



## The Impact of Reading Habits on English Proficiency in South African Grade 4 Township Learners

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**Abstract:** The primary aim of this study is to study the influence of reading habits on English language proficiency among Grade 4 English First Additional Language learners in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. Employing a qualitative method guided by an interpretivist paradigm, this research gathered data through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Thirty Grade Four learners and two teachers from selected township primary schools participated in the study. The collected data were subjected to a thematic analysis. The study highlighted key themes, including reading practices, challenges, and support structures, thereby revealing how these factors collectively influence the development of English language proficiency among Grade 4 FAL learners. The study's findings outline the main themes that emerged from the data, emphasizing how reading habits affect English language proficiency. This study concludes that consistent and well-supported reading plays an important role in shaping the English language proficiency of grade 4 EFAL learners. It contributes to the existing literature by providing context-specific insights into South African township schools, an area that has received little research. The study suggests implementing focused reading programs, enhancing access to reading materials at home and in schools, and providing teacher-led reading support.

**Keywords:** reading habits; impact; language proficiency; literacy development; township schools.

### Dampak Kebiasaan Membaca terhadap Kemahiran Berbahasa Inggris pada Siswa Kelas 4 di Wilayah Township Afrika Selatan

**Abstrak:** Tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji pengaruh kebiasaan membaca terhadap kemahiran berbahasa Inggris di kalangan siswa kelas 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) di Distrik O.R. Tambo Inland. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif yang dipandu oleh paradigma interpretivisme, penelitian ini mengumpulkan data melalui wawancara semiterstruktur dan diskusi kelompok terfokus (focus group discussion). Sebanyak tiga puluh siswa kelas empat dan dua guru dari sekolah dasar pilihan di wilayah township berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Data yang terkumpul dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Penelitian ini menyoroti tema-tema utama, termasuk praktik membaca, tantangan, dan struktur dukungan, yang dengan demikian mengungkapkan bagaimana faktor-faktor tersebut secara kolektif memengaruhi perkembangan kemahiran berbahasa Inggris di kalangan siswa kelas 4 FAL. Temuan penelitian menguraikan tema-tema utama yang muncul dari data, dengan menekankan bagaimana kebiasaan membaca memengaruhi kemahiran berbahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kegiatan membaca yang konsisten dan didukung dengan baik memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk kemahiran berbahasa Inggris siswa kelas 4 EFAL. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada literatur yang ada dengan memberikan wawasan spesifik konteks mengenai sekolah-sekolah di wilayah township Afrika Selatan, sebuah area yang masih jarang diteliti. Penelitian ini menyarankan penerapan program membaca yang terfokus, peningkatan akses terhadap bahan bacaan di rumah dan di sekolah, serta penyediaan dukungan membaca yang dipandu oleh guru.

**Kata kunci:** kebiasaan membaca; dampak; mahir bahasa; pengembangan literasi; sekolah township.

### 1. Introduction

Reading is a fundamental language skill introduced in primary school to enable learners to understand and interpret various forms of written information. When reading, a basic way of acquiring information becomes a habit, and a concept called 'reading habit' is created

(Zenelaga et al., 2024). Reading plays a crucial role in facilitating learning and enhancing comprehension across different subjects. Compelling reading encompasses both content engagement and comprehension, allowing individuals to process and analyze information more efficiently.

Fortuna *et al.* (2024) note that strong reading skills contribute significantly to a learner's ability to acquire knowledge and develop critical literacy skills. Biswas (2023) refers to the reading habit of constantly reading and reflecting on what you are reading. Reading does not become a habit until you make it a daily practice.

The concept of learners' reading habits focuses on their reading frequency, timing, content, and motivation (Yusof, 2021). Reading habits, which involve a regular and well-planned study schedule, have helped learners become more consistent in their comprehension of academic material and pass examinations (Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2014). Having a reading habit means reading regularly, often with a goal or routine in mind. It is when reading becomes a regular part of your daily or weekly routine, helping learners develop a lifelong love for learning.

