

# Teaching Reading in Rukwangali: How Children Learn to Read---A Case Study

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## Abstract

This paper looks at how children learn to read. It draws on the cognitive constructivist view and the schemata theory which inform the teaching of reading. This is a qualitative case study carried out in an interpretive paradigm as it seeks to understand the meaning people attach to human actions. Participants were selected purposefully and in terms of convenience. The data was collected from four grade three teachers at three schools in Rundu, Kavango Region of Namibia. Qualitative research methods were employed and data was triangulated to enhance validity. The study reveals that teachers use multiple methods that include phonics and syllabification to help struggling learners to decode difficult and long words; look-and-say method for whole word recognition; and thematic approach to expand learner's vocabulary and enhance their understanding. The study also found that lack of reading books written in Rukwangali and large classrooms constrain the teachers from teaching in a more learner-centred way.

**Keywords:** Teaching Reading, Reading in Rukwangali, Children Learning Reading

## 1. Introduction

This study was done to investigate the teaching of reading in Rukwangali in grade 3, four Namibian classrooms. Rukwangali is an African language that is used as a first language in schools in the Kavango region of Namibia. The language like other African (Bantu) language is described by Trudell & Schroeder (2007) as having "shallow (or transparent) orthography that have strong, clear sound-grapheme correspondence" (p.168).

The lower primary phase is "the foundation upon which the whole of Basic Education is established" (Namibia. Ministry of Education [MoE], 2006, p.1); it is the level where basic skills of reading; writing and concept formation are acquired. As a lecturer, I train lower primary student teachers (grades 1-4). One of my tasks is to do School Based Studies (SBS) visits. When I observed classes during SBS visits, I realised that many children have difficulty in reading in both their mother tongue as well as in English, even at the level of grade four. It was also observed that schools lack books written in Rukwangali language for learners to read independently to enhance their fluent reading skill. Learners reading skill is influenced by the way they are taught as alluded to by Strang et.al:

If we think of reading as word recognition, we will drill on the basic sight vocabulary and word recognition skills. If we think of reading as a merely reproducing what the authors says, we will direct the student's attention to the literal meaning of the passage and check his comprehension of it. If we think of reading as a thinking process, we shall be concerned with the reader's skill in making interpretations and generalizations, in drawing inferences and conclusions. (Strang, McCullough & Traxler cited in Leu & Kinzer, 1987, p. 8)

Therefore, this study wanted to find out how this vital skill was being taught in local schools so that it could suggest ways to teach students more effectively and equip them with strategies they could use to teach reading to their learners.

The second reason that prompted the research was the findings from studies carried out in related aspects of literacy in Namibia by the English Teacher Development Project in conjunction with the Ministry of Education on the English Language Proficiency of teachers and student teachers in the year 2000 which found that "the training that the teachers have undergone does not have a clear impact on their language and teaching skills." (Namibia. MBEC, 2000, p. 60). The study also reveals that poor reading skills affect both teaching and learning. Other studies conducted in Namibia suggest that teachers are ill equipped to teach reading (Legere, Trewby & van Graan, 2000; Haingura cited in Nzwala, 2007).

## 2. Significance of the Study / The Context of the Study

Reading literacy has been defined as “the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and / or valued by the individual.” (MBESC, 2004, 20); it is the interpretation of printed words and finding meaning in them (Wario, 1989). Reading, according to Marian (in Rees & Shortland, 1997) is what you do for information and recreational purposes like enjoyment and pleasure. Reading is a very important skill and it contributes to the success of a learner’s school career as well as being important later in life (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1998). Heckman (as cited in Statkus, Rivalland & Rohl, 2005) described reading as a communication skill that begets many other skills; it’s a key part of our capacity to increase our capacity. If learners struggle to read, it will be difficult to cope in other subjects as learning involves the understanding of concepts and it also improves the cognitive skill and the academic development of a learner.

