

EFAL Teachers' Experiences in Teaching Listening Comprehension Skills to Grade 4 Learners

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The European Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Listening comprehension is a crucial skill in language learning, deeply interconnected with speaking, reading, and writing. Effective listening enhances speaking through conversation, supports reading by improving decoding skills, and refines writing by strengthening language processing. This study examines the challenges Grade 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers face in teaching listening comprehension, a key skill for early language acquisition. The transition from home language instruction to English as the language of learning and teaching presents unique challenges for Grade 4 learners, many of whom struggle with understanding spoken English, impacting overall proficiency. Using a qualitative case study approach, guided by Schema Theory, data were gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with seven female EFAL teachers. The study identifies several challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, limited vocabulary, poor student concentration, and inadequate access to audio-visual resources. These obstacles hinder effective teaching, especially when English is introduced as the language of instruction. The paper concludes with recommendations for the Department of Education to prioritise providing essential resources, particularly in under-resourced schools, to enhance teaching and learning in the foundational years of English language education. This research offers valuable insights into the complexities of teaching listening comprehension in primary schools and provides actionable recommendations for improving language education outcomes.

Keywords: listening comprehension, EFAL, grade 4, schema theory, teaching challenges

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Introduction

Listening comprehension is the cornerstone of second language acquisition, enabling learners to engage meaningfully with spoken language and develop other language skills. In South Africa, Grade 4 learners face a significant transition from being taught in their home languages to learning in English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). For many, this shift makes mastering listening comprehension particularly daunting, as English is often unfamiliar and not spoken outside the classroom (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019).

While much attention has been given to instructional techniques for teaching listening comprehension (Mzobe, 2023), there remains a limited understanding of the lived experiences of EFAL teachers who navigate the complex realities of fostering listening skills in resource-constrained settings. Teachers are at the frontline of addressing challenges such as limited learner vocabulary, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate teaching resources (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Their experiences provide valuable insights into the dynamics of teaching listening comprehension beyond instructional methods.

This study shifts the focus to explore EFAL teachers' experiences, specifically in Grade 4 classrooms, highlighting the challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ to overcome them. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the contextual and practical realities shaping listening comprehension instruction in multilingual classrooms.

Literature Review

Listening comprehension is a cornerstone of language acquisition and essential for effective communication (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). In EFAL classrooms, it is particularly challenging as it involves both decoding auditory input and integrating prior knowledge (Masalimova et al., 2016; Swan & Walter, 2017). Studies have emphasized that effective listening comprehension strategies include pre-listening activities to activate prior knowledge, during-listening strategies for attention and focus, and post-listening discussions for reinforcement (Farrell & Jacobs, 2020).

In South Africa, EFAL learners face additional barriers such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom, insufficient vocabulary, and the abrupt transition to English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in Grade 4 (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). Teachers often employ strategies like repetition, storytelling, and questioning to address these issues, but challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and limited resources persist (Mzobe, 2023).

While there is a wealth of research on listening comprehension strategies and their effectiveness (Cao & Lin, 2020; Kim, 2022), there is limited exploration of how EFAL teachers in resource-constrained environments, such as South African schools, experience and address these challenges. Existing studies often focus on learners' difficulties rather than the pedagogical strategies and lived experiences of teachers. Moreover, few studies have examined how teachers use Schema Theory to support listening comprehension in multilingual classrooms.

This study is grounded in Piaget's Schema Theory, which posits that learners understand new information by relating it to existing cognitive structures (Piaget, 1976). In listening comprehension, this involves activating learners' prior knowledge (schemas) to interpret spoken language. For EFAL learners, their schemas are often rooted in their home language, which can both support and hinder their understanding of English. Teachers play a crucial role in helping learners assimilate and accommodate new linguistic information, creating schema equilibrium.

Given the limited research on teachers' experiences in addressing listening comprehension challenges in EFAL classrooms, this study seeks to fill a significant gap. By focusing on Grade 4 teachers in South Africa, it explores their strategies, challenges, and reflections, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Understanding teachers' perspectives is crucial for developing targeted interventions, professional development programs, and policy recommendations to enhance listening comprehension instruction.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, which is well-suited for exploring the complex and context-specific experiences of teachers in EFAL classrooms (Yin, 2018). Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with seven Grade 4 EFAL teachers from four primary schools in South Africa. The participants were purposefully selected based on their experience in teaching EFAL and their willingness to share their practices and challenges. Classroom observations provided direct insights into the strategies teachers used to facilitate listening comprehension and how they navigated resource constraints. Semi-structured interviews allowed teachers to reflect on their experiences, including the obstacles they faced and the techniques they employed to support learners. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved identifying patterns and themes related to teaching practices and challenges. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, with informed consent obtained from participants and assurances of confidentiality maintained throughout the study.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study, which sought to explore Grade 4 EFAL teachers' experiences in teaching listening comprehension. The results revealed multiple challenges that directly impacted teachers' abilities to effectively teach listening comprehension. These findings reflect the complex realities of teaching in resource-constrained classrooms in rural South Africa.

Overcrowded classrooms emerged as a significant obstacle. Teachers expressed that large class sizes made it difficult to provide individual attention, manage noise levels, and ensure all learners remained focused during listening activities. Some teachers conducted lessons in multipurpose halls, where learners sat back-to-back, and noise from other groups disrupted learning. In such settings, learners positioned at the back often disengaged, resorting to unrelated activities like drawing, due to their inability to hear or follow the lesson being taught.