This study examined the influence of reading habits on English language proficiency among Grade 4 English FAL learners in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. It has long been recognized that proficient reading habits are crucial for both overall academic achievement and language acquisition (Abid *et al.*, 2023). Despite the importance of reading habits for language learning, many learners in South African township schools face challenges that hinder the development of English language proficiency. The challenges include limited access to age-appropriate reading materials, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate opportunities for meaningful reading practice. This results in Grade 4 learners struggling to build strong reading habits necessary for acquiring English as a First Additional Language. The gap between the significance of reading and what is happening in township schools underscores the need to examine how reading habits affect learners' ability to comprehend English in such disadvantaged learning settings.

Efficient reading habits have repeatedly been found to correlate favorably with academic performance worldwide. Research from several countries has shown that learners who regularly read, both in and out of the classroom, typically achieve better academic results. A study conducted in the United States found that learners who read more frequently scored higher on literacy assessments and achieved better academic outcomes overall (Barber & Kluda, 2020). Reading often helps learners improve their ability to analyze and comprehend language. Building strong reading habits differs

from one learner to another, but the results are the same: they lead to better academic performance.

According to a study conducted in Kenya, learners who establish proficient reading habits early outperform those who do not in national exams (Thuo, 2024). Research conducted in Nigeria revealed the difficulties caused by restricted access to reading materials, which impedes the formation of positive reading habits and, as a result, affects academic achievement (Ezeala, 2020). These results demonstrate that, despite the value placed on reading, structural issues continue to impact educational performance across the continent negatively.

In South African schools, a persistent reading crisis continues to hinder learners' academic progress. Starting in grade four, all learners are required to learn English as a first additional language, even though most of them struggle to comprehend it. Findings by Cronje (2024) reveal that this problem stems from inadequate FAL instruction during the early school years, suggesting that even fluent readers often struggle to understand what they read in English. This study aimed to investigate the influence of reading habits on English FAL Grade 4 First Additional Language learners in township schools in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. The guiding research question for this study was "How do reading habits influence English language proficiency among Grade 4 First Additional Language learners in township schools in the O.R. Tambo Inland District?"

The importance of reading habits in developing literacy and academic success, particularly in early education, is the driving force behind this study. Studies have consistently shown that increased academic achievement and regular reading are positively correlated (Blaabæk & Jæger, 2024). The decision to focus on grade four learners is sensible, as this is a pivotal transition year in South Africa's educational system, when learners shift from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn.' At this point, many learners struggle with reading comprehension, which significantly impacts their overall academic performance. This poor literacy performance directly hinders academic achievement across subjects, making it an urgent educational issue.

For learners in grade four, reading consistently greatly enhances their English language competence. Gedik and Akyol (2022) concur that regular reading enhances vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and overall reading skills while reinforcing learning. Regular reading

is essential for the academic success of grade four English FAL learners. Frequent reading is associated with enhanced vocabulary acquisition and improved reading comprehension, two skills crucial for academic success in language courses (Gedik & Akyol, 2022). This suggests that reading skills benefit academic performance overall; they are not limited to the language class.

The effects of reading habits on language ability are linked to cognitive development concerns. Regular reading helps youngsters better grasp and analyze language, which improves their performance on language exams (Zimmerman & Smit, 2022). Therefore, fostering reading as a habit from an early age is crucial for developing FAL competency.

Furthermore, reading helps learners become more familiar with syntax and phonemic awareness, particularly when they are exposed to a variety of text types. Scheepers *et al.* (2021) agree that knowledge of syntax and phonological awareness are essential building blocks for proficient reading. A learner's ease of learning to read is influenced by the syntax of the language they are learning.

Compelling reading is a foundational skill that supports learning in all subject areas. When learners transition from learning to reading, they utilize critical skills such as vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency to access and comprehend challenging literature (Canonizado, 2024). In grade four, the transition from 'learning to reading to learning to learn' requires these essential skills. Learners who have not yet built reading habits find it difficult to meet requirements across the curriculum. The ability to read is essential for academic success. By building phonetic awareness, grade four learners become more confident in reading. Barends and Reddy (2024) support that reading is an essential learning and awareness-raising tool for future employment and enjoyment. This implies that all learners must become proficient readers, as it provides them with access to all the subjects covered in school and to their future careers. Reading helps learners become better adults.

