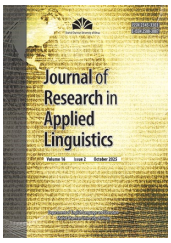
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Research Article

Exploring the Gaps Between Policy and Practice in a South African Reading Comprehension Class: An Appraisal Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores possible factors contributing to the South African literacy crisis. Using Appraisal analysis and Don's (2016) invocation spectrum, this study tracks the role of invoked meaning in the theoretical taxonomies informing reading comprehension in South Africa and in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement governing teaching/assessing at the Grade 4 (10-year-old) level. Similarly, instantiations of invoked meaning in a teacher-selected comprehension text, its associated questions, and learners' responses to them are investigated. The analysis reveals significant disjuncts between policy and practice, particularly in the treatment of invoked meaning and how it is assessed. An overreliance on literal meaning in the comprehension activity further exacerbates matters, providing teachers and learners with a false sense of reading comprehension success, prompting the need for alternative ways of doing reading comprehension in classrooms.

Keywords: Appraisal; Reading Comprehension Pedagogy; Implicit Meaning.

1. Introduction

The expected basic levels of achievement and goals for reading and literacy in South Africa are captured in the following quote:

Every child in South Africa has the right to read at a basic level, in their home language, by the age of 10. That is to say, they can read and understand a short and simple text and answer 80 percent of the literal and straight-forward inferential questions they are asked that are based on that text. Approximately 60-80 percent of these questions should be classified as 'Very easy' or 'Easy' questions. (South African Human Rights Commission, 2021, p. 31)

Despite these seemingly straightforward expectations, reading comprehension remains problematic in South Africa. Insufficient home language teaching policies, curriculum policies attempting to overcome the challenges of the inherited Apartheid education system, and current inequalities in the education system, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, contribute to an ongoing national literacy crisis.[1] The 2023 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), an international measure of reading achievement at the Grade 4 (10-year-old) level, reveals that 81 percent of South African learners cannot "identify and retrieve explicitly stated information or make straightforward inferences about events and reasons for actions" (Spaull, 2018), and thus cannot achieve the most basic reading tasks.[2]

There is thus a tension between the expectations of learners at the Grade 4 level and what is currently achieved. This tension extends to the curriculum policies informing the teaching and assessment of reading comprehension versus what takes place in the classroom, as well as to learner and teacher perceptions of reading achievement versus learners' actual comprehension capacity. In this paper, we consider these gaps between policy, perception, and practice, to examine the extent to which learners can (and do) read for meaning.

Because we subscribe to the critical sociocultural perspective on reading and reading comprehension, we take as core the understanding that reading is a socially and culturally constructed process, micro-politically negotiated in response to (and contributing to) macrocontextual factors[3] and that, following Klapwijk, "Reading involves more than the ability to recognise letters and decode words … [it] is ultimately about constructing meaning from the written texts" (2015, p. 1).

Due to the centrality of meaning in reading and comprehension, we use Appraisal and extensions to it (i.e., Don's (2016) invocation spectrum) to investigate evaluative meaning in a teacher-selected, seemingly level-appropriate comprehension text (*The Leopard and the Pear Tree*, see Appendix 1) and its associated questions. This Systemic Functional linguistic framework is particularly useful for analyzing how meaning is constructed and potentially conveyed, making it well-suited for examining the nuances of comprehension beyond literal understanding. We conduct such an analysis to explore the nature and foundations of implicit meaning, specifically in this comprehension text. We also examine the extent to which learners are expected to, and do, access and interpret this meaning. In doing so, we highlight gaps between South African reading comprehension curriculum policy (the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, hereafter CAPS) and the theoretical framework that informs it (Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension, which distinguishes between various levels of cognitive thinking associated with reading comprehension), which our Appraisal analysis engages with to explore the alignment between policy and practice.

Our investigation is informed by two overarching research aims. The first is concerned with what an Appraisal analysis reveals about (i) the nature and foundation of Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension, (ii) the nature of evaluative meaning in the *Leopard and the Pear Tree* comprehension text and its associated questions, (iii) the assessment of learner responses, and (iv) learners' interpretive abilities. The second aim is to identify the gaps between policy and practice that are revealed by these insights. In exploring these issues, we aim to reveal how an Appraisal analysis of evaluative meaning can highlight gaps in reading comprehension practice/pedagogy and inform social change to improve reading comprehension at the Grade 4 level.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reading and Reading Comprehension

As indicated, we view reading comprehension not merely as a set of isolated decoding and comprehension skills (as in the Simple View of Reading, developed by Gough & Tunmer, 1986), but as a complex, socially and culturally constructed process, deeply intertwined with macrocontextual factors and micro-politically negotiated in the classroom. While acknowledging the extensive body of research on reading, often termed the 'science of reading' (Seidenberg et al., 2020), and the various theoretical lenses informing it (e.g., structuralist, cognitive, developmental), our approach aligns with a critical sociocultural perspective. This perspective emphasises that meaning making is central to reading (Klapwijk, 2015, p.1) and is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which reading occurs.

2.2. Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension

For many years, Western educators have relied on Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Skill (hereafter Bloom's Taxonomy, Bloom et al., 1956) to guide them in designing learning activities and formulating assessment at various levels of cognitive difficulty. This taxonomy classifies educational objectives from simple recall (lower-order cognitive skills) to higher-order, more applied, cognitive skills on a continuum, each of which builds on the simpler skills to become increasingly complex. In its original form, Bloom's Taxonomy organises cognitive skills as belonging to one of six levels of processes, viz. Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analysing, Evaluating and Creating. This framework is particularly useful in conceptualising and developing curricula due to its identification of clear learning objectives and expected outcomes in the various cognitive processes with which learners engage as they learn (Cummins, 2019).

While Bloom's Taxonomy is inter-disciplinary in nature, it serves as the foundation upon which other, more task-specific taxonomies are based. Most significant for this study is Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension (described by Smith & Barrett, 1974, hereafter Barrett's Taxonomy), which classifies the varying cognitive skills inherent in reading comprehension processes. A significant contributing factor to the design of this taxonomy is a need to counter an overreliance on literal comprehension (recall/recognition) tasks and an under-reliance on implicit meaning/inferential

comprehension in reading comprehension assessments (see Guszak, 1967) due to teachers' lack of understanding about the various cognitive skills involved in reading comprehension.

