

An analysis of grade 6 English first additional language reading comprehension questions in CAPS-aligned examinations

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension, a crucial skill for successful text interaction, remains a significant challenge for many South African learners, as evidenced by their persistent difficulties in answering comprehension questions. This struggle underscores the importance of examining how comprehension assessments are designed and implemented. The South African curriculum assessment policy statement (CAPS) mandates a variety of cognitive levels in reading tests, using Barrett's taxonomy for question design. However, there is a lack of research examining whether the reading comprehension questions in grade 6 English first additional language (EFAL) exams align with the cognitive levels. The purpose of this study is to examine the alignment of grade 6 EFA reading comprehension questions with the cognitive levels. The study employs Barrett's taxonomy framework to categorize and evaluate reading comprehension questions in grade 6 EFAL exams. The results show a striking imbalance between actual question distributions and CAPS benchmarks: lower-order questions dominated at 68.75% (Paper 1) and 63.16% (Paper 2), far exceeding the CAPS target of 40%, inferential questions reached only 25.00% (Paper 1) and 26.32% (Paper 2), falling short of the 40% requirement, higher-order questions were critically underrepresented at 0.00% (Paper 1) and 10.53% (Paper 2), versus the 20% benchmark. The study recommends a substantive rebalancing of examination questions to achieve the CAPS-mandated distribution of cognitive levels (40% lower-order, 40% inferential, 20% higher-order).

Keywords: Barrett's taxonomy; CAPS; English first additional language; reading comprehension question

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INTRODUCTION

There is currently a wealth of evidence from national and international assessments demonstrating low reading literacy across all language groups and educational levels, from foundation to university (Malda et al., 2014). Most learners cannot read for meaning, as evidenced by their difficulty in answering comprehension questions effectively. Assessments of reading comprehension conducted both nationally and internationally reveal the reading challenges of grade 6 learners in South Africa

(Mullis et al., 2023). South African Grade 6 learners' reading performance is depicted as a crisis by their test results in the 2017 Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ II) assessment (Spaull, 2017). According to Shabalala (2005), the SACMEQ II survey revealed that South African learners had limited or insufficient skills in literacy and numeracy (due to a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills. In cases where reading comprehension is a challenge, reading comprehension assessments play a crucial role, impacting the educational environment for both teachers and learners (Rahmah & Mistar, 2023). The reading problem emphasizes how important it is to have organized reading comprehension tests that cover a variety of cognitive skills.

The South African curriculum, CAPS, requires that reading comprehension assessments include a range of cognitive levels to ensure a balanced approach that incorporates both higher-order and lower-order thinking skills (Department of Basic Education, 2011). This is accomplished by CAPS using Barrett's taxonomy, which offers carefully planned categories of questions that are intended to promote a profound comprehension of language. The following ratios of different question kinds are adjusted to accommodate all cognitive levels using Barrett's taxonomy levels: Levels 1 (Literal comprehension level) and 2 (Reorganization comprehension level): 40% of total marks; Level 3 (Inferential comprehension level): 40% of total marks; Levels 4 (Evaluation comprehension level) and 5 (Appreciation level): 20% of total marks, according to the examination guidelines, Paper 2 for first additional language (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

