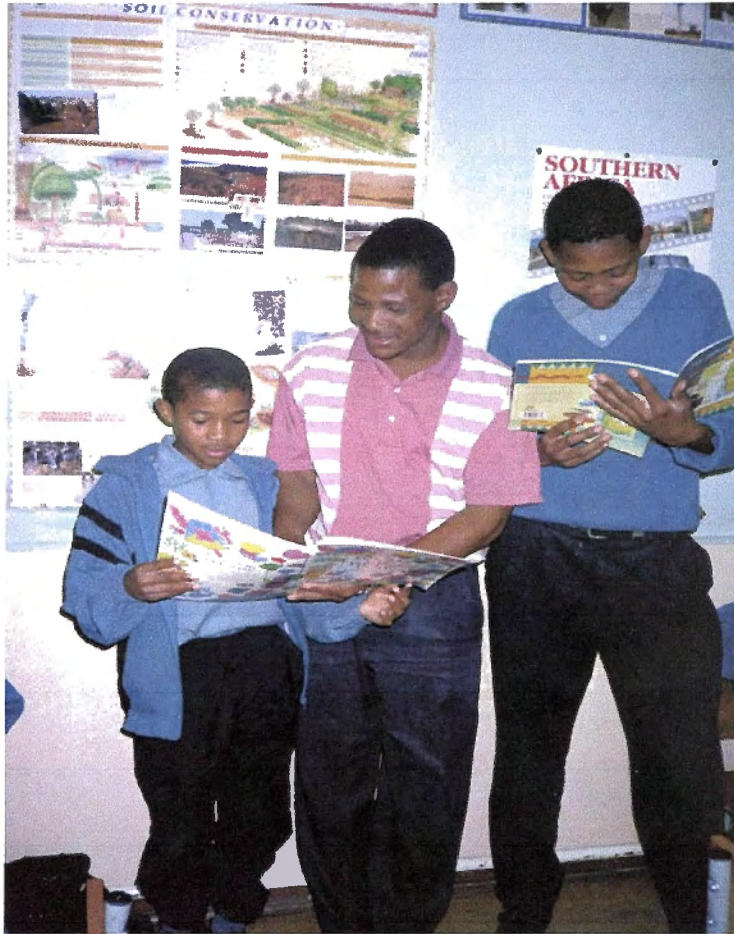


CHAPTER 3

THE ACT OF READING: IMPORTANCE, DEFINITIONS, PROCESSES AND METHODS



READER	READING	RESPONSE	TEXT	AUTHOR
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3.1 Introduction

After having given an overview of the sociolinguistic background of the readers in question, the next step is to focus on the reading process that these particular readers who will be subjected to the empirical study, will engage in. Firstly the importance of reading will be dealt with. A definition of what reading exactly embraces will be considered and then the process and methods of approaching reading will be covered. It should be noted that the scope of the study does not allow for an in-depth look at the processes of reading, as the focus is on the reader and the response to reading material. This chapter will therefore be shorter in length than the chapter on the reader's background and the reader's response.

3.2 The importance of reading

One way to sharpen the mind, I believe, is through reading. Knowledge is indeed power and only through reading do you retain information and become worldly.

People can take your possessions, but they can never take your knowledge and education from you.

We as black people, don't read enough. We need to read and to encourage young people, especially, to read more. As the future leaders of the country they need to be well informed.

With television dominating as a major entertainment medium, more and more people are reading less and less.

Knowledge is power – and powerful information comes mostly in books. The written message is retained for longer and can be referred to over and over again for reinforcement.

Read in order to sharpen your mental capacity. Reading moves beyond the mindset of powerlessness to one of power- from passive interaction to active involvement (Mabuza-Suttle, 1999:1).

The primary concern in this thesis is with **second-language reading** and specifically English reading. It is, however, difficult to separate reading, speaking, listening and writing rigidly from one another as they all form an integral part of the process of acquiring the second language. McMahon *et al.* (1998:178) conducted research on

reader readiness (learners starting to be taught to read only when ready) and emergent classrooms (classrooms where the readers start becoming engaged in reading even from birth). Emergent classrooms have yielded evidence that the four modes, **reading, speaking, writing and listening** are **interrelated forms** of language development which have to be implemented concurrently in order to effect a situation where the reader progresses to experimentation and exploration with print. It is also through reading that many second-language learners are introduced to the second language. Without a solid level of reading proficiency, learners cannot perform in a second language at a required level and cannot compete with native speakers of English. The level of language proficiency, **prior linguistics knowledge** and prior experience and background all play a **major role** in the successful reading experience.