Many studies have been carried out by the Ministry of Education to try to understand this important skill. A study carried out by the English Teacher Development Project in conjunction with the Ministry of Education on English Language Proficiency of teachers and student teachers in the year 2000 showed that “35% of LP teachers, ... do not have the required level of proficiency in English to teach at their respective phase” (MBEC, 2000, p.58). This means that teachers themselves have problems in reading. Some of the findings show that “the training that the teachers have undergone does not have clear impact on their language and teaching skills” (MBEC, 2000, p. 60). It was further explained that the poor reading skill affects both teaching and learning.

Research done by the Namibian Institute for Educational Development (NIED) in 2000 to investigate the reading and writing practices in the Lower Primary (LP) phase as well as the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) 2 study that was done in 1995-2000 at grade 6 has indicated that Namibian scores for literacy were poor compared to those of other African countries. The SACMEQ 2 study found that grade 6 learners were unable to read with understanding and that this led to the high failure rate at grade 10 and 12 level. This means that learners go through their lower primary, upper primary as well as junior secondary school without developing fluency in reading. This problem can be minimised if learners’ reading skills are developed while they are still at lower primary level.

I am a lecturer at Rundu College of Education and when I went for class observation during School Based Studies (SBS), I realised that there are a number of children who have difficulties in reading in both their mother tongue as well as in English, even at grade four level. Some learners were found to be far below the level where they are supposed to be compared to the grade where they are in (Rees & Shortland, 1997).

## 3. Questions of the Study

The intention of this research is to find answers to the following questions:

1. What do grade 3 teachers understand about teaching reading to learners
2. What kind of strategies and activities do grade 3 teachers employ in order to engage their learners

## 4. Research Methodology

This section discusses the research design, methodology and the tools that were used to collect the data, namely: interviews, classroom observations, stimulated recall discussions of the lessons observed and document analysis. It also explains the sampling procedure, ethical and validity issues, data analysis techniques as well as the limitations of the study.

### 4.1 Research Design

The research design I chose is the interpretive paradigm as this paradigm “seeks to understand the meanings that people give to their social interactions” (Winberg, 1997, p. 16). Cohen and Manion (1994, p. 37) explain that interpretive researchers “begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them”. They further contend that this paradigm “yields insight and understanding of people’s behaviour” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 37). Conducting my research within this paradigm has helped me explore and uncover the participants’ understandings of reading and identify the strategies and activities in which learners are engaged. As an interpretive researcher, I am interested in how grade 3 teachers’ interpretations and understandings influence their intentions and actions with regard to teaching reading to their learners (Winberg, 1997).

The approach is a case study because this method gives a researcher an “aspect of a problem to be studied in some depth within a limited time scale” (Bell, 1993, p. 8). Interpretive research as explained by Winberg (1997, p. 20) “uses interviews, personal documents and other hermeneutic processes to produce interpretive knowledge”. The

interpretive paradigm seeks the personal involvement of the researcher in trying to understand the taken-for-granted situations (Cohen & Manion, 1994); I spent time in teachers' classrooms observing how they taught reading.

#### 4.2 Sampling

The data was collected from four grade 3 teachers at three selected schools in the Rundu region. The sampling was done purposefully and in convenience. These schools were chosen because two of the schools are new schools and are staffed mainly by recent BETD graduates from Rundu College of Education (RCE) where the researcher is a lecturer and they are support schools where student teachers go during SBS. It provided an opportunity for the researcher to examine her own practice as she taught two of the selected teachers in BETD class during their training.

All these schools are situated in the Rundu urban area and thus it was relatively easy for the researcher to reach them (convenience sampling). Working with only three schools and four teachers would give me an opportunity to study their practice in depth.

The following table shows the profile of the three schools and the four participants who took part in the study.