Considering this, the present study attempts to assess how well reading comprehension questions help learners in grade 6 to develop a full comprehension of language using the taxonomy as described above. This study applies quantitative content analysis to two grade 6 English first additional language (EFAL) examination papers from 2022 and 2023 in two provinces in South Africa. Based on Barrett's taxonomy, the questions are divided into four levels: literal, reorganization, inferential, evaluation, and appreciation (Department of Basic Education, 2011). It is critical to carefully consider how the assessments' questions relate to the goals of assessing reading comprehension. Do these questions measure learners' comprehension well enough, or do they unintentionally make learning more difficult or too easy? This study also sought to get a deep understanding of the grade 6 EFAL Paper 2 questions by examining how well they match the standards of CAPS. A review of the assessment questions to determine if they adhere to these requirements guarantees that the research is based on current practices and policies in education. Overall, this study makes a substantial advancement in improving the equality and quality of reading comprehension tests in South Africa, guaranteeing that these tests accurately reflect learners' understanding abilities and are in line with academic standards. Any assessment's ultimate objective is to accurately measure the desired competencies. It is the duty of researchers and educators to evaluate these questions' effectiveness in fostering a deep understanding of language. Therefore, the study clarifies the ways in which the correspondence between assessment items and CAPS can impact young learners' reading comprehension abilities. The findings of this research will enhance our knowledge of reading comprehension tests and offer educators and curriculum designers useful information. It addresses critical gaps in South Africa's literacy crisis by empirically analyzing how grade 6 EFAL exams misalign with CAPS cognitive skill expectations, particularly through an overuse of lower-order questions (e.g., 68.75% literal). It highlights the consequences of this imbalance on learners' comprehension development and proposes Barrett's taxonomy as a practical tool for realigning assessments with curriculum goals. By doing so, the study offers actionable solutions that can transform assessments into instruments for cultivating higher-order thinking skills. This study analyzes how well grade 6 EFAL exam questions align with the cognitive skill requirements of the South African CAPS curriculum, using Barrett's taxonomy as the framework.

Research questions:

This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How is the distribution of grade 6 English first additional language examination questions aligned with CAPS requirements and Barrett's taxonomy sublevels in effectively measuring learners' comprehension skills?
2. What specific types of comprehension questions are most and least represented in grade 6 English first additional language examinations?

This study examined two available grade 6 written examination questions given to learners of English as an additional language in Eastern Cape and Gauteng schools in South Africa. In this study, the content analysis method was used to review the information in the exam papers. The following section offers a thorough summary of the body of research on reading comprehension, Barrett's taxonomy, and CAPS requirements. It also draws attention to pertinent research, especially those that which looks at the distribution and efficiency of various comprehension question kinds. The next section reviews the literature, followed by an examination of the methodology. The paper then presents the findings and discussion, ending with the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading comprehension and assessment

Reading comprehension represents a fundamental academic competency that enables learners to extract meaning, analyze content, and engage critically with texts. The ability to understand a book and draw many conclusions from it is known as reading comprehension, according to [Bobkina and Stefanovas \(2016\)](#). It has been also found that reading comprehension is naturally influenced by a person's cognitive growth and heavily reliant on quick and effortless word recognition ([Yurko & Protsenko, 2022](#)). Reading comprehension calls for more than just vocabulary and grammar proficiency; it also calls for the capacity to recognize the precise essence of the text being transmitted ([Khasawneh, 2021](#)). As a result, learners need to learn to read "between the lines" or implicit facts, as well as learn how to discern intentions and moods from factual information ([Elleman & Oslund, 2019](#)). Developing the ability to "read between the lines" and discern authorial intent requires a dual approach to reading. Intensive reading cultivates detailed textual analysis skills, enabling learners to identify implicit facts and nuances within shorter texts. Conversely, extensive reading builds crucial fluency, background knowledge, and exposure to diverse writing styles, providing the broader foundation necessary for applying these interpretive skills across various materials. Additionally, reading comprehension is regarded as a cognitive activity and serves as a key means for developing learners' critical thinking." Given that readers must apply cognitive skills, it may be said that reading comprehension is the capacity to absorb meaning ([Yousefi & Mohammadi, 2016](#)). The ability to read comprehension plays a big part in a learner's academic success or failure. After reading a reading comprehension text, learners are given an array of questions intended to help them expand their ideas, provide background information, make sense of their reasoning, and even raise their level of thinking ([Yurko & Protsenko, 2022](#)). Consequently, evaluating whether the examination questions meet these standards ensures that the study is grounded in current educational policy and practice.

One of the most important educational practices in both instruction and education is assessment. Instruction refers to the direct act of teaching and imparting knowledge, while education encompasses the broader process of learning and acquiring knowledge, skills, and values over time ([Isman, 2011](#)). Assessments of reading comprehension include methods and techniques intended to show how effectively learners can read, understand, interpret, and assess different texts ([Rahmah & Mistar, 2023](#)). According to academics and professionals, most standardized reading comprehension assessments need to accurately reflect the comprehension process ([Muhassin et al., 2021](#)) which are from lower to higher order. To learn more about learners' deeper reading comprehension and to evaluate the validity of the current measures, researchers and teachers must develop assessments that

go above the low-level capabilities obtained by multiple choice questions and closed-ended items (Elleman & Oslund, 2019).

