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# The Use of Schema Theory in Teaching English Reading Comprehension in the Junior Schools of Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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## Abstract

Reading comprehension is essential for learning English, particularly for English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) learners, who often struggle due to limited vocabulary, unfamiliar subjects, and a lack of exposure to the language and cultural backgrounds of the texts. Conventional teaching methods, like the Grammar-Translation Method, focus mainly on grammar and word recognition, often overlooking the cognitive and experiential aspects necessary for proper understanding. Schema Theory, which originates from cognitive psychology, serves as a valuable framework for understanding how prior knowledge, organized into mental structures called schemata, aids in meaning-making during reading. This paper examines how Schema Theory can be applied to enhance reading comprehension among ESL learners, focusing on techniques for activating their schemata before and during the reading process. The research combines theoretical insights with practical findings, showcasing the significance of linguistic, content, and formal schemas in the comprehension process. It suggests that using schema-based teaching strategies, such as pre-teaching vocabulary, discussing overarching themes, and providing contextual information, can significantly boost learner engagement and reading performance, especially in multilingual and under-resourced educational settings. The paper highlights the importance of integrating schema activation methods into reading instruction to better support learners from diverse backgrounds, ultimately leading to improved literacy outcomes and enhanced critical thinking skills. Additionally, it offers suggestions for educators to adopt schema-based strategies that can help address gaps in learners' background knowledge and foster meaningful engagement with reading materials.

## Keywords

reading comprehension, prior knowledge, cognitive frameworks, literacy development, reading strategies

## INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is an essential aspect of language acquisition, particularly for individuals learning English as a First Additional Language (EFAL). Despite the implementation of structured curricula and standardized teaching methods, EFAL learners frequently encounter difficulties in comprehending texts due to challenges such as limited vocabulary, unfamiliar subject matter, or insufficient exposure to the linguistic and cultural contexts surrounding the material. Traditional pedagogical approaches to reading often prioritize the mechanics of word recognition and grammatical structures while overlooking the cognitive and experiential dimensions critical to comprehension.

Schema Theory, grounded in cognitive psychology, offers a robust theoretical framework for understanding how pre-existing knowledge enhances comprehension. Initially introduced by Bartlett in 1932 and subsequently refined by Rumelhart in 1980, Schema Theory suggests that individuals interpret new information by connecting it to existing mental structures or schemata. In the reading process, comprehension transcends mere word decoding and involves the construction of meaning through the interplay between the text and a reader's prior knowledge. This analysis examines the practical applications of Schema Theory in enhancing reading comprehension among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, focusing on the integration of schema activation strategies into instructional practices to improve reading outcomes.

Schema Theory highlights the critical role that prior knowledge plays in how readers engage with texts. According to this framework, readers derive meaning and understanding from new information by activating relevant

mental frameworks, or "schemas," which facilitate the interpretation of the material (Anderson, 2020). The activation of background knowledge empowers learners to make predictions, bridge gaps in understanding, and assimilate new information with their existing knowledge, thereby bolstering comprehension (Ahmadi & Hairul, 2021).

Reading is intrinsically linked to language acquisition. For many learners of English, reading represents the most vital skill among the four core language competencies (Zhao Jing, 2017). Additionally, reading serves as the primary avenue for acquiring and mastering knowledge. Proficient reading comprehension is crucial for learners to effectively gather information and broaden their understanding of different subjects. Through habitual reading, individuals can integrate external knowledge and develop new insights by processing information internally. This skill constitutes a fundamental aspect of English language proficiency, particularly for junior high school students. As Chen Xianchun (1998) articulates, "Reading is one of the most fundamental methods for humans to understand modern society. It also represents the basic application of a foreign language."

