

Assessing and Identifying Learning Barriers: Insights into Reading Difficulties Observed by Grade 7 Teachers

<https://doi.org/10.2478/jesm-2025-0017>

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Abstract

This article explores the learning barriers related to reading difficulties observed by Grade 7 teachers in their English First Additional Language (EFAL) classrooms. Utilising a qualitative research approach and case study design, the research gathered insights from twenty Grade 7 teachers at four mainstream primary schools in the Gauteng East District through purposive non-probability sampling. Data was collected through individual and focus group interviews, which were voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic data analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns, with direct quotes from participants grouped into key themes. The study reveals that Grade 7 learners face significant challenges such as language difficulties, oral reading difficulties, comprehension difficulties, poor concentration, and lack of interest and motivation. The study recommends that teachers develop Individual Support Plans (ISPs) to address the specific needs of learners with reading difficulties. Additionally, Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) is essential to equip teachers with the tools to adapt their instructional strategies and foster more inclusive, supportive classroom environments. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a deeper understanding of reading difficulties' causes, prevalence, and impact. It offers practical insights for refining teaching practices, improving assessment methods, and informing educational policies to enhance literacy outcomes.

Keywords: assessment, comprehension difficulties, Grade 7 learners, identification, learning barriers, oral reading difficulties, reading difficulties

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1. Introduction

Reading is a critical skill that underpins academic success, yet many learners face significant barriers to acquiring proficient reading abilities, especially in the later stages of primary education. Reichle (2021) defines reading as an active process of extracting meaning from written texts, which is a complex skill requiring the coordination of several interrelated sources of information. Cartwright (2023) and Setiorini et al. (2022) state that reading is an important learning tool which will become a barrier for learners if they have not mastered it and will hinder them from achieving success in learning. In addition, Layne (2023) posits that daily activities require a person to have basic reading skills because, without reading skills, people struggle in life. Learners who experience reading difficulties avoid reading whenever they can and struggle with written work in all subjects, which leads to poor academic performance (Pressley et al., 2023). 80% of learners who experience difficulties in reading are in special schools only because they have not learnt to read; this happens only because teachers in mainstream schools are not well-trained to support these learners (Tomas et al., 2021).

Identifying and assessing learning barriers have been widely explored in educational research, emphasising the diverse factors hindering learner progress (Ntseto et al., 2021). Guided by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (DBE, 2011), Grade 7 learners are expected to read any text accurately, whether in their Home Language or English. However, the reality is that Grade 7 learners are experiencing difficulties with reading, which affects their academic performance negatively. These difficulties are particularly pronounced in classrooms where English is taught as a First Additional Language (EFAL), as learners must simultaneously navigate language acquisition and reading development. On the other hand, Mulaudzi (2023) mentions that barriers, ranging from cognitive challenges to external factors such as socioeconomic status, can impact a learner's confidence, motivation, and performance in school. Grade 7 teachers are often the first to observe and identify reading difficulties, giving them a unique perspective on the barriers that hinder learners' reading development. Understanding how these teachers assess and identify reading difficulties is crucial for developing intervention strategies to support learners with reading

difficulties. This study explores the types of learning barriers related to reading difficulties that Grade 7 teachers observe. By examining the teachers' insights, this research seeks to uncover patterns and commonalities in how reading difficulties are recognised, identified, and addressed in the classroom. However, research shows that many teachers lack the necessary skills to effectively meet the diverse needs of learners with reading difficulties, particularly in an inclusive classroom setting (Conner et al., 2022). Through a detailed exploration of Grade 7 teachers' experiences and observations, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of learners' reading difficulties and the practical strategies teachers use to identify and address these barriers. Ultimately, the goal is to provide valuable insights to inform future educational practices and interventions, ensuring all learners succeed in their reading development and beyond.