Table 1

Cognitive levels according to the CAPS document

Cognitive levels	Percentage of task
Lower order	
Literal (Level 1)	40%
Reorganization (Level 2)	
Middle order	
Inference (Level 3)	40%
Higher order	
Evaluation (Level 4)	20%
Appreciation (Level 5)	

A diverse range of question types, including multiple-choice, cloze, comparison, and direct questions, should be incorporated (Department of Basic Education, 2011). In essence, the study examines if the way in which the questions are distributed in the grade 6 EFAL written examination effectively assesses learners' understanding abilities in relation to the standards and sublevels of Barrett's taxonomy and the CAPS. This is consistent with the overarching objective of my study, which is to evaluate and examine the efficacy of reading comprehension exercises in this setting.

English first additional language curriculum

The exam papers analyzed in this study are meant for learners learning English as first additional language. The term "first additional language" describes a non-native language that serves as the main language of instruction in schools and for other specific communication purposes in society (Department of Basic Education, 2011). For learners who plan to use their native language as a language of Teaching and Learning (LoLT), the curriculum offers robust assistance. By the time they graduate from grade 9, these learners ought to be competent and confident users of both their first language and their native tongue for a range of tasks, including education (Department of Basic Education, 2011). In grade 4, many learners in South Africa begin using their second language, often English, as the LoLT. This implies that at the conclusion of grade 3, learners must have attained a high degree of proficiency in English (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The first additional language level assumes that learners will not necessarily know the language when they get to school. During the first few years of school, the emphasis is on helping learners acquire the fundamentals of interpersonal communication—the capability to comprehend and communicate in the language (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Learners begin to construct literacy on this oral basis in grades 2 and 3. Additionally, learners use the literacy abilities they have already mastered in their own tongue. During this stage, learners' spoken language still requires scaffolding, which involves modelling and providing support through resources like sentence structures and terminology (Department of Basic Education, 2011), and the application of the Barrett's taxonomy to set the questions these learners answer is crucial.

Barrett taxonomy of reading comprehension

In 1968, Barrett devised a taxonomy that would help teachers to develop assessments that consider each of the five levels of hierarchy in the cognitive domain. According to the CAPS, "It is important that learners' understanding of what they are reading is assessed and not just their ability to recognise or decode words." (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The South African curriculum, which is outlined in the CAPS, uses the Barrett's taxonomy to specify the types and number of questions that

should be developed for tests and examinations, which test the learners' comprehension abilities. The following table summarizes Barrett's taxonomy.

Table 2

Summary of Barrett's Taxonomy

Type of cognitive demand	What questions require of the student/ examinee
1. Literal Comprehension The ability to recognize or recall: • Specific details • Central ideas • Sequential order • Comparisons • Cause-and-effect relationships • Traits of characters	To locate or identify explicitly stated information (such as character or place names, similarities and differences, or reasons for actions) within a reading passage, text, or material.
2. Reorganization • Categorizing • Structuring • Condensing • Integrating	To systematically arrange, classify, rephrase, or combine clearly stated details or concepts in a reading selection or text.
3. Inferential Comprehension • Key concepts • Sequence • Comparisons • Supporting information • Relationships between causes and effects • Characteristics • Forecasting results • Deciphering metaphorical language	To form hypotheses and draw conclusions about details or ideas (such as the significance of a theme, the motivation or nature of a character) that are not stated explicitly in a reading selection, text, or material by using speculation, one's own intuition, experience, background knowledge, or clues.
4. Evaluation – Judgment of Fact or opinion: • Reality or fancy • Sufficiency or reliability • Appropriateness • Worth, desirability and acceptability	To compare facts or concepts offered in a reading selection, text, or other material using internal criteria (students' own values, experiences, or prior knowledge of the subject) or external criteria supplied (by other sources/authorities) in order to reach an evaluation judgment (for instance, on qualities of accuracy, acceptability, desirability, worth, or probability).
5. Appreciation • Character identification • Emotional reaction to the material • Reactions to the author's language use • Pictures	To react to the value of the reading selection's psychological and artistic components (including literary techniques, forms, styles, and structuring) and to demonstrate emotional and aesthetic/literary sensitivity