Like Bloom's Taxonomy, Barrett's classification is hierarchical, where each cognitive/reading comprehension process becomes more complex as it integrates the simpler processes preceding it. Barrett's Taxonomy comprises five levels of reading comprehension processes: (i) Literal comprehension; (ii) Reorganisation; (iii) Inferential comprehension; (iv) Evaluation; and (v) Appreciation. Literal comprehension and Reorganisation deal with explicitly stated information – how it is recognised or recalled, and how it is synthesised and structured. Inferential comprehension deals with implicit meaning (i.e., meaning that is not explicitly stated) and how readers draw conclusions and make predictions based on other sources of knowledge;[4] and Evaluation and Appreciation are concerned with higher-order thinking skills that require making judgements of and engaging with a text. This taxonomy is useful for many reasons: it offers a nuanced framework for understanding reading comprehension demands, fosters critical literacy skills, encourages learner engagement beyond literal-level questioning, and promotes diversity in teaching and assessing reading comprehension. Furthermore, it forms the basis upon which the CAPS curriculum policy for reading comprehension in South Africa is structured. As we reveal soon, however, there are significant gaps between what the curriculum policy prescribes in how reading comprehension is assessed according to Barrett's cognitive skills and what happens in the classroom.

2.3. The South African Education System and Current Policy

Despite multiple curriculum revisions aimed at redressing historical inequalities, the current, post-Apartheid education context remains fraught, with a fragile education system that is significantly impacted by the legacy of racial segregations and unequal resource distribution. While formal segregation has ended, Apartheid educational policies like the Bantu Education Act instilled "informal institutions of disorder, distrust, rebellion, and a lack of cooperation" (Spaull, 2012, np) in the South African education system, which remain today. This responds to Traxler et al.'s (2023, p. 4) contention that "education systems … [are] always trying to solve last year's problem". This instability extends to the curriculum, which has undergone numerous policy changes since 1994 (post-Apartheid) and has included the Curriculum 2005, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) versions. These revisions, while well-intended, have been described as complex and confusing for teachers (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013; Ramrathan & Mzimela, 2016). The current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), introduced in 2012 and the framework for this research, aimed to provide clearer guidance for teachers by specifying content and assessment. However, it has been criticised for its restrictive nature, potentially stifling teacher autonomy and promoting a "transmission and reproduction" pedagogy (Chetty, 2015). This corresponds with Freire's (2005) notion of 'banking education', where teachers 'deposit' knowledge into learners as one would money into an empty bank account, with little critical awareness and engagement with knowledge.

While CAPS purports to promote both formative and summative assessment of reading, it clearly emphasises formal assessment and provides detailed guidelines for recording marks for summative assessment. This leads to an "assessment-focused, measurement-driven" approach (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013) in the reading comprehension curriculum, where marks are emphasised, sometimes irrespective of actual learner capabilities. Despite this focus on assessment, there is no explicit guidance or actionable advice on assessment in CAPS. What is explicit, however, are the expected cognitive levels to be tested in formal assessment tasks and how they should be distributed. Table 1 represents the cognitive levels, the kinds of comprehension questions that are associated with each level, and the percentage of the task that should be assigned to each level (as found in CAPS, 2012).

Table 1. *Cognitive Levels Table in CAPS*

Cognitive Levels	Activity*	Percentage of Task
Literal (Level 1)	Questions that deal with information explicitly stated in the text	
Reorganization (Level 2)	Questions that require analysis, synthesis or organization of information explicitly stated in the text.	Levels 1 and 2: 40%
Inference (Level 3)	Questions that require a candidate's engagement with information explicitly stated in the text in terms of his/her personal experience.	Level 3: 40%

Evaluation (Level 4)	These questions deal with judgements concerning value and worth.	
Appreciation (Level 5)	These questions are intended to assess the psychological and aesthetic impact of the text on the candidate.	Levels 4 and 5: 20%

*CAPS provides example questions each cognitive level.

While not explicitly stated in CAPS, the cognitive levels in Table 1 are based on those in Barrett's Taxonomy. Significantly, Table 1 also indicates the percentage distribution of these cognitive levels to which all reading comprehension tasks should adhere, i.e., 40% literal/reorganisation questions, 40% inferential questions, and 20% evaluative/appreciation questions. This percentage distribution caters to a range of differing cognitive skill levels while allowing most students to demonstrate basic understanding through lower- to middle-order cognitive skills. The inclusion of higher-order cognitive questions challenges more advanced students.

The percentage distribution of the cognitive levels in the curriculum is significant, as it is among the only explicit information provided for teachers in designing and implementing reading comprehension tasks. It is also pertinent for this paper, as the ensuing analysis reveals a gap in how reading comprehension tasks *should be* designed and how they *are* designed.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Setting

This research, a single case study, was conducted in a South African Grade 4 classroom (referred to as Grade 4B). The school, Wisteria Preparatory, is a public, former Model C school[5] located in Aloe Valley,[6] South Africa. Post-Apartheid, the learner demographic at the school has changed drastically, and Wisteria Preparatory is now representative of many other formal Model C schools in the country, particularly in terms of racial and linguistic distribution. Most learners at the school are African Black (86.6 percent). The language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is English, despite only 15.6 percent of learners speaking English as a first language (L1). Most learners at this school speak isiXhosa (78.6 percent of learners), while the remainder speak one of the other 12 official languages of South Africa.[7] This disparity in L1 and LoLT has significant implications for reading comprehension (see, for example, Abdulatief et al., 2018), although this is not a core concern of the current paper.

