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## ENHANCING READING PROFICIENCY THROUGH FOLKTALES: AN APPLICATION OF COMBRINK'S MODEL AMONG FIRST-YEAR SETSWANA HOME LANGUAGE STUDENT

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the reading abilities of first-year Setswana Home Language students in a South African higher education context, with particular focus on their engagement with folktale texts. Despite being enrolled in their home language, many students experience challenges related to reading fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and comprehension. Guided by Combrink's reading model, the study employed a qualitative research design involving classroom observations and focus group interviews with 30 first-year students. The findings reveal that students struggled with accurate pronunciation, tonal variation, reading fluency, and the interpretation of unfamiliar words. However, the implementation of structured reading strategies, including reading aloud and guided interaction with folktales, contributed to noticeable improvements in students' reading abilities. Students reported positive perceptions of reading aloud, indicating enhanced engagement, confidence, and comprehension. Furthermore, the use of folktales as culturally relevant texts facilitated deeper cognitive and emotional engagement, enabling students to connect meaningfully with the content. The study concludes that the integration of folktales with structured reading models such as Combrink's can significantly enhance reading proficiency among teacher education students. The paper recommends the use of diverse and culturally responsive reading strategies to support literacy development in multilingual higher education contexts.

**Keywords:** Reading proficiency; Setswana Home Language; folktales; Combrink's model; reading fluency; higher education; multilingualism; reading aloud

### INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental academic skill that underpins learning and success in higher education. It enables students to access, interpret, and critically engage with disciplinary knowledge. However, in the South African context, a substantial body of research points to persistent challenges in students' reading proficiency, with many entering higher education institutions lacking the necessary skills to comprehend and engage effectively with texts (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius, Mohohlwane, & Spaull, 2020). These challenges have significant implications for students' academic performance and progression.

The situation is further complicated by the multilingual nature of South African classrooms. Although students may be enrolled in courses offered in their home languages, this does not necessarily translate into proficiency in reading and comprehension. Recent studies have shown that students in African language contexts, including Setswana, continue to experience

difficulties related to pronunciation, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension (Mahoro, Makgato, & Olifant, 2024; Mokobe, Badenhorst, & Schlebusch, 2025). This suggests that home language status alone is insufficient to guarantee advanced literacy skills. Within this context, there is a growing need for pedagogical approaches that not only address reading challenges but also promote meaningful engagement with texts. Folktales represent a valuable resource in this regard. As culturally embedded narratives, folktales provide students with familiar contexts, moral insights, and linguistic structures that can facilitate comprehension and enhance engagement. The use of culturally relevant texts has been widely recognised as an effective strategy for improving literacy outcomes, particularly in multilingual and diverse educational settings (Department of Basic Education, 2024; Böhmer & Wills, 2025).

Despite their pedagogical potential, students often encounter difficulties when reading folktales, particularly in relation to pronunciation, fluency, and the interpretation of unfamiliar vocabulary. These challenges highlight the need for structured instructional frameworks that support students in developing reading proficiency. One such framework is Combrink's reading model, which offers a systematic and scaffolded approach to reading instruction through pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities.

In advancing reading competence among first-year teacher education students, this study centers on two Setswana folktales *Matome le Kagisho*, and *Dinoyane di tlhophha kgosi ya tsona* (Birds Elect Their Chief) as integrated pedagogical tools designed to improve not only decoding and comprehension but also critical engagement and cultural affirmation. Folktales are uniquely positioned to support students' schema building, vocabulary development, inferencing, and narrative comprehension strategies, which are essential components of reading proficiency in any language. Alongside their cognitive benefits, folktales serve as vehicles for transmitting cultural knowledge and values, which can enhance students' motivation and contextual understanding of texts.

This study therefore investigates the reading abilities of first-year Setswana Home Language students when engaging in folktales. Specifically, it explores the challenges students experience, their perceptions of reading aloud in the classroom, and the extent to which Combrink's model supports the development of reading fluency, comprehension, and oral expression. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to enhance literacy development in African languages within higher education contexts.