Source: (Reeves, 2012)

Barrett's taxonomy differentiates between various types of comprehension questions. "Literal Comprehension" questions have answers that are directly and clearly found in the text. "Reorganization" questions also have text-based answers but require the reader to rearrange or summarize information (Javed et al., 2016). "Inferential Comprehension" questions involve synthesizing text content with the reader's own knowledge to draw logical conclusions, analyze, and evaluate material. The reader must assess the author's views in light of their own experiences and convictions in order to answer evaluation questions. "Appreciation" questions demand an emotional and aesthetic response to the text, considering its creative and psychological aspects. The taxonomy categorizes comprehension levels as "read the lines" (literal and reorganization), "read between the

lines" (inferential), and "read beyond the lines" (evaluation and appreciation) (Reeves, 2012, p. 36; Javed et al., 2016). Barrett's Taxonomy is used to set different kinds of questions so that each cognitive level is accommodated in the following proportions: Levels 1 and 2: 40% of total marks; Level 3: 40% of total marks; Levels 4 and 5: 20% of total marks, according to the assessment guidelines, Paper 2 for first additional language (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

Research on using Barrett's taxonomy to assess reading comprehension

Barrett's Taxonomy divides reading comprehension questions into discrete cognitive levels to offer an organized method of evaluating understanding. This taxonomy has been used in numerous research to analyze the efficacy of reading comprehension tests in different educational settings. This section reviews the application of Barrett's taxonomy to reading comprehension and results from other studies that investigated the distribution and influence of question types on learners' comprehension abilities are highlighted.

The studies on evaluating reading comprehension using Barrett's taxonomy in Indonesia and other regions highlight a common trend in the distribution of question types in educational materials. Surtantini (2019) and Amalya et al. (2020) in their studies discovered that most questions in textbooks were lower-order, predominantly literal comprehension questions, suggesting a lack of balance and an emphasis on basic comprehension skills. Similarly, Rahmadani and Zainil (2023) and Nehari et al. (2024) in Algeria, and Aqeel and Farrah (2019) observed an uneven distribution of cognitive levels in textbooks, with a significant number of questions falling into the lower-order thinking skills like literal and inferential categories, and fewer questions targeting higher-order thinking skills. The prevalence of literal questions may hinder learners' ability to develop higher order thinking skills, apply previously acquired knowledge, examine their reflections, solve problems, make decisions, and create new ideas (Seman et al., 2017). These studies are related to mine, which examines how comprehension questions are distributed in grade 6 EFAL tests using Barrett's taxonomy. Like the previously described studies, my research also finds out whether the questions are primarily lower-order, which would provide a restricted assessment of the understanding abilities of the learners.

In contrast to the studies mentioned above, Novytsari (2017) found a higher prevalence of evaluation questions in a grade 11 textbook, indicating a focus on higher-order thinking, though other lower-level questions like reorganization were absent. Overall, these studies highlight a common issue across different places: reading comprehension texts often do not provide a balanced mix of question types according to Barrett's taxonomy. This pattern is important in relation to my study because it indicates that while some reading comprehension texts may prioritize higher-order thinking, there is still a tendency to neglect a comprehensive distribution of cognitive levels.

Göçer (2014) examined written exam questions in Turkish that were based on texts and given to secondary school learners. Using content analysis, the results for this study revealed that most questions were at lower order in Barrett's taxonomy, and the distribution of the questions was not balanced in terms of the taxonomy. Similarly, the goal of my study was to ascertain whether the written test questions were in line with the curriculum and were distributed in accordance with the Barrett's taxonomy domain sublevels.

In South Africa, there is a dearth of research on the analysis of English textbooks or reading comprehension question papers in general, and grade 6 EFAL, in particular, and this study, on a smaller scale, may assist to reveal the discrepancies between the examination items and what the curriculum prescribes. The following section describes how this study was carried out.