As mandated by the critical microethnographic approach we adopted for the broader study, the research focused on a single event – a reading comprehension activity, with which one teacher (Mrs B) and 15 learners (11 boys and four girls) engaged. The reading comprehension text (a fable called *The Leopard and the Pear Tree,* see Appendix 1) and its accompanying comprehension questions were selected by Mrs B as an example of level-appropriate activity. The activity was taken from a CAPS-aligned textbook (i.e. the activity ostensibly corresponds to the objectives outlined in the curriculum) but does not necessarily include local linguistic and cultural heritage knowledge (which Kamilla Yurievna et al., 2023 argue would significantly enhance L2 learners' reading comprehension skills).

3.2. Data Sets and Data Collection

The selected data takes two forms. The first is the 'textual data', which comprises the *Leopard and the Pear Tree* comprehension text and accompanying questions. The second is the 'learner response and assessment data', which comprises the learners' responses to the comprehension questions and the teacher's assessment of these responses. These data sets (and others that make up the broader study) are augmented by other ethnographic sources, classroom observations, and participant perspectives which form what Geertz (1973) calls a 'thick description' of the context. While these are not focal to the current discussion, they contribute significantly to the co-construction of the macrocontext in which the reading comprehension activity takes place (see Kitchen, 2025).

The data were collected during a six-month classroom observation and fieldwork period, during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, when learners attended school on a rotational schedule, i.e., every other day and alternating Fridays. This amounted to a total of five days of contact schooling in a two-week period, which, by June 2021 had led to "as much as a full year of learning … since March 2020" (Shepard & Mohohlwane, 2021, p. 3). The challenges posed by the pandemic contribute to a discourse of docility in the school, where teachers seemingly

accepted the bureaucratic and contextual constraints imposed on them, the effect of which is borne in how the reading comprehension task was conducted (more later).

3.3 Analytic Frameworks

3.3.1. Appraisal Framework

The predominant analytic framework used is Martin & White's (2005) Appraisal Framework, which deals with the *interpersonal*, i.e., how participants negotiate and maintain relationships. This framework is built on the understanding that language is a social semiotic, providing language users with an infinite array of paradigmatic[8] choices to actively construct meaning and fulfill social purposes. Within Appraisal, the evaluative meaning it captures is structured as sets of choices across three main systems, viz. Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Participants select from these options, the combination of which builds an intersubjective stance, which is how individuals perceive and evaluate the world and their collaborative meaning-making with others. Through these choices, participants also invite others to align (or disalign) with their stance to "create a feeling of community and shared values and position the audience in solidarity with the writer (or participants)" (Smith & Adendorff, 2022, p. 30, our parenthesis).

The first Appraisal system, Attitude, deals with *feelings* and how these are construed in discourse. These are represented as core emotions (Affect) or as emotions that have been reconstrued as ethical/moral judgements of behavior (Judgement) or aesthetic/value evaluations of things (Appreciation). Examples of these and the categories that comprise them appear in Table 2.[9]

Table 2. *Attitude Subsystems, Categories, and Examples of Attitudinal Instantiations*

System	Subsystem	Category	Example
Attitude	Affect	Un/Happiness (affairs of the heart)	The animals were very **unhappy**
		Dis/satisfaction (eco-social well-being)	The animals were *hot and hungry and thirsty*
		In/Security (the pursuit of goals)	They were all **afraid**
	Judgement: Social Sanction	Normality (how normal the behavior is)	Suddenly, the rabbit*, holding a thick rope, came rushing out through the forest and out into the field* where the leopard was sleeping
		Capacity (how capable someone is)	You are **big and strong**
		Tenacity (how resolute someone is)	They were *waiting for the rabbit*
	Judgement: Social Esteem	Veracity (how truthful someone is)	He is **trustworthy**[10]
		Propriety (how ethical someone is)	A **mean and selfish leopard**
	Appreciation	Reaction (how impactful something is)	An **exciting plan**[11]
		Composition (how balanced something is)	**Ripe, juicy pears**
		Valuation (how worthwhile something is)	A **terrible drought**

As is evident in Table 2, Attitude instantiations can be classified as positive or negative. They are also either explicitly inscribed through attitudinal lexis (e.g., **unhappy,** represented by bolding), or invoked in the absence of attitudinal lexis (e.g., *they were waiting for the rabbit* implies tenacity, represented by italics).

The second Appraisal system, Engagement, is concerned with the paradigmatic choices participants make to adopt a stance and seek alignment from other participants as they negotiate meaning. In doing so, participants can present their viewpoints as heteroglossic or monoglossic, i.e., as but one of a range of possible alternative viewpoints, or as one that does not engage with alternate voices. Within Heteroglossia, propositions are negotiated in what is called the 'dialogic space' (Bakhtin, 1981), which is either expanded to invite alternate voices, or contracted, shutting down alternate viewpoints. Monoglossic assertions, on the other hand, are typically presented as bare assertions or fact, assuming automatic alignment from participants. Examples of Engagement instantiations, underlined, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Engagement Subsystems, Categories, and Examples of Instantiations*

System	Subsystem	Category	Example
Engagement	Monoglossic		That's being selfish
	Heteroglossic:		
	Expand	Entertain	Maybe there are one or two different questions
		Attribute: Acknowledge	Mrs K, she said she was going to give…
		Attribute: Distance	The rabbit thought this would be a 'good idea'[12]
	Contract	Disclaim: Deny	But this is not so[13]
		Disclaim: Counter	However, this is the case
		Proclaim: Concur	Isn't that such a nice story?
		Proclaim: Endorse	This proves that the leopard was selfish[14]
		Proclaim: Pronounce	You all know what to do

Typically, texts are dialogically rich in how participants position themselves and others in seeking alignment.[15] However, the comprehension text chosen by the teacher for the task at hand (*The Leopard and the Pear Tree)* is highly monoglossic, with almost all instantiations bare assertion. We suggest that this is due to the text's genre, i.e., a fable, which is not attributed to a single author/voice, but represents cultural values passed down through generations in oral storytelling, in which reader/listener alignment is automatically assumed.

The third Appraisal system is Graduation. This is concerned with how attitudinal meaning is graded across two axes of scalability – Force and Focus. Within Force, the strength of the meaning can be upscaled or downscaled, e.g. **scared** vs **very scared**. Focus is concerned with meaning typically not scalable, and instead deals with the extent to which the meaning represents prototypicality, e.g., I expect proper grammar. The categories that comprise these sub-systems and examples of their instantiations are represented in Table 4, underlined.