2. Literature Review

Reading is a fundamental academic skill critical in supporting learner success across disciplines. It helps learners access knowledge, develop critical thinking abilities, and enhance communication skills (Yulian, 2021). Furthermore, reading promotes cognitive development, expands vocabulary and language skills, and provides exposure to different writing styles to improve learners' writing abilities. By becoming proficient readers, learners can transition into independent learners, furthering their academic journey. This is particularly crucial for Grade 7 learners, who engage with more complex texts across various subjects. However, many learners in this grade face significant decoding, comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and fluency difficulties, which can hinder their academic progress (Boyes, 2022).

Decoding, which involves recognising and pronouncing words by mapping letters to sounds, is a crucial skill for Grade 7 learners. However, it can be challenging for learners with reading difficulties, especially when encountering complex words and academic vocabulary (Amalia, 2022; Lawrence et al., 2022). These difficulties may stem from insufficient phonics instruction or limited exposure to words, hindering fluency and comprehension as learners focus more on decoding individual words than understanding the text.

Furthermore, reading comprehension, which requires understanding, interpreting, and retaining information, is essential at this stage. However, limited background knowledge, lack of reasoning skills, and insufficient vocabulary can create barriers to success (Collins & Lindström, 2021). A strong vocabulary is key to navigating academic texts, and gaps in vocabulary, often due to limited exposure or insufficient reading, can hinder learners' ability to grasp key concepts and engage with more complex material (Chiew & Ismail, 2021). Additionally, struggles with reading fluency, often caused by word recognition, decoding, or reading speed issues, can prevent learners from processing texts efficiently, further impacting their academic performance and ability to engage with Grade 7 curriculum demands (Madaminova, 2024). Cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors may also contribute to these challenges. These are vital considerations for teachers when developing interventions to support learners who experience reading difficulties.

2.1 Factors Contributing to Reading Difficulties

Cognitive and environmental factors can influence reading difficulties among Grade 7 learners (Snowling & Hulme, 2021). Internal factors such as cognitive processing difficulties, attention deficits, memory problems, and language processing disorders can significantly hinder learners' abilities to decode words, understand text, and read fluently. External factors, such as classroom environment, teacher expertise, and support from home, also play an important role in shaping learners' reading development (Liwanag, 2023). Additionally, the transition from learning to read to reading to learn, typically occurring in Grade 7, can aggravate challenges for learners with unmet foundational literacy skills (Sparks, 2021). These difficulties, if left unaddressed, can result in academic struggles, lower self-esteem, decreased motivation, and long-term setbacks in both educational and career pursuits. The developmental shift in Grade 7 learners' reading expectations presents an additional challenge. At this stage, learners must engage with complex texts across various subjects, requiring advanced decoding and comprehension skills and an understanding of academic content. As a result, reading proficiency becomes even more critical, and gaps in literacy can have far-reaching consequences

in subjects like science, social studies, and mathematics (Boyes, 2022).

2.2 Teacher Role and Intervention Strategies

Teachers, particularly those working with Grade 7 learners, are essential in identifying and addressing reading difficulties. They play a critical role in recognising early signs of reading challenges, such as difficulty with decoding, summarising texts, or avoiding reading aloud (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2021). Teachers can pinpoint specific challenges that hinder reading development through formal and informal assessments. Standardised tests such as DIBELS, running records, and reading comprehension tests, along with informal reading inventories and one-on-one teacher-learner conferences, allow for a comprehensive understanding of each learner's reading abilities (DeVries, 2023; Ward & Hattan, 2024; Aguirre et al., 2024). Moreover, teacher perceptions and biases significantly influence how reading difficulties are identified and addressed. Teachers who recognise that reading difficulties are not limited to decoding and comprehension but may extend to attention, memory, or language processing issues are better positioned to implement targeted interventions (Tomas et al., 2021; Boyes, 2022). Additionally, teacher expectations can encourage proactive interventions or contribute to the underdiagnosis of reading issues, underscoring the importance of high teacher expectations in promoting learner success.