Seymour (1975:3) hails **reading as the most important and fundamental skill taught in schools**, for there are few aspects of life in modern society to which reading does not relate to by contributing in some essential way. Children who fail to learn to read are thus deprived educationally and socially, and emotional strains and undesirable attitudes can often be related to reading disabilities (Seymour, 1975:3).

Studying reading has become increasingly more important in South Africa since many of the learners suffering from the debilitating effects of adverse socio-economic circumstances struggle with reading and even illiteracy, whether this can be ascribed to a lack of resources at home and at school which has an impact on the practice of reading skills, or whether it is caused by insufficient teaching of reading because of a language problem or whether it is caused by the problem of under qualified teachers.

The importance of reading English among South African citizens and as a concomitant among South African students at tertiary level has recently attracted fresh attention. At universities there has been a disturbing phenomenon involving the situation of languages other than English, with a radical drop being experienced countrywide in the number of students taking African languages and to some extent Afrikaans. With this disturbing new reality which does not seem to be about to

reverse itself (Deans of Arts Conference, Stellenbosch, 2000) it becomes even more important for learners at school to improve their levels of proficiency in English. Beukman (1999:23) underlines this worrying trend by indicating that student numbers of those who take indigenous languages in South Africa are dropping drastically, despite the fact that Zulu, for example, is the vernacular of most of South Africa's population. The report stresses the decrease in all numbers at university level with the exception of English that is not mentioned in the article. The number of Afrikaans students is also down. These changes in numbers are ascribed to the increasing importance attached to jobs in the more professionally oriented type of jobs where English, as the commercial and political lingua franca of the country is of course of paramount importance (even though this kind of trend runs counter to the entire spirit of the language policy of the country).

3.3 Definitions

Goodman (1988:12) provides the following definition of reading:

Reading is a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs. There is thus an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. The writer encodes thought as language and the reader decodes language to thought.

Further proficient readers are both efficient and effective. They are effective in constructing a meaning that they can assimilate or accommodate and which bears some level of agreement with the original meaning of the author. And readers are efficient in using the least amount of effort to achieve effectiveness. To accomplish this efficiency readers maintain constant focus on constructing the meaning throughout the process, always seeking the most direct path to meaning, always using strategies for reducing uncertainty, always being selective about the use of the cues available and drawing deeply on prior conceptual and linguistic competence. Efficient readers minimize dependence on visual detail. Any reader's proficiency is variable depending on the semantic background brought by the reader to any given reading task.

Goodman's definition presents the bottom-up or decoding principle. When

considering the factors playing a role in influencing the readers and reading, it is important to take into account both the so-called **bottom-up and top-down theories** of second-language reading. Carrell (1988:1-5) discusses the two complementary theories in the understanding of the reading process in the introduction to the book: *Interactive approaches to second language reading*. She (1988:2) asserts that reading was regarded as an adjunct to oral skills prior to 1970. Mastering oral dialogues and decoding sounds were regarded as to be more important in the process of developing reading proficiency. This audio-lingual method promoted by Fries and Lado was supplemented by Fries who maintained that socio-cultural elements have a definite impact on reading comprehension, but he focused on the schemata and the **bottom-up** approach giving more attention to **decoding processes**. After the audio-lingual approaches followed the psycholinguistic models dealing with native reading. Goodman describes reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game. The reader has to reconstruct meaning not necessarily using all textual cues to predict meaning. Criticism against the decoding model held that the contribution of the reader was underestimated. Widdowson, Clarke, Silberstein, Mackey and Mountford claim reading to be an active process in which the reader has to act as information processor (Carrell, 1988:3). Since 1979 a top-down perspective on reading has gained significant ground. The **top-down** view involves the reader's **former experience** and is defined as follows:

In the top-down view of second language reading, not only is the reader an active participant in the reading process, making predictions and processing information, but everything in the reader's prior experience or background knowledge plays a significant role in the progress. In this view, not only is the reader's prior linguistic knowledge ("linguistic" schemata) and level of proficiency in the second language important, but the readers' prior background knowledge of the content area of the text ("content" schemata) as well as of the rhetorical structure of the text ("formal" schemata) are also important" (Carrell *et al.*, 1988:4).

