' reading abilities. The implications of the findings were discussed with specific reference to summarization task design (Guoxing Yu, 2008).

Due to problems caused by the use English as a medium of instruction, some universities, colleges are noticing the effects of these on students. Choy and Yee Lee (2010) decided to test the effects of teaching paraphrasing skills to students learning summary writing. To them, this was important because the learners did not have adequate mastery of the L2 to easily paraphrase text .Therefore plagiarising or rote memorization of passages was the order of day (Choy & Yee Lee, 2010). The study had two research questions (RQ): RQ1 – How do students perceive the effectiveness of the paraphrasing skills that were taught to them during their summary writing classes? RQ2 – Did the results from tests administered to the students reflect their perceptions?

Twenty-two (22) students who were enrolled in a two-year diploma programme in a Malaysian institution were used in this qualitative research. The students were interviewed as a group after every class to obtain their feedback on the strategies that were taught. In addition, they formed 20 multiple choice statements relating to students' perceptions as learners and problem solvers. The students were required to choose their preferred response – "ranging from yes to no", "definitely to definitely not". Scores were allocated to each statement using a scale of 1 (most negative) to 5 (most positive) and the score obtained. The next step was a pre-test on summary writing that required the students to compose a summary of 50 words based on the 288 words passage within 30 minutes.

The same test was used as the post-test after the skills were taught for 10 weeks to determine both their progress in acquiring the strategies and skills that were taught and the change in their perceptions as learners. All the students perceived that the paraphrasing skills were difficult to learn. It was found that picking out the main idea from the passage was also difficult for them. The results showed that only 42% of the students showed improvement. The paraphrasing skills did not seem to help all the students equally. Only 36%perceived they had benefited from learning the skills. However, the effectiveness could have been tainted by students' lack of command of the language. Further research needs to be carried out on how well students can learn the skills (Ismail & Maasum, 2009, Choy & Yee Lee, 2010).

2.12. Learners reading preferences in South African schools

Rasana (2006) investigated learners' reading preferences in secondary schools where English is taught as a L2. The study sought to understand the reading patterns and interests of Grade Eleven learners. The researcher used both a focus group interview and a questionnaire to generate and collect data. The focus group was a group interaction in the discus of a topic supplied by the researcher, reading preferences and reading patterns in their school. This group consisted of six learners: two top students, two borderline, and two under-achievers, all from the same class.

The questionnaire written in Afrikaans, English and IsiXhosa, was divided into two sections: Section A dealt with personal or background information, while Section B dealt with learners' reading preferences, with regard to both literature set works and more general reading. Learners could answer in the language of their choice. The Biomedical Data Programme Statistical Software (BMDP) was used for data analysis. Chi-square tests were used to determine significant differences in the groups looking at school effect, gender effect and language effect, etc. A total of 649 questionnaires were collected from all eight schools with only 463 used. From the data, three features were prominent: that they do have preferred reading material, preferred authors and a preferred language in which they read. In terms of choice of reading, access to reading materials proved to be a material factor.

It was noted that males preferred to read the "Bible, sports magazines and the internet" while the females' preferences were linked with the topics of "fashion, beauty, love, and healthy lifestyles" in magazines, novels, and recipe books. At least 135 respondents (29.4% of the total) reported having read nothing: 66 were females and 69 were males. Most participants responded to the questionnaire in their L1, (IsiXhosa, 75.2% and Afrikaans speakers 83.7%) but said that they most liked English. A number of reasons were given for this preference for English: "they wanted 'to improve and understand the language'; that it was 'an important and an international language'; they 'liked English and wanted to gain knowledge'; that 'most interesting books are written in English'; and an even smaller number explained their preference by saying they 'wanted to get jobs and for status' (Rasana, 2006:184,186,190).

Machet, Olen and Chamberlain (2001) also investigated learners' reading preferences at primary and secondary schools in the Gauteng province in South Africa using a questionnaire that was in English. They looked at the relationship between reading and the attitudes of Grade Five up to Grade Ten learners. The majority of their secondary school respondents read magazines "97.9% of the girls and 93.9% of the boys, but magazines were more popular with girls (40.7%) than with boys (17.1%)". (Machet, Olen & Chamberlain, 2001:14). Other preferred readings were "Newspapers at home, Storybooks, Romantic fiction, school stories, fantasy, religious stories, adventure stories, and African folk tales were most popular among girls, while horror, humour, mysteries, adventure, and fantasy were preferred by boys." However, there were significantly different in the assessment of comics. Machet, Olen and Chamberlain (2001) found that comics were read by many secondary school learners whereas in Rasana's study (2006) there was virtually no interest in comics.

Niven (2004) and Dison (1997) both found the Bible to be the most common available book and Bible reading and the reading of other religious literature were the only other readings reported outside the school curriculum. They also found newspaper reading to be another literacy practice that was carried out in respondents' homes.

Niven's findings were again similar to those of Machet, Olen and Chamberlain (2001), as they who reported vast majority of their respondents preferred to read books in English rather than in their home language. Respondents chose English over their mother tongue because they wanted "to practise English instead", and found African languages "hard to understand", and "there aren't enough of the kind of books they liked" (Machet, Olen & Chamberlain, 2001:19). However, in Niven's study, 1 learner preferred to read and be taught in his L1 (IsiXhosa) because "they are Xhosas and they do not see any reason to be forced to read in English" (Niven, 2004:83).

English is a second and foreign language to the majority of people in South Africa but many studies have found that learners, parents, teachers and some school bodies prefer English to be used as medium of instruction in many, especially urban schools, even though the community use their L1 about 90% of the time (Bosch & De Klerk, 1996; Rasana, 2002; Pretorius & Mampuru, 2007; Manyike & Lemmer, 2010). Even though English is preferred, learners do not have the level of language to cope with it as a language of learning and teaching. (Czerniewicz, Murray & Probyn, 2000).

Grabe and Stoller (2002) point out that the amount of knowledge needed by learners will never be the same, and therefore teaching reading at early grades should not concentrate on phonemic awareness only, because word recognition and comprehension abilities are strongly linked to reading fluency, which also has a major role to play. Even though most learners have the basic skills to read, they need cognitive abilities to be able to perform well, since they also struggle with reading in their first language (Nuttall, 1992; National Reading Panel, 2006; Rasana, 2006) notes that non-fluent readers are slow and tend to pause or halt during reading, which hinders comprehension. This limitation creates a burden which can also quench their willingness to read. With little or no practice in English, these learners are stifled to a poor performance zone. Therefore, as Nuttall (cited in Rasana, 2002) points out, if learners cannot develop their ability to identify words on a page, they will always experience difficulties in reading comprehension.

Several studies have shown that learners' reading interest is declining and that they cannot always find their preferred reading material. Poverty and under-resourcefulness, especially in rural areas, are to blame for this problem. According to some researchers, learners are left with only three choices: reading material that is not preferred, or reading in a language that is not preferred, or not reading at all (Machet, Olen & Chamberlain, 2001; Rasana, 2002).

Brindley (1991) looked at black students' reading preferences at secondary and tertiary level. According to the results, most students are keen to read if they have access to the right books and also if the stories are interesting, enjoyable and easy to read. In other words, these books are loved if the language in them is plain or simple and if the books deal with topics attractive to teenagers and adolescents and if they cover a range of issue learners find interesting. From the research, over 100 popular titles were listed in the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ)'s list of TOP TWENTY READING CARDS for Grades Eight to Eleven. These books all had messages that were didactic and of value. The project was conducted under the auspices of READ (Brindley, 1991).

Rasana (2006) believes that there is gap between learners' preference and the reading material provided or recommended by schools. She states that learners have only three choices: "reading something out of their interest, obtaining their own preferred materials themselves, or not reading at all" (Rasana, 2006:183).

In their study, Machet, Olen and Chamberlain (2001) found that primary school learners had a huge enthusiasm for reading religious work (both fiction and non-fiction), whereas secondary school learners did not have this interest. The learners also appreciated books with characters from the same race and ethnicity as them. Machet, Olen and Chamberlain (2001) also found that both secondary and primary school learners preferred reading in their home language, although reading in English was also important to them as it gave them an opportunity to learn English and to increase their vocabulary. Therefore, these learners had no option but to

choose English books since they had insufficient books in their home language to interest them.

2.13. Conclusion

In this Chapter, the literature reviewed showed the diverse nature of reading and comprehension issues. It also revealed the depth of the problems experienced by ESL learners in using English, as well as the disparities in their language preferences. The next chapter presents the research methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

Methodology is seen as the more practical branch of the philosophy of science that deals with the methods, systems, and rules for the conduct of an inquiry (Patton, 2001). This chapter describes the research design and procedures used in this study, including the sampling procedures and the procedures adopted in constructing the data collection instrument. The data gathered were used to address the research questions in order to meet the objectives of the research. The chapter also offers a description of the research process. It outlines the rationale for the choice of the method used, the instruments used to collect data, the procedure for data collection, the population of the study, and the tests used to analyse data. It also discusses the research theory relevant to this study, concentrating on reliability, validity, generalization and ethics.

This study was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The methodology presented below has been divided into the following sections: research design, population and sampling, and data analysis.

3.2 Research design

De Vos et al. (2005: 268) explain that a research design "refers to the option that is available for researchers to study certain phenomena" according to certain "formulae suitable for a specific goal." The present study employed both qualitative and quantitative research approaches because it was aimed at understanding the comprehension level and reading preferences of the selected learners. The study took the form of an exploratory design in mixed-methods research which is often conducted because a problem has not been clearly defined as yet, or its real scope is as yet unclear. In addition, the exploratory design in mixed methods research provides "insights into and comprehension of an issue or situation" (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2002: 20).

Data were collected using different instruments: a test and a questionnaire. The use of qualitative and quantitative methods ensured that there was both in-depth information and statistical data for analysis, thereby creating a balance in the data collected. The analysis involved a comparison of the recall, inference, prediction and summary writing skills of the Grade Four and Grade Seven learners in urban and rural schools.

The research was guided and supported by the theoretical foundation and the conceptual framework outlined in the literature review in Chapter Two. The analysis of learners' reading preferences involved an analysis of the qualitative component of the design and the comprehension test on the one hand, and the quantitative component on the other hand. De Vos et al. (2005: 366) speak about the "dominant-less-dominant model" whereby a small component is drawn from the alternative paradigm (qualitative) and included in the dominant paradigm, namely, the quantitative paradigm. In this study, the component from the qualitative paradigm, which comprised the details and reasons given by the learners in answering the questions on their reading preferences, was used together with the test results (quantitative component) to triangulate and substantiate the findings of the study.

3.3   Population and sample
3.3.1 Population
De Vos et al. (2005: 269) point out that the "population of a study is a total set from which the individuals or units of the study are chosen". The population for this research was made up of all the schools in Capricorn District of Limpopo Province. This is the biggest district in the province and the schools chosen for this study are located in this municipal district. The rural school falls under the Koloti Educational District located about 60km from Polokwane in the Moletji Ga-Komape Village, while the urban school falls under the Pietersburg Educational District, which is situated in the City of Polokwane just five streets from the central business district.

The population of the study consisted of all the intermediate phase learners from the two schools: School A (Urban school) and School B (Rural school). There were a total of 640 learners in the two schools. The learners' age ranged from 9 years to 14 years.

The focus was on the intermediate phase because it is in this phase that the foundation for personal reading needs to be laid and fortified so that learners do not experience difficulties in reading in subsequent years.

3.3.2 Sample

Kumar (1999:148) states that "sampling is the process of selecting a few (sample) from a bigger group (the sampling population) to become the basis for estimating or predicting a fact, situation or outcome regarding the bigger group". The sample is a sub-group of the respondents available to the researcher. For this study, the sampling was done in a stratified random manner. Only Sepedi speakers were selected from the Grade Four and Grade Seven classes in both the rural and urban schools. After the elimination of non-Sepedi speakers, the learners (both boys and girls) were put in two groups. With the use of marked pieces of papers having ticks or crosses, a number of 20 learners were selected from each grade, making a total of 40 learners per school in Grades Four and Seven, with an equal number of boys and girls. In total, there were 80 learners who participated in the project, with 40 from the rural school and 40 from the urban school.

3.4 Data collection instruments

As has been noted earlier, two main instruments were used to collect data for the study. These were a questionnaire and a comprehension test.

3.4.1 Questionnaire

In this study, structured questionnaires were used as a data collection tool. Questionnaires are extremely effective for gathering information from a large number of people as interviews are time consuming. For this study, the use of questionnaires ensured, to some extent, a good measure of objectivity in soliciting and coding the responses. The questionnaire was used to determine learners' reading preferences and their reading abilities. This was done by using a Likert scale with both closed and open-ended questions to which the learners responded. The researcher examined the responses of the six questions on reading preferences, firstly by quantifying the first part and then by looking at the contents of the individual reasons given to support the first part of the questions.

These were compared and the different themes were analysed to determine the reading preferences of the learners and to find out to what extent the grades (Four and Seven) and the school types (rural and urban) were different or similar.

3.4.2 Reading comprehension test

The second instrument used was a reading comprehension test. The comprehension test was based on two different passages taken from grade-appropriate textbooks for English reading and comprehension. The textbooks were books approved by the Department of Education but were not used by any of the schools in the study. This was to avoid bias of any form. The level of difficulty was only in terms of grades, not schools, as both schools answered the same questions fit for the grade level. Questions were asked to evaluate strategies used in comprehension and understanding of the passage. These questions tested learners' ability to recall, infer, predict and write summaries of the passages provided.

For the Grade Four learners, the researcher chose a story from the Grade Four English language textbook published by Maskew Miller Longman entitled *Hare, Hippo and Elephant.* Ten questions based on the passage were designed to check recall, inference and prediction in reading comprehension, while question 11 was used to determine the summary ability of the learners. For the Grade Seven class, the researcher selected a traditional story titled "The Lost Quill" from *Day-By-Day English Grade Seven* published by Maskew Miller Longman. The text had only 4 questions, so the researcher came up with 9 more to make a total of 13 questions which tested recall, inference and prediction. Question 14 was added to test the learners on summary writing.

The breakdown of the comprehension items and the questions answered by the respondents of Grade Four and Grade Seven are tabulated below.

Table 1: Comprehension items and question numbers for Grade Four

Comprehension item	Question numbers used to test
Recall	1, 2, 3 and 4
Inference	5, 6, 7 and 8
Prediction	9 and 10
Summary	11 only

Table 2: Comprehension items and question numbers for Grade Seven

Comprehension item	Questions used to test
Recall	2, 3, 4, 6 and 8
Inference	1, 5, 7, 9 and 13
Prediction	10, 11 and 12
Summary	14 only

There were only 3 grading marks for each of the questions, which were 0 for wrong, 1 for partially correct and 2 for correct. The scoring of the test was simplified for easy use by the researcher. However, due to the coding system of scores, the researcher had to use 1 for wrong because the system needed a number to calculate the frequencies and percentages per item.

3.5 Data collection procedure

Permission to do research in the selected schools was obtained from the provincial Department of Education. The consent of the managers of the two districts in which the schools were located was also secured. Throughout the data collection, the principals of the schools were friendly and helpful. They organised everything, and did all the run-around with the subject teachers of the grades chosen for the study.

The data were collected on two separate occasions during scheduled visits to both schools. The data were first collected from School B (Rural school) with Grades Four and Seven learners on 23 May 2013 at about 12:23. The next day, which was 24 May 2013, data were collected at School A (Urban school) with the Grades Four and Seven learners at about 12:00.

The researcher arrived at the rural school at 07:30 while assembly was in progress and was asked to sit in the office. A Grade Six learner entered the office and could not express himself in English. He was silent for about three minutes, looking away from the researcher. Then he said in Sepedi that he had forgotten how to say what he was there for in English. When the researcher insisted that he uses English, the learner quickly said: "Take glass". He then walked to the desk, took the glass and ran out. After the assembly, the researcher met with the principal and finalised arrangement for data collection.

Although the sample of participants was 40 for the rural school, the principal deemed it necessary to allow the entire class to complete the questionnaires and write the test for the sake of keeping all the learners busy during the data collection period. Thus, extra copies of the questionnaire and test were made to accommodate the entire Grade Four class of 34 learners and the Grade Seven class of 33 learners.

While some learners were very shy and less expressive, some made an effort to express themselves in English. The willingness and effort of these learners to speak in English was encouraging to other learners and appreciated by the researcher. The learners were also very polite. Because the sessions were only 30 minutes each and a whistle was blown to announce the end of a period, there were few moments of distraction and noise throughout the data collection. This meant that the data collection process was conducted with minimal disruption.

Data collection took up two of the periods for Sepedi and part of the period for Economic Management System for the Grade Seven classes, while the Life Skills period and a double period of English were used to collect data among the Grade Four learners. Although the researcher read out the instructions to the learners before the commencement of the procedure, the teacher who was assigned by the principal to help the researcher with the process repeated the instructions to the Grade Four class, because she felt that the learners may not have understood the initial instructions since English was still very new to them. The questionnaire was completed in 30 minutes and then the test was written, and all the learners were allowed to finish the exercise.