The limited English vocabulary of learners was another major concern. Teachers shared that many learners lacked foundational vocabulary, which severely affected their listening comprehension abilities. One participant, Anisha, noted that she had to dedicate considerable

time to teaching vocabulary and spelling before engaging learners in listening tasks. This vocabulary gap hindered learners' understanding of spoken English, making it difficult for them to follow instructions or grasp the content of listening texts.

A critical challenge identified was the lack of teaching resources, particularly audio and visual aids. Many schools did not have access to basic tools such as speakers, recorded materials, or projectors. Consequently, teachers relied heavily on reading aloud to the learners, which limited exposure to authentic listening experiences, including varied accents and pronunciation. This shortage of resources impeded the development of effective listening skills in EFAL classrooms.

Learners' poor concentration during listening comprehension tasks was a recurring issue. Teachers observed that learners often struggled to maintain focus, especially when listening materials were lengthy, complex, or presented without engaging methods. External factors such as classroom noise, overcrowding, and personal challenges like hunger further affected learners' ability to concentrate. Additionally, some learners relied on their home language schemas, which did not correspond with English structures, creating further barriers to comprehension.

These findings highlight the multifaceted challenges EFAL teachers face in promoting listening comprehension, emphasizing the need for better resources, support, and instructional strategies tailored to multilingual and resource-poor contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex challenges faced by Grade 4 EFAL teachers in teaching listening comprehension, particularly in rural South African schools. Overcrowded classrooms, limited learner vocabulary, poor concentration, and the lack of essential resources emerged as recurring themes. These challenges underscore the systemic barriers that hinder effective listening comprehension instruction, consistent with observations from Wildsmith-Cromarty and Balfour (2019), who noted similar constraints in multilingual classrooms.

Overcrowded classrooms, as reported by teachers, impede individual attention, making it difficult to cater to diverse learning needs. This aligns with Schema Theory (Piaget, 1976), which emphasizes the role of prior knowledge in comprehension. Large class sizes limit the opportunity for teachers to activate and build learners' schemas effectively, as personalised engagement is crucial for assimilating new linguistic information. The lack of sufficient vocabulary further compounds the issue, echoing Gilakjani and Sabouri's (2016) assertion that listening comprehension requires both decoding and meaningful integration of words.

The absence of audio and audio-visual materials remains a critical barrier, consistent with Mpofu and Moyo's (2021) findings that under-resourced classrooms limit exposure to authentic language inputs. Teachers in this study highlighted their reliance on traditional methods, such as reading aloud, which, while valuable, cannot replicate the immersive experience provided by recorded or multimedia content. These findings point to the urgent need for systemic interventions to address resource disparities, particularly in rural and underprivileged schools.

While the lack of resources poses significant challenges, teachers can adopt creative strategies to enhance learning outcomes within these constraints. Contextualized listening tasks, visual aids, and collaborative group activities have been shown to improve engagement and comprehension (Farrell & Jacobs, 2020). However, these strategies require support in the form of professional development programs to equip teachers with innovative methods tailored to large and diverse classrooms.

Addressing these challenges demands action from the Department of Education, particularly in resource allocation. The provision of audio-visual materials, such as recorded stories, interactive listening programs, and teacher training workshops, could significantly enhance listening comprehension instruction. As emphasized by Kim (2022), integrating technology into teaching practices not only facilitates learning but also bridges the resource gap in underprivileged schools.

Teachers exhibit remarkable resilience and adaptability, systemic changes are essential to overcome the barriers identified in this study. Prioritising resource provision and professional development would empower teachers to create inclusive and effective listening comprehension environments, ultimately improving learners' outcomes in EFAL classrooms.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified in this study, several actionable steps can be taken to improve the teaching and learning of listening comprehension in Grade 4 EFAL classrooms. The Department of Education should prioritise providing schools, particularly those in rural and under-resourced areas, with adequate resources such as audio and audio-visual materials. These tools are essential for exposing learners to authentic English input and enabling teachers to implement effective listening comprehension strategies. Professional development programs should be designed to equip teachers with innovative techniques for teaching listening comprehension in multilingual and resource-limited classrooms. Training should focus on maximizing available resources and incorporating alternative methods, such as group work and interactive listening tasks, to enhance learner engagement.

The curriculum also requires careful review to ensure it includes meaningful listening tasks that promote comprehension. Authentic listening materials, such as recorded stories, podcasts, and educational broadcasts, should be integrated into teaching practices to make learning more relevant and immersive. Furthermore, classroom management strategies need to be strengthened to address the challenges posed by overcrowded classrooms. Peer-assisted learning, where more advanced students support their peers, can be an effective approach to fostering collaboration and improving listening skills. These combined efforts would significantly enhance the teaching and learning of listening comprehension, ultimately supporting both teachers and learners in achieving better outcomes.

Conclusion

The study reveals significant challenges encountered by Grade 4 EFAL teachers in developing learners' listening comprehension skills, particularly in under-resourced contexts. Key issues include limited access to teaching resources, inadequate professional development, and a curriculum that does not fully accommodate the complexities of teaching listening as an active, cognitive process. Addressing these barriers requires interventions grounded in educational theory, such as constructivist approaches to learning, robust teacher

training programs, and a resource-rich environment. By implementing these strategies, education systems can better equip teachers to foster learners' listening skills, which are foundational to language acquisition, critical thinking, and lifelong learning.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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