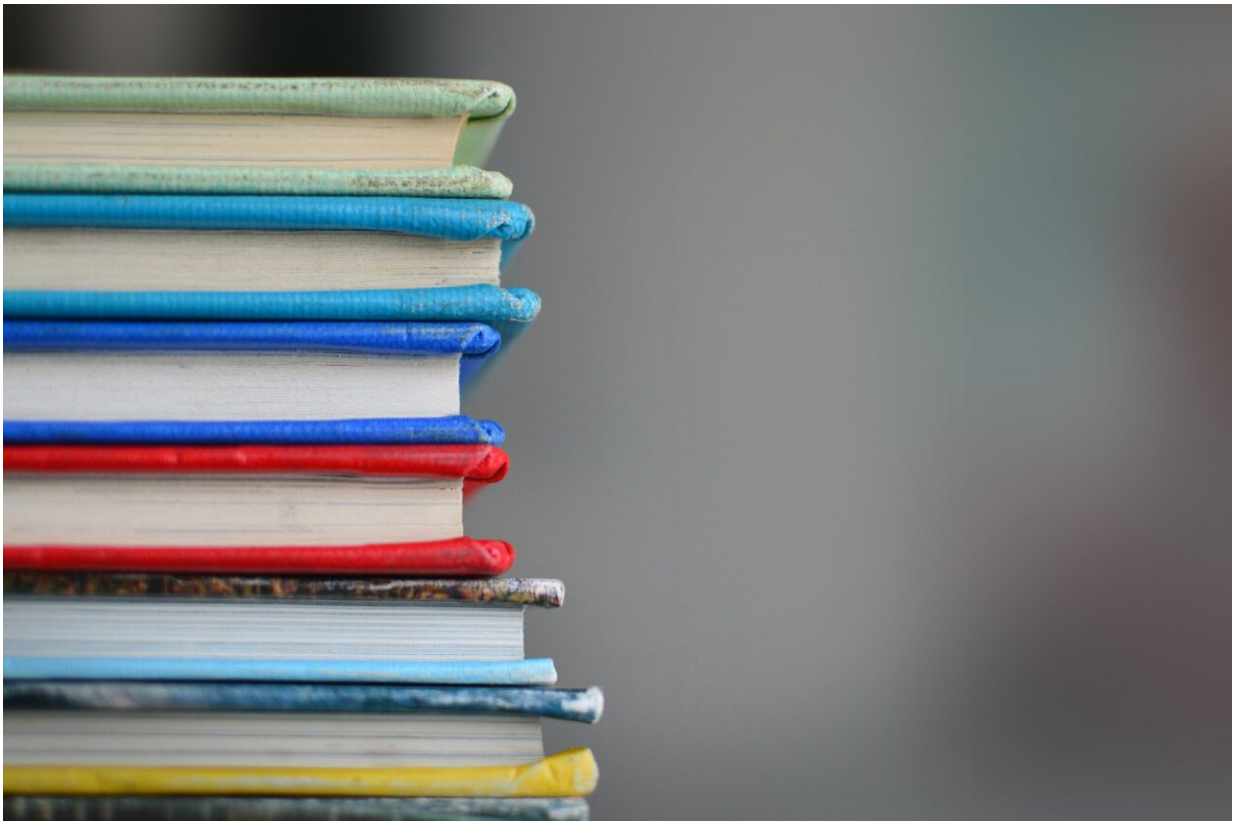


Learning to read in another language is tough: How Namibian teachers can help kids

January 24 2024, by Marta Ndakalako Alumbungu and Nhlanhla Mpofu



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In a classroom in Namibia's northern Oshikoto region, a teacher has written English vocabulary words on the chalkboard. She asks her learners to read them aloud. When they stumble with pronunciation, she

corrects them. She also helps the youngsters to sound out words. At another school nearby, an English teacher is showing her class cartoon strips on her cellphone to help them create mental images while reading—an approach that's proven to [enhance comprehension](#).

These teachers were part of [a study](#) we conducted to understand the unique knowledge and skills that Namibian teachers have developed to teach English reading comprehension to grade 7s (who are on average 12 years old) in a diverse linguistic context. The learners' home languages were primarily Oshiwambo, Oshindonga, Afrikaans and Otjiherero.