School	Teacher s' names (pseudo nym)	Professional Qualifications	Gender	Experience		Number of learners		
				In teaching	At grade 3 level	Boys	Girls	Total
School A	Donna	BETD: Pre-service	Female	8	7	19	19	38
School A	Lucky	BETD: In-service	Female	15	3	18	22	40
School B	Grace	BETD: In-service	Female	15	8	21	23	44
School C	Sylvia	BETD: Pre-service	Female	5	5	19	18	37

The topic was explained to the teachers and when they agreed to participate in the study, the researcher asked for formal permission from the principals of the participating schools. Terre Blanche and Durrheim caution one about the possibility of gatekeepers having the habit of "referring one to the other authorities" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999; Aubrey et. al., 2000). Therefore, the researcher first asked permission to pursue research in schools from the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and attached the permission letter to the letters of request. The researcher personally took the letters to the principals in order to be on hand should queries arise. This made the process of gaining access to the research sites easier.

#### 4.3 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through the following multi methods or techniques to enhance validity:

- semi-structured interviews,
- document analysis,
- classroom observation, and
- stimulated recall discussions on the lessons observed.

##### 4.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

###### The pilot interviews

McMillan & Schumacher (2001) recommend that one pilots your research tools, for example interviews, before they actually take place with the participants. Two pilot interviews were conducted prior to the actual interviews, first with a grade 3 teacher and second with the research supervisor. The first pilot interview with a grade 3 teacher was conducted in English.

## Interviews

Altrichter, Posch and Somekh (1993, p.101) define interviews as “communications that aim at getting to know points of view, interpretations and meaning in order to gain greater understanding of a situation”. Interviews were selected because of their adaptability: “an interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings which questionnaires can never do” (Bell, 1993, p. 91). In order for the researcher to access the teachers’ understanding of how they teach their children to read fluently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four grade 3 teachers. The interviews were conducted in Rukwangali, the language that is used in the lessons as working in their home language would give the teachers the opportunity to express themselves more freely and enable them to give practical examples from their teaching.

The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. Transcriptions of the interviews were provided to the participants for verification before they were translated into English; then they were analysed. The interviews helped the researcher to gain insight into the teachers’ understanding of how to teach reading and how they put this knowledge into practice.

### 4.3.2 Document Analysis

During the time that I spent observing lessons in the classes, I collected some documents like the thematic schemes of work of teachers, their weekly lesson plans and some samples of learners’ work. I did this to help me understand the strategies teachers use and the activities they give to their learners.

### 4.3.3 Classroom Observation

The researcher carried out two lesson observations and took descriptive field notes in each of the four classes to identify features of the teacher’s classroom practice. The lessons were taught in Rukwangali; transcribed and then translated into English.

Observation was also a means of triangulating the data obtained through interviews. Altrichter, et al. (1993, p. 92) contend that, “descriptive reporting describes the behaviour ‘as it is’ (what has been said and done) with as little explanation, judgment and evaluation as possible.” Maykut and Morehouse (as cited in Nzwala, 2007 p. 41) pointed out that:

The qualitative researcher’s field notes contain what has been seen and heard by the researcher, without interpretation. In other words, the participant observer’s primary task is to record without inferring feelings to the participants and without inferring why and how something happened.

According to Bell (1999, p.109) direct observation is reliable because it helps “to discover whether people do what they say they do, or behave in the way they claim to behave.” Patton (as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) pointed out that observation gives the opportunity to the observer to gather ‘live’ data from ‘live’ situations as he / she will look at what is taking place *in situ* rather than receiving second hand information.

The lessons were audio recorded to capture the classroom interactions between the teacher and learners. According to Altricheter, Posch and Somekh (1993) tape-recording can be valuable in giving insights into participants’ thinking.

### 4.3.4 Stimulated Recall Discussions

During the lesson presentations, I noted questions on unclear areas / actions that occurred in column 3 and after the lessons; I carried out stimulated recall discussions of the lessons with the teachers using my field notes. This was to try to understand all aspects of the lesson. The discussions gave the teachers an opportunity to explain why they prepared and taught their lessons in a certain way.

## 4.4 Ethical and Validity Issues

The first research ethical principle that was considered was the principle of autonomy. Participation should be on a voluntary base. I discussed the issue of consent with my participants and ensured them of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time.

