

Article

The Role of Phonological Awareness in Enhancing Reading Proficiency among Learners with Mild Hearing Impairment in South African Mainstream Classrooms

by

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a case study investigating the role of phonological awareness in enhancing reading proficiency among learners with mild hearing impairment included in South African regular classrooms. Learners with mild hearing impairment often encounter challenges in developing reading skills comparable to those of their hearing peers. This is attributed to their inability to hear certain sounds, which negatively impacts their academic performance. The study involved 2 female teachers and 15 Grade-8 learners aged between 14 and 15 years, who were purposively selected from a public mainstream school in Soweto. A case study design was used, with data collected through classroom observations and unstructured interviews with the teachers. The research was guided by Young's (1996) concept of communicative democracy. The findings reveal that phonological awareness is critical for enhancing the reading abilities of learners with mild hearing impairment. It facilitated the identification and recognition of word sounds, which is essential for proper pronunciation and reading competence. The findings also showed that teachers devoted a substantial amount of time to reading words and entire texts aloud in order to strengthen learners' recognition of word sounds and their pronunciation skills. The study concludes that phonological awareness should be central to reading activities designed to support the development of reading skills among this population.

Keywords: English language, mild hearing impairment, phonological awareness, reading ability, mainstream classes, teaching

Introduction

The South African education system requires adequate competence in English language for high school learners in key areas such as reading, writing, and listening for such learners to cope with the curriculum (Department of Education, 2011). Thus, for senior phase, which consists of Grades 7, 8, and 9, the expectation is that these learners must be proficient in the use of English language as a medium of instruction. According to the Department of Education's (2011) policy, reading—particularly identifying the sounds of words (phonological awareness)—plays a fundamental role in fostering literacy competence. This is equally important for learners with mild hearing impairment who are included in mainstream classrooms. Against this backdrop, government policy calls for the inclusion of these learners in mainstream schools (Department of Education, 2011). The inclusion of these learners in regular classrooms could also be important for them to learn English language alongside their hearing peers. As they learn with their hearing counterparts, they assist each other to identify and recognize word sounds, pronounce words correctly, and read competently as espoused in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement [CAPS] (Department of Education, 2011).

One of the central policies of CAPS is that learners be consistently exposed to the English language by employing activities that could enhance their ability to recognize word sounds and read them correctly. For example, the policy objective of learning English for learners at high school is to focus on, among others, the learners' communication (spoken and written) and reading skills, including reading aloud to peers (Department of Education, 2011). Based on this policy, it could be fair to argue that it is important for the learners with hearing impairment to recognize the word sounds so that they can pronounce them appropriately. However, due to limited exposure to the English language, most of these learners are not able to communicate properly in English. The opportunity to interact with the language is only available at school during the lessons as most of them are non-primary English-speakers. In addition, as Musselman (2000) argues, many of the learners with mild hearing impairment communicate with little understanding of the conventions of using English, including proper pronunciation and reading of texts. It is for this reason that Goldin-Meadow and Mayberry (2001) maintain that inadequate exposure to English

and its phonological representations handicaps these learners as speakers and readers of the language. This could also negatively affect their confidence in expressing themselves during class discussions.

For the development of their English skills, the ability to read and speak it, and listen to what is spoken, depends on the ability to identify the phonological coding of the language (Pottas, 2006). For learners with a mild hearing impairment, recognizing the phonological representations of the English language could pose challenges. Learners with mild hearing impairment have a degree of hearing loss ranging from 26 to 54dB. Units of measurement provide a standardized way to assess sound intensity. For teachers, understanding the role of decibel values is essential, as it enables clear communication and effective management of sound levels. This contributes to creating a safer and more comfortable learning environment. In general, learners with mild hearing impairment experience difficulties in hearing faint or whispered conversations; however, they can hear most sounds. Their hearing challenges may potentially act as a barrier to curriculum access, but, if given sufficient support, they are able to learn in mainstream classrooms with their hearing peers (Inclusive Education South Africa, 2019).