Data were collected from the urban school on 24 May 2013. When the researcher arrived at the school, she worked with the principal to make extra copies of the questionnaire which were needed for the two classes (Grades Four and Seven). Even though all the learners completed the questionnaire, only the questionnaires of the sampled learners were marked for data collection purposes. Both the Grades Four and Seven learners were taken to the school hall and seated in classroom style the same way the learners in the rural school had sat in their respective classrooms. Instructions were then given and the learners were asked to indicate if there was anything they did not understand. Just as in the rural school, the respondents began with the questionnaire and followed with the comprehension test.

The atmosphere was not as tense as in the rural school and the urban learners looked more confident and free. The time allocation was the same and the session ran smoothly. Here, the researcher was assisted by the language coordinator for Grade Seven.

3.6 Data analysis

To analyse the data collected in the rural and urban schools, a non-parametric analysis strategy was followed in which descriptive statistics, such as means, one-way frequency tables and composite one-way frequency tables, were calculated on all questionnaire responses and responses received in the comprehension test. Two-way frequency tables were also calculated and Pearson's t-tests were performed on the frequencies of cross referenced item-responses in order to investigate the possibility of significant relationships between specific pairs of questionnaire items. The deductions derived from the frequency tables were probed and associated frequencies were presented as percentages of the totals. All statistical analyses were conducted with the statistical software package - SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science).

The data collected from the reading comprehension test were analysed using SPSS. This was done using the one way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) to test for differences between the multiple means and to test for possible interaction between means (Nunan, 1992:48). In addition, the Scheffe contrast test was used to examine whether the differences registered between pairs are significant. The mean and standard deviation across the two groups of participants were described statistically. A further analysis of comprehension category and a correlation were used to assess the relationship between the variables. Data collected from the questionnaire looking at the preferences of the learners using open-ended questions were analysed thematically.

3.7 Ethical considerations

The researcher requested for permission from the respective authorities to carry out the research. The Department of Education as well as the authorities in the rural and urban schools were approached for permission to conduct the research. The letters granting permission for the study are included in the appendix. The environment of research was conducive and friendly, with the welfare of participants upheld.

No respondent was forced to participate and all consented to take part in the research. The researcher urged the respondents not to be scared and to provide honest answers to the questions. The respondents were also assured about the confidentiality of the information they provide and their anonymity. In addition, they were assured that this research was strictly for academic purposes and would not be used for any other purpose by the researcher.

3.8   Limitations of the study

The study was carried out in two schools in Limpopo Province. It concentrated only on the intermediate phase, that is, Grades Four and Seven, to investigate only certain aspects of comprehension, namely, recall, inference, prediction and summarising. Other aspects such as phonemic awareness, reading speed and fluency were not considered. Factors such as fear, anxiety and other emotions could have affected the results of the test, even though the learners were informed in advance about the test. The findings of this study provide only a partial description of reading challenges at schools in Limpopo Province.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology of the study, showing that it was important to use both qualitative and quantitative methods. As shown above, two instruments were used for data collection: a questionnaire to ascertain learners' preferences, and a reading comprehension test to assess learners' ability to recall, infer, predict and summarise in English as a language of learning at schools. From the open-ended section of the questionnaire, qualitative descriptions were made using thematic analyses of responses and drawing from emerging patterns. Lastly, quantitative analyses of results from the test were carried out. Chapter Four presents detailed analyses and interpretations of all the data collected.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results, analysis and interpretation of the findings on the reading preferences and comprehension levels of Grades Four and Seven learners from the urban and rural schools that were selected for this study.

4.2   Biographical information of respondents

The biographical information of learners from Grade Four is presented in Table 3. A total of 40 learners (N=20 each from the rural school and the urban school) participated in this study. Amongst the learners from Grade Four Rural (GFR), 50% were males and 50% were females, while 65% of the respondents were between the ages of 10 and 11 years. There was equally an identical distribution in frequency of males and females (50% each) for learners from Grade Four Urban (GFU), whereas most of the learners (55%) were between the ages of 8 and 9 years (see Table 3).

Table 3: Biographical information of the respondents from Grade Four

School	Gender		Age		
	Male	Female	8–9	10–11	>11
Rural (N=20)	50%	50%	35%	65%	-
Urban (N=20)	50%	50%	55%	45%	-

N=Number of learners

The biographical information of learners from Grade Seven is presented in Table 4. A total of forty learners (N=20 each from the rural school and the urban school), with an equal distribution of males to females (50% each) participated in this study. Sixty five percent of the learners from Grade Seven Rural (GSR) were between the ages of 12 and 13 years, 20% were 14 years, while 15% were over the age of 14. For Grade Seven Urban (GSU), 85% of the learners were between 12 and 13 years, while the remaining 15% were 14 years old.

Table 4: Biographical information of the respondents from Grade Seven

School	Gender		Age		
	Male	Female	12–13	14	> 14
Rural (N=20)	50%	50%	65%	20%	15%
Urban (N=20)	50%	50%	85%	15%	_

N=Number of learners

4.3   Reading preferences

Learners reading preferences are presented in two parts, based on the six questions posed: Part 1 (learners' preferred language, most used language, and convenient time for reading) and Part 2 (learners' preferred reading venue, book, and the total number of books successfully completed within a 12-month period). These findings are complemented by qualitative aspects on emerging themes from the responses.

4.3.1   Reading preferences in Grade Four

The grade four learners' results on reading preferences are presented below. Figure 1 shows the first three questions (questions 1-3 as Part 1) and Figure 2, the last three questions (questions 4-6 as Part 2) of learners from GFR and GFU.

Figure 1: Grade Four reading preferences – Part 1
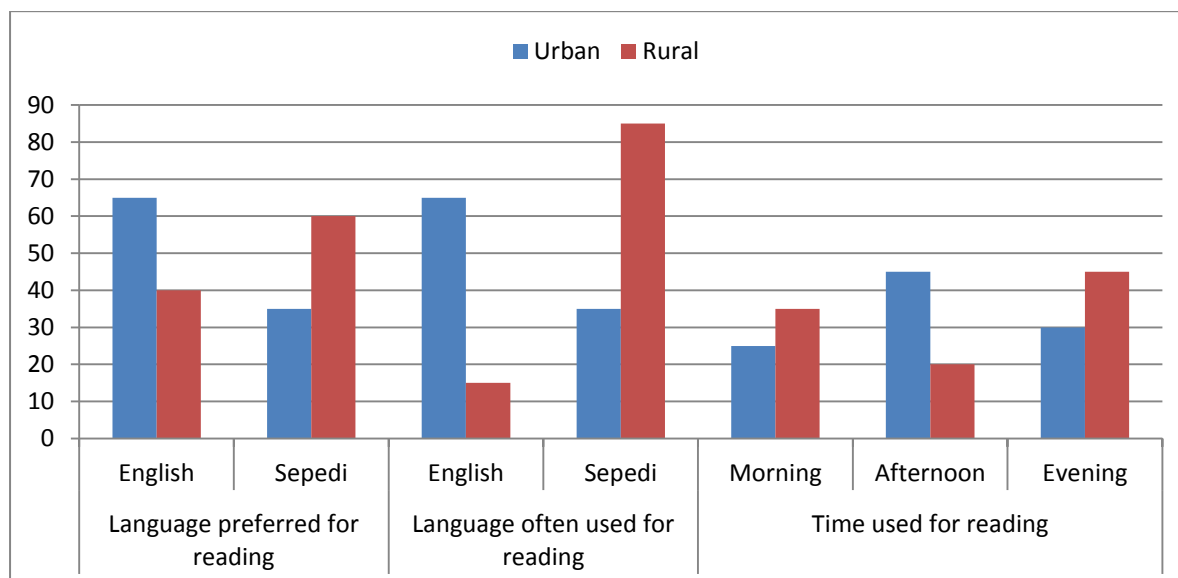
From the responses in Figure 1 above, 40% of learners from GFR preferred reading in English, whereas 60% preferred reading in Sepedi. In terms of the actual language used in reading, 15% indicated that they often read in English, whereas 85% often read in Sepedi. In addition, the learners' preferred time for reading was in the

evening (45%). With regards to learners from GFU, English was the most preferred language (65%). An identical number of learners (65%) equally indicated that they often use English for reading, while only 35% used Sepedi. While 25% of the learners preferred reading in the morning, 45% preferred reading in the afternoon and 30% in the evening.

Figure 2 summarises the results for the last three questions on the reading preferences (Part 2) of learners from GFR and GFU. From the results presented in Figure 2 below, over 45% of the learners from GFR preferred reading in the classroom, 40% preferred reading at home, while only 15% preferred reading in the library.

Figure 2: Grade Four reading preferences – Part 2
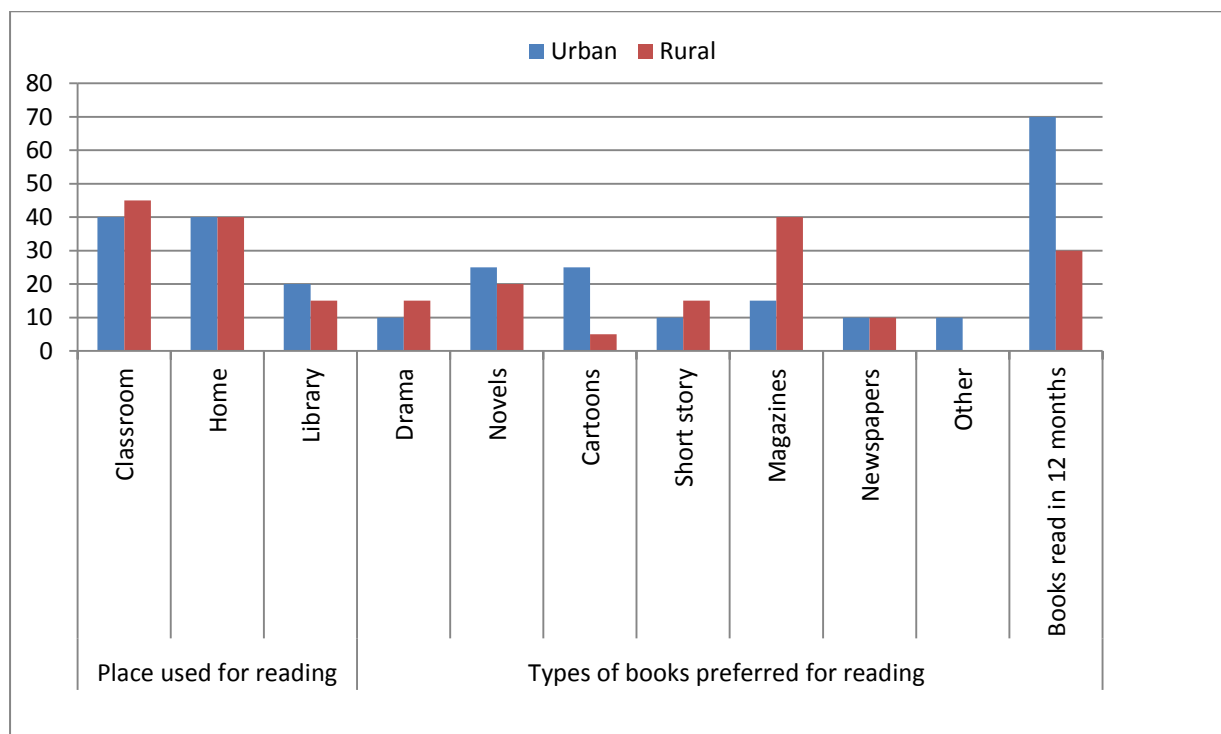
In contrast to the GFR learners, 40% of the GFU learners preferred reading in both the classroom and at home, and just 20% of them preferred reading at the library. With reference to the preferred reading material, 40% from GFR preferred magazines whereas 50% from GFU preferred novels and cartoons combined. This was followed by novels (20%), drama (15%) and short stories (15%) for GFR. For GFU, the learners preferred magazines (15%) and the rest of the reading materials (newspaper, short story and others) were 10% each.

Finally, the last item on the number of books read revealed that in the past 12 months the learners from GFR read a total of 155 books which was equivalent to 30% of the score, whereas their counterparts from GFU read a total of 335 books which was 70% of the score. The reasons for these preferences are presented in the next section.

4.3.2 Reasons advanced by Grade Four learners for reported preferences

This section presents the more recurrent reasons or justifications for learners' responses to the six questions assessing reading preference.

4.3.2.1 Preferred language for reading

Learners from GFR who preferred Sepedi over English said the reason for their choice was the predominant use of Sepedi (at home and in school) and their comparatively better knowledge of the language. These are some of the responses from GFR:

"I speak Sepedi and I do not talk in English",

"I talk in Sepedi all the time" and

"I use Sepedi more and like it".

In addition to the above responses, the learners from GFU (35%) who also preferred Sepedi over English advanced the following reasons:

"I can remember what I read and it's my home language",

"I like reading Sepedi because I understand better" and

"I like Sepedi because I use it at home and it is easy".

Conversely, learners from both rural and urban schools who preferred English (40 and 65%, respectively) argued that it was the language of instruction for the other subjects and therefore should be well studied. The following are some of the responses from GFR:

"The teachers teach me English every day in all the subjects",

"I like English because it nice." and "I am now learning in English."

The learners from GFU made the following remarks:

"Because English is easier than other languages and fun to read…"
"English is the language I understand more"
"Because we learn how to read in English as from Grade R and it is a common language"

Although Sepedi is frequently used in conversation (both in and out of school), this set of learners acknowledge that reading and writing in Sepedi are comparatively more difficult than in English.

4.3.2.2   Language often used for reading
The GFR learners often read in Sepedi. This is the only language these learners had been exposed to from the beginning of their schooling. The reasons forwarded by the learners for reading often in Sepedi were their preference for the language and their love for it. The quotation below confirms this:

"I like Sepedi more" and "I love to read in Sepedi".

The fact that they did not give a variety of reasons suggests that they cannot express themselves well in English or they considered the responses they gave for preferred language above the same as the reason why they often read in Sepedi.

The majority of the GFU learners chose English as the language they often used in reading. The choice for English is not surprising, because it has been their Medium Instruction (MI) language from as early as Grade R and the learners are more exposed to English. These learners find English words easy to pronounce and they have been using the language more, as the following statements indicate:

"Words are easy to pronouns and Sepedi is difficult".
"I understand the English language more. I can't read Sepedi but I am using English to learn all the time".
"We do so much English in class and all the books are in English".

Their responses indicate that there are more books available in English, and English is easier to understand. However, the GFU learners who chose Sepedi said the only reason they did was because it was their mother tongue and they mostly used it at home. These were some of their responses:

> "I use Sepedi all the time at home and with some of my friends in school".
> "Sepedi is my home language and I like it well".

The choice of Sepedi by more of the rural learners could be disadvantageous since most of the knowledge in print form is in English and there are not enough books in Sepedi at their disposal. Moreover, English becoming the MI poses a barrier to learning, especially if the class teacher cannot speak English or prefers to use Sepedi continuously as in the earlier grades. It is worth noting that the rural learners have very little exposure to the English language. This lack of exposure to the English language may have an adverse effect on their understanding and consequently their performance in English and in some of the other subjects. In addition, adherence to the language policy of the country is not enforced, and this policy comes across as being lax or not strict. If the MI is English from Grade Four but the learners prefer Sepedi, it is not likely that they will be able to cope with further education at tertiary level where English is the only MI.

4.3.2.3   Time for reading

The GFR learners gave very few reasons for their choice of reading time. Their choice was based on how they felt at that time of the day. Sometimes they simply read because they were asked to read by the teacher during class time or they read when they were doing their homework. The quotations below are revealing:

> "Because teacher says we must read in class".
> "I read any time I like".
> "I read when I write my work".

It would seem that the rural students did very little reading and maybe the readings were not guided or supervised.

The reasons provided by the GFU learners for their preferred reading times are as follows:

"I come home late".

"I get tired in the afternoon after my homework".

"I do not have any other time".

"I have to read to my parents who come back in the evening".

Those who chose evening as their preferred reading time gave coming home late from school as their reason. They also said that it was a quiet time and they must have rested and done all their homework. The role of parents or guardians in the education of children is brought to light by the responses of the learners. However, if parents or guardians are illiterate, as is the case with most rural parents, then they can hardly give help or guidance to these learners when they return home from school. Therefore, parents' education plays a role in the education of learners.

It is important to note that a few of the GFU learners read in the morning, afternoon and evening, which gives hope that the learners are developing a passion for reading and a culture which will help them in the future. These learners gave several reasons why they read at all times of the day:

"Reading at all times makes me clever".

"When I am bored, I read".

These responses suggest that these learners value reading more than other activities that maybe available to them throughout the course of the day.

4.3.2.4   Preferred venue for reading

The preferred place of reading was decided by the learners and determined by the teacher's request, the beauty of the place, or the comfort and tranquillity of the place. The GFR learners were less expressive and only a few of them gave reasons for their preferred place of reading. The request of the teacher and their obligation to do homework made them choose their preferred place.