Table 4. *Graduation Subsystems, Categories, and Examples of Instantiations*

System	Subsystem	Category	Example
Graduation	Force	Quantification (scaling of amounts or quantities):	
		Number	
		Mass	All the other animals
		Extent: distribution	The other smaller animals
		Extent: proximity	Ate their first meals in days together In a field nearby
		Intensification (scaling of intensity):	
		Quality	
		Process	Terrible leopard He would roar
		Metaphor	All this noise sounded like a big wind coming to blow everyone off the earth
	Focus	Sharpen	I expect proper grammar
		Soften	Not proper grammar

While the three Appraisal framework systems appear distinct, they work interdependently and concurrently to express evaluative meaning. For example, Engagement and Graduation resources do not only scale meaning and maneuver this meaning for positionality but can also be used to signal attitudinal meaning implicitly (see provoke resources in Figure 1).

A particularly significant (yet complex) facet of meaning is how it is expressed. As indicated earlier, meaning is either explicitly expressed by a single attitudinal lexical item (e.g., **terrible**), or it is invoked, where there is no explicit inscription of attitudinal lexis (e.g., *all this noise sounded like a big wind …*). Because implicit meaning requires participants to interpret a sentence/utterance in a specific way to access the intended meaning, it is notoriously difficult to 'pin down' (Macken-Horarik & Isaac, 2014), and the Appraisal framework "lacks sufficient refinement" to deal with

the nuances of this invoked meaning (Adendorff et al., 2009). Evaluative meaning is further complicated by its potential prosodic nature – it transcends specific systemic categories and flows prosodically in 'wave-like' patterns across discourse, propagated by instantiations of inscribed or invoked meaning. These inscriptions of attitudinal meaning leave 'trails' of meaning in the surrounding discourse, which cue participants as to how they should be interpreted. Prosodic meaning is thus particularly valuable in how participants construct their intersubjective stances and seek alignment, especially because those value positions expressed implicitly or as taken for granted can be very powerful.

Martin (2020) and others (e.g., Bednarek, 2007) have sought to categorize the resources for inscribing and invoking meaning along a cline of implicitness, ranking the resources from most explicit (inscribed) to least explicit (requiring the most interpretation/construction of the intended meaning, e.g., flag/afford), represented in Figure 1 below.

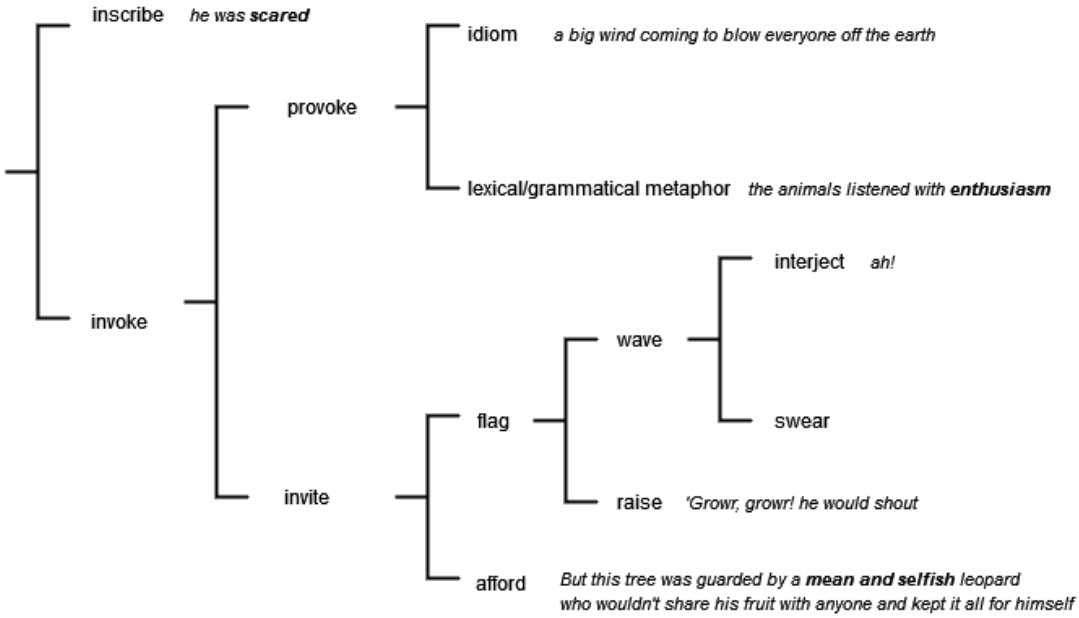


Figure 1. Resources for Inscribing and Invoking Attitude (Adapted from Martin, 2020, p. 21)

While valuable, these resources do not represent the full spectrum of implicit meaning potential. To account for a wider range of invocation strategies, Don (2016) proposes a spectrum of invocation, which "provides the means by which analyses of invocation can be made more explicit" (Don, 2016, p. 3). This allows analysts to more easily identify instantiations of invocation and categorize them, especially when they are highly contextual. This is particularly significant for this study, as such a spectrum provides the tools to identify whether implicit meaning in comprehension texts is cued in-text or relies on cultural knowledge schemata to be interpreted, and how learners should be prompted through comprehension questions (and the cognitive level at which these questions should be pitched) to access the intended meaning.

3.3.2. Don's Spectrum of Invocation

Don (2016) categorizes invoked meaning according to two sub-types (see Table 4). The first, Provoke, refers to attitudinal meanings which, "in addition to relying on assumed cultural knowledge, also involve local co-textual signals or other in-text indicators that an attitudinal value is at stake" (Don, 2016, p. 8). Here, the invocation of meaning relies on textual elements and is typically more easily accessible. The second sub-type, Evoke, relies "entirely on assumed (e.g., cultural, intertextual) knowledge or values for the attitudinal inference to arise" (Don, 2016, p. 8), and requires more interpretive work to be accessed. The various resources within these sub-types are presented in Table 4 and are ranked from most to least explicit.