The Sociocultural Theory serves as the foundation for the study. Vygotsky (1978) developed this hypothesis. According to this view, social interactions are the foundation for cognitive development, which includes reading skills (Nhan, 2020). Reading habits are influenced by learners' sociocultural context, including interactions with classmates, teachers, and parents. Learners acquire literacy through exposure to language and social involvement.

Luong (2022) highlights that social interactions mediate literacy acquisition. The sociocultural context significantly shapes learners' exposure to reading and language learning, particularly in low-resource environments such as South African township schools. Because it emphasizes the significance of social interactions in the development of literacy, socio-cultural theory is pertinent. In the sociocultural context of South African township schools, this study examines the impact of instructors, peers, and family members on the reading habits and English proficiency of grade four learners.

Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a fundamental idea of understanding how learners progress in their literacy skills. In this concept note, teachers play a significant role in promoting literacy growth. They oversee the implementation of various strategies to help learners whose native language differs from the language of instruction and learning in schools improve their literacy (Plaatjies, 2024). Learners' ability to improve reading can be influenced by the more knowledgeable people around them, such as teachers, parents, and peers.

In addition, the socio-cultural approach considers how cultural artifacts and resources, such as books, digital gadgets, and storytelling customs, mediate the development of literacy (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2021). In township schools where resources are scarce, parents must maintain a culture of spending time with their children and sharing stories. A family can even read one book and make it a part of their culture. As Vygotsky emphasized, learning does not occur in isolation but is deeply embedded within specific cultural and historical contexts.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the role of socio-economic factors in shaping the reading habits of grade four learners in the O.R. Tambo Inland Region over 2 years. For this study, interpretivism was the most relevant research paradigm because the aim was to investigate the subjective experiences of learners and teachers concerning how socio-economic factors shape the reading habits of grade four learners. According to Nickerson (2022), interpretivism acknowledges that individuals possess consciousness and are not merely coerced puppets reacting to social forces, as positivists suggest. Interpretivists also believe there is no single correct route or method to knowledge and that no objective knowledge is

independent of thinking or human reasoning (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021); hence, they attempt to derive their constructs from the field by an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of interest.

A research design, as defined by Tan (2022), is the plan or framework for a study that guides data gathering and analysis. It serves as a guide for completing a research project. A case study approach enables the researcher to investigate real-world circumstances and provide comprehensive insights into how socio-economic factors influence reading habits. It is consistent with interpretivism and qualitative methods (Mott & Haddad, 2025). A case study design was employed in this investigation.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two grade four teachers at township schools and thirty Grade 4 learners through focus group discussions to gain rich qualitative insights into the role of socio-economic factors in shaping the reading habits of grade four learners in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and allowing participants the right to withdraw at any time. This methodology aims to provide valuable insights to inform educational practices and interventions in the area.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### Results:

##### Data collected from teacher interviews

The findings reveal that while Grade 4 learners in O.R. Tambo Inland's township schools are beginning to read independently, they remain heavily dependent on structured support from teachers and peers to navigate English as a First Additional Language. Teachers reported persistent challenges, including poor pronunciation, lack of fluency, limited vocabulary, and difficulty with complex grammar and idioms, all of which hinder comprehension and broader language development. However, both educators and learners acknowledged that consistent reading habits, especially with preferred narrative texts like storybooks and fables, positively impact proficiency by expanding vocabulary, improving writing and response skills, and building confidence in speaking English. Despite irregular, self-directed reading practices at home, learners explicitly connected reading to better understanding and communication in English, underscoring reading habits as a critical yet under-supported mechanism for language growth in under-

resourced township contexts. The reflections of the teachers revealed the following themes:

#### Learners are beginning to Read Independently but need Support

One participant mentioned that learners start to read independently. Both participants concluded that learners still need support at this stage. The type of support they mentioned was different; Teacher A talked about support from the teachers themselves:

*"Learners at this stage are starting to read more independently, but they still require guidance and support from wena titsha wabo [you as their teacher]."* (Teacher A, May 2025).