METHOD

The core objective of this study was to investigate the distribution of grade 6 EFAL examination questions in relation to CAPS requirements and Barrett's taxonomy sublevels, and to identify the most and least represented question types. To address these questions, a descriptive-quantitative research methodology, specifically, quantitative content analysis, was used to evaluate two grade 6 EFAL Paper

2 comprehension questions. This method is uniquely suited to my research because it allows for the systemic and objective examination of textual data, in this case, the comprehension questions within the exam papers. Given that this research aimed to determine the frequency and occurrence of specific question types categorized by Barrett's taxonomy levels (literal, reorganization, inferential, evaluation, and appreciation), quantitative content analysis provided the precise tools needed. The ability of quantitative content analysis to methodically count and identify patterns related to 'how much,' 'how many,' or 'how often' a particular theme or question type appears directly aligns with my need to quantify the distribution of cognitive levels in the exam papers (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). This systematic approach ensures that my analysis is replicable and verifiable, thus enhancing the reliability and objectivity of my findings regarding the alignment (or misalignment) with CAPS guidelines. The use of a standardized checklist and assessment sheet, coupled with multiple skilled coders, further ensured the reliability and objectivity of the categorization process, thereby providing a robust foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of the reading comprehension questions in fostering language understanding.

Sampling and data collection

The study's data sources consisted of two publicly available grade 6 EFAL Paper 2 exam papers: one from June 2023 (referred to as question Paper 1) and another from November 2022 (referred to as question Paper 2). These papers were chosen because they were the most recent grade 6 EFAL exam papers readily available online at the time of the study. This ensured that the analysis reflected current assessment practices and policies. The researcher obtained these exam papers directly from publicly accessible online platforms. It is important to note that different provinces in South Africa are responsible for designing and setting their own unique examination papers for their respective schools. Therefore, these papers represent the assessment instruments used by the education departments of the specific provinces during the indicated periods. As public information, the researcher had full access to these documents. The deliberate choice aimed to explore potential regional differences in how the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and Barrett's taxonomy are implemented in EFAL assessments across different provincial education departments. By including papers from different provinces, the study sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of assessment practices beyond a single regional context. The study specifically focused on Paper 2, which is dedicated to reading comprehension questions. This allowed for a direct and concentrated analysis of the cognitive levels of comprehension questions, aligning precisely with the research's objectives. Limiting the sample to two papers from different years and provinces provided a manageable scope for in-depth quantitative content analysis, while still offering valuable insights into current assessment trends and adherence to curriculum guidelines.

Content analysis procedure

The examination questions were analyzed using a checklist and an assessment sheet. The checklist divided questions into five cognitive levels: literal, reorganization, inferential, evaluation, and appreciation. The criteria were based on Barrett's taxonomy and CAPS standards. Coders could follow the comprehensive instructions on the assessment sheet to reliably categorize every question. Multiple skilled coders classified each comprehension question during the coding procedure.

Data analysis

The frequency and distribution of questions across the five cognitive levels were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The analysis determined the percentage of questions in each category to evaluate their alignment with Barrett's taxonomy and CAPS guidelines. This study aimed to determine the frequency of each of Barrett's taxonomy categories—literal, reorganization, inferential, evaluation, and appreciation comprehension—in the grade 6 EFAL examination papers discover the specific comprehension question types that were most and least represented. This analysis addressed the research questions:

1. How is the distribution of grade 6 first additional language examination questions aligned with CAPS requirements and Barrett's taxonomy sublevels in effectively measuring learners' comprehension skills?
2. What specific types of comprehension questions are most and least represented in grade 6 English first additional language examinations?

Five categories of questions were used to analyze items in the two documents. These were level 1 (literal comprehension level), level 2 (reorganization comprehension level), level 3 (inferential comprehension level), level 4 (evaluation comprehension level), and level 5 (appreciation level). An analysis for each question paper was made to see if the comprehension questions set align with the percentages and cognitive levels prescribed by the CAPS and the taxonomy adopted by the South African curriculum, and see which types of comprehension questions were most and least represented. It was then possible to tell which items were at which level, as well as whether the CAPS prescribed percentage levels were followed. It was possible to tell whether or not those who set examinations also included all levels of questions, including higher-order questions which assist learners to think on a deeper level. I chose to use Barrett's taxonomy and not any other taxonomy because it is the one adopted and used by the Department of Basic Education of the South African curriculum.