## **Problem Statement**

Reading proficiency is a fundamental requirement for academic success in higher education; however, a substantial number of first-year students in South Africa enter university with underdeveloped reading skills. This challenge is particularly evident in multilingual contexts, where students are expected to read and engage with texts in their home languages but often lack the necessary fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills. Research has shown that even in African languages such as Setswana, students experience difficulties in pronunciation, decoding, and meaning making, which negatively affect their ability to engage critically with literary texts (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius, Mohohlwane, & Spaull, 2020; Mahoro, Makgato, & Olifant, 2024). In the context of this study, first-year Setswana Home Language

students demonstrated challenges when reading folktales, including mispronunciation of words, incorrect tonal patterns, slow and disfluent reading, and limited ability to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary. These difficulties often result in distorted meaning and hinder students' engagement with the text. Despite the recognized importance of reading as a foundational academic skill, there appears to be insufficient use of structured and culturally responsive instructional strategies to support students in developing reading proficiency in Setswana.

Furthermore, while folktales are culturally rich and pedagogically valuable texts, their potential to enhance reading development is not fully realized due to the lack of effective instructional frameworks that guide students through the reading process. This gap highlights the need for structured approaches, such as Combrink's reading model, which can support both the cognitive and affective dimensions of reading.

The aim of this study is therefore to investigate the reading abilities of first-year Setswana Home Language students when engaging with folktale texts. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the challenges students experience during reading, examine their perceptions of reading aloud in the classroom, and determine the effectiveness of Combrink's reading model in enhancing reading fluency, comprehension, and oral expression.

## Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What challenges do first-year Setswana Home Language students experience when reading folktales in the classroom?
2. What are students' perceptions of reading folktales aloud as a classroom strategy?
3. To what extent does the application of Combrink's reading model improve students' reading fluency, comprehension, and oral expression?
4. How does the use of folktales as culturally relevant texts contribute to the development of students' reading proficiency?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading difficulties among students in higher education remain a significant concern in South Africa. Research indicates that many students lack the necessary reading skills required for academic success, including comprehension, fluency, and critical engagement with texts (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Pretorius et al. (2020) further argue that reading comprehension challenges persist across educational levels, particularly in contexts where learners have limited exposure to effective reading instruction.

In African language contexts, these challenges are often exacerbated by limited access to appropriate reading materials and instructional strategies. Mahoro et al. (2024) found that students in Setswana classrooms experience difficulties in pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension, which negatively impact their reading development. Similarly, Mokobe et al. (2025) highlight that lecturers continue to express concern about students' poor reading skills, particularly in relation to fluency and understanding.

This challenge is particularly evident in Setswana first-language students, who frequently struggle to decode texts accurately, interpret unfamiliar vocabulary, and derive intended meaning from written materials (Mokgokong, 2021; Motsamai, 2023). Studies further emphasize that reading in one's home language fosters deeper comprehension, improves vocabulary acquisition, and supports students' engagement with complex academic texts (UNESCO, 2005; Ncube & Maposa, 2022).

Reading fluency is a critical component of reading proficiency, encompassing accuracy, speed, and appropriate expression. Fluent readers can decode text efficiently while simultaneously constructing meaning. However, many students struggle with oral reading, often exhibiting slow, hesitant, and disfluent reading patterns (Pretorius et al., 2020).

Reading aloud has been identified as an effective instructional strategy for improving fluency and comprehension. It allows students to practice pronunciation, develop auditory skills, and engage more actively with texts. Furthermore, reading aloud promotes interaction with the text, enabling students to construct meaning through active participation. This is consistent with the view that reading is a dynamic and interactive process rather than a passive activity. Le Roux (2024) emphasizes the importance of reading identity in shaping students' engagement with reading practices. When students perceive reading as meaningful and enjoyable, they are more likely to participate actively and develop their reading skills. This highlights the importance of creating supportive classroom environments that encourage reading engagement.

Despite the multilingual fabric of South African society with twelve official languages that reflect diverse cultural literacies literacy outcomes in both home languages and additional languages remain concerning. Large-scale assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 indicate that an overwhelming majority of learners in Grades 4–6 struggle to read for meaning, with more than 80% unable to comprehend texts across languages, which underscores a serious national literacy crisis and highlights the need for targeted intervention and effective pedagogy in African language reading instruction.

*The South African National Literacy Strategy and Plan (2024–2030)* recognizes that African languages with transparent orthographies, such as Setswana, benefit from instructional approaches that emphasize meaning and comprehension rather than rote decoding alone. This strategy advocates culturally relevant learning materials and teaching practices that align with students' linguistic repertoires and home language resources rather than depending solely on phonics-driven methods that have dominated historically in many literacy programmes.