Table 4. *Don's Spectrum of Invocation*

Invocation type	Category	Example	Attitudinal meaning invoked
Provoke	Figurative token/Lexical metaphor	The noise sounded *like a big wind coming to blow everyone off the earth*	Negative Security
	Attitudinal tokens (direct inscription of attitude invokes a different evaluation)	The animals were very **unhappy**, and *they didn't know what to do*	Negative Security
	Local signals/flagging: Up/downscaling	"*Growr, growr*" he would **roar**	Negative Propriety
	Denial	*There is nothing wrong with what he did*[16]	Positive Propriety
	Counter-expectancy	So all the animals were hot and hungry and thirsty. *Except for one.*	Negative Normality
	Logico-semantic relations	All the rivers dried up … *So all the animals were hot and hungry …*	Negative Satisfaction
	Intra-textual reference/linkage	Once upon a time, there was a **terrible** drought. *All the rivers dried up and there was no fruit or grass or leaves for the animals to eat*	Negative Normality/Satisfaction
Evoke: Extra-vocalization (external references which activate attitudinal meaning)	Ventriloquism	*If … the king of the village says "Huh-uh, no-one else is allowed to bring their bucket to this tap. Only me".* That's being **selfish** *Now, remember when they made all that noise?*	Negative Propriety
	Manifest intertextuality (reference to external texts)	*Theirs was a love story like the great romance novels*[17]	Negative Propriety
Evoke: Experiential tokens (rely on shared, specific cultural knowledge to activate attitudinal meaning)	Constitutive intertextuality (reference to genres)	*If … the king of the village says "Huh-uh, no-one else is allowed to bring their bucket to this tap. Only me". That's being **selfish**.*	Positive Composition
	Cultural doxa	*Always write in cursive*	Negative Normality
	In-group allusions		

3.4. Coding the Data

The textual data (comprising the *Leopard and the Pear Tree* comprehension text and accompanying questions) was subjected to an Appraisal analysis and included an additional layer of analysis using Don's (2016) invocation spectrum categories. The comprehension text was typed out and line-numbered for ease of reference and combed for

instantiations of Attitude, Graduation and Engagement. These were then coded in grids, as represented in Figure 2 below.[18]

Line	Instantiation	Affect	Judgement	Appreciation	+/-	Inscribed/ Invoked	Appraised	Don's (2016) invocation categories
7	selfish		Propriety		-	Inscribed	Leopard	N/A
7	wouldn't share his fruit with anyone and kept it all for himself		Propriety		-	Invoked	Leopard	Attitudinal token, implied by 'selfish'

Figure 2. Example of Attitude Coding Grid with Don's (2016) Classifications

This data was then extracted and presented in numerical tables and graphs for interpretation.

In addition to the Appraisal analysis, the comprehension questions were subjected to classification according to Barrett's taxonomic categories, i.e., each question was categorized as Literal, Reorganization, Inferential, Evaluation or Appreciation, depending on the cognitive skill targeted. Additionally, learner responses to these questions were collected, and individual learner marks recorded.[19]

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Meaning in the Leopard and the Pear Tree Comprehension Text

The Appraisal analysis of the comprehension text reveals the following insights:

Instantiations of Judgement are most prevalent, indicating a strong emphasis on character behavior. Within Judgement, Social Esteem is prioritized over Social Sanction, focusing more on characters' capabilities (Capacity) and responses to unusual situations (Normality) than on explicit morality (Propriety), which is unexpected for a fable (which presents a strong moral message).

Negative Affect, particularly feelings of unhappiness and insecurity, is the next prevalent finding. The few instances of positive happiness serve to highlight the shift towards the fable's moral lesson at the end.

Finally, while Appreciation is the least common overall, negative Valuation is the most frequent single category. This suggests that the text emphasizes the significance of the negative situations characters experience.

Significantly, the Appraisal analysis reveals that evaluative meaning in this text is highly implicit, with 80 percent of all instantiations expressed implicitly. Where meaning is inscribed, it is typically negative, as in **terrible drought**; **mean and selfish**; **afraid**; **problem**; **terrifying noise**, etc. Seemingly positive inscribed meanings (e.g., **big and strong**) are generally used to create contrast and contribute to an overall negative prosody within the text. Graduation resources are used in this text to intensify evaluative meaning (e.g., **terrible drought**) and to invoke implicit meaning.

The analysis of implicit meaning using Don's (2016) invocation spectrum reveals that this meaning is mostly provoked (94 percent), i.e., it is cued by the co-text, but still relies on cultural/contextual knowledge to be interpreted. This suggests that, with the necessary reading abilities and cultural background, readers should be able to understand most of the implied meanings by examining the surrounding co-text. However, even where meaning is implied by resources such as figurative language or attitudinal token, there is still a significant amount of interpretative work that needs to be done to access the intended implicit meaning. For example, in 'There was a **terrible drought'**, there are two levels of meaning to be accessed: the inscribed negative Valuation of the drought, and the invoked negative Valuation that the terrible drought led to bad land conditions. Similarly, resources of Flagging (e.g., meaning implied through Graduation or Engagement resources) require increasing interpretive work as meaning becomes more indirect, especially in the case of counter-expectancy (e.g., Except for one) and logico-sematic relations (e.g., So, all the animals in the land …). Finally, the text relies on the use of inter-textual linkage resources (28 percent of all implicit meaning). Despite being cued by the text, we found these resources difficult to identify and code, as linkages can be anaphoric or cataphoric (or both), and can transcend large amounts of co-text. The following excerpt illustrates intra-textual linkage: Except for one. In the middle of the field, there stood a big tree full of juicy, ripe pears. The evaluation of negative Normality in the

second sentence is invoked through a cohesive chain connected to the counter-expectancy of "Except for one." Despite being provoked by the text and its immediate surroundings, this kind of implied meaning is more challenging to interpret than figurative language because it necessitates a subtle grasp of the text's overall meaning and context to identify the link.

These results suggest two significant findings: (1) the text, ostensibly chosen by the teacher for its grade level suitability, is predominantly implicit in nature; and (2) despite this implicit meaning being mostly provoked (and thus should be more easily accessible), it remains, as we found in our analysis, difficult to identify and interpret. This calls into question the suitability of the text for learners at this level.