Nevertheless, conventional English reading instruction predominantly relies on the Grammar-Translation Method, often placing undue emphasis on textual analysis while neglecting other significant areas of content. Consequently, it is imperative for educators to prioritize reading instruction in English and encourage students to distance themselves from traditional learning paradigms. Since the 1960s, theories of English reading have drawn heavily from psycholinguistics, particularly Goodman's psycholinguistic model, known as "Schema Theory." This article explores the potential for applying Schema Theory within English reading instruction to enhance students' reading capabilities. In the context of reading, particularly for learners with limited exposure to a variety of texts, Schema Theory elucidates why some students experience greater difficulty than others: they may lack the foundational knowledge necessary for meaningful engagement with the content (Ngwenya & Busayo, 2022).

Educators can harness this theory by pre-teaching vocabulary, facilitating discussions on themes, and establishing context prior to reading. Such strategies can significantly improve learners' understanding (Yunus, Salehi, and Amini, 2021). Consequently, Schema Theory presents valuable insights into the cognitive mechanisms underlying reading and offers practical methodologies for educators aimed at enhancing reading comprehension, especially within multilingual or resource-limited educational environments.

In conclusion, Schema Theory accentuates the vital importance of prior knowledge and experiences in the reading process. The capacity for readers to construct and activate relevant schemata is fundamental to their comprehension of the text. This consideration is particularly significant for high school learners, who often represent diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such diversity can greatly influence their exposure to both the content and formal structures of texts, underscoring the necessity for a more empathetic educational approach to effectively address their unique challenges.

## Research Question

How does Schema Theory facilitate English reading comprehension?

What are effective strategies for activating learners' schemata before and during reading?

How do teachers implement schema-based strategies in a real classroom?

## LITERATURE REVIEW OF SCHEMA THEORY

### Schema Theory Overview

Schema Theory posits that knowledge is organized into units, or schemata, which serve as mental templates that help individuals interpret and assimilate new information. According to Rumelhart (1980), these schemata are activated when readers encounter familiar content, enabling them to predict and infer meaning. Reading comprehension, therefore, is an active process involving integrating new textual information with the reader's existing cognitive structures.

A schema is a mental model of related concepts that guides how new information is organized (Stein, 1992). Schema theory serves as a framework for cognitive psychologists to understand mental processes. Different scholars have varying perspectives on schema theory. The concept was first proposed in 1781 by the German philosopher and psychologist Immanuel Kant, who described schemas as "innate structures that organize our understanding of the world."

British psychologist Frederick Bartlett (1932) viewed a schema as a "positive development model" and noted its application in language comprehension. David Rumelhart defined a schema as "a data structure that represents a generic concept stored in memory." In contrast, Roger Anderson characterized it as "an abstract structure of knowledge," and Medin and Russ referred to it simply as "a general knowledge structure for understanding."

In the 1970s, scholars such as Rumelhart and Patricia Carrell incorporated schema theory into reading studies, exploring the processes and mechanisms behind understanding text meaning, thus contributing to the development of modern schema theory. The theoretical significance of schemas lies in their role as knowledge and empirical structures that help individuals perceive the world unconsciously. Overall, we can conclude that schemas are accumulated experiences and knowledge structures that inform how people understand the world, whether consciously or unconsciously. The existing literature on applying schema theory in reading comprehension offers valuable insights into its potential benefits. However, it also reveals the limitations of current reading comprehension instruction in South Africa. Often, this instruction relies on assigning reading passages accompanied by short or multiple-choice questions, without explicitly teaching reading strategies and comprehension skills. This approach neglects learners' diverse backgrounds and experiences, which are essential for constructing and activating relevant schemata.

Schema theory posits that reading comprehension is an interactive process between a reader's prior knowledge (schemas) and the text itself, where meaning is constructed rather than merely extracted. This process involves both bottom-up processing (text-driven) and top-down processing (knowledge-driven), which work together to enhance understanding (An, 2013). Recent research indicates that activating relevant schemas prior to reading, such as through self-generated questions or pre-reading activities, significantly improves comprehension by helping readers connect new information to their existing knowledge (Bui, 2023).