However, systematic reviews of reading comprehension interventions in the South African multilingual context reveal that while some programmes show promise particularly those that include reading strategy instruction and vocabulary development there remains a lack of rigorous, high-quality research and definitive evidence about which instructional strategies are most effective for reading comprehension in African languages, signaling a substantial gap in localized literacy research (Carter, Podpadec, Pillay, Babayiğit, & Gazu, 2024). A recent systematic review of reading comprehension intervention studies in South Africa concluded that overall study quality is generally low, with many small-scale or

context-specific investigations and no clear consensus on the most effective models, underscoring the need for more robust, standardized research in multilingual literacy pedagogy (Carter et al., 2024).

In addition, research on lecturers' experiences highlights the importance of students' home language in developing comprehension skills. Studies show that leveraging students' first languages in instruction including interactive reading activities supports comprehension, scaffolds meaning making, and contributes to improved linguistic and cognitive development Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2025; Nkosi, 2024). This aligns with broader scholarly emphasis on harnessing learners' full linguistic repertoires to facilitate deeper engagement with texts (Nkosi, 2024).

Research also identifies persistent challenges such as limited availability of culturally relevant and appropriate reading materials in African languages and lecturers' reluctance to use African language texts due to entrenched language ideologies. One study conceptualizes this as a "text frontier," where African languages remain marginalized in literacy instruction despite policy support, with lecturers and educational systems often resisting written African language texts, which undermines efforts to develop robust literacies in these languages (Pretorius & Mokhwesana, 2009; DBE, 2025).

In this context, folktales present a culturally relevant and pedagogically sound medium for reading instruction. Research in multilingual African and educational contexts emphasizes that folktales reflect shared cultural knowledge, provide familiar narrative structures that facilitate schema activation and meaning making, and support vocabulary development in rich, contextualized environments (Wiysahnyuy & Banfegha, 2023; Mantra & Gana, 2018; Pham, 2016).

Folktales also encourage student engagement and reflection, key components of higher-order reading skills that are vital for academic success (Safitri, 2024; Wiysahnyuy & Banfegha, 2023). Moreover, studies from early literacy contexts show that story-based interventions, including folktale reading, can significantly support language and literacy development, underscoring the value of incorporating narrative and culturally embedded texts into literacy programmes (Mantra & Gana, 2018; Safitri, 2024).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while traditional literacy models, often adapted from research conducted in other linguistic contexts, provide valuable instructional strategies, there is a critical need for contextualized and culturally responsive approaches. Such approaches should draw on students' linguistic and cultural resources, including the use of folktales, to enhance reading proficiency in African languages such as Setswana. This perspective is supported by research emphasizing the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and contextually meaningful reading materials in improving literacy outcomes (Department of Basic Education, 2024; Böhmer & Wills, 2025).

Furthermore, the development of reading proficiency in multilingual contexts requires strengthened teacher education, access to appropriate reading resources, and the implementation of pedagogical frameworks that acknowledge the complexity of multilingual literacy development (Le Roux, 2024; Pretorius et al., 2020). Folktales play a significant role

in language and literacy development, particularly within African contexts. As culturally relevant texts, folktales provide learners with familiar narratives that facilitate comprehension and engagement. They also serve as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and linguistic structures. The use of folktales in the classroom aligns with culturally responsive teaching approaches, which emphasize the importance of incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds into the learning process (Department of Basic Education, 2024). Böhmer and Wills (2025) further argue that contextualized and meaningful reading materials are essential for improving literacy outcomes, particularly in diverse and multilingual settings.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by a theoretical framework that integrates structured models of reading with sociocultural perspectives on literacy development. Central to this framework is Combrink's reading model (Combrink, 1992), which provides a systematic and scaffolded approach to reading instruction through pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading stages. This model emphasizes the importance of guiding students through the reading process in a structured manner, thereby supporting the development of key reading competencies such as decoding, fluency, and comprehension. In line with contemporary literacy research, structured and explicit reading instruction has been shown to significantly enhance students' cognitive processing by enabling them to make sense of texts, identify key ideas, and construct meaning effectively (Pretorius et al., 2020).

Beyond cognitive development, this study also draws on sociocultural perspectives of reading, particularly the view that literacy is a socially situated practice influenced by students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. From this perspective, reading is not merely a technical skill but a meaning-making process that involves interaction between the reader, the text, and the social context. The integration of culturally relevant texts, such as folktales, is therefore critical, as it enables learners to connect prior knowledge and lived experiences with the content of the text. Research suggests that such contextualized approaches enhance both engagement and comprehension, particularly in multilingual settings (Department of Basic Education, 2024; Le Roux, 2024).