All the reading comprehension questions from the two grade 6 EFAL Paper 2 tests published by the Education departments of the two provinces were gathered by the researcher. The examination papers were named as question Paper 1 (June 2023 grade 6 EFAL Paper 2 from Province 1) and question Paper 2 (November 2022 grade 6 EFAL Paper 2 from Province 2). The reason for selecting these two papers was that they were the most recent grade 6 EFAL exam papers available online, and exam papers were from different provinces for the sake of comparison.

FINDINGS

Distribution of grade 6 English first additional language examination questions in the two exam papers

The total number of reading comprehension questions in question Paper 1 was 16, and for question Paper 2 there were 19.

Table 3

The Types of Reading Comprehension Questions

Cognitive levels	Percentage of task	Number of questions in this level		Examples of questions
		Paper 1	Paper 2	
Lower order	20%	62.5%	68.4%	How many blocks do you have to sprint sometimes?
Literal (Level 1)				
Reorganization (Level 2)	20%	6.25%	0%	A Four B One C Three D Two
Middle order	40%	25%	26.32%	What does the writer mean by 'you have to hit the pavement'?
Inference (Level 3)				
Higher order	20%	0%	10.53%	Choose the most correct answer.
Evaluation (Level 4)				How would you describe the mood (feeling) of the poem? Circle the letter.
Appreciation (Level 5)				A Serious B Happy C Grateful D Excited

Literal comprehension

Throughout both papers, the bulk of the questions are literal comprehension questions. Ten out of sixteen (62.5%) of the questions on question Paper 1 are literal. This percentage increases to 68.4% (13 out of 19) in question Paper 2. This suggests that assessing learners' recollection of specific details from the text is highly valued in these reading comprehension questions. This finding is in line with Göçer's 2014 analysis of questions, in which the results revealed that most questions for the examination were at a lower order in Barrett's taxonomy. The prevalence of literal questions may hinder learners' ability to develop higher-order thinking abilities, apply previously learned material, examine their own perspectives, solve problems, make decisions, and come up with new ideas (Seman et al., 2017). This study's finding on the predominance of literal comprehension questions contradicts with the CAPS instruction that literal comprehension questions should be 20% of the total number of questions (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

Reorganization

There are surprisingly few reorganization comprehension questions, which ask learners to summarize or rearrange the content. Reorganization comprehension questions are important because they require learners to gather information from different parts of the text, analyze, integrate, and synthesize it (Javed et al., 2016). By asking learners to analyze the text holistically, these questions assist them in transitioning from a sentence-by-sentence analysis of the text to a more comprehensive perspective (Surtantini, 2019). Of the 16 questions in question Paper 1, only one question (6.25%) asks about reorganization. There are no questions about reorganization in question Paper 2. This implies a deficiency in evaluating learners' capacity for knowledge synthesis and reorganization. This finding is in line with Göçer's (2014) study on evaluating Turkish reading examination questions where it was observed that there are inadequate questions referring to reorganization. The current study conflicts with the CAPS curriculum which states that 20% of the questions should be reorganization comprehension questions (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

Inferential comprehension

Question Paper 1 has 25% (4 out of 16) inferential comprehension questions, while question Paper 2 has 26.32% (5 out of 19), and they are the second most common type after the literal comprehension questions. According to the CAPS curriculum, questions on inferential comprehension should make up 40% of the overall questions (Department of Basic Education, 2011) but in the analyzed papers have way less the required number of questions. Inferential comprehension questions are very important because they allow the readers to use their prior knowledge and enable them to read between the lines, rather than just get what is explicitly said. The results of this study indicate a strong mismatch between the prescribed and the practiced.