Empirical studies show that schema-based instructional strategies effectively enhance learner engagement and comprehension, including brainstorming, guided discussions, and summarization tasks. These strategies help to bridge gaps in background knowledge and support learners in making meaningful connections with texts, especially when culturally relevant content and diverse text structures are included (Bui, 2023). Moreover, schema activation has been demonstrated to improve reading competence in various contexts, such as among engineering learners, where pre-reading schema activation resulted in statistically significant gains in comprehension scores (Chaiyaporn, 2023).

Scholars emphasize the importance of integrating schema theory into reading instruction to address the needs of diverse learners. Teachers play a crucial role in guiding learners to activate and construct relevant schemas, which fosters active and independent learning. This approach improves literacy outcomes and enhances critical thinking and engagement with texts, underscoring the practical value of schema theory in educational settings (Bui, 2023; Mtshali, 2021).

The study by Pretorius and Bohlmann (2003) highlights the considerable number of learners in tertiary institutions who are identified as academically at risk due to their limited reading and literacy skills. Applying schema theory can be especially helpful in addressing these challenges, as it acknowledges the importance of prior knowledge and experiences in the reading process (Linyang, 2021).

### **The Classification of Schema Theory**

Types of Schema Anderson (1977) identified three primary types of schema that play a role in reading comprehension: Linguistic Schema: Encompasses the reader's knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and language conventions. Without a firm grasp of the linguistic code, comprehension is significantly hindered. Content Schema: Refers to the reader's background knowledge about the world and the text's subject matter. It influences the reader's ability to relate to and understand the material. Formal Schema: Involves understanding the structure and organization of different texts, such as narratives, expository passages, and dialogues.

Depending on the meaning of the above description, it is either assimilated into existing knowledge structures and the schema remains the same, or the schema changes and is reconstructed. Either way, the schema provides individuals with a knowledge base that serves as a guide for the interpretation of information, actions, and expectations, thereby simplifying the process by which people make sense of events and situations (Bartlett, 1932; Lord & Foti, 1986; Engle & Lord, 1997). In this section, we will talk about three schemas: Language schema, content schema, and formal schema.

#### **Language Schema**

Language schema is a general understanding of a particular language's language rules, including vocabulary, grammar, speech rules, and so on. In other words, it refers to basic language knowledge. According to schema theory, reading comprehension is an interactive process where readers actively construct meaning by integrating new textual information with their existing knowledge structures or schemas (Anderson, 1984). In this model, language schema plays a foundational role because, without a solid grasp of the language in which a text is written, learners struggle to process even familiar content or text structures. For example, a learner may have a well-developed content schema (background knowledge about a topic) and a formal schema (understanding of narrative or informational text structures). However, if their language schema is weak due to limited vocabulary or grammatical knowledge, they will still face difficulties comprehending the text (Alhaisoni, 2017).

This is particularly relevant in South Africa, where many learners in the Intermediate Phase are taught in English, a second or additional language for the majority. Studies have shown that limited English language proficiency can impede reading comprehension, even when learners are otherwise capable (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). This highlights the necessity for teachers to develop learners' content knowledge and explicitly teach language to support reading development. Moreover, when learners' language schema is underdeveloped, especially in early grades like Grade 4, they are less able to make meaning from texts, negatively affecting their academic performance across subjects (Howie et al., 2017). Strengthening learners' language schema involves building vocabulary, improving grammatical knowledge, and increasing exposure to varied texts. In summary, language schema is a critical component of reading comprehension. For learners in multilingual and under-resourced contexts like the Eastern Cape, explicitly strengthening language schema in the classroom can support broader academic success. Teachers' understanding of this concept is vital in shaping effective reading instruction.