We aimed to shed light on what approaches the teachers used in their classrooms. We also wanted to explore the broader implications for Namibia's education landscape.

We found that Namibian teachers had the skills to equip learners with the tools to become literate and fluent in English. In some situations the teachers tried to adapt their instruction to better reflect learners' daily experiences and cultures. But this adaptation happened on the spur of the moment rather than being central to planned lessons.

We argue that using culturally appropriate, relevant examples should be a deliberate daily practice. For example, teachers could select a text or passage or story that incorporates traditions, folklore, or contemporary situations relevant to the students.

This would increase engagement. It would also allow students to connect more deeply with the material, fostering better comprehension by being familiar and relatable. It's an approach that has been [repeatedly proven](#) to [boost](#) reading comprehension.

Recent studies [show](#) that Namibian children have [low proficiency](#) in English. Literacy is [a fundamental skill](#) for personal development and

societal progress.

Different cultural contexts

The mismatch between imported educational approaches and the realities faced by English language learners in the global south has been [identified](#) as contributing to the struggles encountered in reading comprehension.

In Namibia, English (although it is the country's official language) is spoken by [only 3.4% of the population](#) as a first language or mother tongue. There are 13 [recognized languages in Namibia](#); [Oshiwambo](#) is the most prevalent first language, including in the Oshikoto region.

Since 2009 the Namibian Ministry of Education has administered the National Standardized Achievement Test for grades 5 and 7. This covers English, mathematics, natural science and health education. It gauges learners' English comprehension competency and overall performance in these subjects. The results are worrying.

[In 2015 the results](#) showed that 87% of grade 7 learners scored below basic proficiency in English. The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality also found that the country [did not exhibit significant improvements](#) in reading and mathematical literacy between 2005 and 2010. Its reading proficiency score in 2010 was 496.9 compared to a mean score of 511.8 for all [15 participating countries](#).

Our study

The study involved five experienced grade 7 English teachers. All had taught the subject for five years or longer. The teachers were each

affiliated with one of four combined schools in the northern Oshikoto region of Namibia, and one [primary school](#) in Windhoek, the capital city.

All are state schools and learners are not required to pay fees.

Through stimulated recall interviews and classroom observations, we gained an understanding of the teaching practices used. Stimulated recall interviews are a way of talking with people about their past experiences or actions. It's like watching a replay of something you did, and then being asked questions about what you were thinking or feeling during that time. It helps to better understand why people make certain choices or decisions.

We also conducted classroom observations, quietly sitting in to watch what teachers and learners were doing. We examined the learners' comprehension by observing how actively they participated in question and answer sessions, collaborative activities, and retelling and summary tasks.

The findings reveal that teachers continue to use teaching and learning practices acquired during their initial teacher education. These included previewing, reading aloud, fluency training and vocabulary development.

Previewing happens when teachers ask learners to take a quick look over the title, headings and pictures to get an idea of what the reading is about. It helps the learners understand what to expect and makes reading a lot easier because they already have some clues about what is coming up.

Reading aloud helps learners hear the words and understand them better. It is a fun way to enjoy a test or share something interesting with others. Fluency training involves practicing reading smoothly and easily. And

vocabulary development is learning to read words smoothly without stumbling or pausing too much.

The teachers' practices were pedagogically sound. But that doesn't guarantee improved reading comprehension for learners without sensitivity to the lived experiences and the imagined future of the learners.

The teachers did not often adapt their practices to suit their specific cultural and linguistic contexts. Most of the reading material used didn't contain examples learners could relate to from their own daily lives. In the few instances where there was link to a learner's background, it was made on the spur of the moment, in response to the way a lesson was progressing or stalling.

Teacher training

We concluded that much more intentional use of relevant material is needed to integrate learners' prior knowledge of the world into their reading comprehension.

For this to happen initial teacher education programs need to be enhanced to ensure that teachers are equipped with skills to adapt pedagogical practices to diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Many [teacher](#) education institutions prepare educators as if they will be teaching in well-resourced urban schools, assuming [learners](#) are eager to learn, and the school community supports enhanced reading. The reality is quite different: teachers deal with crowded classrooms and don't get much support from schools to meet learning goals.

To enhance reading comprehension in primary schools within diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, teachers can begin by selecting [reading material](#) and resources that reflects the cultural diversity of their

students, making the content more relatable.

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