Both the bottom-up and the top-down perspectives can be used to arrive at a proper definition of reading and can be used supplementary. Both the above-mentioned approaches contain elements of Piaget's theory of cognitive development, for the

bottom-up theory refers to the assimilation and accommodation of new knowledge and the top-down theory contains elements of the theory of schemata which are constantly changed due to newly absorbed knowledge.

Stephens (1992:23) claims that both the **top-down and bottom-up approaches of reading interact**. The top-down approach involves the experiences of the reader and the bottom-up the interpretation of the letters. Interpretation of the reading book will thus involve all the linguistic components.

3.4 Processes

Birch (1998:18) in her very informative research on reading problems experienced by two particular readers who detested reading adds to the model of the top-down and bottom-up strategies by inventing a reading processor to explain the process of reading. English speaking readers start to develop a phonological sub-processor to comprehend spoken English in infancy. By the time that readers start reading, the phonological sub-processor is linked with the orthographic sub-processor which readers acquire as they become more proficient in reading. Messages from the orthographic sub-processor are sent to the lexical sub-processor that helps to recognise words and to chunk them into phrases in order to construct meaning. The whole inference engine consisting of the phonological, orthographic, lexical syntax, semantic and context sub-processors constitute the inference engine. These processes which draw and confirm inferences about printed material on sub-processors are said to be interrelated in that knowledge constantly flows from the one to the other upwards and downwards. Inferences about the printed material are based on background knowledge. Children who do not have a sound understanding of the alphabet and the sounds will treat words as whole units and children who suffer from this reading disability are often in need of an orthographic sub-processor. Slow readers also often suffer from weak connections between the orthographic and phonological sub-processors. In short it boils down to a need for a remedial programme in letter recognition, developing phonemic awareness, teaching English sounds and alphabet letters.

Dr Caroline Leaf (1999a:1) explains the reading process in terms of the brain being a muscle that has to be exercised in order to function to its full potential. The **left hemisphere of the brain** is said to study **detail called analysing**. The **right hemisphere of the brain** is said to be busy **synthesising**, studying the whole pattern. When both hemispheres of the brain are allowed to talk to each other, intelligent thinking occurs. She discusses four steps in reading successfully:

- ◆ The first step is getting your eyes to move properly so that you read better, with improved understanding of what you read.
- ◆ The second step is writing down what you read in the correct brain-friendly way. Did you know that when you write things down in straight lines, the two sides of your brain start fighting with each other? We need to learn how to write information down on paper in a way that allows the two sides of the brain to be friends. We call this brain-friendly way of writing metacogging.
- ◆ The third step is when you recheck the metacogs, reading them properly to make sure you understand them.
- ◆ The fourth step is the reteach, when you practise teaching the metacogs to someone else, because it is only when you talk about the metacogs that you realise how much you know- or don't know (Leaf, 1999a:1).

Leaf (1999b:1) refers to the reading process in terms of words going into the brain as electrical impulses. It is vital that these electrical impulses arrive at the two sides of the brain at the same time. Information should get to the eyes properly by using a finger or pencil while reading. When using a finger or pencil information arrives at the brain simultaneously and the reader can double his understanding of what he has read.

Seymour (1975:3) describes the process of learning to read as a process of growing into a language. At the age of eight a learner has the competence of written expression, a point from which he gradually improves onwards. Consequently reading

ability and improvement is also measured as the learner progresses and improves at school. It is when a learner no longer shows a sign of improvement that his reading problem is recognised. Dealing with reading problems and remedial reading are of extreme importance in our current especially black South African schools, therefore reading methods cannot be excluded from this study, as the current information on the profile of the learners reflects a need in approaching reading and teaching reading very carefully.

Apart from the various structures as functions and ways of reasoning, reading is also regarded by psycholinguists as a more complex process. The model that they have adopted to account for the comprehension of words when reading a passage is the PDP model (Parallel Distributing Processing). They draw on the fields of neurology, computer science and psychology to explain the reading process.