Furthermore, this framework recognizes the dual role of cognitive and affective engagement in reading development. Structured reading models not only support the development of decoding and comprehension skills but also facilitate emotional and interpretive engagement with texts. This is particularly important in the case of folktales, which require readers to interpret symbolic meanings, understand moral lessons, and respond emotionally to characters and events. Learners who are encouraged to engage with texts at both cognitive and affective levels are more likely to develop deeper comprehension and a sustained interest in reading. By integrating Combrink's structured reading model with sociocultural and affective perspectives, this study adopts a holistic approach to literacy development. This framework acknowledges the complexity of reading in multilingual contexts and highlights the importance of combining explicit instructional strategies with culturally responsive pedagogies to enhance reading proficiency among first-year Setswana Home Language students.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the reading abilities of first-year Setswana Home Language students and their experiences when engaging with folktale texts. Qualitative design was deemed appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, experiences, and meaning-making processes within a natural classroom context (Flick, 2022).

## **Research Design**

The study employed descriptive qualitative design, focusing on classroom-based practices and students' responses to a structured reading intervention based on Combrink's model. This design allowed the researcher to capture rich, detailed data on students' reading behaviours, challenges, and perceptions, particularly in relation to oral reading and engagement with folktales.

## **Participants and Sampling**

The population for this study consisted of 17 first-year students enrolled in Setswana Home Language. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants, as they were directly involved in reading folktales as part of their coursework. This sampling approach is appropriate in qualitative research, where participants are selected based on their relevance to the research objectives (Flick, 2022).

## **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected through classroom observations and focus group interviews. Classroom observations were conducted to examine students' oral reading skills, including pronunciation, fluency, expression, and comprehension. A structured observation checklist was used to ensure systematic data collection.

Following the reading sessions, focus group interviews were conducted in a conversational format to explore students' views, experiences, and perceptions regarding the reading of folktales and the use of Combrink's model. This method enabled participants to reflect on their learning experiences and articulate the challenges they encountered during the reading process.

## **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as credibility, dependability, and confirmability were considered. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants during the reading intervention and using multiple data sources (observations and interviews). Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of the research process, while confirmability was supported through careful documentation and interpretation of data in alignment with the research objectives (Flick, 2022).

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles were adhered to throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that no identifying information was disclosed.

## Data Analysis

The data generated from classroom observations and focus group interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, guided by the coding procedures outlined by Saldaña (2021) and the principles of qualitative data analysis described by Flick (2022). The analysis was conducted in a systematic and iterative manner to ensure that the findings were grounded in the data and aligned with the research questions.

### Phase 1: Data Preparation

All observational notes and focus group interview responses were carefully reviewed and organized. The data were transcribed and read multiple times to achieve familiarity and to gain a holistic understanding of students' reading behaviours, challenges, and perceptions (Flick, 2022).

### Phase 2: Initial Coding

In line with Saldaña's (2021) approach, initial (open) coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of data. Codes were assigned to segments of text that reflect specific aspects of students' reading performance and experiences. These included, for example:

- mispronunciation of words
- difficulty with tone
- slow and hesitant reading
- lack of vocabulary
- positive engagement with reading aloud

This phase allowed the researcher to break down the data into manageable units for further analysis.

### Phase 3: Categorization and Pattern Coding

Following initial coding, pattern coding was applied to group similar codes into broader categories (Saldaña, 2021). These categories were organized in relation to the research questions and included:

- Reading challenges (e.g., pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary)
- Reading behaviours (e.g., hesitation, repetition, pace)
- Students' perceptions (e.g., enjoyment, motivation, confidence)
- Impact of instructional strategies (e.g., reading aloud, Combrink's model)

This stage enabled the identification of relationships and patterns across the dataset.

### Phase 4: Theme Development

The categories were further refined into themes and sub-themes, which represented recurring patterns in the data. The main themes that emerged included:

- 1 Challenges in reading Setswana folktales
- 2 Students' positive perceptions of reading aloud
- 3 Effectiveness of Combrink's reading model
- 4 Role of folktales in enhancing reading ability

These themes were aligned with the research questions and provided a coherent structure for presenting the findings.

#### Phase 5: Interpretation of Findings

The final phase involved interpreting the themes in relation to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature. The analysis revealed that students experienced significant challenges in pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension, which affected their ability to engage meaningfully with folktale texts. However, the data also indicated that structured reading strategies, particularly reading aloud and the application of Combrink's model, contributed positively to students' reading development.