Below are some of their responses:

> "The teacher asks me to read in class".
> "I read at home when I do my work".

Unlike the GFR learners, all the GFU learners gave reasons for their choices. This means that the GFU are more expressive and advanced in the writing and use of the English language. This could be as a result of the language of teaching and learning policy adopted by the school (MI) and/or the location of the school in an urban area.

The majority of the GFU learners chose the classroom, the media centre at school, and home as their preferred place of reading. This is confirmed by the following quotations:

> "I read after school at home".
> "I read when I am done with my work".
> "I feel comfortable at home".
> "Every day we read at home to our parents".

Those who preferred the library as their place of reading said the following:

> "It has books and it is quiet".
> "It is nice and inspiring".
> "Because the places are nice and quiet".

It was not clear if the library they referred to was the school library or the community library where they lived. Nevertheless, this was clearly a disadvantage for the learners.

4.3.2.5   Types of books read

The only reason the GFR learners gave for their preferred choice of books is their love or likeness for the genre. Many learners simply said "I liked it", no matter the choice – newspaper, novel, or drama. However, they chose cartoons because of pictures.

They said that "cartoons are fun". Their age probably made them to like cartoons and stories with pictures more. The nature of the story also made a majority of the learners to choose magazines and newspapers. It was the entertaining aspects of the type of book that were of importance to the learners. The same applied to the GFU learners. They gave the following reasons for their choices:

"They talk about people".
"Show what is around us".
"They make you know the world".

With regards to novels and dramas, the size of the books was the problem. The number of pages they had to read and the format of both novels and dramatic texts disfavoured the learners. They said the following about these types of books:

"Novels are too big".
"Drama is good to watch and not for reading".

Those who preferred to read the Bible did so "Because reading God's word is good" and "The love of reading the word of God is important".

If the learners prefer books with pictures and short animated stories, then the schools and the libraries should buy more of such books to keep the learners reading. It is therefore important to identify the needs of the learners and look for ways to address them.

When learners read books that they prefer, it develops their passion for reading and they get intrinsically motivated. The more they read, the more they gain new knowledge and vocabulary, which helps them to perform well in their school work. Therefore, teachers should encourage learners to read both at school and at home.

4.3.2.6 Number of books read in twelve months

With regard to the number of books read by the learners in the past twelve month, the GFR learners read considerably less number of books than the GFU learners. The reasons they read less were: they did not like reading; they lacked reading speed; they lacked appropriate books to read and they were hampered by poverty to buy books.

The quotations below express their views:

> "I do not like reading".
> "I read slowly".
> "No money to buy books".

The reasons given above show that the lack of fluency and reading skills is not the only problem the learners face, but also the unavailability of books and low economic power of their parents have an impact on their education.

The GFU learners also gave reasons for reading the number of books they read. This is what they had to say about the number of books:

> "I thought it was enough for me to read".
> "I love reading but sometimes I don't have time".
> "I don't want to read too much book".

The learners who read many books or did their best to read as many books as possible did so because they preferred reading and found reading an important skill they needed in order to perform well in school.

4.3.3 Reading preferences of Grade Seven learners

Figure 3 below summarises the learners' responses to the first three questions asked with regards to reading preferences.

Figure 3: Grade Seven reading preferences – Part 1
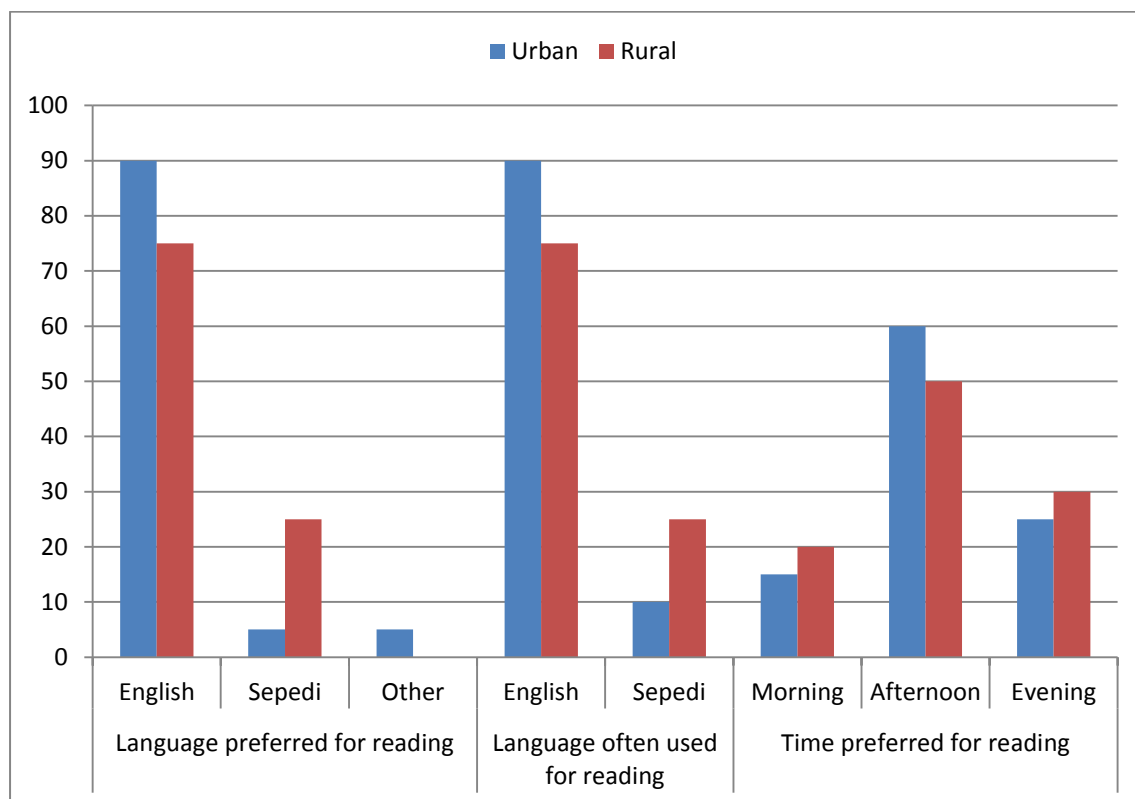
The graph above shows that 75% of the GSR learners chose the English language as their preferred language for reading as well as the language they often used for reading, while 25% preferred Sepedi and often used Sepedi for reading. On the other hand, 90% of the GSU learners preferred reading in English, while 5% preferred Sepedi and another 5% preferred Afrikaans.

Unlike the rural learners who read more in Sepedi, 90% of the urban learners often read in English while the remaining 10% read in Sepedi. Furthermore, with respect to the time of the day that learners preferred reading, on the one hand 20% of the rural learners said morning, 50% preferred afternoon, and 30% chose evening. On the other hand, 60% of the urban learners preferred afternoon, 25% chose evening, while only 15% said morning. These results indicate that the majority of the learners preferred reading in English and reading in the afternoon.

Figure 4 below summarises the results for the last three questions on the reading preferences (Part 2) of learners from GSR and GSU.

Figure 4: Grade Seven reading preferences – Part 2
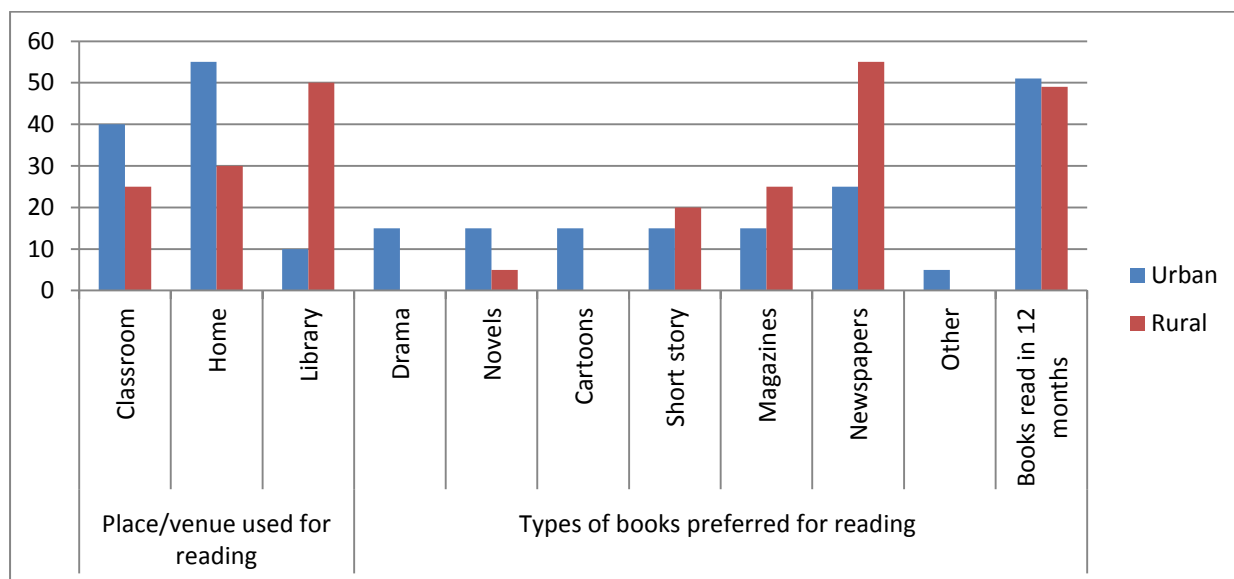
The responses show that 25% of the GSR learners read in the classroom, 25% at home and 50% used the library, meanwhile 40% of the GSU learners read in the classroom, 50% at home and 10% in the library. With regard to the types of books read, 50% of the GSR learners preferred reading newspapers, 25% magazines, 20% short story, and 5% novels. On the other hand, 25% of the GSU learners preferred reading newspapers, 15% preferred drama, novels, cartoons, short stories and magazines, and 5% preferred the bible. Lastly, regarding the number of books read in the past 12 months, the GSR learners read 290 books (49%), while their urban counterparts read 300 books (51%).

4.3.4 Reasons advanced by Grade Seven learners for reported preferences

The Grade Seven respondents were required to give reasons for their preferences in terms of language preferred for reading, language often used for reading, and the time preferred for reading, as discussed above. The emerging themes arising from their responses are discussed below.

4.3.4.1   Language preferred for reading

The GSR learners preferred English because it is a common language spoken by many and it is important to the learners as they preferred to learn more about English. They emphasised the importance of English, especially for the future, noting also its influence in helping them pass their other subjects well.

These learners had been using the English language as MI for a period of 4 years, but there was still a negligible difference between them and the urban learners in terms of their performance in the English language. Below are their verbatim reasons for preferring English:

"Many people can talk English and I want to talk English too".

"English is very important in my life and my education".

"When I learn it, other young kids will learn from us".

"Because in many universities the other teachers cannot understand the Northern Sotho". However, not all the rural learners appreciated English, regardless of the fact that it was the MI.

The learners who preferred Sepedi loved it because it was their home language and they used Sepedi both in and out of the classroom. This means that the teachers were not enforcing the policy of keeping English as the MI. Some of the learners said Sepedi was their preferred language because their teachers spoke to them in Sepedi and it was the language that they understood well. If the mother tongue is used for codes switching to enable the learner understand better, it is good, but if it is used because of lack of knowledge in English, then there is a problem. If the learners continuously use Sepedi in the classroom, naturally, they will find it difficult to write both tests and exams in English. A good model of bilingualism may be a solution.

The GSU learners preferred English because it was a simpler and less complicated language for them to understand. These learners had been using English as MI from Grade R, and therefore English was easier for them. From the learners' responses, it seems that the urban teachers used English as MI and encouraged the learners to use it also, and that both learners and teachers are more exposed to the English language.

Moreover, the location of the school could be advantageous to the learners. The statements below capture the views of the learners:

"English is easier than other languages and fun to read".

"I can't speak Sepedi even though it is my home language".

"We learn how to read in English as from Grade R and it is a common language".

The above statements indicate that even though these learners had Sepedi as their home language, they felt that the words were difficult and complicated to write. This suggests that learners can be fluent in speaking Sepedi, but reading and writing are different skills.

4.3.4.2 Language often used for reading

The responses clearly show that the learners had improved in terms of language expression, as opposed to the GFR learners who could not express themselves freely in English. All the GSR learners made comments to defend their choices. The main theme that emerged was the importance of English in relation to speaking with other people, doing well in other content subjects, and gaining more knowledge. The quotations below support this view:

"English helps me to read the other subjects and to understand well".
"I use English to learn about different cultures and talk to other people."
"Everywhere you go, you can speak English and it is a common language".

From the responses above, English is seen as a language of power and influence.

With the GSU learners, the themes that emerged were the availability of books in English, the presence of more variety, and the simplicity of the language. Below are examples of the learners' statements:

"The story books and texts books are in English and it's my first additional language."
"I do all my work in English and it is easy to understand than other languages".

These responses were the same as those given for the preferred language of reading. The policy to use English as the only MI in both rural and urban schools as from Grade Four means that English should be used in all the classes from Grade Four upwards.

Unlike the Grade Four learners, though, the Grade Seven learners have been using English for four years as the language of teaching and learning and therefore can perform better in the language. The simplicity of English when compared to other languages, the wider use of English in communication, and the fact that more information is written in English made English the favourite and preferred language for many of the learners.

4.3.4.3   Preferred time of reading

The majority of the GSU learners read more in the afternoon since they had a lot of free time during that period and only did homework in the evening. It was noticed that learners who read in the evening did their homework in the afternoon, and vice versa. They explained that they "have free time to work" in the afternoon, while the evening is "nice and cool and we can read." One learner also said: "It is the time I am awake and free to do what I like". It was noted from the responses that the time for reading is strongly determined by the amount of work to be done and the preferred time for doing the set work. The GSR learners expressed the same feeling as the GSU learners with regard to reading in the afternoon and evening, but learners who read in the morning indicated that their energy levels were high at that time, their minds were fresh, and they felt good when reading in the morning. These are some of their verbatim responses:

"Because I feel good and will not forget.
"I have fresh power to read and learn".

The classroom is a more controlled environment that can be used to motivate the learners to read, learn how to concentrate in reading, and generally develop a passion for reading. Therefore, teachers have to continue teaching reading even in the upper primary levels and to make it a requirement for learners to read and write summaries of books at home during their free time. If the learners are given reading activities to do at home or reading and sharing activities to do in class, they will develop good reading habits and skills for life.

4.3.4.4   Preferred reading venue

With regard to the place or venue where GSR and GSU learners could read, two places were preferred. For the GSU learners, their homes and classrooms were the most favourite places, whereas for the GSR learners the library was most preferred.

As noted above, the urban learners preferred reading in the classroom and at home. In the following quotations, they give reasons for their choice:

> "In the classroom we read and share the story with our mates and do reading comprehension".
> "I take books from the library at school to read both at school and at home".

Their responses reveal that they had easy access to the library at school which had books they could borrow and read at home. Reading at home was preferred because of the calm environment and the absence of disturbance:

> "Home is where I get all the peace and quiet and no one to disturb".
> "People do not disturb me and I feel comfortable".

These preferred places for reading were determined by the home dynamics and surroundings.

The rural learners preferred reading at the library for several reasons, including the availability of books and the tranquillity of the environment, as the following statements indicate:

> "The library has many books and it is very quiet".
> "Because no one makes noise and it is a nice place for reading".

Other learners preferred the classroom because they preferred to read in front of other children and let the teacher correct them where they made mistakes. More reading in the classroom should therefore be encouraged where there will be some form of supervision.

The learners who read at home said they did so because they were not disturbed and it was also quiet. This is something that was echoed by the urban learners. It however, cannot be the reality for all the learners, especially those from the rural areas with parents who are illiterate and poor. Schools should therefore come up with reading skills competitions and programmes that will motivate the learners and promote a culture of reading among them. Parents need to invest in children's schooling and guide them all the way. All classrooms should be conducive for reading and learning and all parents should be encouraged to help the learners at home.

4.3.4.5   Preferred types of books read

The GSR learners preferred reading the newspaper. Magazines were the next choice, followed by short stories. The main reason provided by the learners for choosing newspapers was that they provided information on world news and events:

> "I read news from all around the world".
> "Newspapers talk about a variety of things and people."

Short stories were chosen for their shorter length as compared to novels and magazines for their layout and value in terms of usage. The learners justified their choices or preferences as follows:

> "Magazines give me pictures to cut and paste for assignments and projects and talks about fashion".
> "Short stories are easy to read and complete unlike novels that are too big."

Thus, the preference of either the GSU or GSR learners depended on a variety of factors.

The GSU learners also preferred newspapers more. According to the learners who loved and enjoyed reading a lot, short stories did not satisfy their zeal for reading. They preferred reading novels and dramas rather than cartoons. These urban learners said that "Newspapers tell us a lot about what happens around our world and give us important information". They also pointed out that "Newspapers and magazines keep us updated with current affairs about everything." Generally, their

responses reveal that there is an element of taste which plays a role in determining learners' preferences.