The first explanation for the storage of words in our brains in our lexicons is the logogan model as part of the PDP method. When you read a word and see it on the printed page, you stimulate an individual logogan, or **lexical detection device** for the specific word. **Logogans** are likened to the neurons in a gigantic neuronal network. When activated they work parallel and together with other logogans to create comprehension. High frequency words are rapidly fired by logogans and low-frequency words take longer to be stimulated. By adopting PDP, psycholinguists can account for the different spellings like **through** and **threw** which differ on account of their grammatical functions.

A second method is used frequently by readers. It is called the **TOT** (Tip-Of-the-Tongue) phenomenon. When we read and cannot recall the meaning of a word we know it is on the tip of our tongues although we cannot instantly recognise the words. Psycholinguists have discovered that the lost word is not completely forgotten, but parts of the words can be recalled and most often fragments of the words are first letters of the syllable. Sometimes the TOT word we are trying to recall seems to end in -ion, and the last syllable then which has a bathtub effect will bring to the reader's mind the following words: prestidigitation, pretension, Presbyterian and predilection.

These search strategies enable the reader to come up with the appropriate word. Our schematic knowledge that is based on our experience can assist the lexical search process further. Spreading networks of association will further assist the reader to locate the word (Scovel, 1998:56-58).

Chomsky's explanation of comprehension and interpretation in terms of transformational processes can also be linked with the processes of reading for it also deals with the reading and interpretation of text. He explained the comprehension of sentences in terms of a phrase structure that forms the skeleton and after applying the transformational rules, meaning becomes clear. The **transformations** are plenty and they create many surface structures and by rearranging words found in the deep structure comprehension takes place (Lyons, 1977:74). Chomsky made quite a number of changes to his theory and today psycholinguists maintain that transformational complexity does not influence comprehension (Scovel, 1998:63). Chomsky is also criticised by Steinberg (1993:128-131) for contradicting himself. He asserts that Chomsky's grammar is unreal. Chomsky claims that the principles and rules of his grammar are psychologically real and he asserts that there is a distinct relationship between syntax, meaning and sound. Syntactic principles are written in order to convert the deep structure into the surface structure. Steinberg (1993:129-131) criticises Chomsky, however, for his directional order of structure construction of his grammar in speaker performance, for it is absurd to think that for each letter the speaker will construct meaning letter by letter. Steinberg maintains that speaker performance begins with sounds, and not a letter and a variety of syntactic principles. He is criticised for giving syntax a primary role and making mentalistic claims about his grammar.

The factors identified to influence comprehension of texts and thus reading texts are the following **automated transition networks** (ATNs) according to which sentences should be explained sequentially. In the same way as words follow and explain the former ones and fit into a specific sequence helping to explain the meaning, sentences also form a network which can help meaning to become clear (Scovel, 1998:65). Another comprehension strategy is known as **garden-pathing**, according to which is

the strategy to explain when a reader meanders down the wrong path in his attempt to create meaning and comprehension is temporarily impeded. They explain garden-pathing in terms of the following sentence:

- A Since Jay always jogs a mile seems like a short distance to him.
- B Since Jay always jogs a mile this seems like a short distance to him.

In sentence A the reader is temporarily confused because of the omission of a comma after **jogs**. The reader then wanders on other paths in order to remove the ambiguity and to comprehend what is written down. In sentence B we can see that the structure of the sentence takes up some of the processing time. Garden-pathing is a natural strategy in comprehension and is only recognised when comprehension is interrupted (Scovel, 1998:66).

Smith (1978: 44-51) discusses reading in terms of the process of **observing with the eyes**, and keeping the information in the sensory store until it is stored in either the **short-term** or **long-term memory**.

There is no physical evidence for the sensory memory and it only acts as terminology. The operating characteristics of the sensory store is large enough to hold visual information equivalent to 25 letters per first few milliseconds of a fixation although the brain may not be fast enough to be able to perform this task. Persistence is brief, only a second, and retrieval depends on how fast the brain can process information. Sensory store cannot be overloaded.

Information stored in the **short-term memory can be retrieved at once**. It is referred to as the buffer or working memory. It refers to the memory you use to remember what you have just said on the phone or when you are looking for the number to call. The short-term memory is of central importance when it comes to reading in that you lodge the traces of what you have just read there and try and make sense of the new words to follow. It refers to what we are attending at the moment. It cannot contain little more than half a dozen items or facts. The more the reader is trying to stock the

short-term memory with letters, bits of words and unrelated letters the bigger his problem will become to make sense of it.