#### **Content Schema**

Content schema refers to learners' background knowledge about the article's content. It mainly includes the cultural background knowledge and knowledge related to the article's topic (Li Han, 2020). It is also called a thesis schema. The Content Schema is a theoretical framework used in reading comprehension research that focuses on the reader's

background knowledge about the subject matter of a text. This schema helps readers make sense of what they are reading by allowing them to connect new information with what they already know. Content schema relates to prior knowledge of the topic or theme presented in a text.

Content schema is one of three schemata proposed by schema theory, alongside formal schema (knowledge of text structure) and linguistic schema (knowledge of vocabulary and grammar). It plays a crucial role in reading comprehension because it helps readers infer meaning, fill in gaps, and retain information more effectively. A reader with a well-developed content schema related to the text is more likely to comprehend it successfully (Anmarkrud & Bråten, 2015).

In education, especially among primary school learners, underdeveloped content schemata can hinder reading comprehension. For example, suppose a Grade 4 learner is reading a passage about farming but has no prior experience or knowledge of farming. In that case, they may struggle to understand the text despite being able to decode the words correctly. This issue is particularly relevant in multilingual and multicultural classrooms where learners come from diverse backgrounds (Pretorius and Klapwijk, 2016).

Engaging in activating content schema prior to reading, utilizing strategies such as pre-reading discussions, concept mapping, and visual aids, can substantially enhance comprehension. Educators can further support the learning process by introducing essential concepts and vocabulary, enriching the content schema required for a more profound understanding of the material. (Kispaal, 2020).

In South African classrooms, especially in rural or under-resourced areas like the OR Tambo Inland District, learners may not always have access to materials or experiences that develop diverse content schemata. This can affect their ability to engage meaningfully with texts, especially in languages not their home language (Van Staden and Bosker, 2014). Teachers must therefore use culturally responsive teaching strategies to bridge these knowledge gaps.

### **Formal Schema**

Formal schema pertains to a reader's prior knowledge regarding the organizational formats and conventions of different text types or genres. This encompasses understanding how various texts are commonly structured, such as the narrative arc found in stories, the cause-and-effect framework in expository texts, or the argumentative format used in persuasive writing. According to Buck (2018), formal schema includes an awareness of rhetorical structures and genre-specific expectations, which aid readers in predicting and grasping the flow of information in a text. This aspect of schema is vital for reading comprehension, as it allows learners to identify textual indicators, anticipate content, and grasp the intended purpose of individual sections within a text (Grabe, 2009).

In second language learning, particularly with English as a First Additional Language (EFAL), formal schema is essential for bridging linguistic knowledge and understanding of texts. Learners unfamiliar with English rhetorical structures may find it challenging to comprehend texts, even if they can decode the words (Hudson, 2016). For instance, EFAL learners moving from Grade 3 to Grade 4 may encounter difficulties due to their limited exposure to various text types in English, which can impede their ability to understand academic texts that rely on genre-based comprehension (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016).

Additionally, formal schema does not function in isolation; it interacts with content and linguistic schemata to promote a comprehensive understanding of the text (Kobayishi, 2017). Educators can foster the development of formal schema by explicitly teaching text structures and providing opportunities for learners to engage with a range of genres. This support is critical in multilingual classrooms, where learners' literacy experiences in their native languages may differ significantly from those expected in English academic texts (Howie, 2017).