Hearing impairment and deafness are different, although in certain instances they are grouped together. Learners with hearing impairment who are referred to in contemporary terms as hard of hearing can hear most sounds. In South Africa, for example, deaf learners typically receive their education in special education units whilst those with mild hearing impairment are included in general education. In recognition of the right to universal access, inclusive education is deemed a basic human right that fosters equity in providing education to all learners, including those with hearing impairment (Bell, 2013; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Similarly, Fakolade et al. (2009) define inclusive education as embracing the inclusion of learners with specific educational needs in mainstream classrooms. In the South African context, Sayed et al. (2003) point out that a curriculum founded on such an education recognizes the importance of access and equity, and accommodates all learners regardless of their background, ability, or disability. In Sayed et al.'s (2003) view, such a curriculum fosters active learner participation and offers learners various ways of accessing its content for academic success in all subjects, including English.

It is worth noting that proficiency in the use of English is important for the academic success of all learners, including those with mild hearing impairment. Thus, their educational placement and interaction with peers with diverse language skills is crucial, particularly in assisting each other to recognize phonological codes of different words, and to pronounce and read them correctly (Brackett, 1997). Based on this assertion, it is fair to conclude that phonological awareness could be influenced by active interaction among learners as they learn to discriminate sounds from each other.

Phonological Intervention and Hearing Impairment

According to Cárnio et al. (2017), phonological awareness involves the ability to recognize that speech is segmented into words and syllables that have distinct sounds. It also entails analyzing and remembering different segments of words or phrases and their sounds. In other words, phonological awareness implies the ability to be aware of where and when the linguistic sounds are produced and how these sounds are grouped together to form a word, phrase, or sentence (Carvalho et al., 2020). In this regard, research such as that conducted by Cárnio et al. (2017) demonstrates that phonological awareness skills are essential for the development of reading skills. In addition, literature, for example, (Ripley, 2013), is replete with evidence reporting on below-average performance on literacy skills for many learners with limited phonological awareness skills. Consequently, learners face difficulties reading words and whole texts quickly, accurately, and fluently. As such, deficiency in phonological discrimination negatively impacts the successful reading process for learners with inadequate phonological awareness ability (Khasawneh, 2021). It is for this reason that Lafferty (2021) established that reading activities based on phonological awareness intervention improve reading and pronunciation performance among learners.

Saiegh-Haddad et al. (2020) argue that phonological awareness functions as a predictor of performance in reading tasks. In their view, this ability is related to word knowledge, listening comprehension, and reading proficiency. Such ability is also associated with an understanding of the relationship between the spoken language

and reading. In English, the task confronting the learners as readers is to determine a connection between what is written and the sounds of what is spoken, bringing together phonetic symbols into syllables, combining syllables into words, and pronouncing such words correctly (Khasawneh, 2021). As Lund (2020) argues, the creation of this connection requires the learner to recognize the smaller segments that form a word to enhance reading competency. Once learners identify the link between specific sounds and the letters they represent, they can recognize unfamiliar words and expand their vocabulary (Khasawneh, 2021).

As regards vocabulary expansion, Hayward et al. (2017) found that learners tend to commit errors in phonological awareness—for example, adding letters at the beginning, middle, or end of a word, and reordering or repeating phonemes—thus negatively affecting the development of word knowledge. Furthermore, Hayward et al. (2017) also argue that at the reading comprehension level, learners who experience challenges in reading words also face difficulties in comprehending written texts. Similarly, as regards learners with mild hearing impairment included in mainstream classrooms, the ability to read words correctly and understand written texts is crucial for their academic success. As such, Park et al. (2013) contend that, on average, learners with mild hearing impairment can obtain reading skills that are equal to their hearing peers when their phonological awareness skills are well developed to identify word sounds for appropriate pronunciation and reading.