Evaluation

Evaluation questions, which require learners to base decisions on standards and criteria, are absent in question Paper 1. However, question Paper 2 includes 2 evaluation questions, making up 10.53% (2 out of 19) of the questions. According to CAPS, evaluation comprehension questions should make up 10% of the overall questions (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Therefore, there was some effort in question Paper 2 to incorporate higher-order thinking skills, and question Paper 2 met the requirements while question Paper 1 did not. This finding concurs with Göçer's (2014) study which analyzed Turkish text-based written examination questions, and the evaluation comprehension questions were not adequate. Evaluation comprehension questions are important because they force learners to form opinions based on standards and criteria, which fosters the growth of critical thinking, decision-making, and the capacity to judge the reliability of claims or theories (Amalya et al., 2020).

This aligns with general aims of the South African curriculum that aim to give learners the tools they need to for real-world problem-solving (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

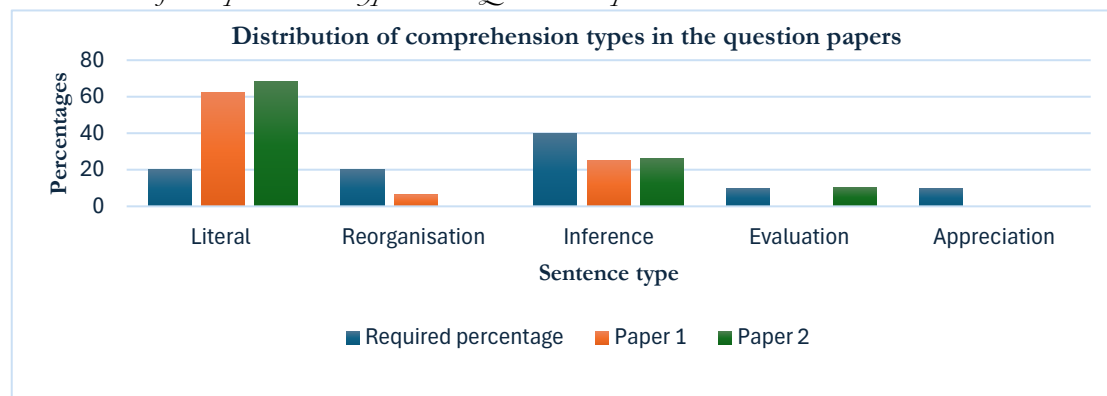
Appreciation

Both question papers lack questions that evaluate appreciation, which entail identifying and appreciating the author's skill and underlying ideas. This is a deviation from the CAPS requirements and Barrett's taxonomy, which state that evaluation and appreciation comprehension questions should account for 20% of the total number of questions (Department of Basic Education, 2011). This suggests that without appreciation questions, learners might not be adequately challenged to interact with the material more deeply and reflectively. The absence of such questions encourages teachers to focus more on rote learning and factual recall. This finding also aligns with Surtantini (2019), Amalya et al. (2020), and Rahmadani and Zainil (2023), who also found imbalances in question types in their respective contexts, especially the underrepresentation of higher-order questions.

Types of comprehension questions most and least represented in grade 6 English first additional language examinations

Figure 1

Distribution of Comprehension Types in the Question Papers



According to Figure 1, literal comprehension questions, which correspond with lower-order cognitive skills, are the most prevalent and strongly favored in both papers. The second most prevalent type of questions in both papers is inferential, followed by the evaluation, which is represented only in question Paper 2, and the appreciation questions were missing in both papers.

These results are consistent with those of research by Nehari et al., (2024) and Aqeel and Farrah (2019), which demonstrated that high level reading comprehension questions were given less weight in the reading comprehension evaluation (appreciation, evaluation) and more weight to simple reading comprehension questions (literal and inferential) (Nehari et al., 2024; Aqeel & Farrah, 2019). This implies that evaluating learners' understanding and remembering explicit information from the reading passages is given a lot of attention. Even while this ability is fundamental, the overemphasis on literal questions suggests that learners may not be sufficiently challenged to use higher-order cognitive processes.