4.2. Reading Comprehension Questions

The reading comprehension questions, and their mark allocations out of 15 are represented in Figure 3.

1. Name all the animals in the story, there are six animals. (6 marks)
2. Find four verbs in the story to describe what the animals did in the forest to make such a loud noise. (4 marks)
3. How did the leopard feel when he heard all the noise in the forest? (1 mark)
4. How do you think the leopard felt when he realised that the rabbit had played a trick on him? (1 mark)
5. Who do you think this story is usually told to? (1 mark)
6. The leopard was being selfish when he kept the fruit to himself. When else in the story is he being selfish? (1 mark)
7. Can you explain the sentence "except for one"? (1 mark)

Figure 3. The Leopard and the Pear Tree Comprehension Questions

Drawing on Barrett's Taxonomy, the distribution of cognitive skill level types in these questions is:

Table 5. *Distribution of Cognitive Skill Level in Comprehension Questions*

Cognitive skill level	Percentage of distribution	Corresponding questions	Total number of marks	Attitudinal meaning accessed
Literal and Reorganization	73%	Questions 1, 2 and 3	11 marks	Negative Security
Inference	20%	Questions 4, 6 and 7	3 marks	Negative Happiness, Normality and Propriety
Evaluation and Appreciation	7%	Question 5	1 mark	N/A

Evident in Table 5, the comprehension questions disproportionately favor lower-order skills (Literal and Reorganization) in terms of weighting and allocated marks. Additionally, the distribution of cognitive skills in these questions (73% Literal and Reorganization; 20% Inference; and 7% Evaluation and Appreciation) is not reflective of the CAPS-required distribution (40% Literal and Reorganization; 40% Inference; and 20% Evaluation and Appreciation). This is concerning, as the comprehension text and questions are taken from a textbook that is CAPS-aligned but are shown to be over-reliant on literal comprehension, a consequence that Barrett's Taxonomy was designed to mitigate (cf. 2.2).

Additionally, Table 5 reveals that only four attitudinal meanings are elicited by these questions, viz. negative Security, Happiness, Propriety and Normality, despite the spectrum of meaning available in the text. There are no questions dealing with Valuation or Capacity, the two most employed attitudinal values in the text. When implicit meaning is sought, it is either through conjecture (as in Question 4), demanding both reader schematic knowledge[20] and a grasp of the prosody in the text, or provoked by Graduation or counter-expectancy (as seen in Questions 6 and 7). In what follows, we show how learners responded to these questions.

4.3. Learner Responses to Comprehension Questions

As part of the *Leopard and the Pear Tree* comprehension activity, learners provided written responses to the comprehension questions, which were assessed by the teacher according to a memorandum. Figure 4 reveals learners' marks for this activity, assigned by the teacher.

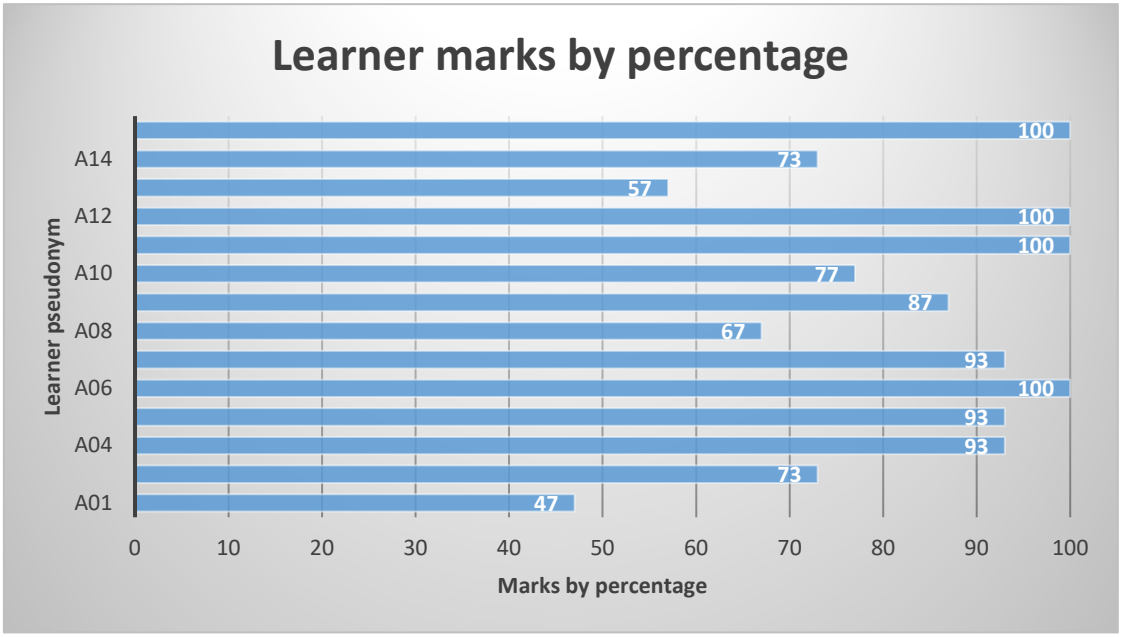


Figure 4. Learner Marks for Comprehension Question Responses

As is evident in Figure 4, learner marks range from 47 to 100 percent for this activity. If the pass mark is deemed to be 50 percent,[21] only one learner failed this activity, while more than half the class achieved above 90 percent. The average mark across all learners for this activity is 82.9 percent, which would indicate seeming reading comprehension success across the board.

However, a more accurate representation of learner success can be achieved by unpacking learners' results for each question type/cognitive skill level, revealing the kinds of meaning that learners can and cannot access. To do so, we present the frequency distribution of learner marks: for the Literal/Reorganization questions, then for the Inferential questions, and finally for the Evaluation/Appreciation question.