Phonological Awareness and Literacy Challenges

Generally, literature on reading outcomes for learners with mild hearing impairment remains limited (Camarata et al., 2018), despite concerted efforts to include these learners in mainstream schooling. There continues to be a considerable risk for below-average reading achievements, particularly phonological awareness and language abilities for learners with mild hearing impairment (Werfel, 2017). It is worth noting that these learners markedly use spoken language as a form of communication such that the issues that are often associated with deaf learners, for example, verbal communication and spoken language access are not noticeable (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). One could argue that learners with mild hearing impairment have restricted access to auditory stimuli. However, these learners have broad

access to auditory input and are often included in ordinary classrooms (Camarata et al., 2018). This suggests that these learners are capable of learning in mainstream classrooms with their hearing peers. Thus, the focus of this study is not on learners with profound hearing impairment who are alternatively referred to as deaf, as these learners are served in special education schools or units in regular schools.

According to Camarata et al. (2018), the association between phonological awareness and reading skills for learners with mild hearing impairment continues to be blurred. Some authors, such as Porter et al. (2016), argue that these learners' reading ability is at the same level as their hearing peers. However, other authors, such as Wake et al. (2004), report that the reading ability of learners with mild hearing impairment is below that of their hearing counterparts. An important element that influences the reading proficiency of learners with normal hearing is their ability to employ phonological awareness to decipher text. However, it could be argued that this is not the case with learners with mild hearing impairment, due to their inability to hear certain sounds. Consequently, the development of their phonological awareness skills is considerably delayed compared to their hearing peers (Nittrouer & Caldwell-Tarr, 2016). In reference to this position, it is crucial to expose these learners to environments that are rich in conversations with peers and teachers for them to develop phonological awareness.

Soleymani et al. (2016) conducted a study in which they compared phonological acquisition rates for learners with hearing impairment and those with normal hearing. They found that the stage of learning phonological awareness was long and protracted for learners with hearing impairment. As a result of their inadequate auditory input, these learners showed weaker representations of sound patterns of spoken language. Generally, learners with normal hearing are able to organize phonological representations to recognize and correctly pronounce new words. Such phonological representations could also be mapped into the meaning of the words. However, learners with mild hearing impairment experience challenges in the development of phonological awareness and face difficulties in learning new words because of their inability to organize phonological representations of the words they encounter (Lee et al., 2012). Against this backdrop, these learners require adequate

exposure to sound patterns for them to sufficiently develop phonological awareness at the same level as their hearing counterparts.

Teaching Phonological Awareness to Learners with Mild Hearing Impairment

It is crucial to note that learners with mild hearing impairment belong to specific groups with distinct educational needs. Based on their inability to hear specific sounds, these learners can attain phonological awareness through explicit instruction that includes, for example, shared reading, whereby teachers assist the learners during reading activities (Alasim & Alqraini, 2020). In Alasim and Alqraini's (2020) view, when learners with mild hearing impairment lack phonological awareness skills, their ability to read properly is hindered. It is for this reason that Trezek et al. (2010) point out that phonological awareness skills are critical for these learners to map letter sounds onto speech sounds.

In the South African context, limited research has been carried out on teaching reading to learners with a mild hearing impairment included in regular classrooms. One that could be tracked is the study by Du Plessis (2006), which involved classroom observations whereby learners with hearing impairment were engaged in reading activities by listening to others when reading. With their auditory challenges for the hearing of specific sounds, the research focused on the identification and recognition of words and their phonological representations. The findings showed that the learners benefited from focusing on listening to what was spoken. As such, consistently engaging in the activities assisted them to identify the phonological representations of what was read aloud.