Students' responses further highlighted the importance of culturally relevant texts, as folktales facilitated engagement, emotional connection, and improved comprehension. These findings were interpreted within the broader context of multilingual literacy development, emphasizing the need for structured and culturally responsive pedagogical approaches.

#### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS (Aligned to Research Questions)**

The findings indicate that students experience significant challenges when reading Setswana folktales. Classroom observations revealed persistent difficulties in pronunciation, particularly with phonetically similar words, as well as incorrect tonal usage, which often altered the meaning of sentences. Students also demonstrated slow, hesitant, and disfluent reading characterized by frequent pauses, repetitions, and reliance on fillers such as "uh," "um," and "eh."

Furthermore, students struggled with word recognition and decoding unfamiliar vocabulary, indicating limited use of word attack strategies. These challenges were compounded by difficulties in regulating reading pace and ignoring punctuation, which further affected comprehension and meaning making. Overall, the data suggests that students lack foundational reading fluency skills in Setswana, despite being enrolled in a home language module.

The findings show that students generally held positive perceptions of reading folktales aloud in the classroom. A large proportion (85%) reported that they found reading aloud engaging, while 90% indicated that they enjoyed the activity. Additionally, 70% of students reported an intention to read Setswana texts daily to improve their reading skills.

Students further indicated that reading aloud improved their listening and auditory skills and increased their confidence in oral expression. Focus group responses confirmed that students experienced reading as an interactive and enjoyable activity that supported their engagement with folktale texts. These findings suggest that reading aloud promotes active participation and enhances students' motivation to read. The data indicates that Combrink's reading model

had a positive impact on students' reading development. Students reported improvements in pronunciation, comprehension, and their ability to express ideas verbally and in writing. They also demonstrated increased ability to interpret, compare, and contrast folktales, indicating enhanced higher-order thinking skills.

Focus group responses revealed that students perceived the model as beneficial in enabling them to "engage with text better," "apply their minds and feelings," and "explore the contents of the text." These responses suggest that the model supports both cognitive and affective dimensions of reading. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Combrink's structured, staged approach facilitates improvements in fluency, comprehension, and oral expression. The findings indicate that folktales play a significant role in enhancing students' reading engagement and comprehension. Students reported that they enjoyed reading folktales and found them relatable due to their cultural relevance. The use of familiar cultural narratives supported understanding and encouraged deeper engagement with the text.

Additionally, folktales facilitated emotional involvement and meaning making, allowing students to connect personally with the narratives. When combined with structured instructional strategies such as reading aloud, peer feedback, and lecturer modelling, folktales contributed to improved reading confidence and participation. These findings suggest that culturally relevant texts are effective in promoting reading development in multilingual classroom contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the reading abilities of first-year Setswana Home Language students, their perceptions of reading folktales aloud, and the effectiveness of Combrink's reading model as an instructional framework. The findings confirm that many students experience significant challenges in reading Setswana, particularly regarding pronunciation, tonal accuracy, fluency, and vocabulary. These difficulties hinder their ability to interpret and engage meaningfully with folktale texts, despite Setswana being their home language. This highlights the broader concern that home language proficiency does not automatically translate into advanced literacy skills, especially within multilingual higher education contexts (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius et al., 2020).

The study further demonstrates that reading aloud serves as an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing students' engagement, confidence, and oral reading skills. Students reported positive experiences with this approach, indicating that it supported their development of fluency, listening skills, and overall comprehension. These findings underscore the importance of active and participatory reading practices in promoting literacy development. Importantly, the implementation of Combrink's reading model contributed significantly to improving students' reading abilities. The structured and scaffolded nature of the model enabled students to engage more effectively with folktale texts, supporting both cognitive and affective dimensions of reading. Students were able to improve their pronunciation, deepen their comprehension, and engage more meaningfully with the content. The study also highlights the value of folktales as culturally relevant pedagogical resources. When integrated with structured reading strategies, folktales facilitate not only linguistic development but also cultural engagement and emotional connection with texts. This is particularly important in

multilingual settings, where culturally responsive approaches are essential for effective teaching and learning (Department of Basic Education, 2024; Böhmer & Wills, 2025).

However, the study is limited by its focus on a single genre, namely folktales, and a relatively small sample size. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to all Setswana literary contexts or student populations. Future research should explore the application of similar instructional strategies across a wider range of genres and larger, more diverse samples to provide a more comprehensive understanding of reading development in Setswana.

In conclusion, the study affirms that the integration of structured reading models, such as Combrink's, with culturally relevant texts like folktales, offers a viable and effective approach to enhancing reading proficiency among first-year Setswana Home Language students

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