Long-term memory, on the other hand, refers to the knowledge that **exists in our memory** without having it rehearsed. The long-term memory's capacity is infinite and it cannot be overloaded. It is like a network of organized items related to one another. Sometimes the TOT effect is experienced when we feel that something is just on the tip of the tongue and cannot be recalled immediately and at will. The success of the long-term memory depends on clues that we can find to retrieve knowledge and also whether it was absorbed in organized form. Memorization, however, interferes with long-term memory and both processes cannot run concurrently. A child will not, for example, be able to comprehend what he is trying to read if he is also simultaneously trying to memorize the names of characters.

MacGillivray (1997:140) investigated the reading strategies first-grade learners employ when engaging in the reading process. The first strategy involves the description of pictures related or unrelated in the book without using the language in the book talking in oral fashion. The second strategy concerns the narrative telling of the story after having studied the illustrations. The third strategy deals with the reliance on memory to recite the words of the text. The fourth strategy employed utilizes pictures and written text to remember what is imparted. The fifth strategy has at its heart the reading word-for-word effect where the reader constantly has his finger on the word when saying it.

Spingies (1993:56) comments on extensive reading research which defines the reading process as a thought-getting phenomenon involving at all stages the realization of important elements of meaning in their essential relations. Reading should therefore also be regarded as a thinking process and not a mere identification of shapes. Even initial reading should be viewed as more than only "barking at print". Learning to read must be regarded as a developmental process that is an ongoing process throughout the child's school career. The apex of reading ability is seen as the ability to read critically, efficiently and regularly. Between the apex and the basis the

spiral represents interrelated factors which relate reading to thinking. The act of reading is also said to involve a hierarchy of skills such as lower order and higher order skills. The lower order skills involve letter shapes, letter recognition, auditory discrimination and possibly eye movements. The higher order skills such as comprehension, inference and speed can only be acquired after the lower order skills. The intermediate skills are seen as the skills used when the learner does vocabulary branching and extension. All these skills are said to operate simultaneously and are interrelated factors.

3.5 Methods

Methods of reading are vital to understanding the reader's profile since readers differ in levels of cognitive development and stages of development not only because of their difference in age in one class, but also because of differences in personality. The reader's reading choice can be influenced by applying certain reading methods in order to equip the reader to deal with the reading material. The most prominent aspect in the process of reading is the eye movement. **The eyes move along the lines on the page from left to right** and stop, pause and move on. While the eyes are moving no recognition is made and it is only **when the eyes stop that words are interpreted**. The number of pauses depends on the age of the reader and the degree of difficulty of the material. During the pause process, the eyes are directed to a central point that may be part of a word or even a space between words. There is also an area of partial recognition when the reader takes in a number of words.

According to Seymour (1975:11) writing a thing down acts as an aid to memory. The kinaesthetic experience of writing words enhances learning initially as well as later. Whether a child writes or reads letters, this helps him/her to bridge the gap between auditory and visual representation and to imprint onto his mind a picture of the word. The simplest language is that of **picture-writing** – for example, primitive people will be able to communicate by means of pictorial signs. A hunter will by means of a picture of a deer communicate to people in the surroundings that deer are plentiful in that area. A series of pictures would communicate a complicated message. It is not

necessary for the writer and the reader to share the same language to be able to communicate through pictures.

The next and more sophisticated type of writing is **word-writing**. Each word is made up of different signs arranged in a specific order as the words in speech. The Chinese language is one of the best-developed examples of word-writing. There is a conventional character for every word and the writer has to arrange every character representing a word in the correct order. Word-writing is an improvement on picture writing. It is difficult to learn Chinese because the children have to learn thousands of characters. Numerical digits are also an example of word-writing.

The third type of writing is **writing by means of the alphabet**. Any written language based on the alphabet is basically a phonetic language.

Seymour (1975:11-20) discusses the two methods of learning to read, viz. the **“phonic”** and the **“look-and-say”** methods.

A slow reader may never gain confidence to read if his teacher does sounds. The teacher also has a vital role to play in the selection of the suitable reading material and selecting positive encouraging even stimulating methods to aid the learner on his way to appreciate and love reading.