The development and implementation of instructions to foster phonological awareness skills for learners with mild hearing impairment is a critical factor for developing their reading ability. The use of these instructions requires employing various strategies appropriate to the capabilities of the learner in addition to the expectations to enhance their reading ability and academic success (Lederberg et al., 2019). This calls for the need to study the importance of phonological awareness for learners with mild hearing impairment and its relationship with the process of

reading. The study focuses on learners with mild hearing impairment, who have traditionally been under-studied but represent a substantial number of learners who experience hearing loss and are likely to receive their education in inclusive educational classroom settings (Porter et al., 2016). This research aims to identify the pedagogical approaches of teaching phonological awareness in the English language to students with mild hearing impairment included in mainstream classroom.

Exploring the Role of Phonological Awareness and Reading to Learners: A Contextual Overview

Learners with mild hearing impairment in South African mainstream classrooms often struggle to achieve reading proficiency comparable to that of their hearing peers due to limited phonological awareness. Although phonological awareness is critical for decoding and recognizing word sounds, there is insufficient research on effective instructional strategies that address these learners' unique auditory challenges. This gap in the knowledge hinders the development of inclusive pedagogical practices that can enhance literacy outcomes and academic success for this understudied group.

The study seeks to answer the following two questions:

- What strategies do teachers use to teach phonological awareness and reading to learners with mild hearing impairment?
- How does phonological awareness influence the reading ability of learners with mild hearing impairment?

Conceptual Framework

Young's (1996) concept of communicative democracy was adopted to guide the study, aiming to investigate how the teachers used various pedagogical strategies to teach phonological awareness to learners with mild hearing impairment. A significant element of communicative democracy is embracing the notion of equalizing forms of communication (Young, 1996). The concept therefore provides opportunities to engage in communicative settings in which all learners contribute to discussions

equally and with respect from peers. Against this backdrop, the concept involves the inclusion and recognition of others' contributions during phonological awareness activities and implies full participation by all to foster confidence among learners. Among other things, the concept was employed to probe how the teaching approaches were used to facilitate the learning of phonological awareness among learners with mild hearing impairment. Of particular interest was how the teachers adjusted their teaching strategies to be inclusive, and promoted dialogue, cooperative learning, and respect among learners (Reich, 2007). For communicative democrats, inclusion therefore embodies the principle of equal respect. Within the context of this study, the concept entails the full and respectful participation of all learners, both those who hear and those with mild hearing impairments.

Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design. One of the fundamental tenets of a quantitative case study research design is allowing for in-depth examination of a phenomenon in its natural context (Zainal, 2007). It thus permits an organized approach of observing and recording actions, generating and analyzing data in the natural setting, and providing an understanding of the teachers' pedagogical practices (Merriam, 2002). The design therefore facilitated data collection in a setting in which the pedagogical activities happened. At the data analysis stage, the design was crucial for pinpointing similarities and differences, discovering categories, and forming themes for data presentation. Thus, the qualitative study design was invaluable for examining the teaching strategies that the teachers used to teach phonological awareness to learners with mild hearing impairment.

The Research Site

The research site for the study was in Soweto, which is one of the major townships in Gauteng province. The school was selected due to its enrolment of a significant number of learners with mild hearing impairments. This placed it as a suitable site to conduct the study to record the ways in which teachers taught phonological awareness to learners with mild hearing impairment in inclusive settings (Yin, 1989). Moreover, the participant teachers for the study had two or more years' experience of teaching English to the learners. It is for this reason that Lanza (2008) argues that

selecting a suitable site is crucial for the reliability of the research findings. As such, the research site was a public school with a total enrolment of 103 learners with hearing impairment.

Sampling

Following the recommendation of the district office, a total of four schools were purposively selected. The schools admitted learners with hearing impairments and were then visited to determine the availability of suitable participants. The first three schools visited had a limited number of learners with mild hearing impairment, that is, fewer than 10 learners. However, the fourth school had a significant number of learners with hearing impairment at senior phase, (Grades 7, 8, and 9), with a total of 103 learners with hearing impairment admitted into the school. This is the phase that the study focused on, based on the English language content that included phonological awareness. Sampling involved familiarizing oneself with the culture of the school, for example, how the school functions during the lessons and how the teachers and learners are supported by the school administration. Thus, to select suitable participants for the study, a systematic sampling approach was adopted (Berndt, 2020), which involved choosing a random start at the beginning of the population list, thereafter capturing every unit evenly spaced (Bellhouse, 2014). The technique also took into consideration aspects such as teacher experience and the number of learners with mild hearing impairment as study participants.