Teacher B's opinion was that learners need support from their peers. Teacher B added that:

*"It is essential to make reading an everyday activity, whether it is individual, paired, group, or whole-class. The group reading helps them support each other in their abilities."* (Teacher B, May 2025).

The transition from the foundation phase to the intermediate phase that learners in grade four are undergoing in their reading journey is something both teachers highlight. Teacher A further stated that, even though learners start to read on their own at this stage, they still need assistance to help improve their reading skills. This means that, for learners to reach the point of reading independently, they must go through a step-by-step process that requires planned guidance, scaffolding, and encouragement.

Planned guidance includes arranging reading lessons to help learners develop their reading skills. For example, a teacher may plan lessons around vocabulary, create comprehension exercises, or select texts appropriate to their learners' reading levels. One benefit is that language skills, structure, and conventions are taught in context rather than separately. This could be extremely helpful to the learners. As they are busy with other skills, such as reading, viewing, listening, speaking, writing, and presenting, they are also learning languages, which will help them understand what they are reading.

Teachers should also assess learners' reading levels at this stage. This can be done by evaluating their current reading abilities, enabling the teacher to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses. Teachers should also create engaging reading experiences by using texts, writing, and activities that capture students' interest. This will motivate learners and make reading more enjoyable.

Scaffolding involves providing temporary support and guidance to learners to enhance their learning. The teachers will build on the existing skills that learners have acquired in grade three. Review and reinforce phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension skills to enhance learning. As learners advance to grade four, they face a shift from simpler to more complex reading material. At this point, scaffolding becomes crucial as much more assistance is needed.

As the English First Additional Language, it poses a difficulty for learners. Pre-reading activities such as building background knowledge, introducing vocabulary, discussing themes or topics, and setting the purpose for reading should be introduced. These activities will help build confidence, improve comprehension, and reduce anxiety.

Learners who receive encouragement are more self-reliant and remain self-driven. Sometimes they do not even wait to be told to read. They interact with texts. Encouraging learners can be as simple as praising their reading success as they progress from one reading level to the next. The teacher should show acknowledgment. The teacher needs to know and familiarise themselves with all the learners. A sense of achievement and a desire to read more are fostered in learners through positive reinforcement.

Encouraging learners to read can have a profound impact on their confidence, motivation, and overall reading ability. When learners are encouraged to read, they are more likely to view challenges as opportunities for growth and development. Learners need to be encouraged to read, as this will motivate them and enable them to assist one another. Team or group work must be encouraged, as this will influence other learners to read. This will also provide space for learners to participate in competitions, encouraging them to develop positive reading habits.

Teacher B further discusses the importance of making reading a daily habit in classroom activities, mentioning a range of approaches, including individual, paired, group, and whole-class reading. These strategies will foster a range of reading skills, including fluency, comprehension, and critical thinking.

During independent reading sessions, learners practice reading at their own pace. This improves their fluency and allows them to form personal connections with texts. During this type of reading, learners can explore different genres and topics at their own pace. Learners even set goals for themselves. Learners read in groups of

four to eight during group reading sessions, often with a teacher present. Not all groups in the class must read the exact text simultaneously. Groups can read texts according to their cognitive levels. Whilst reading, they also share their experiences and discuss the text. As time goes by, they progress to collaborative activities, such as summarising and analyzing the text. This type of reading helps learners develop critical thinking and analytical skills through discussion. It also promotes social engagement.

By using these diverse reading strategies, learners receive focused support that enhances their foundational reading abilities, ultimately improving learner proficiency.

### **Challenges Learners Face While Reading in English**

From the data collected, it has become apparent that learners encounter specific challenges while reading. Both participants mentioned reading challenges and differences based on their individual experiences. Teacher A said:

*“Learners struggle with unfamiliar words, idioms, and phrases. Also, grammar and sentence structure are another challenge. English is a second language, and its complex sentence structures can be difficult to understand. Learners struggle to read with meaning and to build sentences.”* (Teacher A, May 2025).

Additionally, Teacher B remarked:

*“The familiar challenges include poor pronunciation, reading without fluency, and reading without understanding. These challenges hinder grade four EFAL learners; they cannot develop their writing and listening skills or respond to texts when they are struggling with these challenges.”* (Teacher B, May 2025).