4.3.4.6 Number of books read in the past 12 months

Three main factors determined the number of books read by the GSR learners. These were their passion for reading, their reading speed, and their ability to understand words found in the text. The reason why some read fewer books was because they could not read fast. One learner stated: "I cannot read fast and some words are difficult to understand". This difficulty acts as a barrier and hampers the learners' speed in reading, which may then de-motivate them. However, some learners said that their desire to know more and the goals they had set for themselves pushed them to work harder and read more. A learner stated: "I must read fast and well to go to high school, pass matric and become a doctor". Another one said: "Reading many books is good and gives more knowledge". However, if a learner has great passion for reading but has difficulties in reading, he or she can become de-motivated and may be seen as someone without passion.

The GSU learners gave several reasons for reading the number of books presented in Figure 4 above.

Those who read many books said that their personal agendas motivated them. Some of these agendas are captured in the statements below:

"I read so that I can entertain my friends with the stories".
"Books are my life and I cannot spend a day without reading".
"Reading takes away boredom".

From the above quotations, it is evident that most of the urban learners were self-motivated. However, the unavailability of preferred books hindered some of them from reading many books:

"I read less because there are few books that are interesting".
"I am not forced to read as in the junior grades".

Unlike the Grade Four learners, the Grade Seven learners read many books because they preferred reading and found reading an important skill needed to perform well.

Looking at the total number of books read by the Grade Seven learners, it was noticed that the rural learners improved their reading and were more motivated to read than their urban counterparts. In addition, it would seem that the absence of controlled class and home reading in the upper primary levels contributed to the decrease in the number of books read by the Grade Seven learners.

4.4   Reading Comprehension in Grade Four Rural

Learners' reading comprehension was assessed based on four variables: their ability to recall, infer, predict and summarise (see Tables 5 and 6). The percentage, frequency and mean scores of the GFR learners' responses for recall and inference are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Frequency distribution of responses and mean scores for reading comprehension in Grade Four Rural (recall and inference)

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	**Partially correct (PC)**	**Correct (C)**	
RECALL				
1. Who was the first player in the game?	**50%** 10x1=10	**5%** 1x2=2	**45%** 9x3=45	1.95
2. Why did the Elephant agree to play the game?	**75%** 15x1=15	**15%** 3x2=6	**10%** 2x3=6	1.35
3. Why did the Hippo and the Elephant start pulling at each other?	**90%** 18x1=18	**10%** 2x2=4	**0%** 0x3=0	1.1
4. What made the Elephant and the Hippo to fight for hours non-stop?	**65%** 13x1=13	**20%** 4x2=8	**15%** 3x3=9	1.5
			Total score for recall	**1.47**

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Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
INFERENCE				
5. How did the game help the Hare?	**65%** 13x1=13	**30%** 6x2=12	**5%** 1x3=3	1.4
6. Why did the Hippo say "I can't lose?"	**70%** 14x1=14	**15%** 6x2=12	**15%** 3x3=9	1.45
7. What does the Hare mean by saying "I'm very strong".	**70%** 14x1=14	**25%** 5x2=10	**5%** 1x3=3	1.35
8. Match the following words: softened, pull, win and swaying.	**55%** 11x1=11	**25%** 5x2=10	**20%** 4x3=12	1.65
			Total score for inference	**1.46**

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

4.4.1 Recall

Assessment of learners' ability to recall focused on analysing their responses to Questions 1 to 4 as presented in Table 5 above. With respect to *Question 1*, 50% of the learners responded incorrectly, whereas 45% responded correctly and 5% gave responses that were partially correct.

About 75% and 90% responded incorrectly to *Questions 2* and *3* respectively, while only 15% responded correctly to *Question 4*. Based on the frequency of responses, the mean score for each question was obtained. With respect to all four questions, the total mean score for recall in GFR was 1.47.

4.4.2 Inference

Four questions (Questions 5 – 8) were used to assess learners' ability to infer. About 65% of the learners responded incorrectly to *Question 5*, while 30% were partially correct. With respect to *Question 6*, about 70% of the responses were wrong, 15% were partially correct, and 15% were correct, whereas for *Question 7*, 70% were wrong and only 5% were correct.

For *Question 8*, 20% of the responses were correct, 55% were wrong and 25% were partially correct. The total mean score for inference was 1.46 as shown in Table 5 above.

4.4.3 Prediction and Summary

Learners' ability to predict was assessed by two questions *(Questions 9 and 10)*, while their ability to summarise was assessed by a single question (Question *11*). The results are presented in Table 6 below. With respect to *Questions 9* and *10*, about 70% and 75% of the responses respectively were wrong, whereas just over 15% and 25% respectively were correct. For *Question 11*, 50% of the learners responded incorrectly, while 45% were partially correct and 5% were correct. The total mean score for prediction and summary was 1.45 and 1.48 respectively. From all four variables, the total mean score for reading comprehension in GFR was 1.48. Table 6 below visually represents the data for prediction and summary writing.

Table 6: Frequency distribution of responses and mean scores for reading comprehension in Grade Four Rural (prediction and summary)

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
PREDICT				
9. What do you think the Hippo and the Elephant will do to the Hare?	**70%** 14x1=14	**15%** 3x2=6	**15%** 3x3=9	1.45
10. What will be the quantity of the Hare's harvest?	**75%** 15x1=15	**5%** 1x2=2	**20%** 4x3=12	1.45
			Total score for predict	**1.45**
SUMMARY				
11. In your own words, write the summary of the story in the dotted lines provided	**50%** 10x1=10	**45%** 9x2=18	**5%** 1x3=3	**1.55**
	Total mean score for reading comprehension			1.48

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

4.5 Reading Comprehension in Grade Four Urban

The percentage, frequency and mean scores of responses for the GFU learners are summarised in Tables 7 and 8. The criteria for assessing the learners' reading comprehension (that is, item, variables and questions) were the same as those reported for GFR. Firstly, data for recall and inference are presented in Table 7 followed by the analysis, while Table 8 presents the data for prediction and summary.

Table 7: Frequency distribution of responses and mean scores for reading comprehension in Grade Four Urban

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
RECALL				
1. Who was the first player in the game?	5% 1x1=1	0% 0x2=0	95% 19x3=57	2.9
2. Why did the Elephant agree to play the game?	30% 6x1=6	5% 1x2=2	65% 13x3=9	2.35
3. Why did the Hippo and the Elephant start pulling at each other?	65% 13x1=13	20% 4x2=8	15% 3x3=9	1.5
4. What made the Elephant and the Hippo to fight for hours non-stop?	65% 13x1=13	25% 5x2=10	10% 2x3=6	1.45
			Total score for recall	**2.05**
INFERENCE				
5. How did the game help the Hare?	20% 4x1=4	55% 11x2=22	25% 5x3=15	2.05
6. Why did the Hippo say "I can't lose?"	60% 12x1=12	25% 5x2=10	15% 3x3=9	1.55
7. What does the Hare mean by saying "I'm very strong".	50% 10x1=10	35% 7x2=14	15% 3x3=9	1.65
8. Match the following words: softened, pull, win and swaying.	20% 4x1=4	45% 9x2=18	35% 7x3=21	2.15
			Total score for inference	**1.85**

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

4.5.1 Recall

With respect to recall, 95% of leaners from GFU responded correctly to *Question 1,* while 5% gave wrong answers. For *Question 2*, 65% of the responses were correct, whereas for *Questions 3* and *4*, 65% of the responses were wrong (see Table 7). About 20% and 25% of the learners gave partially correct responses to Questions *3* and *4* respectively, whereas only 15% and 10% respectively responded correctly. The total mean score for recall in GFU was 2.05.

4.5.2 Inference

With regard to inference, 55% of the learners' responses for Question 5 were partially correct, 20% were wrong and 25% were correct. For Question 6, 60% of the responses were wrong, 25% were partially correct and only 15% were correct. Meanwhile, for both Question 7 and Question 8, only 15% and 35% respectively were correct, 35% and 45% respectively were partially correct, and 50% and 20% respectively were wrong responses. The total mean score for inference was 1.85.

4.5.3 Prediction and Summary

With regard to prediction, 60% of the responses to *Question 9* were correct, 30% were partially correct and 10% were wrong, whereas for *Question 10*, 65% were wrong, 30% were partially correct and 5% were correct. The total mean score for prediction was 1.93 (see Table 8). With regard to summary, 20% of the responses to Question 11 were correct, 75% were partially correct and 5% were correct. The mean score was 1.85. Based on all four variables, the total mean score for reading comprehension in GFU was 1.92. Table 8 below summarises the data for prediction and summary writing.

Table 8: Frequency distribution of responses and mean score for reading comprehension in Grade Four Urban

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
PREDICT				
9. What do you think the Hippo and the Elephant will do to the Hare?	**10%** 2x1=2	**30%** 6x2=12	**60%** 12x3=36	2.5
10. What will be the quantity of the Hare's harvest?	**65%** 13x1=13	**30%** 1x2=2	**5%** 4x3=12	1.35
			Total score for predict	**1.93**
SUMMARY				
11. In your own words, write the summary of the story in the dotted lines provided	**20%** 4x1=4	**75%** 15x2=30	**5%** 1x3=3	**1.85**
	Total mean score for reading comprehension			1.92

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

4.6 Comparison of comprehension between learners from Grade Four Rural and Grade Four Urban

As indicated earlier, learners' reading comprehension was assessed based on four variables, namely, recall, inference, prediction and summary writing. In order to obtain a quantitative measure of learners' reading comprehension ability, the average of the sum of mean scores for all four variables was determined (see Tables 7, 8, 9 and 10). The total score for reading comprehension obtained for learners from GFR was 1.48 while GFU was 1.92. Following a two-sample student-test analysis, it was observed that there was a significant difference in mean scores (or performance) between GFR (Mean = 1.48) and GFU (Mean = 1.92) at conditions $t(5) = -9.15$, $p = 0.001$. Further comparisons of the performances of learners from both GFR and GFU with specific reference to the four variables are presented in the sections that follow.

4.6.1 Recall

A comparison of the performance of learners from both urban and rural schools with respect to their ability to recall is summarised in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Comparison of performances of learners from Grade Four Urban and Grade Four Rural on recall test
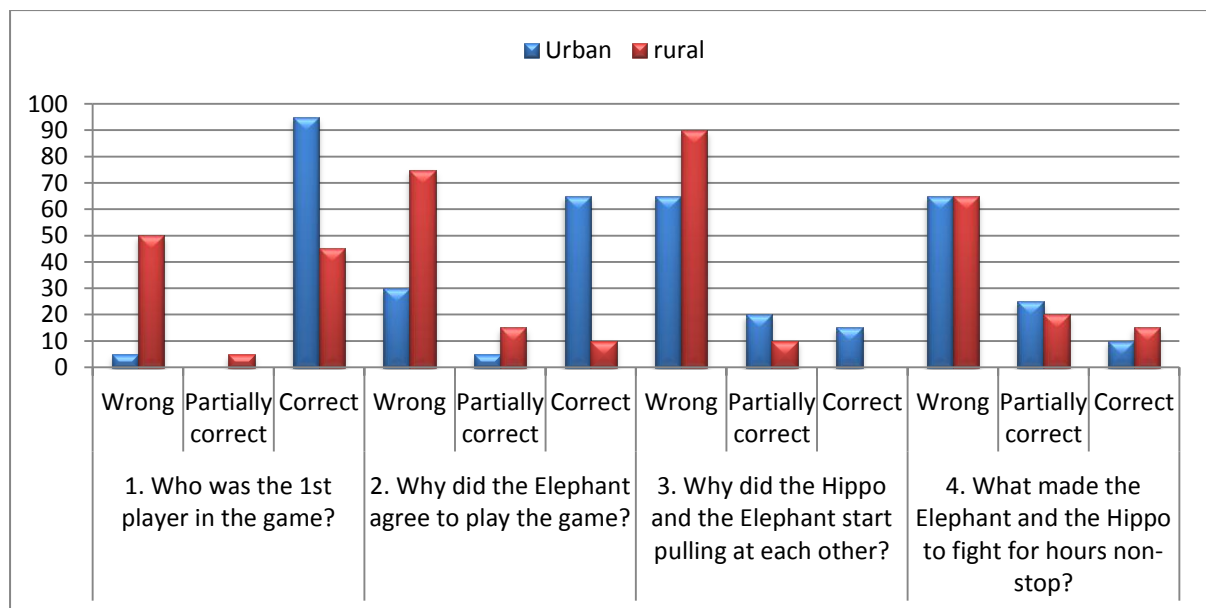
By visual inspection, it is evident that the learners from GFR gave comparatively more wrong answers than their counterparts from GFU. However, in order to ascertain how significantly different the responses of these two groups of learners were, the mean score for recall obtained for both groups (that is, GFR = 1.47 and GFU = 2.05) was subjected to a two-sampled student-test. The results of the analysis indicate that the observed differences in mean scores between GFR and GFU is not significant at Alpha 0.05 level $t (4) = -1.46$, $p = 0.22$.

4.6.2 Inference

Figure 6 below summarises the performance of GFR and GFU with respect to inference. Learners from GFR gave comparatively more wrong responses to all four questions assessing inference than their peers from GFU. Results from the inference tests further suggest a better performance for GFU (mean score = 1.85) compared to GFR (mean score = 1.46).

Figure 6: Comparison of performances of learners from Grade Four Urban and Grade Four Rural on inference test
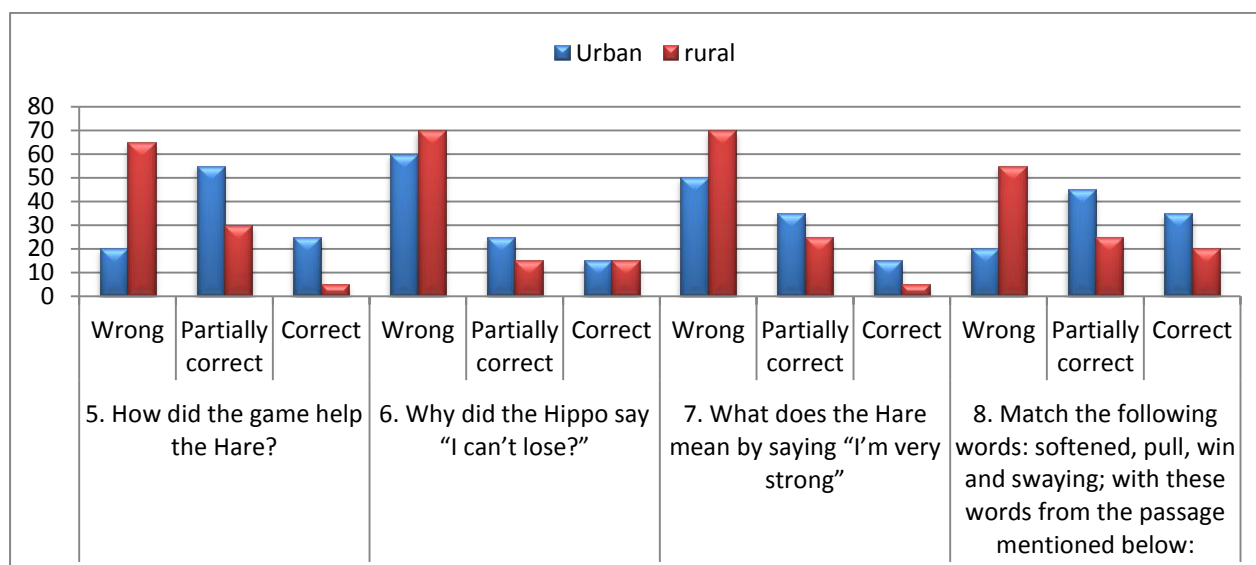
In order to determine statistically how significant these results were, a t-test was performed. From the analysis (see Appendix 3), the two-sampled t (4) = -2.4, p = 0.07 indicated that the observed differences in mean responses between both groups is not significant at Alpha 0.05 level.

4.6.3 Predict

The performance of learners from GFR and GFU in relation to their ability to predict is presented in Figure 7 below. With respect to the two questions assessing learners' ability to predict (*Questions 9 and 10*), most of the responses of learners from GFU to *Question 9* were either partially correct (30%) or correct (60%), whereas those from GFR were predominantly wrong (70%). By contrast, for *Question 10*, the responses from both groups (GFR and GFU) were mostly wrong (65% and 75% for GFR and GFU, respectively). Further analysis of the performances of both groups indicated that there was no significant difference in mean score for GFR (Mean = 1.45) and GFU (Mean = 1.93) at conditions t (1) = -0.82, p = 0.56. Figure 7 below summarises the data presented above.