2.3 Teacher Training and Professional Development

Practical teacher training is crucial for equipping teachers with the necessary skills to identify and address reading barriers. Pre-service education provides the foundational knowledge of reading development, while ongoing professional development ensures teachers are informed about the latest research and intervention strategies (Christopher, 2023). Evidence-based instructional strategies, including differentiated instruction, small group work, and one-on-one interventions, are essential in providing targeted support for struggling readers (Capin et al., 2024; William, 2025; Chang, 2023). However, limited time, large class sizes, and inadequate resources can challenge the implementation of these strategies. Addressing these issues through policy reform, increased funding, and

reduced class sizes is vital for improving the quality of reading interventions (Donegan & Wanzek, 2021; McMaster et al., 2021).

2.4 Technology in Reading Support

In recent years, technology has emerged as a powerful tool for identifying and addressing reading difficulties. Digital tools, apps, and assistive technologies provide personalised, data-driven instruction that can address individual learning needs. Research suggests that when integrated with traditional instructional methods, technology-based interventions can significantly enhance reading proficiency, mainly as part of a broader instructional strategy (Mize et al., 2023; Stein et al., 2022). Nonetheless, technology should be employed with high-quality teaching practices to maximise its potential to improve reading outcomes.

2.5 Cultural and Linguistic Factors

The cultural and linguistic diversity in Grade 7 classrooms presents additional complexity when addressing reading difficulties. Learners from diverse backgrounds may face challenges in decoding words, understanding vocabulary, or grasping complex sentence structures, particularly second language learners. Teachers must be sensitive to these factors to avoid misidentifying learners as struggling readers due to language barriers (Ateek, 2021). Culturally responsive teaching strategies, such as scaffolding, differentiated lessons, and targeted language support, can help ensure that all learners, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background, can succeed in reading.

2.6 Classroom Environment and Teacher-Learner Interactions

A positive classroom environment is crucial for developing reading skills, particularly for learners with reading difficulties. Teachers can foster a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes active engagement with reading tasks, encouraging learners to take risks and improve their skills. Teacher-learner interactions play a key role in this process, as positive, supportive relationships help learners feel confident and motivated to overcome reading challenges. By building trust, offering constructive feedback, and fostering an engaging environment, teachers can create the environment necessary for reading development (Campilla & Cariño, 2024).

Research aims

This study aims to assess and identify the learning barriers related to reading difficulties observed by Grade 7 teachers.

Research question

What are the key learning barriers to reading difficulties observed by Grade 7 teachers?

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm to explore teachers' subjective and multifaceted experiences (Ryan, 2018; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022), using a qualitative approach to examine these experiences in depth within a natural setting (Hatch, 2023). A case study design was employed to analyse the experiences of Grade 7 teachers observing learners with reading difficulties, utilising multiple data sources over time (Hancock et al., 2021). Purposive non-probability sampling selected twenty Grade 7 English First Additional Language teachers to provide insights relevant to the research question (Thomas, 2022). Thematic data analysis was then applied to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes to uncover deeper meanings (Christou, 2022).

4. Findings and interpretations

The following figure represents the key to the presentation of data.

Figure 1: Keys for presenting data

Key of abbreviations.

P: Participant.

P1-8: Individual interviews.

For example.

P1 refers to Participant 1.

P9-14: Focus-group 1.

P 15-20: Focus-group 2.

For example.

P10FG1 refers to Participant 10 in Focus Group 1.

P20FG2 refers to Participant 20 in Focus Group 2

The study reveals that Grade 7 learners face significant challenges related to reading, such as language difficulties, oral reading difficulties, comprehension difficulties, poor concentration, and lack of interest and motivation. Participants also mentioned that learners

used various languages when communicating with each other instead of English, which is used for teaching and learning. As a result, home languages seemed to reduce opportunities for learners to improve their English vocabulary. The themes are discussed in the next section with selected extracts and elaborated with literature. Extracts are presented verbatim.

4.1 Language difficulties experienced by learners

Regarding language difficulties, the study found that Grade 7 learners are taught in English as FAL, which is a language that is not their home language. Thus, English as a foreign language was a barrier to learning for most learners. Furthermore, it emerged that participants were concerned that English as a Foreign Language affected learners' academic attainment, as most learners could not reach the desired learning outcomes. Below are examples of selected extracts from individual and focus-group interviews.

