What Literacy Means: check your reading.

Six questions on one real news article. Each uses a different reading skill, from finding a fact to judging what to trust.

READ THIS FIRST

South African learners struggle with reading comprehension: study reveals a gap between policy and classroom practice

Tracy Kitchen, Rhodes University · The Conversation · August 4, 2025
https://theconversation.com/south-african-learners-struggle-with-reading-comprehension-study-reveals-a-gap-between-policy-and-classroom-practice-260033

How to use it. Read the whole article first. Keep it open while you answer, the way you would at the kitchen table. The questions go roughly from easier to harder. The levels are a guide to how hard each kind of task is on the international adult literacy test, not a score. The answer key is on the last page.

DECODE LEVEL 1

1. Paragraph 1 says many learners can “decode words” but cannot “read for meaning.” What is the difference?

LOCATE LEVEL 1 TO 2

2. What share of grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning?

RESTATE LEVEL 2

3. In one or two sentences of your own, what did the study find?

INFER LEVEL 3

4. The learners averaged 82.9% on the textbook's questions. Why doesn't that score show they understood the text?

COMPARE LEVEL 3

5. Compare the mix of questions the policy requires with the mix in the textbook.

EVALUATE LEVEL 4 AND UP

6. The study observed one classroom over six months during the pandemic. How far can you apply its findings?

Answer key

1. Decode. Decoding is recognizing and sounding out the words. Reading for meaning is understanding what the text says, and what it implies. You can do the first without the second, which is the point of part two of this series.

Where to look: Paragraph 1

2. Locate. 81%.

Where to look: Paragraph 1

3. Restate. In one classroom, the reading questions were mostly simple, literal ones, not the mix the national policy requires, so learners scored high without really understanding the text. When they were given questions that matched the policy, their scores dropped.

Where to look: Paragraphs 5 to 8 and 27 to 31

4. Infer. Most of the questions only asked them to find and list things stated in the text: 73% were lower-order questions, and at least six of the 15 marks could be earned just by listing stated items. A high score on easy questions measures an easy kind of reading.

Where to look: Paragraphs 27 to 30

5. Compare. The policy calls for 40% literal and reorganisation, 40% inferential, and 20% evaluation and appreciation. The textbook had 73% lower-order questions, 20% inferential, and 7% evaluation or appreciation.

Where to look: Paragraphs 20 to 22 and 28

6. Evaluate. Carefully. One class in one school at an unusual time cannot show how common the problem is, and the author lists other causes too. What it does show is a mechanism worth checking elsewhere: easy questions can make readers look stronger than they are.

Where to look: Paragraphs 25, 34 and 35

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