Figure 7: Comparison of performances of learners from Grade Four Urban and Grade Four Rural on prediction test
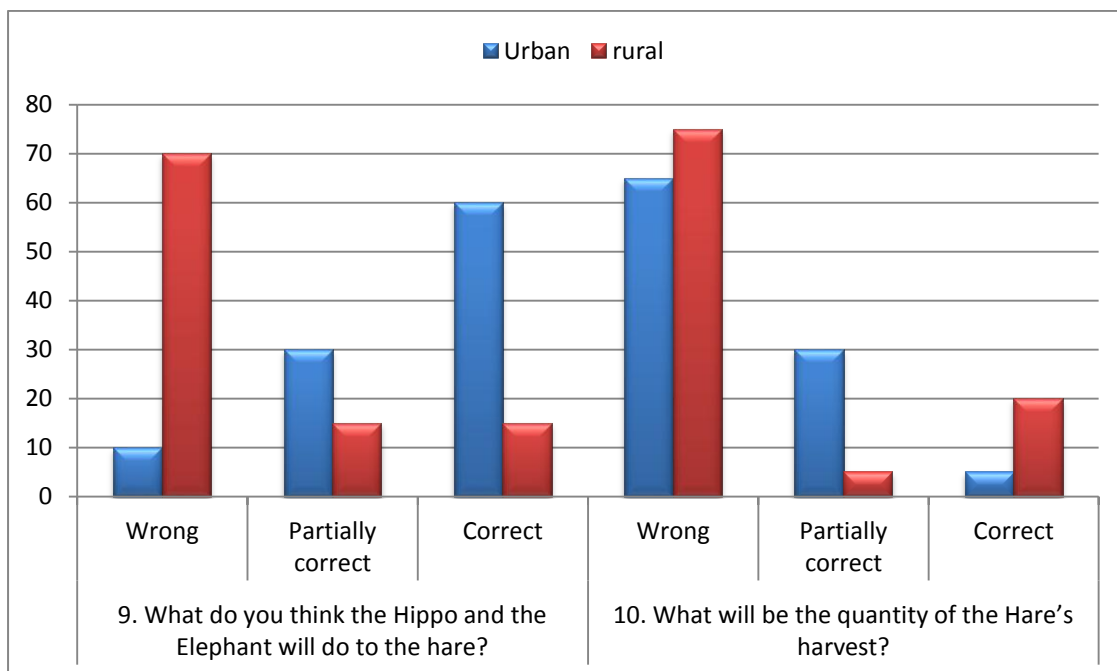
4.6.4 Summary

The performance of learners from GFR was as follows: 50% of the responses were wrong, 45% were partially correct and 5% were correct (see Figure 8). The mean score was 1.55. For GFU, the responses were as follows: 20% were wrong, 75% were partially correct and 5% were correct. The mean score was 1.85. The t-test analysis could not be carried out due to the fact that there was only a single question (Question *11*). Figure 8 below shows a vivid picture of the data discussed.

Figure 8: Comparison of performances in summary writing between Grade Four learners from urban and rural schools
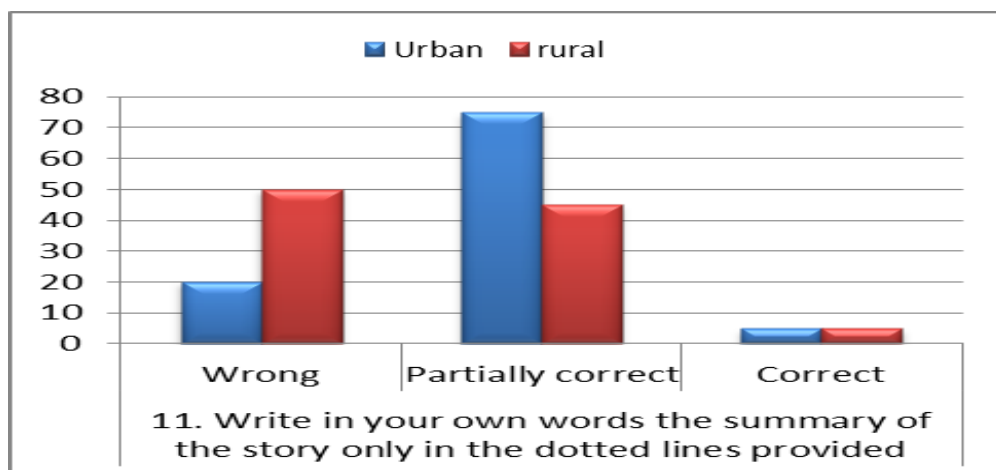
In the preceding section, the results for Grade Four urban and rural have been presented in detail. The section below presents the results of the reading comprehension of the Grade Seven learners, using both tables and graphs for clarity and understanding.

4.7   Reading comprehension of Grade Seven Rural

Learners' reading comprehension was assessed using the same four variables (recall, inference, prediction and summary writing) that were used for the Grade Four learners. The percentage, frequency and mean scores of learners' responses for GSR are presented in Tables 9 and 10.

Table 9: Frequency distribution and mean scores for reading comprehension in Grade Seven Rural (recall and inference)

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
RECALL				
1. Why did the animals fight?	65% 13x1=13	20% 4x2=8	15% 3x3=9	1.5
2. Why did the elephant win the fight?	15% 3x1=3	25% 5x2=10	60% 12x3=26	1.95
3. Why did the Rhino want a quill from the Porcupine?	65% 13x113	5% 1x2=2	30% 6x3=18	1.65
4. What does the Porcupine use the quills for?	70% 14x1=14	5% 1x2=2	25% 5x315	1.55
5. What did the Rhino use the baobab fibre for?	60% 12x1=12	0% 0x2=0	40% 8x3=24	1
			Total score for recall	**1.53**

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
INFERENCE				
6. What made the animals to have a big fight?	**40%** 8x1=8	**35%** 7x2=14	**25%** 5x3=15	1.85
7. The story begins with the words "Once in ancient times", which of the words below mean the same?	**65%** 13x1=13	**0%** 0x2=0	**35%** 7x3=21	1.7
8. How does the Porcupine use the quill for protection?	**75%** 15x1=15	**5%** 1x2=2	**25%** 5x3=15	1.45
9. Why does the Rhino kick his dung?	**60%** 12x1=12	**15%** 3x2=6	**25%** 5x3=15	1.65
10. Put the words with similar meaning below into pairs: Rage, bruised, fight, argument, bad temper, wounded, return, bring back.	**85%** 17x1=17	**15%** 3x2=6	**0%** 0x3=0	1.15
			Total score for inference	**1.56**

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

4.7.1.1 Recall

The assessment of the GSR learners' ability to recall focused on their responses to five questions (see Table 9). With respect to *Question 1*, 65% of the learners responded incorrectly and only 15% responded correctly. About 60% responded correctly to *Question 2,* while 65%, 70% and 60% responded incorrectly to *Questions 3, 4 and 5* respectively. Based on the mean score for each item, the total mean score for recall in GSR was 1.53.

4.7.1.2 Inference

Five questions (Questions 6–10) were used to assess learners' ability to infer. Table 9 shows that 40% of the learners' responses to *Question 6 were incorrect*, while 35% were partially correct. With respect to *Question 7*, 65% of the responses were wrong and 35% were correct, while for *Questions 8*, 9 and 10, most of the responses were wrong (75%, 60% and 85% respectively). The total mean score was 1.56 for inference (see Table 9 above).

4.7.1.3   Prediction and Summary

Learners' ability to predict was assessed using three questions *(Questions 11, 12 and 13)* and their ability to summarise was assessed using a single question *(Question 14)*. Most of the learners' responses to the three questions assessing prediction were wrong (90%, 80% and 95% respectively). A similar trend was observed for the learners' ability to summarise, with about 75% of the responses being wrong. The total mean scores for prediction and summary were 1.13 and 1.25 respectively. From all four variables (that is, recall, infer, predict and summary), the total mean score for reading comprehension in GSR was 1.37. Table 10 below summarises the data.

Table 10: Frequency distribution and mean scores for reading comprehension in Grade Seven Rural for prediction and summary writing

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
PREDICT				
11. Looking at the Rhino, how can one tell that it once had a big fight?	**90%** 18x1=18	**10%** 2x2=4	**0%** 0x3=0	1.1
12. What happens to all the things which the Rhino swallows?	**80%** 16x1=16	**15%** 3x2=6	**5%** 1x3=3	1.25
13. In the story, the Rhino draws a conclusion about what happened to the quill. How does this affect his behaviour today?	**95%** 19x1=19	**5%** 1x2=2	**0%** 0x2=0	1.05
			Total score for predict	**1.13**
SUMMARY				
14. In your own words, write the summary of the story in the dotted lines provided.	**75%** 15x1=15	**25%** 5x2=10	**0%** 0x3=0	**1.25**
	Total mean score for reading comprehension			**1.37**

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

4.8   Reading comprehension in Grade Seven Urban

The percentage, frequency and mean scores of responses for GSU learners are summarised in Table 11 below. The criteria for assessing learners' reading comprehension (that is, variables and items) were the same as those reported for GSR.

Table 11: Frequency distribution and mean scores for reading comprehension in Grade Seven Urban (recall and inference)

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
RECALL				
1. Why did the animals fight?	55% 11x1=11	5% 1x2=2	40% 8x3=24	1.85
2. Why did the elephant win the fight?	5% 1x1=1	70% 14x2=28	25% 5x3=15	2.2
3. Why did the Rhino want a quill from the Porcupine?	5% 1x1=1	80% 16x2=32	15% 3x3=9	2.1
4. What does the Porcupine use the quills for?	10% 2x1=2	0% 0x2=0	90% 18x3=54	3.2
5. What did the Rhino use the baobab fibre for?	0% 0x1=0	80% 16x2=32	20% 4x3=12	2.2
			Total score for recall	**2.31**

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	Partially correct (PC)	Correct (C)	
INFERENCE				
6. What made the animals to have a big fight?	**30%** 6x1=6	**40%** 8x2=16	**30%** 6x3=18	2.3
7. The story begins with the words "Once in ancient times", which of the words below mean the same?	**65%** 13x1=13	**0%** 0x2=0	**35%** 7x3=21	1.7
8. How does the Porcupine use the quill for protection?	**30%** 6x1=6	**25%** 5x2=10	**45%** 9x3=27	2.15
9. Why does the Rhino kick his dung?	**25%** 5x1=5	**5%** 1x2=2	**65%** 13x3=39	2.3
10. Put the words with similar meaning below into pairs: Rage, bruised, fight, argument, bad temper, wounded, return, bring back.	**15%** 3x1=3	**35%** 7x2=14	**50%** 10x3=30	2.35
		Total score for inference		**2.16**

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

4.8.1 Recall

As presented in Table 11 above, with respect to recall, 40% of the learners' responses to *Question 1* were correct, while 55% wrote the wrong answers. For *Question 2*, 25% of the responses were correct, whereas for *Question 3,* 80% of the responses were partially correct. Up to 90% of the learners' responses to *Question 4* were correct, whereas only 20% of their responses to *Question 5* were correct. The total mean score for recall in GSU was 2.31.

4.8.2 Inference

For inference, 30% of the learners' responses to *Question 6* were wrong, while 30% were correct. With respect to *Question 7*, 65% responded incorrectly. For *Questions 8, 9* and *10,* 45%, 65% and 50% of the responses respectively were correct. The total mean score for inference was 2.16, as shown in Table 11.

4.8.3 Prediction and Summary

With regards to prediction, 60% of the responses to *Question 11* were correct, 15% were partially correct and 20% were wrong, whereas for *Question12*, 25% were wrong,

30% were partially correct and 45% were correct. The total mean score for prediction was 2.08. Question 13 proved to be difficult for the learners as 45% of their responses were wrong, 35% were partially correct and only 20% were correct. With regard to summary, 50% of the responses were correct, 40% were partially correct and 10% were wrong. The mean score was 2.4. Based on all four variables, the total mean score for reading comprehension in GSU was 2.24.

Table 12: Frequency distribution and mean scores for reading comprehension in Grade Seven Urban (prediction and summary)

Item and questions	Percentage/frequency distribution of responses			Mean score
	Wrong (W)	**Partially correct (PC)**	**Correct (C)**	
PREDICT				
11. Looking at the Rhino, how can one tell that it once had a big fight?	**20%** 4x1=4	**15%** 3x2=6	**60%** 12x3=36	2.3
12. What happens to all the things which the Rhino swallows?	**25%** 5x1=5	**30%** 6x2=12	**45%** 9x3=27	2.2
13. In the story, the Rhino draws a conclusion about what happened to the quill. How does this affect his behaviour today?	**45%** 9x1=9	**35%** 7x2=14	**20%** 4x3=12	1.75
			Total score for predict	**2.08**
SUMMARY				
14. In your own words, write the summary of the story in the dotted lines provided	**10%** 2x1=2	**40%** 8x2=16	**50%** 10x3=30	**2.4**
		Total mean score for reading comprehension		**2.24**

Scoring; W = 1, PC = 2, C = 3

4.9 Comparison of reading comprehension between learners from Grade Seven Rural and Grade Seven Urban

In order to compare the reading comprehension abilities of the GSR and GSU learners, their total scores for reading comprehension were subjected to a two-sample Student's t-test analysis.

From the t-test analysis, it was observed that there was a significant difference in mean scores (or performance) between GSR (Mean = 1.37) and GSU (Mean = 2.24) at conditions t (5) = -6.8, p = 0.001. Further comparisons of the performances of learners from GSR and GSU with respect to the four variables (recall, inference, prediction and summary writing) are presented in the proceeding section.

4.9.1 Recall

The performances of the learners in both the GSR and the GSU are presented below. A comparison of the performances of learners with respect to their ability to recall is summarised in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9: Comparison of performances of learners from Grade Seven Urban and Grade Seven Rural on recall test
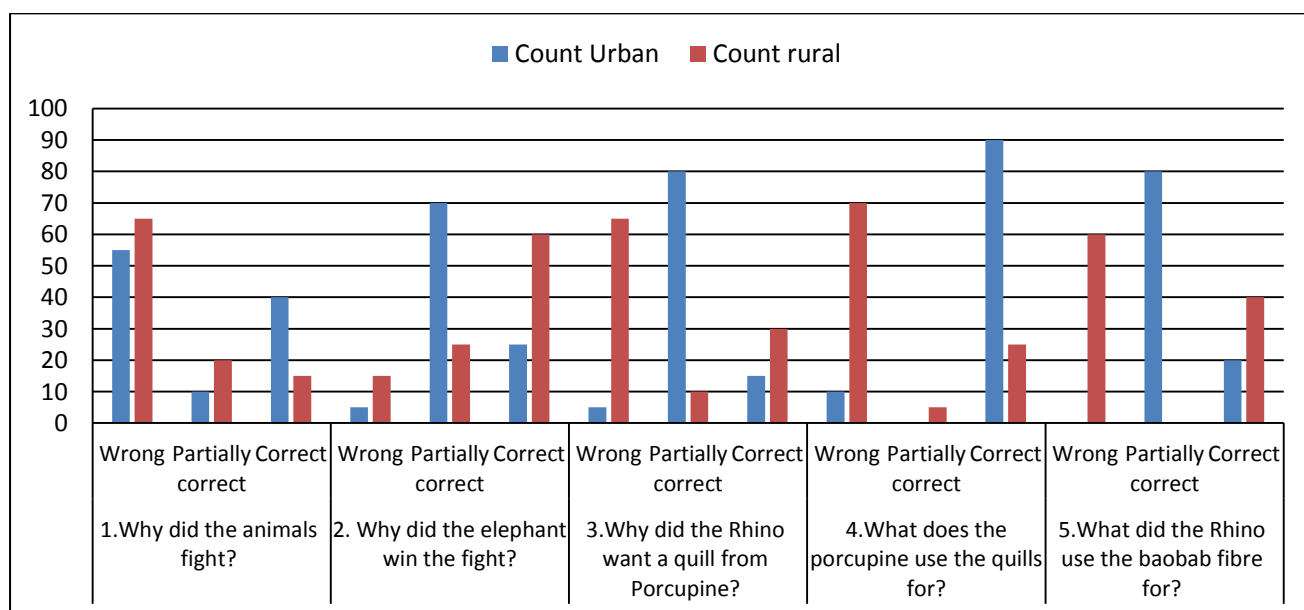
In order to ascertain how significantly different the responses of the two groups of learners were, the mean scores for recall obtained for both groups (that is, GSR = 1.53 and GSU = 2.31) were subjected to a two-sampled Student's t-test.

The results from the analysis indicate that the observed differences in mean responses between both groups is significant at Alpha 0.05 level t (7) = -2.8, p = (0.02).

4.9.2 Inference

Learners from GSR gave comparatively more wrong responses to all five questions used in assessing inference than their peers from GSU.

Results from inference tests further suggest a better performance for GSU (mean score = 2.16) compared to GSR (mean score = 1.56). In order to determine statistically just how significant these results were, a Student's t-test was performed. From the analysis, two-sampled t (8) = -3.52, p = 0.007, indicating that the observed differences in mean responses between both groups is significant at Alpha 0.05 level. Figure 10 summarises the performance of GSR and GSU with respect to inference.