Alignment with CAPS and Barrett's taxonomy

Barrett's taxonomy's lower-order cognitive levels (literal and inferential) are strongly aligned with both papers. The underrepresentation of questions about reorganization, evaluation, and appreciation, however, points to a misalignment with the suggestions made by CAPS for a fair evaluation of cognitive skills. A wide range of question types should be included, according to CAPS, to accommodate all cognitive levels. Göçer (2014) also found that the reading comprehension

assessment he analyzed did not align with the curriculum. Most questions were at a lower order in the Barrett's taxonomy, and the distribution of the questions was not balanced in terms of the taxonomy. Aqeel and Farrah (2019) recommend incorporating Barrett's taxonomy-based high-level comprehension questions in reading comprehension tests. It is possible that most literal questions do not adequately assess learners' comprehension abilities overall, particularly their capacity for higher-order thinking. This imbalance could impede the growth of all-around reading abilities, as learners are not sufficiently challenged to engage with texts on deeper cognitive and emotional levels. According to Candra (2014), an English reading comprehension assessment is not a suitable assessment if the reading comprehension questions mostly cover the literal recognition level, which is a rather easy level of questioning. There should be a good representation of all levels of questions. Applying Barrett's taxonomy revealed significant misalignment between CAPS goals and actual assessments. While CAPS mandates 40% inferential questions, only 25% appeared in the exams, a shortfall that may explain learners' struggles with critical analysis (Mullis et al., 2023). This gap underscores the need to restructure examinations using Barrett's framework as a guide.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to assess how well grade 6 EFAL exam questions matched the Barrett's taxonomy and the CAPS standards in South Africa. The five levels of Barrett's taxonomy—literal, reorganization, inferential, evaluation, and appreciation—were used to categorize comprehension questions from two grade 6 EFAL exam papers from 2022 and 2023 through a quantitative content analysis.

The results showed that the distribution of question categories was noticeably unbalanced. With 62.5% of the questions in Paper 1 and 68.4% in Paper 2, most of the questions were about literal comprehension. Although they were there, inferential questions were less common; in Papers 1 and 2, they made up 25% and 26.32% of the total questions. Questions about rearrangement, evaluation, and appreciation were notably underrepresented; they made up only 6.25% of question Paper 1 and 5.26% of question Paper 2, whereas questions about evaluation were not included in question Paper 1 and made up 10.53% of question Paper 2. There were no appreciation questions in both papers.

These findings point to a significant emphasis on lower-order cognitive skills, especially literal comprehension, at the expense of higher-order cognitive functions like evaluation and appreciation of texts. This disparity points to a mismatch with CAPS standards, which support a fair method of evaluating different cognitive capacities. Learners' capacity to acquire critical thinking, analytical abilities, and a deeper grasp of texts may be hampered by the current emphasis on literal comprehension questions. These abilities are crucial for both academic performance and real-world problem-solving.

The study emphasizes the importance of test developers and educational policymakers to evaluate and modify the way they formulate exam questions. Assessors can more accurately reflect the CAPS criteria and offer a thorough assessment of learners' reading comprehension skills by including a more balanced variety of question types from Barrett's taxonomy. In addition to increasing the effectiveness of reading comprehension tests, this well-rounded strategy would help learners develop higher order thinking abilities, preparing them for increasingly difficult academic tasks and improving their overall educational experience. Curriculum delivery and instructional strategies are significantly influenced by educational assessments. Examinations that emphasize lower-order thinking skills over other subjects unintentionally send the message to teachers and learners that rote memorization and superficial comprehension are adequate for success in the classroom. This may cause educators to focus more on factual recall than on deeper, more meaningful engagement with texts, which could lead to a narrowing of their teaching strategies. As a result, learners lose out on opportunities to acquire critical literacy skills that are essential for both higher education and solving

problems in the real world, like synthesizing information, making inferences, and assessing the reliability of arguments.

The research concludes by recommending a deliberate reassessment of the layout and arrangement of comprehension questions on grade 6 EFAL examinations. To comply with CAPS standards and promote the comprehensive development of learners' reading comprehension abilities, assessments must ensure a balanced representation of all cognitive levels. To ensure continued progress in educational procedures and results, future research should keep tracking and evaluating the application of these modifications.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

The author of the manuscript affirms that they have no conflicting interests.

Availability of data and materials:

Upon request, the accompanying author can supply the data utilized to back up the study's conclusions

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