To express their views on language as a barrier to learning, P12FG1 mentioned that:

I found that they [learners] have a language barrier since they communicate in Zulu and Sotho in their community, and here [in the school], we use English as a medium of instruction; that is the language barrier number one I observe.

Elaborating, P8 mentioned that:

... She was speaking a "dead" language; that was the language she was speaking when she came here. When she was admitted, I was informed that this learner did not know Sesotho or English... It will be the first time she is learning these languages,

When we probed about the phrase "speaking dead language", P8 said:

Dead language simply means the language one could not understand, the language the school and the surrounding community do not use, know and understand.

P3 stated that:

One of the problems is that they [learners] speak different languages at home. At crèche [day care], the child is exposed to other languages. As a Pedi, the child is raised by a Zulu-speaking mother and a Pedi father. In crèche, the child is exposed to Xitsonga; in pre-school, the class teacher is a Zulu lady. Now, a child has been exposed to different languages.

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So, that is also a problem because when a child gets to Grade 1, the teacher uses Sepedi to teach, and in the intermediate phase (grades 4-7), subjects are taught in English as a first additional language. This Grade 7 child is now exposed to several languages, which becomes a problem.

P1 echoed the same view and said:

Yooo!!! Yhaaa (showing the seriousness of the issue) ... it is not easy, especially for me. So, when learners are in Grade 7, they are taught all subjects in English, so if those learners have not mastered their reading skills in English from the previous grades, they will continue with that gap until they reach Grade 7, especially if they did not get support in the other grades. Mhhhh..... Most of our learners lack exposure to the English language. As a result, they lack vocabulary, and most of the words are unfamiliar, so it is not easy.

On the other hand, P20FG2 also shared that:

Learners do not understand English. We have learners who speak different languages, and when they come for the first day, you do not hear what they are saying; you do not know how to help them because maybe I [as a teacher] also do not know their language. They speak Xitsonga or other languages, which also becomes problematic, so it is a big problem. How will they help them at home? If the learner does not understand the class instruction, teaching in English makes it more problematic and does not help.

This theme highlights the context relating to language difficulties from the participant's perspective, and it is also evident that the classrooms are multilingual. Language diversity in schools poses significant challenges to learning, mainly when the medium of instruction differs from learners' home languages (Fesi & Mncube, 2021). As highlighted by P12FG1, learners struggle with transitioning from their community languages, such as isiZulu and Sesotho, to English. Limited exposure to English leads to difficulties in comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, reinforcing the gap in learning (Charamba, 2023). The issue is aggravated when learners enter school speaking a language unfamiliar to teachers and peers, as noted by P8, who described such a case as speaking a "dead language." This linguistic isolation hinders academic progress and

social integration (Mofammere, 2023). Moreover, exposure to multiple languages at home and in early childhood education settings can sometimes result in confusion rather than linguistic enrichment, making it difficult for learners to adapt to English instruction in later grades (Maseko & Siziba, 2024).

The long-term effects of these challenges are evident, as learners who do not receive adequate language support in lower grades continue to struggle by the time they reach Grade 7 (Petersen et al., 2020). P1 and P3 emphasise that without structured interventions, language barriers persist and hinder academic success. Additionally, teachers face difficulties assisting learners who speak unfamiliar languages, further complicating instruction (Fesi & Mncube, 2021). To address these issues, bilingual education models, structured language development programs, and teacher training in multilingual instruction should be implemented (Charamba, 2023). Enhancing parental involvement and community engagement can also help bridge the language gap and support learners' linguistic development, ultimately improving their educational outcomes.

4.2 Oral reading difficulties

Linked to the above theme, the study found that learners could not identify the words they saw. They omitted letters and made sound errors; others could not recall and pronounce simple words; they inserted or omitted difficult words in a reading text.

To illustrate that learners who struggled to read experienced difficulties in identifying words from the text that they were reading, P9 FG1 said:

Today, we were reading in Grade 7, and I realised that the learner could not recognise the alphabet, he could not make a sound of the alphabet, the learner could not read "THE"; he could not read it because he could not recognise the alphabet and their sounds.