Figure 10: Comparison of performances of learners from Grade Seven Urban and Grade Seven Rural on inference test
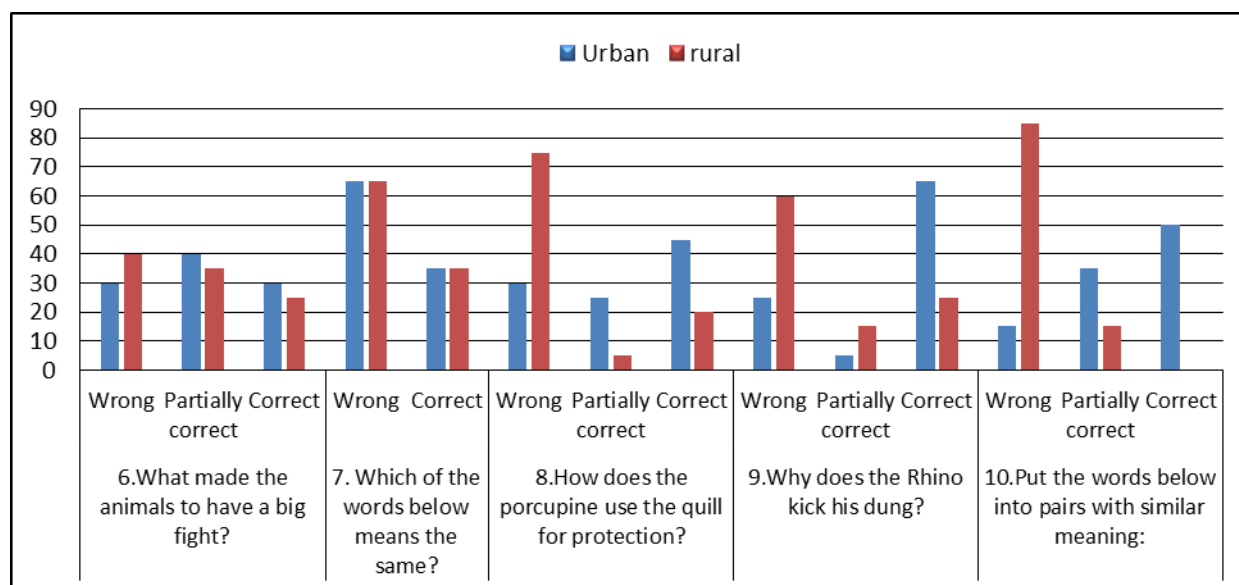
4.9.3 Predict

The performance of learners from GSR and GSU in relation to their ability to predict is presented in Figure 11. With respect to the three questions (*11, 12 and 13*) used in assessing learners' ability to predict, the responses of learners from GSU were often partially correct or simply wrong. Analysis of the performance of both groups

indicated that there was a significant difference between mean scores for GSR (Mean = 1.13) and GSU (Mean = 2.08), conditions; t (2) = -5.29, p = 0.03.

Figure 11: Comparison of performances between learners from Grade Seven Urban and Grade Seven Rural on prediction test
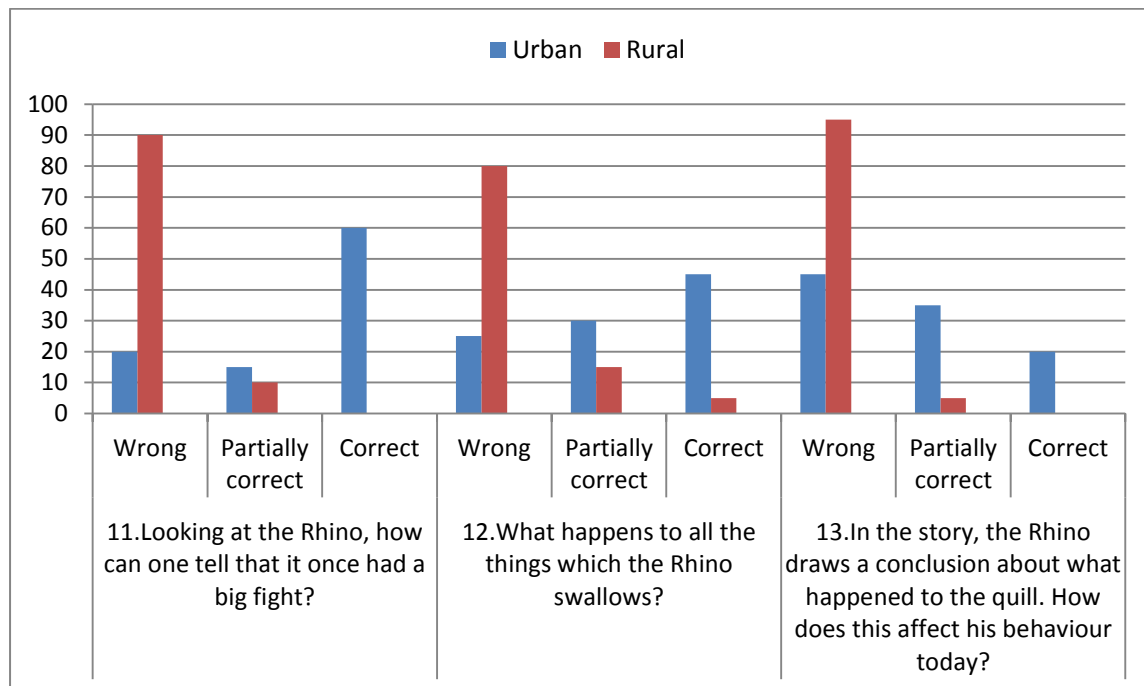
4.9.4 Summary

The performance of learners from GSR was as follows: 75% of the responses were wrong and 25% were partially correct. The mean score was 1.25. For GSU, 10% of the responses were wrong, 40% were partially correct and 50% were correct, and the mean score was 2.4. Given that there was just a single question (*14*), the t-test analysis was not carried out. Figure 12 below shows the comparison.

Figure 12: Comparison of performances of learners from Grade Seven Urban and Grade Seven Rural on summary writing
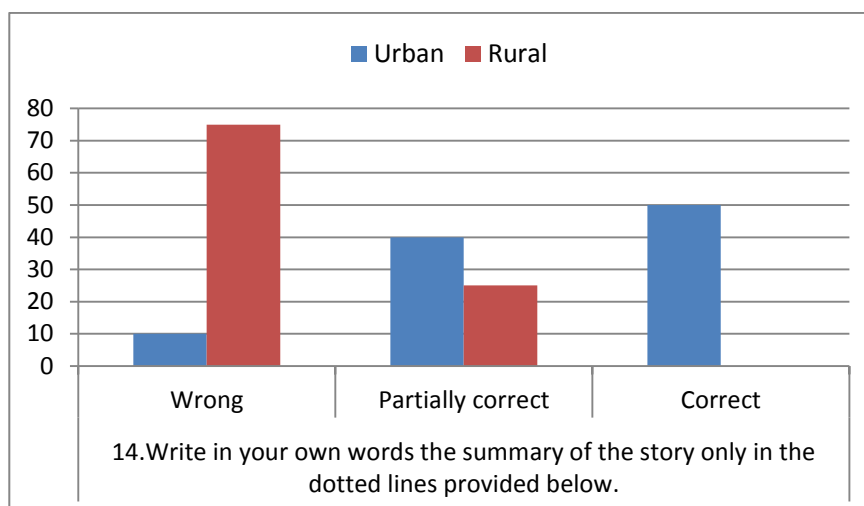
4.10 Interpretation of the results

This study had three objectives which were as follows: firstly to assess learners' reading preferences in both Grades Four and Seven; secondly, to assess the learners' ability to recall, infer, predict and summarise in the English language; and lastly to compare the learners' performance in reading comprehension for Grades Four and Seven in the rural and urban school. The data collected in line with these objectives have been analysed and presented above.

In order to explore and compare the reading comprehension of learners in the urban and rural schools, the following research questions guided the investigation:

- Do the learners in the urban and rural schools have the ability to recall, infer, predict, and summarise in English second language?

- Do the learners' performances in reading comprehension in the urban and rural schools show a significant difference for Grade Four and Seven?

- What are the learners' reading preferences in English second language in both urban and rural schools?

The interpretation below discusses in detail the researcher's views, comparing them with views expressed in previous research studies carried out in the area of reading comprehension skills and strategies.

4.10.1 Language issues and medium of instruction

The two schools investigated in this study implemented two different language policies. While the urban school opted for an early English-only medium of instruction, the rural school introduced the English medium only at Grade Four, and still this was not strictly implemented because of language barriers and other social challenges experienced by both learners and teachers. The situation in the rural school has been termed submersion, because it is like putting learners under water without teaching them how to swim, or allowing them to play football without giving them a ball, as explained by Pretorius and Mampuru (2007). The government wants learners to learn in English, but there are a number of challenges. Learners are struggling to learn English because they are not exposed to the language, they lack reading skills and some do not have well-resourced libraries. The Annual Literacy Test run by the Department of Education for the past five years are really not showing any marked improvements.

Mother tongue development for six years in primary schools should be advocated. Such initiatives have received more attention and support in recent years from donor agencies interested in improving educational quality and equity (Sida Report, 2001). Even though such initiatives are good, local ground work should be properly done to identify and understand unique differences in order to avoid negative results, as suffered by other African countries such as Niger and Guinea Bissau (Hoven, 2003).

Another major problem is that the new curriculum, CAPS, has brought in new challenges as a number of schools are still adjusting the transition from The Outcome Based Education(OBE) to Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).Like Alexander (1999) suggests, the bottom-up practices are a good foundation for strong, effective and efficient programmes since all stakeholders contribute. Thus, groups like the Multilingualism Action Group (Heugh, 2000) lobby for more coherent language policy and practice in South African schools. This study has certainly shown that there is a dire need for such innovation.

4.10.2 Reading comprehension: recall, inference and prediction

The learners' ability to recall, make inferences, predict and summarise determines their level of comprehension and understanding.

In the investigation of these factors and in comparing the rural and the urban schools in this study, it was found that the learners' conception of the task – their ability to make sense of what they read – was below average for the rural school and was average for the urban school. When the learners did not understand or did not know what to do, they just copied any portion of the text as a response. The general lack of aptitude in such strategies by the learner greatly hampered the enhancement of reading comprehension, and comprehension failures were the consequences.

4.10.2.1   Recall

Even though students could successfully decode words in the L2, this study confirms that it takes years before they discover meaning in what they read. The higher grades performed better than the lower grades in both rural and urban schools. This is in line with the result of the study conducted by Alloway et al. (2008) which showed automated working memory assessment scores increasing in memory capacity as children got older. The present study confirms the above results since the Grade Seven learners of both rural and urban schools performed better than their Grade Four counterparts.

In addition, in the study conducted by Andreassen and Braten (2010) which looked at the contribution of recalling ability, the results revealed that participants found it easier to memorize a few lines than to remember or make sense of a larger paragraph. This was also the case with the present study.

4.10.2.2   Inference and prediction

Generally, the Grade Four learners did not interact well with the text. There was no sign of prior knowledge or of actively constructing meaning from the text. Learners merely looked for words in the passage and copied them as answers. Their reasoning skills were minimal. They could neither analyse the text nor express their own views when interpreting the text using any form of prior knowledge.

Thus, both rural and urban learners need support to excel. They all need to acquire proficiency in both their home language (which provides a solid foundation) and in the second language. The learners need to be taught strategies to read more efficiently, to guess meaning from context (inference), and to make predictions about the text using their stored knowledge. The teaching of text structure, organisers, cause-and-effect relationships, and story mapping should be strictly implemented. Learners should be able to both learn to read and read to learn.

Learners' knowledge of the English language to make inference was better in the urban school than in the rural school. The longer period of exposure to English and the daily use of English accounted for that difference. Their ability to predict was poor due to the little world knowledge (prior-knowledge) that they had. Recalling was not as bad as inference and prediction because it dealt with issues within the text. Learners found it difficult to import knowledge from their backgrounds to suit required situations. Even though the difference between the urban learners and the rural learners was obvious, the gap between them is rather large. However, looking at Grade Seven, this gap had significantly closed, except for summary writing. Again, the researcher attributes this to the absence of consistent English use both inside and outside the classroom.

The urban learners were more successful in making inferences than the rural learners and this led to better overall comprehension by them. They were able to grasp the authors' meaning and understand the whole picture of the text. They could draw more logical conclusions, resulting in fewer gaps in comprehension, especially at Grade Seven. Even with the engagement of the text, the urban learners were better than the rural learners. It should be noted that this leads to a more enjoyable reading, since drawing information becomes easier and the help of prior knowledge facilitates comprehension, making predictions simpler. Moreover, the learners will be eager to read more to confirm intuition. This is a good reason why some of the urban learners could perform better in recall, inference, prediction and summary writing. They could look beyond events in the story and letters on a page.

This performance, suggests overall that these learners still lack adequate proficiency in English to use it effectively as a LoLT for the mastery of academic content in all learning areas.

There is an even greater lack of English proficiency amongst the learners when they are compared to those at Maxima (former model C school) in the study conducted by Manyike and Lemmer (2010) which is like the urban school in this study. This suggests that the language of instruction could be a problem, since there is a possibility that the learners are not able to access academic content in all learning areas through English as the LoLT. Thus, it was revealed that the type of school has implications for the acquisition of English language, especially in a rural setting. The learners in this study could not give the correct sequence of events (mere recalling), and their interpretive ability was even worse, as shown by their wrong responses in drawing inferences.

The more exposure one has to a language, the better the understanding and use of that language. As was noted in Chapter Two of this study, it takes 5-7 years to attain cognitive level of proficiencies. Therefore, it is not surprising that the urban learners who started using English from Grade One performed better than the rural learners who only started using English in Grade Four. This study confirms Cummins' findings (2000), because the difference in the performance of the Grade Four learners was minimal, but all the parameters of reading comprehension for Grade Seven were significant. The urban school performed better than the rural school in recall, inference and prediction compared to the gap in level of performance among the Grade Four learners.

Higher order thinking of CALPs is disrupted by other language difficulties and therefore drawing inferences and making predictions become limited. Thus, once the lower level of processing is not well automated, the top-down process lags behind (Cummins, 2000). This explains the disparity in the results of this study. The performance of the learners in this study showed that they lacked the ability to infer and predict which means that they lack the knowledge base and ability to interpret text. There seemed to be a mismatch between the prior knowledge of the reader and the subject matter of the text. Content schemata comprehension (Carrel, 1984) was impaired. This lack of prior knowledge therefore had a negative effect on the learners' ability to comprehend the text.

Another reason for the poor results could be the type of books (readers) used in the primary intermediate phase of Grade Four to Grade Seven. There are very few questions asked in these books and little or no opportunity given for learners to guess meaning or predict outcomes as Goodman (1967:26) points out "…reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game". With provision of books that provide meaningful context, learners will be able, through constant practice and assistance, to recall, infer and predict better.

4.10.3   Summarising

The effectiveness of paraphrasing skills may be affected by the students' perception of the level of difficulty of the exercises given, but determining the right level of difficulty cannot be easy because of the differences in proficiency. This seems to support the research done by Carrell (1984) who found that students have to comprehend and make sense of the task prior to scanning for significant key points to meet the demands of writing summaries. In that study, even though cues were given to help the students complete the task, they still found it difficult to apply the skills. In the present study, the learners were also unable to apply the skills of summary writing. This is the main reason for their poor performance.

This study also seems to support the research conducted by Choy and Cheah (2009) who found that students begin to evolve their thinking processes when using higher order thinking skills. Instead of copying from the original passage, students began using the paraphrasing skills they had learned, albeit with difficulty, to do the exercises.

Perin, Keselman and Monopoli (2003) note that when doing summary writing, many students tend just to copy text directly from the passage; those which they think is important. The learners in this study also used similar strategies. They also used repeated words in the text as an indicator of importance. They preferred to copy the sentences directly from the original passage than to paraphrase them. To them, summarising was copying and reducing the text.

Furthermore, one of the deficiencies of the process might be students' focus on reflecting the subject matter. This could be far less than it is expected, as students

have shifted most of their attention to paraphrasing the readings (Choy & Yee Lee, 2010). As a result, the effectiveness of paraphrasing may be strong; yet, it may cause students to lose sight of the requirement of the task. There is a lack of semantic engagement and analysis of text by the learners in this study. There is a feeling that learners do not accumulate meaning, that is meaning is not retained in accurate comprehension, and therefore minimal summary skills are noted, especially with the rural learners. All of this is confirmed by South Africa's performance in PIRLS and other research carried out by Pretorius and Mampuru (2007).

In the summary writing activity, the rural learners in this study copied word for word portions of the text in sequence and could not paraphrase, unlike the urban learners who could write better summaries. Making predictions, identification of cause and effect, and identification of main idea were also seriously lacking in the summaries of the rural learners. They had little or inadequate sense of paraphrasing and ended up selecting words from the text or copying one or two sentences directly. However, this was not the case with the urban learners who scored fairly well and did better at the Grade Seven levels.

Twining (1991) lists some reasons for lack of reading comprehension, namely, failure to understand how sentences relate to one another, failure to understand how the information fits together in a meaningful way, and lack of interest or concentration. In the current research, it is possible that these same reasons could account for the poor performance of the intermediate phase learners. It is also possible that the teachers do not teach comprehension skills or do not pay particular attention to individual learner's problems or areas of difficulty.