Table 6. *Frequency of Learner Marks for Literal Questions*

Learner mark (out of 11)	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
6	1	7.1 %	7.1 %
7	2	14.3 %	21.4 %
9	1	7.1 %	28.6 %
10	4	28.6 %	57.1 %
11	6	42.9 %	100 %

As noted earlier, Questions 1, 2, and 3 are literal questions. All learners successfully answered Question 1 (worth six marks). In fact, 42.98 percent of learners achieved full marks for all three literal questions, and another 28.6 percent scored 10 out of 11. This means a total of 72 percent of the class achieved a perfect or near-perfect score for these questions. As shown in Table 5, these questions deal with meaning that is explicitly stated or easily retrievable and do not require significant interpretive work by learners. The bulk of the mark weighting (73 percent of all marks) is thus attributed to lower-order cognitive skills that require very little input or interpretation from learners.

Inferential questions account for only three of the available 15 marks. They are comprised of Questions 4, 6 and 7. The frequency distribution of learner marks for these questions are:

Table 7. *Frequency of Learner Marks for Inferential Questions*

Learner mark (out of 3)	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
0	1	7.1 %	7.1 %
1	3	21.4 %	28.6 %
2	3	21.4 %	50.0 %
3	7	50.0 %	100.0 %

For the inferential questions, half of the learners achieved full marks, and an additional 21.4 percent scored two out of three. However, approximately 29 percent of learners failed this section, achieving less than 50 percent, with 7 percent scoring zero. This suggests that learners are less adept at answering inferential questions, especially where the evaluative meaning is provoked (as in Questions 6 and 7).

Question 7 is the only Evaluation/Appreciation question (accounting for only one mark), and the frequency distribution of learner marks for this question is:

Table 8. *Frequency of Learner Marks for Evaluation/Appreciation Question*

Learner mark (out of 1)	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
0	5	35.7 %	35.7 %
0.5	2	14.3 %	50.0 %
1	7	50.0 %	100.0 %

While 50 percent of learners achieved full marks for this question, a significant 35.7 percent achieved zero. This suggests that while the proportion of learners earning full marks is consistent across question types, a significant number struggle with higher-order cognitive questions (7% for inferential and 36% for evaluation/appreciation questions failing to answer successfully).

Collectively, these frequency distribution tables reveal that while the marks represented in Figure 4 appear to be positive and learners are seemingly successful in their reading comprehension, learners do not need to do much to pass. The heavy weighting of the literal questions ensure that learners can achieve 67 percent of the total mark simply be identifying explicit information. There is thus very little comprehension, reading for meaning, or interpretive work required.

The results of the Appraisal and other analyses above reveal significant insights about meaning in the *Leopard and the Pear Tree* text, how this meaning is accessed and assessed through the comprehension questions, and how learners respond to these questions. These insights can be summarized as follows:

Evaluative meaning in the *Leopard and the Pear Tree* – how it is composed, encoded, and accessed – is complex. Much of this complexity lies in the highly implicit nature of the meaning which requires a good grasp of the English language, as much of the implicit meaning is provoked by complex cues. This complexity poses a significant gap: the text, designed for Grade 4 learners who are still developing reading proficiency, is semiotically complex, especially in the depth of meaning potential it encodes, much of which is inaccessible to learners who are not L1 English speakers. Moreover, this complexity fails to consider learners' linguistic and cultural identities – both crucial dimensions of meaning-making (Zorina & Pomortseva, 2023; Rashidi & Esmaeeli, 2023). While the implicit meaning in this text is technically 'more directly encoded' according to Don's (2016) invocation spectrum and should be accessible via textual cues, learners need fairly advanced linguistic skills to interpret these cues and the meanings they invoke. There is thus a gap between the broad range of meaning potential in this text and the narrow range of meaning that is assessed in this activity and brings into question whether learners are being taught how truly to comprehend meaning.

A significant gap exists between curriculum policy (CAPS) that specifies how reading comprehension should be assessed and how assessment is implemented (and promoted through CAPS-aligned resources) in classrooms. While CAPS prescribes a balanced set of cognitive skills to be assessed, comprehension activities are revealed to be heavily skewed toward lower-order cognitive skills in practice. This over-reliance on lower-order cognitive skills also means that learners are engaged to a lesser degree with implicit meaning, which, as indicated above, accounts for most of the meaning potential in this text. This overly narrow focus on literal/inscribed meaning ensures that the text's fuller meaning potential remains untapped. Moreover, these observed disjuncts between policy and practice also manifest as a symptom of a

broader challenge in preserving the linguistic and cultural identities of South African learners, as the texts they interact with are limited in fostering such connections (see Khabibullovna Nurgayanova et al., 2023).

The heavy weighting of lower-order comprehension questions allows learners to achieve relatively high marks with very little interpretive work. As a result, learners are perceived to be very successful in this comprehension activity. This contradicts the persisting narrative that Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning. However, upon closer inspection, it is revealed that this may only be the case because of the over-reliance on lower-order comprehension questions. It is thus worth considering how learners might respond to a set of revised comprehension questions that better reflect the CAPS-prescribed cognitive skill distribution.

While these insights reveal gaps between policy, practice and perception, we remind the reader that what is taking place in this comprehension activity (and thus the gaps that are highlighted through it) is co-constructed by participants in response to a set of broader contextual factors. For a fuller exploration of how these responses are shaped by (and in turn shape) the contextual factors described in Section 2, see Kitchen (2025). For the purposes of this paper, however, we note that the gaps we have identified are worsened by the impact of contextual, institutional, and bureaucratic constraints, which led teachers at Wisteria Preparatory to adopt an approach of docility, in which the status quo is preserved, and critical literacy and awareness is avoided. This is further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and issues of severely reduced teaching time and pressure to complete curricula during this time. All these factors contribute to an environment, where the learning process (in this case, reading comprehension) is likened to making ‘deposits’ at a bank, i.e., learners are considered empty containers into which teachers ‘deposit’ knowledge with no scope for developing critical awareness (Freire, 2005).

These gaps in practice beg further research and targeted reading comprehension interventions. However, to best identify the kinds of interventions required, it is necessary to obtain a more accurate understand of learners’ actual reading comprehension abilities. To do this, learners’ responses to comprehension questions that more accurately represented the CAPS’ prescribed cognitive skill percentage distribution (and which assess a broader range of the meaning potential in the *Leopard and Pear Tree*) need to be collected and analyzed. This will offer a more reliable representation of learners’ actual comprehension abilities (and of their abilities post-COVID-19) and will provide the basis upon which actionable interventions can be designed.