Following a discussion with the Head of Department, who oversaw various subjects, including English, Grade 8 was selected as suitable for the study. It is in Grade 8 that learners interact with detailed English-language content, including teaching strategies for phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is covered in Grade 7 but in less detail. The selection of study participants also involved the inclusion of those teachers with a minimum of two years' teaching experience, who provided important insights regarding the teaching of phonological awareness in Grade 8. Therefore, the study sample was purposively selected, and the approach was in line with Tongco's (2007) view that selecting knowledgeable and experienced participants is crucial for conducting research.

Data Collection Tools

In qualitative research, observations are an important tool for data collection. The study adopted the use of classroom observations to collect data. Classroom observations were conducted mainly to witness the teachers' classroom practices regarding the teaching of phonological awareness. In addition, the observations assisted in recording how learning materials were used and how the learners interacted among themselves and with the teacher (Potter, 1996). As such, the researcher was a non-participant observer witnessing classroom actions in the natural settings (Polkinghorne, 2005). Accordingly, the researcher had sufficient time to observe the pedagogical practices and learner behavior, and to take notes.

An observation schedule was agreed on with the participant teachers. The lessons were observed over a period of two months, with two sessions per week. Overall, 16 lessons were observed. To record the teachers' pedagogical practices and classroom dynamics, and to document how the lessons were conducted, observational notes were taken. To gain deeper insights and understanding of their views on the teaching strategies that they had adopted to teach phonological awareness, informal post-lesson conversations with the teachers were conducted. Data collection was followed by its analysis.

Data Management and Analysis

Tully (2014) points out that one of the fundamental aspects of data management and analysis is to be true to the participants; in his view, it is their experiences that the researcher aims to unravel and report on. Muzari et al. (2022) contend that data management and analysis encompass immersing oneself in the data to identify patterns, similarities, and differences. The study therefore adopted the use of content analysis and thick description to interpret classroom actions to form categories, codes, and themes (Younas et al., 2023), and to structure the presentation of the findings.

Observation notes were examined carefully, and patterns were grouped together. Once the patterns were coded, they were categorized to reveal trends from which themes emerged. Additionally, the teachers' responses to the questions arising from

informal conversations were compared with the observational notes, to identify similarities and differences. This technique allowed the researchers to interpret what the teachers perceived as critical when teaching phonological awareness to learners with mild hearing impairment in a mainstream classroom.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was sought from the University of Johannesburg, where a broader PhD study had been conducted from which this study was developed. An introductory letter highlighting the objective of the research was presented to the Gauteng Department of Education. Upon receiving permission to conduct the study, this introductory letter was shared with the school at which the research would be conducted. In addition, a consent form was issued to the participants for them to sign and agree to participate in the study.

I informed the participants that their participation was voluntary and emphasized to them that they would not be exposed to exploitation. Furthermore, we pledged to acknowledge their contribution to the study (Capron, 1999). We assured them that they could withdraw from participating at any time and that their privacy and anonymity would always be protected. Explanation was provided that the sole purpose of their participation and the data they imparted was to inform the study. We further clarified that their participation would not be accompanied by any financial gain.

Findings

The data collected for the study generally indicated that teachers considered phonological awareness to be essential for reading. They highlighted the importance of teaching word sounds as crucial for word recognition. They held the view that phonological awareness enhances the ability to recognize sounds of words, which facilitates reading proficiency and an understanding of the meaning of such words. Furthermore, they asserted that phonological awareness is also important for spelling success and overall language comprehension. The views expressed by the teachers are consistent with Park et al.'s (2013) contention that learners with a mild hearing

impairment demonstrate reading skills that are at the same level as those of their hearing peers once their phonological awareness skills are acquired.