### **The Application of Schema Theory in English Reading Teaching**

Schema Theory underscores the importance of reader-based factors in text comprehension. Comprehension is enhanced when the reader's existing schemata align with the text. Conversely, a mismatch between schemata and text content can lead to misunderstanding. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) emphasized that activating relevant schemata before reading helps learners engage more deeply with the text, improves recall, and aids in making inferences and drawing conclusions. Language schema is instrumental in aiding learners in identifying specific information within a text and preparing them for the reading process. It provides essential background knowledge, thereby enriching learners' understanding and activating their existing cognitive frameworks, facilitating comprehension. Moreover, educators can motivate learners to formulate predictions based on the title and the accompanying visual elements. The following elaboration offers a comprehensive examination of the role of language schema in English reading instruction. Schema theory, a cognitive framework emphasizing the role of prior knowledge in comprehension, has significantly influenced English reading pedagogy. It posits that readers interpret texts by integrating new information with existing mental structures, or schemata, encompassing linguistic, content, and formal knowledge. Recent studies affirm that activating these schemata enhances reading comprehension among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. For instance, Wang (2024) highlights the efficacy of mind mapping and information technology in facilitating schema activation, thereby improving reading abilities among Chinese university learners. Similarly, Khartite (2021) emphasizes the importance of pre-reading activities in building and activating relevant schemata, leading to more accurate and enjoyable comprehension experiences for ESL readers.



Incorporating schema theory into reading instruction involves strategic pre-, during-, and post-reading activities. Pre-reading tasks like discussions and vocabulary previews aim to activate existing knowledge structures. During reading, strategies like predicting and questioning help maintain engagement and facilitate connections between new information and prior knowledge. Post-reading activities, including summarizing and reflective discussions, reinforce comprehension and aid in integrating new information into existing schemata. Hu (2024) notes that such schema-based instructional approaches enhance language skills and foster critical thinking abilities among junior school learners.

Despite its benefits, the application of schema theory in reading instruction faces challenges. Cultural differences can lead to mismatches between learners' existing schemata and the content of reading materials, potentially hindering comprehension. Additionally, some educators may lack training in effectively implementing schema-based strategies. Adedokun et al. (2024) advocate using authentic materials and culturally relevant content to bridge these gaps, enhancing vocabulary acquisition and overall reading proficiency in ESL contexts. Tackling these challenges necessitates ongoing professional development and curriculum design that takes the varied backgrounds of learners into consideration.

### ***The Application of Language Schema in English Reading Teaching***

Language schema plays a crucial role in English reading comprehension. Before engaging in reading activities, English teachers should help learners become familiar with relevant vocabulary, grammar, usage, and other related knowledge to establish their language schema.

For instance, when discussing a passage about sports, learners might learn new vocabulary related to the topic, such as "basketball," "volleyball," and "football." To teach the word "basketball," the teacher could use a PowerPoint presentation featuring a picture of a basketball and Yao Ming, accompanied by positive comments from netizens. A sample sentence could be, "Yao Ming plays basketball very well." This method aids learners in learning new vocabulary through visual cues.

Additionally, teachers can guide learners to infer the meanings of words based on context. A rich language knowledge structure helps activate the reader's language schema during the reading process. This allows the text information to combine with the reader's linguistic skills, facilitating a better literal understanding (Cao Jianhui, 2019).

### ***The Application of Content Schema in English Reading Teaching***

Discourse is situated within specific contexts; this principle also extends to reading materials. The concept of content schema pertains to the frameworks of knowledge and personal experiences an individual brings to their understanding of a given topic (Ding Yidan, 2017). For example, when engaging with the topic of the Dragon Boat Festival, one might immediately associate it with Qu Yuan, dragon boat races, Zongzi, realgar wine, and other culturally relevant elements.

In instructional settings, when a teacher introduces a text titled "The Spring Festival," they can prompt learners to forecast its content based on the title. In response, learners may identify various customs linked to the Spring Festival, such as exchanging lucky money, posting couplets, and preparing dumplings. This approach effectively activates learners' prior knowledge regarding the Spring Festival, which has been previously encoded in their memory.

Schema theory provides valuable insights into the dynamics among the reader, the reading context, and the text itself. Content schemas facilitate learners in making predictions and grasping the meaning of a text, thereby enhancing their English reading proficiency. The background knowledge possessed by a reader significantly influences their comprehension of material in a second language. Schmitt (2020) firmly advocates this perspective, asserting that when readers share comparable competencies in other domains, greater familiarity with the topic leads to easier understanding of the relevant text.