The challenges described by both Teacher A and Teacher B reveal significant barriers that grade four English First Additional Language learners encounter in developing practical reading skills. The language gap between academic English and everyday language use is highlighted by Teacher A's observation that learners struggle with complex grammatical structures, unfamiliar vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions. For learners to overcome these challenges, they need a level of proficiency that many grade four learners are still learning. Due to these challenges, learners struggle to comprehend what they read. Another cause of poor comprehension of text results among

English First Additional Language learners is a lack of grammatical awareness.

Teacher B adds that learners' difficulties with pronunciation, lack of fluency, and limited understanding further hinder their reading development. Pronunciation mistakes can disrupt the flow of reading and make it more difficult for learners to grasp the main ideas of the texts. Moreover, reading fluency, as defined by frequent pauses, incorrect pronunciations, and a lack of intonation, indicates that learners are more concerned with decoding words than with comprehending them.

When it comes to reading in grade four, English First Additional Language learners need more than simply basic decoding skills, such as letter-sound recognition and word identification. Sound recognition involves identifying the individual sounds within words, such as phonemes. Word identification, on the other hand, requires learners to accurately recognize and read words. By the time learners begin grade four, they are expected to have mastered these skills. They are now expected to develop comprehension and fluency skills.

Learners who have not yet mastered sound recognition and word identification skills struggle with reading in grade four. They experience difficulties, such as struggling to decode unfamiliar words, which slows their reading because they are still accustomed to words with fewer letters. Learners often struggle to understand the meaning of texts due to inaccurate word recognition. Other learners struggle to keep up with their peers while reading, often falling behind and becoming confused, which leads to frustration and decreased motivation. Learners struggle to comprehend complex texts, as they devote more mental energy to decoding individual words. These challenges hinder their ability to engage with the curriculum and enjoy reading fully.

For learners to become proficient readers, they need to practice reading consistently. If learners are consistent in their reading, they will become fluent readers; hence, in English, the saying is that practice makes perfect. Fluency is not just speed; learners should be aware of this, because sometimes, during whole-class reading, those who read quickly or loudly may think they are reading better than others. Fluent reading is the ability to read with accuracy, proper expression, and a natural flow, which allows the reader to make meaning of the text. When learners read fluently, they can convey meaning and emotion through their voices, bringing the text to life.

When learners face challenges with reading, it affects their overall academic performance. The reason is that grade four learners take six learning subjects, and those who take English as a first additional language learn all five of them in English, except for their home language. If learners cannot read and understand texts in English, they are likely to struggle with following instructions and understanding concepts and ideas across various subjects. When questions are asked, learners may not comprehend them and will be unable to answer what they do not understand. This will lead to incorrect and incomplete answers. This all comes back to poor academic performance.

Improving reading skills can boost learners' confidence and motivation. Teachers should help learners improve their reading skills, enabling them to better understand complex texts and concepts. By improving reading skills, reading habits will also improve, and learners will perform better academically and achieve their full potential.

### **Good habits could lead to improved language proficiency**

When asked about the impact reading habits could have on learners' proficiency in English, both participants showed some positivity. It shows that regular reading could help grade four learners improve their proficiency in English. Teacher A stated:

*"Improved reading habits can impact their proficiencies because, as they read regularly, they are exposed to a wide range of vocabulary. This includes their ability to read and write fluently."* (Teacher A, May 2025).

Teacher B further stated:

*"These habits could have a positive impact on their proficiency in English, as they will develop fluency, reading with understanding, and pronunciation. They may improve their writing skills and ability to respond to texts."* (Teacher B, May 2025).

Teacher A and Teacher B both recognize the importance of developing proficient reading habits in enhancing language proficiency. Teacher A talks about how consistent reading helps learners learn unfamiliar words. This provides the learner with an opportunity to become familiar with a wide range of English words. When learners read regularly, they encounter unfamiliar words and begin to read with greater understanding. As they learn these unfamiliar words, they ask for the meaning or check it out in their dictionaries if they do not understand the word. This affects their language

proficiency. Teacher A also postulated that improved reading habits lead to fluency in both reading and writing, suggesting a strong connection between the two skills.