The lessons presented below serve as evidence of how teachers adopted the use of phonological awareness activities to improve the reading skills and language comprehension of learners with mild hearing impairment.

Teacher A's Approach

Using Rhyming to Teach Phonological Awareness

This approach involved using rhyming to impart phonological skills by paying attention to distinct word sounds. The teacher's strategy helped the learners to discriminate auditory word sounds, thereby enhancing word recognition and vocabulary development. She assumed that if, for instance, learners were aware that *tig* and *big* rhyme, they would pay attention to the ending sound *ig*, thus becoming familiar with the sound. As the teacher pointed out, the use of rhyming words to teach phonological awareness enhanced auditory discrimination.

In the observed lessons, the teachers used a box with different flash cards and selected learners to pick a flash card from the box. The learners were then asked to sort the pictures according to the words that rhymed, and the initial and final sounds of the words depicted in the pictures. The learners were then asked to read the name of the picture aloud to their peers, stressing the initial and final sounds of the word. When the learners recognized the starting sound of the word on the flash card, for example, *mat*—the learner pronounced the sound /m/. In another example, the learners identified the first and last sound of the word *keep* which sounded as “k...eep.” Upon identifying the sounds, the teacher asked them to merge the sounds together to create the word *keep*. In the teacher's view, word-sound recognition also assisted the learners to pronounce the words correctly. During post-lesson conversation, the teacher made the following remark:

The use of rhyming words plays a big role when I teach phonological awareness. Rhyming words are important in that they focus on discriminating word sounds, which is crucial for word recognition.

As argued by the teacher, adopting the use of rhyming words to improve phonological awareness is critical to fostering the ability to recognize word sounds,

manipulate them, and make progress in reading skills. This view is consistent with that of Paul (2009), who claimed that word identification is facilitated when learners are proficient in skills such as phonological awareness, thus enhancing reading competence and text comprehension.

Repeated Reading Activities and Phonological Awareness

Teacher A also incorporated repeated reading activities to help develop phonological awareness. In one of the lessons, the teacher selected several words with distinct sounds. Learners were asked to repeatedly read the words while paying attention to the different sounds that constituted the words. The teacher asked the learners to exchange the words assigned to them to provide opportunities for learners to read different words. As the learners read the words repeatedly, they became familiar with their sounds, and confidently and successfully read the words, which included the following examples: *familiar, break, sense, radiant, and discussions*.

In addition to fostering their phonological awareness, it became clear that by reading the selected words repeatedly, the learners' reading rate, accuracy and word comprehension also improved. Asked to justify the choice of repeated reading to enhance phonological awareness, Teacher A remarked as follows:

There is a strong link between phonological awareness and repeated reading. Repeated reading helps the learners to identify word sounds, pronounce the words correctly, and generally improve their reading rate.

The teacher observed that continuous exposure to different words allowed the learners to recognize their sounds. Therefore, when they came across such words in a text, they were able to read them effortlessly.

Teacher B's Approach

Phonological Awareness Through Peer Cooperation

Teacher B believed that when learners interact with each other during, for example, reading activities, they collectively assist one another to recognize word sounds. For Teacher B, peer-assisted reading stimulated word-sound recognition when learners helped each other to manipulate the word sound of unfamiliar words. To further develop the learners' phonological awareness, the teacher explained that during

reading activities, she asked the fast readers to read to their cohorts with limited reading skills.