The second ethical principle that was considered was the principle of anonymity. I respected the anonymity of my participants by using pseudonyms in place of their real names.

The third ethical principle was confidentiality. The information that was collected during the data collection as well as that which emerged during the data analysis was handled confidentially.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using qualitative data analysis. The interview transcriptions and observation notes were first coded into categories and then analysed (Bell, 1999). To validate data, triangulation was used by interviewing the participants, observing their classrooms, discussing their lessons and getting information from the documents they used in their classrooms, plus samples of the learners' work. During the analysis I constantly cross-checked the data obtained using these different tools.

#### 4.6 Limitations

I am aware that being a college lecturer, teachers might be constrained in what they said to me and how they behaved. To overcome this, I talked to them about the research and reassured them that I would maintain their anonymity and confidentiality and that I would share with them all my findings and analysis.

The interviews were conducted in the mother tongue, Rukwangali then translated into English. There is a possibility that some of the teachers' ideas might have lost their original meaning through translation. To reduce this risk, I did the translations myself and took the translated transcript to the participants for cross checking.

Another limitation that is common to all case studies is that of depth. The sample of my study consisted of only four teachers from three schools, therefore findings cannot be generalised.

### 5. Results and Their Discussion

The discussion is presented per categories they were coded into.

#### 5.1 The Choice of the Method Used by the Teachers

This study reveals the use of multiple methods to teach reading. Teachers used a variety of methods that included phonics and syllabification to help learners who struggled to decode words; and the look-and-say method for whole-word recognition and meaning making at word level and sentence level.

Teachers tried to implement the whole language approach to teaching and learning by using thematic teaching, as they had a basic understanding of the importance of actively involving learners, but a lack of books restricted teachers from fully involving learners in active participation.

Teachers in this study are still working at the level of sounds and words, and then to sentences and finally to text. Their approach is strongly rooted in phonics and reading aloud, rather than using real books and focusing on meaning. This situation is brought about by lack of books written in Rukwangali.

The lack of books makes the lessons teacher directed and it prevents learners from getting the practice they need to read fluently, as well as to demonstrate deeper understanding and critical evaluation of texts. A lack of books and large classes constrain teachers from teaching in a more learner-centred way.

In order to adapt to these resource constraints, teachers have adopted the approach of teaching reading from posters in place of books. They have successfully moved away from rote learning, as the learners are actively involved in the lessons.

Referring back to the opening quotation in this thesis from Strang, McCullough, and Traxler (cited in Leu & Kinzer, 1987), this study reveals that the teachers view reading primarily as a combination of a visual task of word recognition and reproduction of what authors say. The evidence is that their teaching is based on phonics and word recognition, meaning making at word and sentence level. Although the teachers discuss reading texts with their learners to support understanding, they do not give them opportunities to make inferences and draw conclusions to make reading a thinking skill.

The fact that there are marked similarities between the ways that the four teachers teach reading suggests that these practices may be widespread, because their lessons are guided by the syllabus, which contributes to the similarity and consistency in their teaching.

However, silent reading for enjoyment, which is an objective in the syllabus, was not observed in the three classrooms in which books were not used. This means that learners are not getting enough exposure to a wide range of texts to increase automaticity, fluency and comprehension (Abadzi, 2008). Thus, learners in this study were at a disadvantage in developing as skilled, independent readers.

#### 5.2 The Use of Teaching Corner for Discussions and Shared Reading

The use of discussions and shared reading came out strongly in the lesson presentations of all four teachers observed. The discussions helped learners to understand the structure of Rukwangali language as well as expanding their

vocabulary when the teachers explained the meaning of words. Furthermore, they were involved in phonological awareness activities such as discussing syllables and phonemes. They were guided in the correct pronunciation of words and the use of punctuation marks to guide reading aloud, both of which contribute to fluency in reading.

The teachers discussed the texts prior to the learners reading them, in order to ensure that the learners understood what they read. They guided their learners through questions and answers, discussing the pictures as well as reading and explaining vocabulary words from the text. Shared reading also helped to solve the problem of lack of reading books.