While the corpus of reading material is vast, the subject range remains relatively finite. By assisting learners in developing content schemas across diverse topics, educators can streamline the teaching process of teaching English reading and empower learners to engage with texts more holistically and comprehensively (Zhang Xiang, 2011).

### ***The Application of Formal Schema in English Reading Teaching***

The formal schema is predominantly associated with a reader's familiarity with the structural arrangement of a text. It encompasses an understanding of the text's organization, as well as its genre and rhetorical devices. For example, when learners engage with reading comprehension questions that require them to identify cause-and-effect relationships, their ability to succeed is often contingent upon recognizing causal terms, such as "because" or "on account of." Mastery of the formal schema enables learners to comprehend the logical connections within the text, enhancing their ability to analyze the overarching themes.

In conclusion, a well-developed language schema assists learners in systematically organizing the information presented in a passage, thereby improving their analytical skills. Educators play a crucial role in this endeavor by activating learners' prior knowledge of the text, cultivating their linguistic sensitivity, and expanding their vocabulary. Additionally, possessing adequate background knowledge equips learners to appreciate the emotional nuances of the passage better and to interpret the author's intent with greater accuracy. Consequently, in English reading instruction, educators must guide learners in applying their language schema. This approach is vital for enhancing reading efficiency and facilitating significant progress in reading proficiency.

## EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Multiple empirical studies affirm the positive impact of schema activation on reading comprehension. Al-Issa (2006) demonstrated that culturally familiar texts and pre-reading discussions improved EFL learners' comprehension scores. Erten and Razi (2009) found that learners exposed to schema-activating tasks, such as previewing key vocabulary or discussing relevant experiences, showed higher levels of engagement and understanding. These findings highlight the need to integrate schema theory principles into ESL reading instruction.

### Methodology

**Research Design** This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the practical application of Schema Theory in English reading instruction. A case study approach was chosen to provide in-depth insights into instructional practices and learner experiences in a real-world classroom setting.

### Participants

The paper involved three English teachers and 60 Grade 9 EFAL learners from a public secondary school in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The teachers had 5 to 15 years of teaching experience and had undergone training in communicative and learner-centered teaching approaches.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through: **Classroom Observations:** Six English reading lessons were observed to examine how schema activation strategies were employed. - **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Teachers were interviewed about their understanding of schema theory and its application in teaching reading. - **Learner Work Samples:** Comprehension tasks and reflections were analysed to evaluate learners' engagement and understanding.

### Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically using NVivo software. Transcripts from observations and interviews were coded to identify patterns related to schema activation techniques, learner responses, and instructional challenges. Categories were refined to develop themes that addressed the research questions.

### Challenges in Implementation

Educators have identified several obstacles to effectively applying schema theory for enhancing English reading comprehension. Key challenges include limited instructional time, large class sizes, and a lack of culturally appropriate reading materials. Furthermore, discrepancies in learners' background knowledge complicate the creation of effective schema activation activities for diverse learners.

Limited instructional time is a significant concern in curriculum-driven environments, where opportunities for pre-reading exercises designed to activate or develop learners' prior knowledge are scarce (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

Large class sizes pose another considerable challenge, particularly in under-resourced contexts such as many South African public schools. The presence of numerous learners makes it difficult for teachers to assess individual existing schemas or tailor instruction to diverse needs. Consequently, schema activation strategies may become overly general and less effective. Additionally, the scarcity of culturally relevant reading materials impedes the successful implementation of schema-based approaches. When texts are culturally unfamiliar or distant, learners struggle to relate new information to their existing knowledge frameworks (Karami, 2021). This issue is especially pronounced in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, where learners' backgrounds and experiences can vary significantly.

Variations in learners' background knowledge further complicate the design of schema activation tasks that can effectively reach all learners. Each learner brings a unique set of experiences to the classroom, making it challenging for teachers to select pre-reading strategies or materials that resonate with everyone. Without shared schemas, comprehension can become inconsistent among learners (Ajayi, 2011).