During one of the lessons, the teacher asked the learners to work collaboratively in pairs. Each pair chose four words from a pool of words, and the aim was for them to help one another to identify the sounds that made up each word. Examples of these words include *radiant*, *sick*, *passing*, *clothes*, and *friend*—for example, with the word *radiant*, the learners successfully identified the sounds /ra/ /di/ /an/ /t/. They were asked to read the sounds of the words out loud to each other in their pairs and were then asked to choose a different word for which they also had to identify the sounds. According to Teacher B, participation in such activities provided the learners with the opportunities to discuss with partners, ask questions, and gain confidence as they correctly pronounced the words, which enabled them to read whole texts successfully.

Asked to explain why she emphasized the teaching of word sounds, the teacher made the following remarks:

The starting point for the correct pronunciation of words and reading them properly begins with recognizing word sounds. I ensure that my learners identify word sounds before allowing them to read words and whole texts.

Teacher B's view is consistent with Domínguez and Alegria's (2010) contention that the ability to recognize word sounds and pronounce them correctly is at the center of literacy development and academic success. Similarly, Benner and colleagues (2022) point out that reading activities, such as collaborative reading, contribute to literacy development, particularly for struggling readers. As such, wittingly or not, by allowing learners to work together on an equal basis, Teacher B appeared to embrace Young's (1996) concept of communicative democracy, which advocates for treating each other equally and with respect.

Raising Phonological Awareness Through Pictures/Objects

In the lesson, Teacher B used a variety of objects and pictures and asked learners to sort them according to their initial or final sound. Those with similar initial or final sounds were grouped together. The teacher also asked the learners to write the names of the objects and pictures in their exercise books and to highlight the initial

and final sounds. The effectiveness of the teaching strategy was confirmed during the activity, in which the teacher used the picture of an alligator and offered the explanation below:

Alligator begins with the sound /a/
It ends with the sound /tor/

The learners repeated after the teacher and read out loud the initial and final sounds of the word alligator. She also showed them a picture of a village and a video cassette; she explained that some words have similar initial sounds but have different meanings, for example, village and video cassette have a similar initial sound /vi/. To further consolidate the importance of recognizing word sounds, she provided more examples with the initial sound and final sound. She also explained that words also have middle sounds, and gave the following examples:

Phone /ph/ /o/ /ne/
Bell /b/ /e/ /ll/
Ambulance /am/ /bu/ /lan/ /ce/
Rainfall /ra/ /in/ /fall/
Mattress /m/ /att/ /re/ /ss/

Teacher B clarified that word-sound awareness facilitates word identification, and is central to reading fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. She argued that sound awareness helped the learners to pronounce the words correctly during reading activities. Identifying the initial and final sounds of words was consistent with what Fredrick (2005) underscores as an essential principle of print-sound mapping, where students learn to read accurately as they associate language sounds with what is written in the text. When asked to explain the importance of fostering phonological awareness for learners with mild hearing impairment, the teacher made the following remarks:

For these learners to develop reading skills and overall English language competence, we need to teach them the importance of phonological awareness to improve their pronunciation. However, I sometimes get concerned because they are unable to hear all the sounds.

Discussion

As Young (1996) argues, communication that embraces fairness and respect for others' contributions, and that is inclusive inspires learners to be active participants in classroom discussions and activities. In this sense, an inclusive communication environment has the potential to ensure that all learners, regardless of their background or learning style, have equitable access to the learning environment and

are empowered to succeed. It is therefore important to adjust the curriculum to include diverse learners, including those with mild hearing impairment, in mainstream classrooms. In this study, the teachers adopted different teaching strategies aimed at enhancing learners' phonological awareness. These strategies allowed the learners to understand the significance of recognizing word sounds, which may play an important role in the correct pronunciation of words. Domínguez et al. (2016) emphasize that the effectiveness of such teaching strategies is associated with proficiency in reading. As argued by Webb and Lederberg (2014), such teaching strategies assist learners with mild hearing impairment to recognize word sounds, and to develop phonological awareness, oral language, and reading skills. The latter view is also consistent with a position expressed by Zhang et al. (2021), that when learners are proficient in the use of language, their ability to recognize word sounds fosters their reading skills. Wagner et al. (1997) share the same idea, that phonological awareness has a bearing on rapid naming skills, which has a direct influence on accurate and fluent reading.