In addition, P14FG1 said:

They struggle with recognising words.

P5 mentioned that:

Because they are not fluent, they cannot recognise sounds, and they cannot recognise certain words when grouped.

In support of the above statement, P11FG1 articulated that:

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Sometimes, you will say, you cannot read this sentence; please read this and point to the letter 'T'. Others can read the phonic, but for others, it is difficult to identify and read that [letter]. Others will just read short words like that, is, the, but when it comes to other words like "understanding", the learner will not even try to read that one.

On the other hand, the omission was also observed as another error learners commit during the reading process.

P7 mentioned that:

Some of our Grade 7 learners omit or insert words in the text if they cannot pronounce the next word in a sentence.

P5 also said:

Another specific reading difficulty, eh... they would rather what? Eh... They will say any word that comes to their mind. If you say read for me this, they will give you any word that comes to their mind.

Similarly, FG1 P12 mentioned that:

Another problem I have observed is that when they read and come across a complex or unfamiliar word, they will omit the word or replace it with one they are familiar with.

Furthermore, pronunciation was observed as a barrier. To express her view, P1 mentioned that:

They struggle with pronunciation. They just cannot; some, even three-letter words, are tricky to pronounce.

FG1P10 said:

I agree with my colleagues that these learners struggle to pronounce phonics.

Participants also revealed that Grade 7 learners still struggled with differentiating.

P2 mentioned that:

You will discover that some learners do not know the difference between "b and d".

Similarly, P7 said:

... they mistake b for d, showing difficulties with phonics and sounds. They commit this error even though they are in Grade 7.

P3 said:

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They do not know the letters; they do not know the difference between b and d.

In addition, P4 mentioned that:

Most learners cannot ehh..... differentiate between ehhehhh..... for example, d and b in Grade 7.

In emphasising the issue of not observing punctuation marks.

P19FG2: said:

... they do not observe punctuation marks, so our classes are chaotic during reading.

To express her views, P16FG2 said:

Ma'am, you know these learners can read a paragraph for you without stopping or observing any punctuation marks, and when you ask them to show you a word in the text, they will not be able to show it to you.

P13FG1 elaborated and said:

When they read, other learners just do not observe punctuation marks, ehhe [pausing and seemingly thinking] ... they try to read slowly, and I think it is because they are guessing.

P18FG2 mentioned that:

Eish [a sign showing that this is stressful], the difficulties for me include pronunciation, punctuation, ehhehh..... [thinking] to recognise words and sounds, sometimes they read word for word by the time they reach the full stop, you did not understand the sentence. They read without understanding, so it is difficult.

Evidently, from this theme, oral reading difficulties manifest in different forms, influencing fluency in reading; this is in line with Ming (2018) and Ja'afar et al. (2021) definition of oral reading difficulty, which refers to challenges that individuals encounter when reading aloud, which may manifest in various forms, such as inaccurate word recognition, slow reading rate, lack of fluency and difficulty with expression. Moreover, Snowling and Hulme, 2021 mention that oral reading difficulty can stem from underlying decoding skills, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary and language development issues. The study revealed that Grade 7 learners face significant reading challenges, including alphabet and word recognition, pronunciation, phonics, letter differentiation, and

punctuation. These difficulties hinder reading fluency and comprehension, aligning with research on reading development (Snowling & Hulme, 2021; Hudson et al., 2020).

Alphabet and word recognition difficulties were commonly observed, with learners struggling to identify letters and their corresponding sounds (Snowling & Hulme, 2021). Fluency and pronunciation issues further compound these struggles, reducing reading confidence and engagement (Tomas et al., 2021; Ja'afar et al., 2021). Additionally, learners tend to omit or substitute unfamiliar words, indicating reliance on guessing rather than phonetic decoding (Hudson et al., 2020). Some learners also experience letter reversal, particularly confusing 'b' and 'd,' which suggests a lack of phonics reinforcement (Ja'afar et al., 2021). Furthermore, poor punctuation awareness leads to disorganized reading and reduced comprehension (Tomas et al., 2021; Snowling & Hulme, 2021). To address these challenges, literacy interventions should focus on phonics instruction, fluency training, and structured reading programs (Ja'afar et al., 2021; Hudson et al., 2020). Teachers must provide targeted support to learners with reading difficulties to enhance their reading skills and academic performance.