These challenges underscore the necessity for context-sensitive approaches to schema activation that account for learners' socio-cultural backgrounds, linguistic diversity, and the practical limitations faced by educators. They also highlight the importance of training teachers in diagnostic and adaptive pedagogical methods that can address the varied needs of their learners.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The paper highlights that Schema Theory offers a robust framework for enhancing reading comprehension in ESL contexts. Pre-reading activities helped learners access relevant background knowledge, making the reading process more meaningful. During-reading strategies-maintained learner engagement and promoted inference-making, while post-reading tasks reinforced schema integration. These findings align with previous research (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Erten & Razi, 2009) that emphasizes connecting instruction to learners' prior knowledge. However, practical implementation requires thoughtful planning, especially in classrooms with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To be effective, schema-based instruction must be flexible, inclusive, and supported by appropriate resources and teacher training. The findings of this paper have important implications for applying schema theory in reading comprehension instruction in junior schools of the Eastern Cape region. The study demonstrates that educators can significantly improve

their reading comprehension skills by explicitly teaching learners to activate and construct relevant schemata. This approach can be particularly beneficial in addressing the challenges faced by learners in this region, such as limited exposure to the linguistic and cultural norms of the reading materials and the diverse backgrounds and experiences they bring to the classroom. To effectively implement this approach, educators should incorporate pre-reading activities that help learners activate their prior knowledge, explicit instruction on text structures and strategies, and opportunities for learners to connect the reading materials and their experiences. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to apply schema theory in their reading comprehension instruction effectively. The study underscores that Schema Theory constitutes a practical framework for enhancing reading comprehension within ESL contexts. Engaging in pre-reading activities allows learners to access pertinent background knowledge, rendering the reading experience more meaningful. The implementation of during-reading strategies sustains learner engagement and facilitates the process of inference-making, while post-reading tasks serve to reinforce schema integration. These findings are consistent with prior research (Ferdianto, 2025), highlighting the necessity of linking instruction to learners' existing knowledge.

Successful practical application demands meticulous planning, particularly in classrooms characterized by diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For schema-based instruction to be effective, it must demonstrate flexibility and inclusivity and be supported by suitable resources and comprehensive teacher training.

The implications of this study are particularly significant for applying schema theory in reading comprehension instruction in junior schools within the Eastern Cape region. It illustrates that educators can substantially improve their reading comprehension abilities by explicitly teaching learners to activate and develop relevant schemata. This methodological approach is especially advantageous for addressing the unique challenges confronted by learners in this region, including limited exposure to the linguistic and cultural conventions prevalent in reading materials, alongside the diverse backgrounds and experiences that learners bring to the classroom.

To effectively implement this instructional strategy, educators are advised to integrate pre-reading activities that facilitate the activation of prior knowledge, provide explicit instruction on text structures and reading strategies, and offer opportunities for learners to relate reading materials to their own experiences. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the critical role of ongoing professional development for teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to apply schema theory effectively in their reading comprehension instruction.

It is essential to acknowledge that the findings of this study are confined to the specific context of junior schools in the Eastern Cape region. Nevertheless, the insights derived from this research have the potential to inform analogous initiatives in other educational settings, particularly those characterized by diverse learner backgrounds and experiences that may present challenges in reading comprehension. Future research should examine the long-term effects of schema theory-based instructional strategies on learners' reading comprehension and investigate practical methods for integrating this approach into the wider curriculum and school-wide literacy initiatives.

Educators must provide explicit instruction in schema activation and construction strategies to enhance reading comprehension. This may encompass pre-reading activities to build background knowledge and familiarize learners with text structure and vocabulary. The quantitative results of this study indicate a statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension scores among learners who received schema theory-based instruction compared to their peers in the control group.