Teacher B agrees that proficient reading habits have a positive impact on learners' proficiency. Teacher B mentions that consistent reading leads to the development of fluency and comprehension. Learners tend to read fluently and understand what they read. Consistent reading helps improve and enhance response skills. Learners respond to text, also adding their prior knowledge and understanding.

Both teachers emphasize the importance of developing good reading habits. Both Teacher A and Teacher B emphasize that proficient reading habits are crucial for enhancing language proficiency. Both teachers emphasize fluency as a significant benefit of proficient reading habits, whether it is fluency in reading and writing (Teacher A) or fluency in reading with comprehension (Teacher B). They suggest that reading habits affect learners' academic performance.

Developing proficient reading habits is essential for improving language proficiency. Poor reading habits will lead to poor results, whilst rich reading habits will lead to rich results. Learners' academic outcomes highly depend on their reading habits. Fostering proficient reading habits should be a primary objective for learners, especially for grade four students who are being introduced to more subjects and greater independence.

### **Data collected from the Focus Group Discussion**

The focus group discussions revealed that Grade 4 learners predominantly prefer reading narrative texts, particularly storybooks and fables, which they find engaging, relatable, and easy to follow due to clear story structures, moral lessons, and culturally familiar themes. Reading frequency varies, with most learners reading independently and informally—often at night or during free time at home, without structured guidance or scaffolding. Notably, several learners demonstrated metacognitive awareness by stating that they read English specifically to improve their language skills, suggesting an emerging understanding of reading as a tool for vocabulary building and communication. Learners articulated a clear perceived impact of reading on their English proficiency, noting that it helps them understand word meanings, speak more confidently, and communicate with people who do not speak their home language. However,

the absence of formal support, limited access to diverse reading materials, and reliance on unstructured personal reading point to significant gaps that constrain the full development of English proficiency among township learners. The reflections of the teachers revealed the following themes.

### **Preferred Reading Materials and Frequency**

The data reveal that most grade four English First Additional Language learners prefer reading narrative texts, especially storybooks and fables. Learners prefer these types of texts because they are engaging, relatable, and easy to follow. These stories usually feature animal characters, and learners enjoy identifying them. Additionally, narratives typically have a clear beginning, middle, and end. This allows learners to easily identify the elements of the story as something the researcher observed they enjoyed. Furthermore, fables and short stories often convey moral lessons, and learners enjoy reflecting on them.

The stories are often short and carefully chosen to suit grade four learners, with simpler vocabulary and sentence structures that make it easier for learners to comprehend and gain information. As a result, learners are more likely to engage when working with such stories. Learner 3 expressed a fondness for fable stories, one of the learners stated,

*"The types of books I like reading are fable stories. I read them at night."* (Learner 3, May 2025).

The stories usually convey cultural and moral values aligned with African storytelling traditions. The connection means learners not only gain language skills but also a knowledge of culture throughout the text.

The frequency of reading varies, but is initiative-taking; most learners stated that they read on their own. Two learners, in addition to Learner 3, demonstrated that their reading was unstructured; they read at their own pace and on their own schedule. The learners' attest:

*"The type of book I like reading is storybooks, and another thing I do is that I read them at home."* (Learner 1, May 2025).

*"The type of book I like reading is storybooks, and I often read them at night before my bedtime, at home."* (Learner 11, May 2025).

*"I like to read my workbooks whenever I get the chance, which is free."* (Learner 4, May 2025).

*"I enjoy reading stories; I often read before going to sleep."* (Learner 5, May 2025).

Notably, Learner 8 mentioned:

*"I often read them in English after school to improve my English skills."* (Learner 8, May 2025).

This highlights learners' use of reading as a language-acquisition strategy; they are also aware that reading contributes to English development. This indicates that learners also have goals they aim to achieve to enhance their academic life.

While learners' reading preferences are positive, they also indicate that they read, but there is a lack of formal guidance or structured support. Most learners mentioned that they read on their own, at their own time, whenever they had time. Meaning that if they do not find time, they will not read. There is also a gap in scaffolding when learners read on their own; without a more knowledgeable person, they cannot recognize whether they are reading correctly. This might also discourage learners.