5. Conclusion

Using linguistic analysis, this paper exposes significant disjunctions between curriculum policy (CAPS), and actual classroom practice. Despite the CAPS framework drawing from Barrett's Taxonomy, which advocates for a balanced approach to literal, inferential, evaluative, and appreciative cognitive skill, our findings reveal an overreliance on literal meaning in both the selected comprehension text and its associated questions. This overemphasis on explicit information, coupled with a lack of nuanced assessment of invoked meaning (as highlighted by Don's (2016) invocation spectrum), creates a false sense of reading comprehension success among teachers and learners.

The challenges are multifaceted, stemming from the legacy of Apartheid education, ongoing inequalities, and the compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning time. While CAPS aims to provide clearer guidance for teachers, actual assessment practices promote a "banking education" approach, where knowledge transmission and an over-reliance on literal meaning often trumps more in-depth meaning-making. The disparity in home language versus the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) for the majority of learners at Wisteria Preparatory further complicates the landscape of effective comprehension.

Ultimately, this research underscores the urgent need for alternative approaches to reading comprehension pedagogy in South African classrooms. A deeper understanding and explicit integration of implicit meaning into both curriculum materials and assessment practices are crucial. By fostering a more nuanced engagement with texts that moves beyond surface-level understanding, we can empower learners to become truly critical and engaged readers, thereby contributing to a more effective response to the national literacy crisis.

Notes

[1]See Kitchen (2025)

[2]The authors acknowledge the challenges that standardized international literacy tests like PIRLS pose on the African context, discussed by Abdulatief et al. (2018). While we support the need for more research on literacy and testing for the African learner, insights from PIRLS are used to prompt the kinds of ethnographic research that Abdulatief et al. (2018) urge.

[3]A similar position is adopted by Shahani & Chalak (2017).

[4]This definition is based on Smith & Barrett's (1974) conceptualization of inferential meaning.

[5]Public schools previously classified as 'White' under the Apartheid schooling classification, partially funded by government.

[6]All place and participant names are pseudonyms.

[7]The 12 official South African languages include English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, Setswana, isiZulu, Sesotho, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, siSwati, Sepedi, isiNdebele, and South African Sign Language.

[8]The paradigmatic perspective views language as "consisting of a set of systems which offer the speaker/writer an unlimited choice of ways of creating meaning" (Bloor & Bloor, 2004, p. 3).

[9]Unless otherwise indicated, all examples are taken from *The Leopard and the Pear Tree* comprehension task and/or a discussion between participants about the task (see Kitchen, 2025).

[10]Invented example

[11]Invented example

[12]Invented example

[13]Invented example

[14]Invented example

[15]A more comprehensive account of social positioning is provided by Dreyfus & Li (2021).

[16]Invented example

[17]Invented example

[18]While instantiations of Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement are coded in separate grids, they must be interpreted cumulatively.

[19]Readers are welcome to request this data and analysis, as well as the statistics referred to in the paper.

[20]See Meshkat & Hassanzade (2014) for a discussion on content schemata in comprehension.

[21]The National Policy for Promotion (Department of Basic Education, 2016) indicates that learners must achieve above 50 percent in their Home Language to progress to the subsequent grade.

Information on Informed Consent or any Data Privacy Statements

Informed consent for this data was obtained at the time of data collection, approved by the Rhodes University Human Ethics Committee (Approval number 2020-1107-3313).

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethics Board Approval Statements

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The Leopard and the Pear Tree text

Once upon a time there was a terrible drought in the land. All the rivers dried up and no fruit or grass or leaves grew for the animals to eat. So, all the animals in the land were hot and hungry and thirsty.
Except for one.
In the middle of a field there stood a big tree full of juicy, ripe pears. But this tree was guarded by a mean and selfish leopard who wouldn't share his fruit with anyone and kept it all for himself. If anyone came near the pear tree he would growl and shout at them.
"Growr, growr!" he would roar. "These are my pears, you can't have any."
The animals were very unhappy and didn't know what to do. They were all afraid they would die if they did not get something to eat or drink soon.
A rabbit came passed (sic) one day and he heard the animal's (sic) problem. He soon had a plan.

“Listen closely,” he told the animals. “I have a plan”.
The animals listened with enthusiasm.
The next morning all the animals gathered in the forest near the leopard and the pear tree. The animals that lived on the ground waited quietly holding sticks and logs. The birds and the monkeys waited quietly in the branches of the trees. They were all waiting for the rabbit.
Suddenly the rabbit, holding a thick rope, came rushing through the forest and out into the field where the leopard was sleeping.
“Get up! Get up!” he shouted.
The leopard lifted his head and growled, “Why are you making such a noise? Can’t you see I’m sleeping?”
“Leopard, you’ve got to get away! A big wind is coming and it’s going to blow everyone off the earth!” shouted the rabbit.
At this moment all the animals in the forest started making a terrifying noise. The elephants, rhinos and hippos knocked large branches against the trees. Other animals on the land bashed sticks against smaller trees and bushes. The birds flapped their wings and caused the leaves to rustle and swish. The monkeys jumped up and down on the branches to make them shake and shudder. All this noise sounded like a big wind coming to blow everyone off the earth.
The leopard was terrified.
“What are we going to do” he shouted.
“Well, I’m taking this rope to go and tie down some of the other animals so that they don’t blow away. You are big and strong, so you can run away,” said the rabbit.
“No,” shouted the leopard. “You must tie me down with that rope.”
“But it’s for the other animals,” said the rabbit.
“I don’t care. You must tie me down. Now,” insisted the leopard.
“Very well,” said the rabbit, and he tied the leopard tightly to a tree at the bottom of the field.
Then he called all the other animals to come out of the forest, and they sat around the pear tree and ate their first meal in days together.
“Thank you, Rabbit,” all the animals said.
The rabbit simply replied, “No one has the right to keep to himself what was meant for everyone.”

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