### *5.3 Phonics and Syllabification*

Even though grade 3 learners are supposed to have gone beyond the decoding level towards fluent and automatic reading with understanding, there were learners who were still struggling to read. To assist these learners, all the teachers in my study used phonics and syllabification as strategies to help learners understand the letter-sound relationship and be able to put together or blend sounds represented by letters (Leu & Kinzer, 1987; Hann, 1984).

The teachers in this study found syllabification a very useful strategy in teaching learners to decode and read in Rukwangali because of its orthography. African languages have a “consonant vowel phonological structure” (Williams, 1998, p. 97) and “strong, clear sound-grapheme correspondence” (Trudell & Schroeder 2007, p. 167).

### *5.4 The Use of Thematic Teaching*

All four teachers in this study made use of thematic teaching, organising their teaching around a theme. This approach promotes reading for understanding as learners read about what they had already discussed.

However, the fact that the thematic schemes of work are only provided in English is problematic, as teachers do not have sufficient knowledge to work out the phonics in Rukwangali. Only one teacher was able to rethink the English phonics in Rukwangali. The other teachers simply taught vocabulary from the reading passage instead of phonics.

### *5.5 The Problem of Language*

It was revealed that some of the learners who learn to read in Rukwangali are not mother tongue speakers. Research has shown that learners find learning to read easier when it is done in mother tongue because their phonological awareness and phonemic awareness has developed due to their exposure to that language (Armbruster et al., 2003; Graves et al., 2007). Research shows that children’s ability to learn to read can depend on how much phonological and phonemic awareness they have (Armbruster et al., 2003). Learners’ fluent reading and comprehension in this study was hindered when their home languages influenced their pronunciation of words. This created problems as teachers kept on correcting them.

### *5.6 Lack of Reading Books*

The lack of reading books in Rukwangali was the main problem cited by all four teachers involved in this study. The study revealed that only one of the four teachers taught reading from books while two taught reading from posters and one taught reading from the chalkboard.

Similarly, a study done by NIED found that “there is a shortage of textbooks, teaching aids and support materials for national languages” (Legere, et al., 2000, p. 28).

Research attaches great significant to the use of books in reading (Leu & Kinzer, 1987; Hedge, 1985; Graves et al., 2007; Nzwala, 2007). Lack of reading books deprives learners from experiencing independent reading.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendation**

The findings of this study revealed that the teachers use a range of methods and strategies to teach reading. Phonics and syllabification were used to help learners who had trouble reading. Thematic teaching was used to teach in a holistic way, to promote reading for understanding and learner-centred teaching, as well as to guide discussions about themes and topics.

However, the fact that phonics is not provided in the scheme of work in Rukwangali was problematic. A translation needs to be done by Rukwangali language experts who know the orthography of the language.

This study also found that the issue of language and lack of reading materials hinders the teaching of reading for understanding.

Class sizes are bigger in Namibia and this is another challenge for teachers to reach out to each learner in the class.

This study is not designed to make generalisations and recommendations, as its main purpose was to investigate grade 3 teachers’ understanding of how to teach reading, to observe the strategies they used to teach reading and the activities

in which they engaged their learners. However, there are three issues emerging from the study that I think need to be addressed:

- The Ministry of Education, specifically NIED, the institution responsible for curriculum development, should consider calling in language specialists who have knowledge and understanding of the orthography of Rukwangali to translate the thematic schemes of work into the mother tongue. Some aspects, such as phonics, would need to be reconceptualised.
- In-service workshops should be conducted to equip teachers with more knowledge of different methods of teaching reading as well as to fully understand the themes and topics in the thematic scheme of work.
- Reading books in mother tongue need to be developed for learners to practice independent reading in order to develop fluent reading skills.

Challenges will continue to exist in the teaching of reading, but I feel strongly that if these issues are addressed, the problems will be minimised and the quality of education will improve.

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