Learners' reading habits are shaped more by personal preference and availability of reading resources than by curricular or instructional design. These disadvantages affect learners because their environments (townships) are under-resourced, and they face limitations in their reading, which is limited to what they can find or borrow. This restricts their exposure to vocabulary and English proficiency.

### **Perceived Impact of Reading on English Proficiency**

Learners demonstrate a strong link between reading in English and their ability to understand and speak the language. Several comments from learners indicate that they view reading not only as a means for academic learning but also as a tool for communication and social inclusion in our diverse country. Learner 9 stated:

*"It helps me know how to speak or communicate with people who do not understand Xhosa."* (Learner 9, May 2025).

It was impressive to hear learners acknowledge that English helps with communication, especially from a township environment.

Others highlighted how reading builds vocabulary and decoding skills:

*"It helps me know what the words mean and how they are written."* (Learner 3, May 2025).

The learner seems to appreciate how reading helps them understand the meaning of English words, and they comprehend to the extent that they even write. When one comprehends and can read a language, they can also write it, because

they have developed decoding skills, including vocabulary. Learner 12 added:

*"It helps me understand and speak that language."* (Learner 12, May 2025).

This learner emphasizes the importance of reading in language acquisition and proficiency. It helps them with comprehension and communication. These remarks suggest that language learners acquire vocabulary and grammar when they are exposed to texts slightly above their current proficiency level. Storybooks with pictures and familiar themes offer this type of input. In support, Learner 11 observed that reading in English helps her understand "difficult words."

*"I feel good because if I read English, I understand some of the words that are difficult for me."* (Learner 11, May 2025).

What remains missing is how to apply these reading strategies to academic contexts. To fully benefit from reading, learners need to be taught to apply reading strategies across all subjects. This will help them improve their overall academic performance.

### **Discussion:**

Learners who engaged in consistent reading practices demonstrated a firm grasp of vocabulary and sentence construction. Jakfar *et al.* (2025) support the notion that reading is essential for learners' academic achievement and personal growth, as it improves vocabulary, fosters critical thinking, and enhances knowledge. Some learners demonstrated the ability to build sentences with less teacher assistance and could also write short paragraphs in response to reading activities or stories read to them by the teacher.

The ability to read independently or in groups exposed learners to a range of language skills. There was a notable improvement in language structures, vocabulary, and writing. Learners who read regularly were more confident when speaking English and used more complex sentence structures. The learners also had fewer errors in written tasks. Hicks (2023) agrees that learners are more likely to succeed academically the more they read. Reading regularly will not only help learners excel academically but also enhance their vocabulary, improve their writing skills, and develop their critical thinking abilities. The data collected revealed that reading plays a key role in building foundational language structures.

Despite some promising practices, several learners faced challenges during reading, which directly impacted their language proficiency.

Many learners struggled with decoding unfamiliar English words, limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and a lack of fluency. These difficulties often led to disengagement. Cartwright and Palian (2024) note that vocabulary limitations complicate the understanding of complex texts. In addition, Nussy and Pekpekay (2024) note that one of the biggest obstacles to reading comprehension is a small vocabulary. Unfamiliar terms can be difficult for learners to understand, hindering their ability to comprehend texts or phrases.

#### 4. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study examined the influence of reading habits on English language proficiency among Grade 4 First Additional Language learners in township schools in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. The results showed that although learners are starting to read independently, they still require constant support from teachers, parents, and the school environment. While favorable reading habits and access to preferred reading materials helped enhance proficiency, challenges such as limited resources and language barriers have been found to impede progress. Overall, the study highlights the pivotal role of reading habits in shaping language development and underscores the need for sustained interventions in township schools to strengthen literacy outcomes.

Suggestions include offering organized reading assistance programs to help learners improve their developing reading skills independently. In addition, address challenges by offering targeted interventions such as vocabulary enrichment and guided reading sessions. It is important to encourage regular reading practices in schools while ensuring that everyone has access to a variety of engaging, age-appropriate reading materials. Furthermore, raise awareness among learners, teachers, and parents about the positive impact of consistent reading on English language proficiency.

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