4.3 Comprehension difficulties

The study found that many learners read without comprehending. According to participants, learners could not retell what they read and could not answer questions relating to what they read. Participants mentioned that this was because learners lacked vocabulary; they could not read long words; they read word for word and could not recall information based on the text.

Examples of comments from participants are captured below:

P17FG2 stated:

They [learners] read without understanding, they struggle to comprehend because if... (pausing) if ehh..... (pausing and seemingly thinking) you ask them a question about what they read, they cannot explain what they read about and especially when they read long words and sentences.

Similarly, P19FG2 mentioned that:

We also have those who read without understanding. They are unable to answer questions based on the read text.

To elaborate, P15FG2 said:

I can say that they read without understanding because when you ask them questions, they do not respond. They just keep quiet.

P10FG1 agreed and said:

The majority of learners struggle with comprehension. When you ask them questions based on their reading text, they cannot answer the question correctly.

P14FG1 elaborated by stating that:

They will read something very long or very slowly, and at the end, it loses meaning because they wait for 20 seconds before pronouncing the next word. They read without understanding.

This theme reveals the multifaceted manifestation of comprehension difficulties expressed by participants. A recurring issue observed among learners is reading without comprehension. Participants (P17FG2, P19FG2, P15FG2, P10FG1, and P14FG1) noted that many learners struggle to grasp the meaning of the texts they read. Learners often fail to answer comprehension questions or provide meaningful explanations about the content they have read. This aligns with research by Ntshikila (2021) and Ntshikila et al. (2022), who found that limited vocabulary and poor reading fluency negatively impact comprehension skills. Additionally, Saraswati et al. (2021) highlight that slow reading rates and decoding difficulties contribute to poor understanding, as learners expend more effort on pronunciation than meaning making. Comprehension strategies, such as guided reading and questioning techniques, should be integrated into lessons to help learners develop meaning-making skills (Ntshikila et al., 2022). Teachers must provide targeted support to struggling learners to enhance their understanding of the reading text.

4.4 Poor concentration

It emerged that learners also experienced concentration difficulties that affected their reading abilities. Participants observed that learners cannot focus on tasks until completion. They asserted that the inability to focus affected their academic performance negatively. Participants further mentioned that these learners struggle to make decisions.

To express their views on this issue, P6 mentioned that:

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Poor concentration contributes to learners being unable to read because it may happen that the learner has lost interest because he does not know what to do anymore because of lack of concentration, which is the difficult part.

P9FG1 added that:

I also realise again that you can teach a learner a sound, but within a short period, they have a short concentration span, are easily disrupted, and forget quickly.

P4 added:

There are activities to support this learner, but she does not complete any work given to her. Her concentration is very short; she cannot concentrate for long, and her reading level is very low.

Emphasising poor concentration, P16FG2 said:

The other problem is the learners who lack concentration; they do not finish their work, never sit down in class, are always up and about, move around the classroom, and constantly ask for the toilet.

The findings indicate that poor concentration significantly affects learners' reading abilities. According to P6, a lack of concentration leads to disinterest and an inability to engage with reading tasks, contributing to difficulties in literacy acquisition. This observation is supported by research from the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2014), which emphasizes that sustained attention is crucial for literacy development. When learners struggle to focus, their ability to decode and comprehend texts diminishes, impeding their overall academic progress. P9FG1 further elaborated on this issue, stating that even when learners are taught phonemic sounds, their short concentration spans result in them quickly forgetting the material. This aligns with findings from Komari et al. (2024), who highlight that children with attention difficulties often struggle with memory retention, making it challenging to build foundational literacy skills. The rapid loss of learned content due to distractions suggests that traditional teaching methods may be insufficient for learners with concentration challenges. Similarly, P4 pointed out that although support activities are available for struggling learners, they often remain incomplete due to their limited concentration. This concern is echoed by Class (2021), who argues that learners with attention difficulties require tailored

interventions, such as structured routines and multisensory learning approaches, to maintain engagement and complete academic tasks effectively. Emphasizing the behavioural aspects of poor concentration, P16FG2 noted that learners who struggle with attention are often restless, frequently leaving their seats, moving around the classroom, or making excessive requests to leave the classroom. Karthigesu and Mohamad (2020) support this observation by stating that children with attention difficulties display hyperactive behaviours that interfere with learning. They suggest that such behaviours may stem from underlying cognitive processing issues that hinder sustained engagement with reading and other academic tasks.

