

CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN IMPLEMENTING READING INTERVENTIONS FOR SESOTHO LEARNERS

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Abstract

In South Africa, where Sesotho is used as a language of teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase, many learners struggle to read at grade level. Despite national reading initiatives, teachers face barriers in implementing effective Sesotho reading interventions, revealing a mismatch between policy expectations and classroom realities. This study explores challenges affecting reading instruction and proposes improvement strategies. A qualitative descriptive design was used. Data were collected through a focus group of nine Grade 3 teachers from three primary schools in the Mangaung Metropolitan District. Discussions were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed. Trustworthiness was ensured through systematic coding and peer review. Findings reveal challenges such as limited Sesotho reading materials, inadequate teacher training, and minimal parental involvement. These factors hinder effective reading interventions. The study recommends sustained professional development, improved resource provision, and stronger school–community partnerships to enhance literacy outcomes.

Keywords: *Early-grade reading, foundation phase, literacy interventions, parental involvement, Sesotho literacy.*

1. Introduction

Reading is essential for learning across subjects. Learners who cannot read struggle with comprehension and critical thinking. In South Africa, learners are initially taught in home languages such as Sesotho, yet many still struggle with reading by Grade 4 (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019).

Despite interventions such as phonics programmes and the DBE's Reading for Meaning initiative, literacy outcomes remain low. Teachers, particularly in under-resourced schools, face challenges such as large classes and limited materials, making effective implementation difficult. This study explores these challenges and proposes practical strategies to improve Sesotho reading instruction.

1.1. Problem statement

Literacy levels remain low despite interventions, teachers face barriers in implementing Sesotho reading strategies, and policy expectations do not align with classroom realities.

1.2. Purpose of the study

To explore challenges teachers face in implementing Sesotho reading interventions, to understand barriers affecting reading instruction effectiveness, and to propose practical, evidence-based strategies for improvement.

2. Gaining knowledge of Sesotho reading interventions

Reading interventions are structured programmes that support struggling readers (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020). In Sesotho, they focus on comprehension, pronunciation, and decoding (Lephoto, 2021).

However, Sesotho presents unique challenges. As an agglutinative language, it contains long and complex word structures, making English-based strategies less effective. Therefore, interventions must be linguistically appropriate and culturally relevant. Teachers often face practical and structural barriers that limit effective implementation.

As a result, reading interventions need to be sensitive to the specific linguistic features of Sesotho while making use of materials that are relevant and engaging for learners. At the same time,

teachers often face both structural and practical challenges that make it difficult to apply these interventions consistently and effectively in the classroom. The below structure illustrates that both Sesotho and English were spoken by the people who speak both languages.

Table 1. Illustrates how Sesotho differs from English in structure.

Sesotho vs. English: Key Structural Differences	
Sesotho	English
Subject–Verb–Object	Subject–Verb–Object
Agglutination Meaning built by prefixes/suffixes	Separate words
Noun classes Affect agreement	No noun classes
Tone Changed by tone	Meaning Changed by word order
Pronouns and agreement Pronouns built into verbs	Pronouns Separate

3. Challenges faced by teachers in implementing Sesotho reading intervention

Many teachers lack training in African language literacy, leading to ineffective strategies such as rote learning and translation (Nkosi, 2020; Mahlangu, 2022). This limits learners' reading development.

3.1. Lack of reading materials in Sesotho

There is a shortage of age-appropriate Sesotho reading materials. Teachers often rely on translated English texts, which may not suit learners' linguistic or cultural contexts (DBE, 2023, (Department of Basic Education, 2019; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Lack of appropriate resources hinders teachers from adopting systematic reading interventions, such as guided and independent reading activities, and makes it challenging to maintain student motivation (Mestry, 2021).

Figure. 1. illustrates lack of appropriate Sesotho reading materials.



3.2. Linguistic and symbolic difficulty

The complex vocabulary and spelling of Sesotho pose special difficulties for teaching reading. Early readers become challenged to break down words because they are often very long and contain several phrases (Lephoto, 2021). This implies that teachers are expected to help learners break words into smaller, meaningful parts to support reading and understanding. Yet many lack the skills or resources necessary to remedy the situation. Furthermore, differences in spelling and pronunciation can confuse learners and make it more difficult to provide similar reading resources.

3.3. Classroom situations with multiple languages

Learners from diverse families who speak multiple African languages attend numerous schools, even those that are labelled as Sesotho-medium (Department of Basic Education, 2023). Therefore, when adopting Sesotho reading interventions, teachers must manage language variety (Nkosi, 2020). Because learners' experience with Sesotho and home language competency differs, it is challenging to implement similar strategies. To improve understanding, teachers often resort to code-switching or translation, which might interfere with reading teaching and restrict learners' exposure to real Sesotho readings (Department of Basic Education, 2023), and the code-switching confuses learners in acquiring reading skills at the foundation phase level and hinders their performance.

Figure 2. Illustrates diverse learners with multiple African language.



3.4. Insufficient time and heavy workload

Teachers face increasing administrative and curricular demands, leaving little time for individualized reading support (Department of Basic Education, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). As a result, delays in literacy development occur whereby struggling readers do not receive the repeated practice and guidance they need. Foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency may remain weak (International Literacy Association, 2024; World Bank, 2025), making it harder to read at the required grade at a later stage. Learners who fall behind in the early grades continue to lag their peers because they are not getting the targeted support needed to catch up (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). In the future, these gaps can affect overall academic performance, confidence, and engagement. Effective reading interventions require small-group instruction, repeated practice, and consistent assessment, all of which are difficult to sustain in large, overcrowded classrooms (Adeniran, 2025). Without sufficient instructional time, teachers struggle to provide the intensive support struggling readers need, particularly in the early grades where foundational skills are most critical (Department of Basic Education, 2023).