4.10.4 Reading preferences

4.10.4.1 Lack of resources and unavailability of preferred reading material

In this study, it was revealed that less than 10% of the learners preferred reading in the libraries. The rural learners in this study did not have a school library, and even the community library was very poorly resourced. It had very old and out-dated books

which probably did not interest the learners. The rural school was seriously challenged in terms of reading material, as there was neither a library nor a media centre in the school. This is a problem that was also alluded to by Pretorius and Mampuru (2007), Makoe (2007) and Matjila and Pretorius (2004). Therefore, South African schools, especially the black rural schools, are seriously under-resourced. According to the study conducted by Pretorius and Mampuru (2007), only 27% of the schools in South Africa have school libraries.

Trok's study (2005: 59) was not specifically on Limpopo, but what he expresses below is relevant to correlate the findings of this present study. He states:

> Children are not introduced to libraries and reading early enough. In schools where there are libraries, the only books available are textbooks and children and teachers only go to the library to study or to complete a certain task. They have no story books for children or any lessons for stimulating reading for fun. For parents ... a library is a no-go area and sharing books as a family is unheard of.

Thus, for the children of Limpopo, one of the poorest provinces in South Africa, coming from homes where the parents are unemployed and dependent on social grants and where the parents themselves have no schooled literacy, there is little hope that these children can develop any meaningful literacy practices prior to schooling, especially in English which quickly becomes the medium of instruction. These children and their parents depend on schools to provide and develop these crucial literacy skills. However, one may ask: are the parents helping these learners to swim or to sink and drown?

In the present study, many of the learners did not also have access to their preferred books, and some said they read fewer books because of lack of choice. Pretorius and Mampuru (2007) confirm that most schools in the rural areas do not have libraries. With regards to choice of reading material, Rasana (2006:176) notes that there is an "ever-increasing gap between learners" preferences and the reading material that schools provide or recommend. She says this leaves learners three choices: "reading what they actually like, reading what is available, or not reading at all" (Rasana, 2006:184). These choices however lead one to pose questions such as: what if the learner cannot afford their preferred reading material or gets a material that is not appropriate?

In addition, some learners of both the rural and urban schools preferred reading in the morning in the classroom, but complained that enough reading was not done during class times. They read at home and sometimes with no supervision and the reading could be inappropriate, especially because the school did not have a library. This is evidence to what Sisulu (2004) notes about South Africa not having a reading culture and most parents being illiterates who cannot help the learners at home. Essentially, no reading role models are available for these learners in the rural schools.

In this study, although the learners were from primary intermediate Grades Four and Seven, all the learners who chose "other" said it was the Bible they read. This finding goes to confirm what Niven (2004) and Dison (1997) both found, that the Bible was the most commonly available book in the homes of their respondents, and that the reading of the Bible and other religious literature was the only other reading the learners reported doing outside the school curriculum. The current study did not investigate the type of texts/books available in the homes of the participants, the findings of which can be interesting and informative in correlating differences in the performance of the learners.

Rasana (2002) found that learners have little exposure to a range of literature of reasonable quality, suggesting that teachers, school libraries, and local libraries have failed to play their role in promoting reading, because learners' choices of reading materials are not stocked at schools or in libraries. This present study also found that learners were more interested in magazines and newspapers as they provided them with news of events from all over the world and exposed them to the current issues around the country and the world. The Grade Four learners, especially the rural learners, said they enjoyed reading cartoons and books that had fewer pages. To them, novels and short stories were too voluminous. Therefore, teachers need to recognise and acknowledge such preferences when they select reading materials for the schools.

Learners should be allowed to make their own choices and read anything which interests them. Passion increases the zeal to do – the more one likes what one reads, the more one will read.

4.10.4.2 Preference of English over Sepedi

With regard to language preferences, the findings of this study were again similar to those of Machet, Olen and Chamberlain (2001) who reported that the vast majority of their respondents preferred to read books in English rather than in their home language. Findings by Rasana (2006) also indicate learners' preference for English over Afrikaans and African languages. In this study, 60%/35% of Grade Four and 90%/75% of Grade Seven urban and rural learners, respectively, preferred English and often read in English. Therefore, they appear to attach more value to reading in English than to reading in their home languages. A number of reasons were given for this preference for English, including access to job opportunities, easy communication with other people, and easy access to books written in English. In addition, learners stated that English was easier to understand than Sepedi.

In another study, respondents claimed that they chose English over their mother tongues because they wanted "to practise English instead", because they considered African languages "hard to understand", and because in these languages "there aren't enough of the kind of books they liked" (Machet, Olen & Chamberlain, 2001:33). These findings were confirmed by the present study. Although some of the learners in this study preferred Sepedi, the only reason they gave was that they liked it and that it was their mother tongue. With the rural Grade Four learners, this was not surprising as Sepedi was the language they had been using all along. It was thus sensible that they would prefer it. However, this preference would obviously later cause problems for them as they would inevitably experience difficulties with English in the higher grades.

The learners in the present study did not read much, just like the learners in the studies by Machet, Olen and Chamberlain (2001), Niven (2004), and Dison (1997). Both the Grade Four and Grade Seven learners of both the rural and urban schools read very little in either Sepedi or English, although they preferred English because they perceived English as necessary for future social, commercial or academic mobility. This means that writers, publishers, librarians, and teachers should
encourage learners to attach more value to reading in their home languages by publishing more interesting material in these languages. PANSALB should be more visible in the work that it does to promote indigenous languages. Bilingualism is a better route to follow to enforce knowledge.

4.10.4.3   *The importance of reading*

Machet, Olen and Chamberlain (2001) and Rasana (2010) found that learners did not see reading as a way to increase their knowledge of other school subjects and did not raise questions for teachers in relation to the importance of projects, assignments, and homework which should be seen as a way of introducing learners to libraries as sources of new information. In the present study, learners liked reading and said they read in English because it helped them to do well in the other subjects.

Several studies have shown that reading interest was in serious decline and there was a mismatch between the preferred reading language and the preferred material (Worthy, 1996; Machet, Olen & Chamberlain, 2001; Rasana, 2002). This is confirmed by the present study which found a decline in the number of books read by Grade Four and Grade Seven learners in the rural and urban schools. Significantly, though, the study found that the urban learners read more as compared to their rural counterparts. One thing must be mentioned: the rural school had no library while the urban school had a library and the learners were allowed to borrow books and take them home.

4.11   In summary

Young learners in South Africa are struggling to acquire the reading skills needed for their future academic progress (Fleisch, 2008). Learners are not able to satisfactorily demonstrate higher order thinking in L2 English, and they lack cognitive academic proficiency. Learners' failure rate can be attributed to learners' inability to comprehend reading materials (Howie & Plomb, 2001). The learners in this study found it hard to abstract concepts from the text. Comprehension in terms of inferring and predicting was poor, and summary writing was no better.

Comprehension refers to the overall understanding process where meaning is constructed within a sentence, within linked sentences, or across a larger unit of text as a whole (Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005). When this ability is fully grasped, the ability to summarise is achieved. However, the learners in this study mostly read just to answer questions. They lacked interpretive skills to help them "read between the lines" (Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005:140) as well as the skills to make good inferences or predict well. These learners did not read to form a bigger picture and mostly did not relate what they read to any prior knowledge.

According to the Department of Education (2002, 2008), by Grade Four learners should be proficient and be able to use the English language across the curriculum. In rural schools, English is introduced as medium of instruction at Grade Four and the learners have to be supported and properly assisted in the transition from mother tongue to second language usage across the curriculum. However, it has been noted that learners who are still in the process of acquiring reading skills in their L1 are forced to read in L2 (Manyike, 2007). The Grade Four learners still in the process of gaining good ground in the mother tongue are expected to learn and use the second language cognitively. Therefore, the learners end up struggling with reading and writing in both the L1 and the L2. The researcher's opinion is that the immersion model of bilingualism will be more appropriate. Learners should not be forced to "swim" when they cannot because they will obviously "drown or sink" (Heugh, 2008). It is like asking them "to play football without a ball", as explained by Pretorious and Mampuru (2007).

Even though the learners generally lacked adequate proficiency in English which can be used for the mastery of academic content in all learning areas, the urban school in this study performed better. It seems that the school's context somehow acts as a mode of agency to influence learning and learner outcomes, especially as the language policy is not uniformly implemented.

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an analysis of the data collected in the two schools as well as the findings ensuing from the analysis. It has also provided an interpretation of the findings. The next chapter presents the summary, conclusion and recommendation of the study.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1   Introduction

The aim of this research was to investigate and compare the reading comprehension of Grade Four and Grade Seven learners in an urban and rural school in Limpopo Province. The findings of the study have been discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter summarises the research, draws conclusions from the findings and makes recommendations to improve the reading comprehension of the learners.

5.2   Overview of the study

In Chapter One, the main research problem highlighted was that there was no in-depth information available to establish the relationship between rural and urban learners, especially in terms of language policy and performance in reading comprehension, as well as preferences in reading development in primary schools. In order to fill this gap, the researcher sought to investigate and compare the reading comprehension ability of Grade Four and Grade Seven learners in a rural and urban school in Limpopo. There was a need to carry out a study of this nature in order to uncover internal variables (information processing strategies) that elucidate comprehension matters in English and to add to the body of knowledge on L2 reading trajectories in South Africa.

Before going to the field, the researcher reviewed existing literature on reading strategies, reading comprehension, and reading preferences, which is presented in Chapter Two. As understood from the literature, there are two thresholds of competence achieved by learners. The first is to do the basic task of decoding meaning, which introduces some form of comprehension but does not bring about any higher cognitive effect. Once the higher level of competence has been achieved, learners will then have positive cognitive effects in terms of cognitive academic language proficiency that strongly facilitates comprehension (Cummins, 2000). Using this theoretical framework, research has shown that South Africans are reading at least four years below their expected reading levels. This study has shown that it is

still not known empirically whether reading under-achievement is a language problem or a reading problem as there is also a reported lower reading proficiency.

Once the literature review had been completed, the researcher then engaged with research methodology. Chapter Three presents the research methodology that was adopted for the study. The study used the mixed-method approach which suited the exploratory design of the study since it sought to investigate the reading preferences and information-processing strategies which explain the comprehension proficiency in English among rural and urban Grade Four and Grade Seven primary school learners in Limpopo Province. A questionnaire and a reading comprehension test were administered at different times, based on scheduled appointments at both the rural and urban school. This was followed by an analysis of the data collected during the field work, presented in Chapter Four. The analyses and discussions were organised according to the different variables and themes that emerged. The next section then summarises the findings, which will culminate in the drawing of conclusions and provision of recommendations.

5.3   Summary of the findings

5.3.1 Reading preference

English is generally the preferred language for reading for both the rural and urban learners. The preference was as a result of English being the medium of instruction and the LoLT for all the other content subjects. English was seen as the best language to use in communicating with other people. It is worth noting that the simple form of English gave it an advantage over Sepedi as learners found English easier to read than Sepedi. With regard to the number of books read in twelve months, it was revealed that the rural Grade Four learners read only 155 books as opposed to a total of 335 books that were read by the urban learners. As for the Grade Seven learners, the rural learners read 290 books as opposed to their urban counterparts who read 300 books. This indicates that irrespective of the grade, the urban learners were reading more than the rural learners.

It was found that the curiosity and interest of the learners dropped significantly between Grade Four and Grade Seven due to lack of choice or preferred reading material and the fact that reading was no longer taught as a component of the English language lesson. In addition, it was discovered that less reading took place in the Grade Seven classes as it was assumed that they knew how to read and could read on their own.

Furthermore, it was noticed that learners' preferred reading time and place greatly depended on the amount of work to be done.

5.3.2 Reading comprehension

From all the four variables (that is, recall, inference, prediction and summary writing), the results from the Grade Four rural and urban learners indicated that the observed differences in mean responses between both groups is not significant at the Grade Four level. The mean score for reading comprehension obtained for learners from GFR was 1.48 whereas the mean score for GFU was 1.92. Even though the urban learners scored better, both groups were still grappling with cognitive academic language proficiency which takes 5-7 years to acquire, thus confirming Cummins' theory of BICS and CALPS. On the other hand, the total mean score for reading comprehension in GSR was 1.37, while that for GSU was 2.24. Following a two-sample students-test analysis, it was observed that there was a significant difference in mean scores (or performance). It was evident that the learners from the rural school gave comparatively more wrong answers than their counterparts in the urban school. Therefore, there was significant difference in terms of performance at the Grade Seven classes.

This study has shown that the different reading comprehension skills (recalling, inference making, predicting and summary writing) were very poor in the rural schools. However, there was some improvement from Grade Four to Grade Seven in both the rural and urban schools, as shown in the results. This is to say that Cummins' theory of BICS and CALPs holds true in this study. Major findings of the study are presented below per variable.

5.3.2.1 Information recall

There were differential overall achievement scores in each of the two schools under investigation, with the urban school having higher scores. Such differences were statistically significant when tested through t-test. The learners merely read to search for answers by copying and reproducing words from the text. Mere sequencing of events was provided.

5.3.2.2 Inference making, prediction and the ability to summarise

There was a noticeable lack of semantic engagement and analysis by the learners. There was a feeling that learners did not accumulate meaning – meaning was not retained – in accurate comprehension, and therefore minimal summary skills were developed. The results of this study suggest that low vocabulary and insufficient prior knowledge do not only affect learners' ability to comprehend in general, but also inhibit their ability to make good inferences and write appropriate summaries.

In assessing inference, it was found that learners from GSR gave comparatively more wrong responses to all five questions than their peers from GSU. Results from the inference tests further suggest a better performance for GSU (mean score = 2.16) compared to GSR (mean score = 1.56).

Both the rural and urban intermediate grade learners showed little creative imagination. The learners lacked proficiency in inference making and prediction skills. With inferences being a starting point for imaginative thinking, it was not unusual that their experience of the text was considerably poor. Thus, the learners' reading was meaningless and their comprehension was poor because they could not recall, infer or predict sufficiently at grade level, especially at the rural school.

When the results on recall and inference were compared, it appeared that the geographical locations of the schools made a difference on reading performance. This finding confirms previous studies (see Pretorius and Mampuru, 2007; Pretorius and Currin, 2010) that showed more comprehension variance in English in urban schools than in rural schools.

Although there were obvious differences among learners in each school, probably due to stratified proficiency levels (low, intermediate and advanced), the average school performances were not statistically significant at the Grade Four level but significant at the Grade Seven level.

Overall, the main finding of the study was that the Grade Seven urban learners read and comprehended better than their rural counterparts. While this finding is consistent with research and theories on competency development (e.g. Cummins, 2000), it will be interesting to test the same learners in Sepedi which is their mother tongue to see if the results will contradict or confirm the claim that primary school learners have a high reading variance in English than in their home language (Pretorius and Mampuru, 2007).

The lack of decoding skills could also be the reason for the poor results. Word recognition and meaning are two different things, but they are very much related and can affect comprehension. A decoding deficiency leads to slow and tedious comprehension, which translates to poor or minimal performance. This brings to mind the question of whether poor performance is a language problem or a comprehension problem. This can be answered through further research comparing the L1 and L2 abilities of learners.

Another major finding of the study was that the rural learners were at least 3-4 years below their expected levels. A conclusion from these findings is that intermediate phase learners still have a lot of work to do. Even the Grade Seven learners are not ready or adequately prepared to begin with their secondary school education. There is a need therefore to teach comprehension strategies as part of reading literacy development, starting from the early grades. There should be a project to get learners' perspectives on reading and to check the prescribed school readers. Such a project will provide more answers and offer deeper insights on bi-literacy development.

It was also noted that the learners were unable to express themselves through writing, as evident in their poor scores in summary writing. There is therefore a need to introduce writing into the classrooms, because it develops learner's skills to

comprehend facts, make inferences, predict outcomes, and give opinions without getting confused.

The findings of the present study are limited by the small number of schools and learners selected for the study. Future research may examine a larger number of grades and draw respondents from the foundation, intermediate and advanced levels of the school educational system. It is on the basis of these findings that the researcher makes both practical and research recommendations in the next section.

5.4 Recommendations

- Reading programmes and reading competitions should be put in place in all schools. Activities such as drama, role play or debates should be started in the foundation phase to enable the learners practise using English, cultivate skills, and boost their confidence. Purposeful engagement in conversations, as well as expanding and modelling conversations, should begin in the very early grades so that learners develop early interest and grow up liking the activities.

- Learners should read and retell stories where possible and bring out the meaning of words through action or objects from within the text or from prior experiences. It is important for teachers to create more questions for testing comprehension, questions that will address the problems in reading comprehension. Comprehension strategies should be taught and monitored.

- The reading periods for learners should be increased and the teachers should ensure that the periods are utilised for that purpose. Guided reading and reading for pleasure should be emphasised. In addition, pictures and visual material must be increased for the readers. The textbooks should include pictorials and lots of questions to guide learners' comprehension.