Qualitative findings further substantiate these results. Learner interviews and classroom observations suggest that explicit instruction in schema activation and construction, in conjunction with pre-reading and post-reading strategies, was pivotal in augmenting learners' engagement with reading materials and their overall comprehension levels. These findings' implications are significant for applying schema theory in reading comprehension instruction within junior schools in the O.R. Tambo Inland District.

Moreover, integrating post-reading activities that encourage learners to reflect upon and consolidate their understanding of the text can further strengthen their schemata. Pre- and post-test assessments revealed that learners exposed to schema theory-based instruction were more skilled at constructing and activating relevant schemata, resulting in enhanced reading comprehension. These qualitative results are consistent with existing literature on applying schema theory in reading comprehension instruction, underscoring the importance of addressing the challenges faced by junior school learners in the Eastern Cape region to improve their reading comprehension skills significantly.

The findings of this study illuminate the potential of schema theory-based instruction to enhance reading comprehension for junior school learners in the Eastern Cape. This approach is particularly pertinent given these learners' considerable challenges, including limited access to resources, socioeconomic disadvantages, and insufficient literacy skills. The results align with extant research emphasizing activating and constructing relevant schemata to facilitate understanding (Harste, 1989; Wissinger et al., 2018; Boakye, 2016).

Learners who received explicit instruction in schema activation and construction, alongside pre-reading and post-reading strategies, exhibited greater engagement with reading materials and improved comprehension. However, it is crucial to recognize that implementing schema theory-based instruction necessitates a departure from traditional reading comprehension methodologies, which typically rely on assigning reading passages followed by short-answer or multiple-choice questions, without explicitly teaching comprehension strategies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite its valuable insights, this paper is constrained by certain limitations. It lacks detailed content analysis and does not incorporate empirical data, limiting the robustness and generalizability of its claims. To advance understanding in this area, future research should undertake comprehensive, data-driven investigations exploring schema theory-based instruction's long-term impacts. Such studies should also examine their applicability across varied educational contexts and learner demographics, particularly within under-resourced environments.

Nonetheless, the findings align with existing literature affirming the importance of schema activation and construction in enhancing reading comprehension. The application of schema theory in instructional design has shown promise, particularly for junior school learners in the Eastern Cape, who often contend with significant barriers such as socioeconomic disadvantages, limited access to educational resources, and underdeveloped literacy skills.

Educators can meaningfully address these challenges by incorporating explicit schema-based strategies, such as pre-reading discussions, targeted vocabulary instruction, and post-reading reflection. Consequently, schema theory serves as a theoretical framework and a practical tool for improving reading outcomes in contexts marked by systemic educational inequities.

## CONCLUSION

This study examines the potential of schema theory to enhance the effectiveness of English reading instruction. It details the practical applications of various aspects of schema theory in teaching reading and provides illustrative examples for each discussed component. In conclusion, educators should recognize the importance of understanding their learners' learning characteristics, fostering their motivation to learn, acknowledging the inherent nature of reading, clarifying instructional content, and flexibly applying schema theory to enrich the quality of English reading instruction (Asif, 2020).

Nevertheless, this paper has certain limitations. Notably, it lacks detailed content and analysis and does not incorporate empirical research, resulting in insufficient data to substantiate the claims presented. Future research endeavors should aim for more comprehensive and in-depth investigations of this subject. Specifically, subsequent studies should explore the long-term effects of schema theory-based instruction and its applicability across diverse educational contexts and student demographics. The findings of this research underscore the potential of schema theory-based instruction to improve reading comprehension among junior learners in the Eastern Cape region. This instructional approach is particularly pertinent given these learners' significant challenges, including limited access to resources, socioeconomic disadvantages, and inadequate reading and literacy skills.

The results corroborate existing literature highlighting the significance of activating and constructing relevant schemata to enhance comprehension. By integrating explicit instruction in schema activation and construction, along with pre-reading and post-reading strategies, educators can effectively address the reading comprehension challenges encountered by junior school learners in the Eastern Cape.

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