3.5. Limited parental and community involvement

Parental involvement is crucial for reinforcing reading outside the classroom, yet many parents in Sesotho-speaking communities have limited literacy skills or access to materials (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Many view reading as solely a school responsibility and do not engage in home reading activities, often unaware of its role in literacy development. Without clear communication from schools, parents may assume reading belongs only in formal classrooms and that only teachers can teach it effectively. As a result, learners receive minimal reinforcement at home, slowing literacy development and reducing exposure to the print-rich environments needed for sustained reading growth.

4. Strategies for addressing the challenges

4.1. Strengthening teacher professional development

In any organization, there is a belief that training employees leads to better outcomes. The University of the Free State (2022) claims that teachers need continuous professional development (CPD) focused on teaching reading in Sesotho. Teaching reading in Sesotho requires different approaches from English because it is an agglutinative language with unique grammatical and phonetic structures, where words are formed by attaching prefixes and suffixes to a root (University of the Free State, 2022). For example, the root *bala* (“read”) can become *ke-a-bala* (“I am reading”) or *re-bala* (“we read”). This means teachers must understand how to teach decoding, syllable awareness, and word formation within this context.

Researchers (Nkosi, 2020; UNESCO, 2020) note that many teachers are trained in English-medium instruction and lack preparation for African language literacy teaching. According to Ntlhare (2025), ongoing CPD helps teachers understand Sesotho orthography and morphology, design appropriate phonics instruction, and develop culturally relevant materials, while also strengthening diagnostic skills and confidence in implementing reading interventions. The South African Department of Basic Education (2020) further highlights that many teachers are not adequately equipped to teach literacy in African languages, reinforcing the need for targeted professional development.

4.2. Limited training in African languages

Training should include phonics instruction, comprehension strategies, and assessment techniques suited to Sesotho’s linguistic features. Continuous training and mentoring can provide practical classroom support and help teachers adapt interventions to their learners’ needs, as noted by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). The statements are in line with the South African Department of Basic Education (2020), saying that teachers require further professional development to teach literacy effectively in African languages. Learner literacy levels in African languages are particularly low due to

most of the teachers lacking specialised preparation in African-language literacy pedagogy. There is a need for ongoing professional development to equip teachers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to teach literacy effectively in African languages.

4.3. Developing and distributing quality sesotho materials

The Department of Basic Education emphasises that authorities and researchers must prioritise the development of culturally relevant, graded reading materials in African languages and that teachers and the department should collaborate to produce texts that reflect learners' experiences while fostering language development (Department of Basic Education, 2024, p. 17).

4.4. Promoting collaborative learning communities

Professional learning communities (PLCs) can help teachers share resources, discuss challenges, and reflect on effective intervention strategies (Lieberman & Miller, 2016). Collaborative professional learning practices among teachers strengthen their confidence and foster a collective responsibility for improving reading outcomes (Bromley & Mitchell, 2022).

4.5. Integrating Assessment into reading instruction

Adeniran (2025) highlighted that teachers should be trained to use simple, ongoing assessment tools such as oral reading fluency checks and comprehension rubrics to monitor learner progress. Assessment-driven instruction allows teachers to tailor interventions to specific learner needs (Adeniran, 2025).

4.6. Engaging families and communities

"It takes a village to raise a child" (African proverb). The Department of Basic Education, in collaboration with schools, can organise family literacy workshops to empower parents with strategies for supporting reading at home. Reading clubs and community story hours can also cultivate a culture of reading in Sesotho beyond the classroom. Research shows that parental and community involvement plays a significant role in children's literacy development (Department of Basic Education, 2011; UNESCO, 2017; Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, 2021). Community story hours increase literacy exposure outside the classroom and can improve reading outcomes. When parents support reading at home by reading together, asking questions, and modelling reading habits, children gain more opportunities to practice and enjoy reading. This practice helps improve word recognition, vocabulary, and comprehension.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to explore teachers' experiences in implementing Sesotho reading interventions. The design allows for an in-depth understanding of contextual challenges and practical classroom realities affecting literacy instruction.

5.2. Objectives

The study aims to:

- Investigate the challenges teachers experience in implementing Sesotho reading interventions.
- Identify barriers affecting the effectiveness of reading instruction.
- Propose practical, evidence-based strategies to improve literacy outcomes in Sesotho.

5.3. Study context and participants

Nine female Grade 3 teachers from three township primary schools in the Mangaung Metropolitan region of the Free State Province, South Africa, were purposively selected. Focus groups, digital recordings, and field notes served as the primary data collection methods, facilitating reflection and dialogue concerning shared difficulties and pragmatic resolutions. Ethical approval was secured from the pertinent institutional research ethics committee, and measures to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation were implemented prior to the commencement of the study.

5.4. Analysis

The discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then analysed using thematic analysis. To ensure trustworthiness, systematic coding procedures, peer review of emerging themes, and careful documentation of the analytical process.

6. Discussion

Findings show that inadequate training, lack of materials, linguistic complexity, multilingual classrooms, and limited time hinder effective reading instruction. Teachers often rely on translation and rote learning, slowing literacy development. Learners may not develop essential reading skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Limited parental involvement further contributes to the problem. Addressing these challenges requires professional development, improved resources, collaboration, assessment, and community partnerships.

7. Conclusion

Teachers play a vital role in developing Sesotho literacy but face significant challenges. Addressing these requires a holistic approach combining professional development, resource provision, and strong partnerships (World Bank (2021) and International Literacy Association (2020)). Equipping teachers with appropriate support will improve literacy outcomes and ensure that learners read with understanding and confidence.

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