There is much controversy as to whether the child should first be approached by the **look-and-say** or the **phonic** method of teaching to read. Seymour (1975:7) maintains that both the methods in fact go hand in hand and that learners differ individually. What is a better approach for the one to commence with is not of necessity the best way for the other learner to pursue.

The **phonic method** is explained as a science dealing with speech sounds. Opinions differ widely on the regularity of English phonetics, but the fact of the matter is that much of the regular phonetics greatly facilitates the decoding of written symbols. The **phonic** method is therefore described as primarily a matter of sounding out words

which is in fact a **sounding out and blending approach**. Learners are taught to sound out the beginning of words first. Words are then combined into sentences and when reading the child will only sound out words which are unfamiliar to him. He will sound out the words by using consonants and vowels. Proponents of the **phonic** method focus on the single-letter words at first before embarking on teaching more complicated words. The theory underlying the phonic approach is that learners gradually learn to develop an own word recognition that makes him more independent. As a sole method the **phonic** method has limitations, but in conjunction with other methods it does have a proper place in teaching learners to read.

The **look-and-say method** of teaching learners to read works on the principle that young children are not very analytical and respond to the very characteristics of a perceived object. This method uses **pictures in relation with the matched word** and it is repeated after a while. Success depends heavily on conditioning. Reinforcement will thus form an integral part of this method and the incorrect use of a word is discouraged. Readiness, motivation and insight are, however, said to be more important than drilling and repetition. If a child has also not seen the word clearly, repetition will have no impact. In conclusion it can be added that both the **phonic** and the **look-and-say** methods can be recommended to be blended in an approach to teach reading (Seymour, 1975:20).

Added to the methods of reading are the following:

- ◆ **scanning** which is the rapid inspection of texts in search of relevant information;
- ◆ **search reading** which is a longer process of scanning a text with more periods of close attention;
- ◆ **skimming** which is the tracing of the author's sequence to gain an overall impression of the text;
- ◆ **receptive reading** which is a close reading without too much consideration of every word; and
- ◆ **responsive reading** where the reader uses the text as a prompt to reflective thought.

A trained reader will make use of the most appropriate method that serves the purpose and will not read at one speed (Spingies, 1993:61).

Arabella Koopman of Juta (1999:1) claims that current research has revealed that children learn to read by:

- ◆ Reading a lot;
- ◆ Being exposed daily to reading material of different types;
- ◆ Listening regularly to stories which are read or told to them;
- ◆ Reading about familiar cultural aspects of their lives; and
- ◆ Reading stories and information books that capture their attention and motivate them to read more.

In conclusion one can say that educators should in fact all take cognisance of what the reading process constitutes of and the methods involved in teaching learners to read, as many people in South Africa can't read and of those who can many experience reading problems even in higher grades and it does help if the educator then disposes of the necessary knowledge of how to remedy the problem, focusing on methods to teach reading such as the Look and Say and the Phonic methods.

3.6 Summary

Reading is regarded as one of the most fundamental skills needing to be mastered in order to acquire a second language. It is of extreme importance also in the light of the recent focus on literacy and the decrease in numbers of students taking the other official languages of the country at tertiary level – a fact that is highly lamentable. Reading can be defined both in terms of the bottom-up and the top-down approaches. The bottom-up approach concerns the involvement of the reader decoding the text, encoded by the writer, assimilating and accommodating information and the top-down approach involves the background and former experiences of the reader which plays an influential role in the making of meaning. There are many approaches to pursue

when interpreting the reading processes. Reading is seen as the movement of the eyes in order to determine text and a process during which the left hemisphere of the brain is analysing detail and the right hemisphere of the brain absorbing the whole pattern. Reading is also interpreted as a process of reading by means of the short-term memory and storage of information in the long-term memory. The two most salient methods by means of which a learner acquires reading skills as part of the acquisition of a language is by means of the **look-and-say** and the **phonic** methods where the learner uses the association of pictures and connect them to words and where the reader is saying the words and sounds them in order to gain a picture of the letters involved.

The subsequent chapter will deal in some more detail with the notion of reader response as part of the complex pattern involved in dealing with reading issues involving learners in the age group considered in this study.