- A multicultural perspective should be added in the programmes and diversity must be seen as an important repertoire in their general knowledge of the world as we are a rainbow nation. Learners must be put at the centre of all class activities. Learners should be seen as valued members of the school and the classroom especially. Their needs and interests must be of vital importance if we consider them as clients. These young individuals have a lot to say if the teachers, parents and school governing bodies will give them the

space to communicate.

- The chosen Medium of Instruction (MI) should be used at least 90% of the time to expose and familiarise the learners to speak the said language. A true bilingual option will be the best (50% L1 and 50% L2 from the very beginning of schooling). The researcher suggests a good model of bilingualism so that both 1st and 2nd languages are catered for, while considering that English is the only MI as learners get into higher education. English should be used to provide a wide variety of activities that encourage interaction both in and out of the classroom. A good and solid foundation is important.

- All schools must have libraries that are well resourced with books of learners' interest, including magazines and newspapers.

- Planning needs to consider how children can develop pride in their ability to be bilingual and bicultural learners, so that they do not see English as being too important but understand that even their mother tongues are equally important and useful.

- Finally, regular control, observation and evaluation of both the learners and the teachers should be carried out for both formative and summative improvements. Schools should monitor individual progress in English as a second language at various stages throughout the year to identify problems or areas of difficulties and have strategies in place to address these problems.

5.5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the reading comprehension of English second language learners in the intermediate phase (Grades Four and Seven) in rural and urban schools in Limpopo Province. The study has shown that learners at Grade Four and Grade Seven comprehend below their expected proficiencies. This calls for resourcing of schools with reading literacy events and support for reading in L1 and L2 for additive reading development. More research, however, is necessary to augment the findings of this study. This can be done in three ways. First, a larger study covering more geographical areas as well as more variables such as speed reading and reading aloud can be undertaken. Secondly, research can be conducted to compare the L1 and L2 abilities of foundation, intermediate and high school learners in rural and urban areas. Lastly, experimental studies can be conducted on resourced bi-literate development and the impact on reading development gap.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Letter to respondents, questionnaire on reading preferences and reading comprehension test for grade four and grade seven

A: Letter to respondents

Dear respondents,

As part of my MA research at the University of Limpopo, I am conducting a study on English Second Language titled *A Comparative Study of the English Second Language Learners' Reading Comprehension in Urban and Rural Schools in Limpopo Province.* I will appreciate if you could complete the following questionnaire as honestly as possible. Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified to you will remain confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified and even the names of your schools will be coded. Only group data will be presented.

Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you very much for your cooperation

B: Grade 4 Questionnaire

SECTION A

Biographic Information

Respondent number ………………………
Name of school……………………………………………………………………………………

Please tick the correct box that applies to you

Gender	M	F		Age	8-9	10-11	12-13	14+		Grade	4

SECTION B

Questionnaire on Reading Preferences

This section consists of both closed and open-ended questions.

Answer all the questions below by ticking the correct answer that applies to you. Then give reasons for your choice on the dotted lines.

1. In which language do you prefer reading? English [ ] Sepedi [ ] Any other [ ]
Give reasons for your answer

………………………………………………………………………………………………
2. In which language do you often read**?**   English [ ] Sepedi [ ] Any other [ ]
Give reasons for your answer
…………………………………………………………………………………………..
3. When do you usually read?   Morning [ ] Afternoon [ ] Evening [ ]
Give reasons for your answer
………………………………………………………………………………….
4. Where do you usually read?   Classroom [ ] Library [ ] Home [ ]
Give reasons for your answer
…………………………………………………………………………………
5. Which types of books do you prefer reading? Novels [ ] Short story [ ] Drama [ ]
                                        Newspapers [ ] Magazines [ ] Cartoons [ ]
                                        Others (specify)[ ]
Give reasons for your answer
…………………………………………………………………………………
6. How many books have you read in the past 12 months?   5 [ ] 10 [ ] 15 [ ]
                                20 [ ] 25 [ ] 30 [ ]
                                Others(specify)[ ]
Give reasons for your answer
…………………………………………………………………………………..

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

SECTION C
Grade Four: Reading Comprehension Test

Please read the passage below and answer all the questions which follow.

Hare, Hippo and Elephant

Hare was very lazy. He didn't like working. He hated going out to the field to get his food.

One day he had an idea. He went to the waterhole to find Hippo. He took a long rope with him. "Hello," he said to Hippo. "Why don't we play a game? I'll tie this rope to you and see if I can pull you out of the mud."

"Sounds good," said Hippo." I can't lose."

"Great," said Hare. "So I'll go to the trees over there. The moment you feel a tug on the rope, you pull hard. OK? But I'm warning you, I'm very strong."

Hippo laughed. "Is that so, Hare?" He did not believe Hare at all.

Hare tied the rope round Hippo and then went off to wait under the trees. Soon Elephant came past." Good day, Elephant," said Hare." Do you want a tug-of-war with me? I usually beat everyone at it."

"No", said Elephant." I haven't got time for silly games."

"No listen. If you win, I'll do anything you want."

Elephant liked the sound of that. So he let Hare tie the rope around him. Hare walked to where neither Hippo nor elephant could see him. He tugged on a rope, so that both Hippo and Elephant could feel it. At once, both Elephant and Hippo started pulling back. They pulled for hours, all day and right through the night. When the sun came up they fell down and rested.

Elephant and Hippo could not understand how Hare had managed to pull so long and hard. They got up and staggered towards each other. Then they saw the rope around each other's bodies." Hare tricked us!" they said crossly. The next day Hare saw that his fields were all churned up. "Just ready to plant my seed", he thought. "And I didn't have to dig or plough myself!"

(From *Grade Four English Language* by Maskew Miller Longman)

Questions
1. Who was the first player in the game?

……………………………………………………………………………………………
2. Why did the Elephant agree to play the game?

……………………………………………………………………………………………
3. Why did the Hippo and the Elephant start pulling at each other?

……………………………………………………………………………………………
4. What made the Elephant and the Hippo to fight for hours non-stop?

……………………………………………………………………………………………
5. How did the game help the Hare?

……………………………………………………………………………………………
6. Why did the Hippo say "I can't lose?"

……………………………………………………………………………………………

7. What does the Hare mean by saying "I'm very strong"

……………………………………………………………………………………………

8. Match the following words: <u>softened</u>, <u>pull</u>, <u>win</u> and <u>swaying</u>; with these words from the passage mentioned below:
   a. Beat   ………………………………
   b. Churned up ……………………………..
   c. Staggering ………………………………
   d. Tug ………………………………………

9. What do you think the Hippo and the Elephant will do to the Hare?

……………………………………………………………………………………………

10. What will be the quantity of the Hare's harvest?

……………………………………………………………………………………………

11. In your own words, write the summary of the story in the dotted lines provided

……………………………………………………………………………………………

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

C: Grade 7 Questionnaire

SECTION A

Biographic Information

Respondent number ……………………………..
Name of school…………………………………………………………………………………
Please tick the correct box that applies to you

Gender	M	F		Age	10-11	12-13	13-14	14+		Grade	7

SECTION B

Questionnaire on Reading Preferences

This section consists of both closed and open-ended questions. For each of the statements below, please indicate your preferred answer.

Answer all the questions below by ticking the correct answer that applies to you. Then give reasons for your choice on the dotted lines.

1. In which language do you prefer reading? English [   ] Sepedi [   ] Any other [   ]
Give reasons for your answer
 ………………………………………………………………………………………………

2. In which language do you often read**?** English [   ] Sepedi [   ] Any other [   ]
Give reasons for your answer
………………………………………………………………………………………………

3. When do you usually read?   Morning [   ] Afternoon [   ] Evening [   ]
Give reasons for your answer
………………………………………………………………………………………………

4. Where do you usually read?   Classroom [   ] Library [   ] Home [   ]
 Give reasons for your answer
………………………………………………………………………………………………

5. Which types of books do you prefer reading?   Novels [   ] Short story [   ]
Drama [   ]   Newspapers [   ] Magazines [   ] Cartoons [   ]
                                              Others(specify)[]
Give reasons for your answer
………………………………………………………………………………………………

6. How many books have you read in the past 12 months?   5 [   ] 10 [   ] 15 [
                                                        20 [   ] 25 [   ] 30 [
                                                        Others[   ]
Give reasons for your answer
………………………………………………………………………………………………

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Grade Seven: Reading Comprehension Test

Please read the passage below and answer all the questions which follow.

THE LOST QUILL

Once in ancient times, Elephant and Rhino had a little argument which led to a big fight (both were short-tempered animals, as you now well know). Rhino fought bravely and wounded Elephant several times with his sharp horns, but his long temper and rage made him fight rather blindly.

Elephant, however, kept his temper under control and because he was much bigger and stronger, and could use his long tusks, he was soon winning. Eventually, Rhino had to give in. Bruised and torn, with a great many gashes in his thick hide, he limped away.

Rhino was in great pain, and bleeding badly. He sought out Porcupine, who he thought might be able to help him. He begged her to give him one of her longest and strongest quill so that he could use it as a needle and sew up the great tears in his skin.

Porcupine, who was not too happy, about being awakened her daytime sleep, was anxious to get back to bed, and one condition: that Rhino would return it when he had finished with it. She also felt rather sorry for Rhino.

"My quills," she squeaked, "are all I have to protect me against my enemy, Lion. So I am depending on you, Rhino, to bring that back."

Rhino solemnly agreed to this and gave her his word that he would return the quill the very next day.

Rhino sewed up his torn skin, using fibre from a baobab tree. (To this day, you can still see the rough, scarred ridges on his hide.) Satisfied with his handiwork, he lay down in some soft grass for a much-needed, healing sleep. He placed Porcupine's quill carefully besides him for safekeeping.

One evening a few days later, Rhino happened to meet Porcupine. He suddenly remembered his promise, but tiny as he might, he just couldn't remember where he had left the quill, or what had become of it. All he remembered was sewing himself up with the quill held in his mouth, "Goodness me!" he thought. "Could I have swallowed it by mistake?"

After a great deal of thought, Rhino came to conclusion that if he had swallowed the quill, then sooner or later it would meet the same fate as all the other things that he swallowed each day. He explained all this to Porcupine, and apologised, promising soon to return the quill. And that is why Rhino began to kick his dung about: he has been searching ever since in the hope of finding that lost porcupine quill among his droppings.

(A traditional Ndebele story from Day By Day English Grade Seven by Maskew Miller Longman)

Comprehension Test Questions

1. What made the animals to have a big fight?
   ………………………………………………………………………………..
2. Why did the animals fight?
   ………………………………………………………………………………..

3. Why did the elephant win the fight?

....

4.   Why did the Rhino want a quill from Porcupine?

....

5. The story begins with the words "Once in ancient times", which of the words below means the same? Tick the correct answer. Later times [   ] Times in memory [ ] Classical times [   ]

6. What does the Porcupine use the quills for?

....

7. How does the Porcupine use the quill for protection?

....

8. What did the Rhino use the baobab fibre for?

....

9. Why does the Rhino kick his dung?

....

10. Looking at the Rhino, how can one tell that it once had a big fight?

....

11. What happens to all the things which the Rhino swallows?

....

12. In the story, the Rhino draws a conclusion about what happened to the quill. How does this affect his behaviour today?

....

13. Put the words below into pairs with similar meaning: Rage, bruised, fight, argument, bad temper, wounded, return, bring back.
a).. and ....
b).. and ....
c).. and ....
d).. and ....

14. Write in your own words the summary of the story only in the dotted lines provided below.

....

Thank you very much for your cooperation

Appendix 2: Summary of Student t-Test for Grade Four and Seven performances on recall, inference, prediction and reading comprehension

A: Grade Four

Recall t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	GFR	GFU
Mean	1.47	2.05
Variance	0.12	0.49
Observations	4	4
Hypothesised Mean Difference	0	
Df	4	
t Stat	-1.46	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.10	
t Critical one-tail	2.13	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.21	
t Critical two-tail	2.77	

GFR, (Grade Four Rural); GFU (Grade Four Urban)

Inference t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	GFR	GFU
Mean	1.46	1.85
Variance	0.017	0.08
Observations	4	4
Hypothesised Mean Difference	0	
df	4	
t Stat	-2.40	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.03	
t Critical one-tail	2.13	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.07	
t Critical two-tail	2.77	

GFR, (Grade Four Rural); GFU (Grade Four Urban)

Prediction t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	GFR	GFU
Mean	1.46	1.85
Variance	0.017	0.086
Observations	4	4
Hypothesised Mean Difference	0	
df	4	
t Stat	-2.40	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.037	
t Critical one-tail	2.13	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.07	
t Critical two-tail	2.77	

GFR, (Grade Four Rural); GFU (Grade Four Urban)

Reading comprehension t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	GFR	GFU
Mean	1.48	1.93
Variance	0.002	0.007
Observations	4	4
Hypothesised Mean Difference	0	
df	5	
t Stat	-9.15	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0001	
t Critical one-tail	2.015	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0002	
t Critical two-tail	2.57	

GFR, (Grade Four Rural); GFU (Grade Four Urban)

B: Grade Seven

Recall t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	GSR	GSU
Mean	1.53	2.31
Variance	0.11	0.26
Observations	5	5
Hypothesised Mean Difference	0	
df	7	
t Stat	-2.8	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.013	
t Critical one-tail	1.89	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.026	
t Critical two-tail	2.36	

GSR, (Grade Seven Rural); GSU (Grade Seven Urban)

Inference t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	GSR	GSU
Mean	1.56	2.16
Variance	0.07	0.07
Observations	5	5
Hypothesised Mean Difference	0	
df	8	
t Stat	-3.52	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.003	
t Critical one-tail	1.85	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.007	
t Critical two-tail	2.30	

GSR, (Grade Seven Rural); GSU (Grade Seven Urban)

Prediction t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	GSR	GSU
Mean	1.13	2.08
Variance	0.01	0.08
Observations	3	3
Hypothesised Mean Difference	0	
df	2	
t Stat	-5.29	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.01	
t Critical one-tail	2.91	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.03	
t Critical two-tail	4.3	

GSR, (Grade Seven Rural); GSU (Grade Seven Urban)

Reading comprehension t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	GSR	GSU
Mean	1.36	2.23
Variance	0.04	0.02
Observations	4	4
Hypothesised Mean Difference	0	
df	5	
t Stat	-6.80	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000	
t Critical one-tail	2.015	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.001	
t Critical two-tail	2.57	

GSR, (Grade Seven Rural); GSU (Grade Seven Urban)

Appendix 3: Letter of Certificate for Research from the Supervisors to the Department of Education

University of Limpopo
Department of English
Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa
Tel: (015) 268 3661, Fax: (015) 267 0485, Email: noel manganye@ul.ac.za
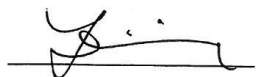
To: Department of Education

Date: 09 April 2013

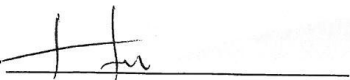**Subject: Certificate of Research**

This is to certify that Ms E. Mboacha is conducting an MA study at the University of Limpopo on Reading Comprehension at Primary School level. The title of her thesis is *A Comparative Study of the English Second Language Learners' Reading Comprehension in Urban and Rural Schools in the Limpopo Province*. The aim of the study is to investigate English second language learners' reading comprehension in the intermediate phase in grade 4 and 7. The research areas are Pietersburg Comprehensive School and Moshasha Primary School. These schools have been selected based on their location and language use.

We wish her success in her research.

Kind regards

Supervisor: Dr L. Mkuti

Co-supervisor: Mr N. Manganye

Finding solutions for Africa

Appendix 4: Permission granted for research by the Department of Education.

LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

Enquiries: Dr. Makola MC, Tel No: 015 290 9448. E-mail: MakolaMC@edu.limpopo.gov.za.

P O BOX 1025
Polokwane
0700

Dear Mboacha

RE: Request for permission to Conduct Research

1. The above bears reference.

2. The Department wishes to inform you that your request to conduct a research has been approved- TITLE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LEARNERS READING COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL SCHOOLS IN LIMPOPO PROVINCE .

3. The following conditions should be considered

   3.1   The research should not have any financial implications for Limpopo Department of Education.

   3.2   Arrangements should be made with both the Circuit Offices and the schools concerned.

   3.3   The conduct of research should not anyhow disrupt the academic programs at the schools.

   3.4   The research should not be conducted during the time of Examinations especially the forth term.

   3.5   During the study, the research ethics should be practiced, in particular the principle of voluntary participation (the people involved should be respected).

Page **1** of **2**

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Tel: 015 290 7600, Fax: 015 297 6920/4220/4494

The heartland of southern Africa - development is about people!

3.6   Upon completion of research study, the researcher shall share the final product of the research with the Department.

4. Furthermore, you are expected to produce this letter at Schools/ Offices where you intend conducting your research as an evidence that you are permitted to conduct the research.

5. The department appreciates the contribution that you wish to make and wishes you success in your investigation.

Best wishes.

Thamaga MJ

Head of Department

Date