4.5 Lack of interest and motivation.

The study revealed that learners who experience reading difficulties develop a lack of interest and motivation towards reading. Often, such learners felt uncomfortable, refused to read in front of other learners or privately, kept quiet, and did not want to show that they were struggling. Lack of motivation in this study also manifested in learners showing their frustration by crying and being anxious, and learners indicated that they feared their peers would laugh at them. Selected extracts are presented below.

P2 mentioned that:

The other problem is that some of these learners don't even want to try; they have given up; they will tell you, Mam, I cannot read, or they will ask you if you want the whole class to laugh at me because everybody knows that I cannot read.

P17FG2 elaborated on the issue of lack of interest and stated that:

The other thing that makes the situation more difficult is that these learners lack interest, self-motivation, and self-confidence.

P14FG1 mentioned that:

.... it is very difficult to work with learners who cannot read in Grade 7 because they struggle to work independently, become disruptive in class, lack interest, and sometimes are not motivated to do anything.

P6 mentioned that:

Poor commitment and lack of interest from the learners who experience reading difficulties are problematic. Remember, I assist these learners during my spare time or in the afternoon;

the learner comes and shows a lack of interest in your activity, which is problematic.

P13FG1 shared why other learners lose interest in reading and said:
Whenever he is supposed to read, other learners laugh at him, and he loses interest even in trying.

P11FG1 shared her classroom experience and mentioned that:
In our classes, learners who cannot read tell you that I cannot read. If you force them to read, they will either cry or just keep quiet. They are not willing to try and make mistakes. They are no longer interested in reading.

The statements from the participants highlight several key issues related to learners' lack of interest, motivation, and self-confidence in reading. These issues significantly impact their academic progress and classroom engagement. One of the recurring themes in the participants' statements is the learners' lack of self-confidence. P2 and P13FG1 indicate that learners avoid reading because they fear embarrassment and ridicule from their peers. P11FG1 further elaborates that learners are often unwilling to try, and when forced, they either cry or remain silent. This aligns with Akbari and Sahibzada (2020), who emphasize that a learner's self-perception and emotional state play a crucial role in academic performance. When learners experience repeated failures or negative reinforcement, they internalize a sense of incompetence, leading to avoidance behaviours. Several participants, including P17FG2 and P14FG1, pointed out that learners with reading difficulties often lack interest and motivation. They struggle to work independently, become disruptive, and disengage from learning activities. This finding is supported by Filgona et al. (2020), who argue that motivation is a key driver of learner success. They highlight that intrinsic motivation, when learners find joy and satisfaction in learning, plays a significant role in academic performance. However, when learners feel they cannot succeed, their intrinsic motivation diminishes, leading to a lack of effort and participation.

Teachers face significant challenges in assisting learners with reading difficulties. P6 mentions that despite providing additional support outside regular class hours, some learners lack commitment, making intervention efforts difficult. This is consistent with Tohir (2022), who states that teacher interventions are most effective when learners

are engaged and willing to participate. Without learner commitment, remedial strategies may not yield the desired results, ultimately perpetuating their reading difficulties. P13FG1 and P2 emphasize that negative peer interactions contribute to learners' reluctance to read. When struggling learners are mocked or laughed at, they withdraw and lose confidence. This aligns with the findings of Akbari and Sahibzada (2020), who stress the impact of social factors on learning. A supportive classroom environment is essential for fostering reading engagement, yet when learners perceive reading as a source of embarrassment, they avoid participation altogether.