Although the teachers highlighted the importance of teaching phonological awareness to learners with mild hearing impairment, one of them raised her concern that phonological awareness skills are not the optimal pathway to teach language to these learners, due to their inability to hear certain sounds. This viewpoint is supported by Goldin-Meadow and Mayberry (2001), who contend that learners with hearing impairment are disadvantaged as readers because of their inadequate exposure to phonological coding.

The findings revealed that the teachers devoted a substantial amount of time to reading words and whole texts, to enhance learners' word-sound recognition and pronunciation ability. Their guidance included explicit instructional strategies, such as pairing learners to read together to assist each other during the reading activities. As argued by Lederberg and colleagues (2022), learners' willingness to discuss with one another develops their confidence to read the words aloud, especially for learners with hearing impairment. However, considering the evidence from the findings, it seemed that the teachers did not pay sufficient attention to individual needs. From the classroom observations and the teachers' remarks, they appeared to rely on

strategies that addressed individual needs of learners as they navigated how to familiarize themselves with word sounds.

With phonological-awareness teaching strategies, the teachers aimed to enhance the recognition of word sounds for proper pronunciation and accurate, fluent reading, which reflects Milankov et al.'s (2021) contention that phonological awareness skills are strongly associated with reading fluency.

The findings also revealed that the teachers made efforts not to be at the center of the pedagogical practices, with the use of groups and pairs instead being fundamental to their teaching. These teaching approaches were collaborative in nature and encouraged learner participation during classroom activities (Qureshi et al, 2023). Furthermore, the findings indicate that when the learners constantly engaged with texts, they were able to discern word sounds, pronounce the words correctly, and eventually understand the meaning of the words they encountered. As such, the literature used in the study offered a solid ground from which to consider the pedagogical classroom approaches that were adopted by the teachers and how effective they were in the teaching of phonological awareness to learners with mild hearing impairment.

Young's (1996) concept of communicative democracy was invaluable for the study's clear incorporation of aspects of teaching that embraced respect and treating each other equally during classroom tasks. The concept helped to form an understanding of the strategies that were adopted by the teachers, and to explore whether such strategies were inclusive for diverse learners, particularly those with mild hearing impairment.

Conclusion

The teacher participants were information-rich and provided insights about the strategies that they adopted to teach phonological awareness to learners with mild hearing impairment. Their adoption of various teaching strategies to teach phonological awareness contributed to the learners' ability to discriminate word sounds, thus reflecting improved reading skills. The evidence in the study showed

that the strategies that the teachers used, such as the use of rhyming, improved the learners' phonological awareness. Furthermore, the choices of classroom activities supported a learner-centered approach that was facilitated by the teachers. The schooling system in South Africa expects learners to be proficient in the use of English for academic success. Therefore, to enhance the phonological awareness skills of learners with mild hearing impairment and to improve their reading skills, it is imperative to expose these learners to a variety of words and the sounds that constitute such words.

Research Problem and Study Purpose

Studies on inclusive education that deal specifically with phonological awareness for learners with hearing impairment included in mainstream classrooms are still emerging. Therefore, it was important to examine the teaching strategies that are employed to develop phonological awareness and to determine how inclusive they are, particularly for learners with mild hearing impairment.

Implications of the Study

The study offers insights that can help teachers and practitioners to better understand the key elements of implementing inclusive strategies in classrooms with learners who have hearing impairments.

Limitations of the Study

Only two teachers participated in the study; therefore, their experiences and classroom practices may not accurately represent the broader South African context of schools that include learners with mild hearing impairments.

Future Research

Rigorous research needs to be conducted on different phonological awareness programs that are tailored for learners with mild hearing impairment, including technology-assisted learning tools.

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