5. Discussion

The findings from the study highlight several significant reading difficulties faced by Grade 7 learners in an English (FAL) classroom. These barriers primarily stem from language difficulties, as learners often use their home languages instead of English, which hampers their vocabulary development and academic progress. Learners are taught in English, which is not their home language. This creates a barrier to learning, as many learners are exposed to multiple languages at home and in the community, making it difficult for them to master English for academic purposes. As a result, they struggle to achieve desired learning outcomes.

Learners also face challenges with word recognition, pronunciation, and fluency. They often omit or replace words and struggle to recognize and pronounce letters or words, which affects their reading comprehension. Many learners read without understanding the text. They struggle to recall and explain what they have read, primarily due to a lack of vocabulary and poor decoding skills. Learners have short attention spans and find it difficult to focus on tasks, leading to incomplete work and low academic performance. Due to their reading struggles, many learners lose interest in reading, feel embarrassed or frustrated, and lack self-confidence. This emotional response further hinders their academic engagement. These challenges are linked to the multilingual context of the learners and their lack of exposure to English, which affects their ability to read and understand the language effectively. The study recommends that classroom strategies like code-switching and emotional support could help address these barriers.

5.1 Recommendations

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- Schools should implement targeted language development programs that enhance vocabulary, speaking, and listening skills while integrating learners' home languages into lessons when possible.
- Offering reading programs in earlier grades to address foundational gaps in phonics and pronunciation will help prevent struggles later.
- Guided and interactive reading sessions and individual or small group support can significantly improve reading fluency and comprehension.
- Creating a supportive classroom environment that encourages learners to take risks, using positive reinforcement and peer support systems, will help build their confidence.
- Tasks should be broken into smaller steps to maintain focus and engagement, and interactive learning techniques and mindfulness exercises should be incorporated.
- Additionally, providing professional development for teachers on managing multilingual classrooms, code-switching, and supporting struggling readers will ensure that teachers are equipped to meet diverse needs.
- Educating parents on supporting their children's language development at home, including reading together in home languages and English, will further reinforce learning.
- Finally, integrating digital tools like language-learning apps, audiobooks, and online resources will enhance reading practice and make the learning experience more engaging and accessible for learners.

5.2 Limitations of the study

- It may not be possible to generalise the results of this study due to several limitations. Firstly, data was collected from only four mainstream primary schools within the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) in one district, whereas Gauteng Province encompasses 15 districts.
- As a result, the participating schools do not represent the broader diversity of educational contexts across the province. Secondly, only 20 English (FAL) teachers participated,

meaning the experiences of other teachers in different schools and districts are not reflected in this study.

- Finally, the study did not include other key stakeholders, such as School Governing Bodies (SGBs), parents, or learners, who could provide valuable perspectives on the challenges faced by learners with reading difficulties. These limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings of the study.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight significant challenges faced by Grade 7 learners in mastering English as a First Additional Language (FAL), including language barriers, reading difficulties, poor comprehension, lack of concentration, and low motivation. These issues are compounded by the multilingual backgrounds of learners, which hinder their ability to fully engage with the English language as the medium of instruction. The recommendations provided emphasise the need for targeted interventions, such as enhanced language support programs, early intervention, active reading strategies, and fostering a supportive and motivational classroom environment. Additionally, professional development for teachers, increased parental involvement, and the integration of technology can play crucial roles in overcoming these challenges. By addressing these issues systematically and holistically, it is possible to improve learners' English proficiency, boost their academic performance, and foster a more positive and confident approach to learning. With these recommendations, schools can create an inclusive and effective learning environment that empowers all learners to thrive academically and develop the necessary skills for their future success.

Acknowledgement

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, Mahetlana NI, Sadiki MC; methodology, Mahetlana NI, Sadiki MC; validation, Mahetlana NI, Sadiki MC; formal analysis, Mahetlana NI, Sadiki MC; investigation, Mahetlana NI; resources: Mahetlana NI; writing—original draft preparation: Mahetlana NI; writing—review and editing, Sadiki MC

Funding: There was no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article was received by the authors.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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