

Impact of COVID-19 on Self-Directed Learning: Perspectives of Rural English First Additional Language Teachers

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Abstract

Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been changes in the ways teaching and learning occur in most classrooms, including English first additional language classrooms. Teachers spent less contact class time with their English FAL learners to comply with the COVID-19 safety protocols, such as social distancing. More than ever, learners in rural schools faced the responsibility of learning independently for extended periods. The focus in this article is on how the learners' efforts to learn independently were disrupted and how teachers assisted these learners in overcoming these challenges amid the pandemic. The article explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural English FAL learners' self-directed learning. The findings confirm the existence of COVID-19-induced challenges that impeded rural English FAL learners' self-directed learning. These included a lack of motivation and a negative attitude towards self-directed learning, closure of learning facilities and a lack of learning material, overdependence on the teacher, poor physical learning environments and limited parental support. The study also reports on strategies that English FAL teachers used to enhance learners' self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included strengthening home-school partnerships, providing emotional support, and simplifying learning activities. The article concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted self-directed learning in South Africa.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; impact; English language; rural schools; self-directed learning

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Introduction

The end of 2019 marked the beginning of the “new normal” caused by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of this pandemic were felt in all aspects of life, including teaching and learning at all levels of education. The virus and its ever-evolving variants and mutations added to the challenges facing the provision of quality education. Across the world, it became necessary for educational institutions to ensure continuity of and access to learning opportunities for all learners (Xhaferi and Xhaferi 2020, 89).

For many countries, online learning became the primary tool for continuing teaching and learning. Although the transition to online learning appeared comparatively easy for certain developed countries, it presented severe challenges for South African schools, especially ones in rural areas (De Klerk and Palmer 2021, 13). The challenges included a lack of information and communications technology (ICT) skills among the teachers and learners in rural schools (Du Plessis and Mestry 2019, 2; Kamble et al. 2021, 201). In addition, the schools lacked the infrastructure needed for online learning (Chu et al. 2021, 1; De Klerk and Palmer 2021, 13). As a result, learners and teachers in these contexts struggled to cope with the demands of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dube 2020, 139).

In addition, online learning could not be used to address the main challenges facing English first additional language (English FAL) learners in South Africa. For instance, English FAL learners have poor reading skills (Mensah, Pillay, and Sibaya 2017). Some cannot read, while others read below the grade level (Makiwane-Mazinyo and Pillay 2017; Zimmerman and Smit 2014). English FAL learners also struggle with writing (Ngubane, Ntombela, and Govender 2020). Many of these learners fail to develop the competency to write effectively and proficiently (Mhlongo, Pillay, and Maphalala 2018).

The South African national Department of Basic Education (DBE) adopted a curriculum trimming and recovery plan during the half-capacity COVID-19 national lockdowns. According to this plan, learners alternated when attending school. In other words, one group of learners would attend school for one week while another group would be “learning” from home. The reduced physical contact time between teachers and learners due to COVID-19 caused the latter group of learners to learn independently. It was important for English FAL teachers to prepare learners for self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Damayanti et al. 2021, 113). Although much research has been done on the pandemic and its impact on education (Mohale et al. 2020; Xhaferi and Xhaferi 2020), there is still a need to understand how it impacted rural English FAL learners from the teachers’ perspectives. This article aims to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural English FAL learners’ self-directed learning. The following questions are central to this study:

- What challenges do the COVID-19 pandemic present to rural English FAL learners' self-directed learning?
- What strategies do rural English FAL teachers use to enhance learners' self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Regarding this article's structure, I begin by reviewing the literature related to learning and teaching English FAL in the South African context. Next, I discuss the central tenets of self-directed learning. Then, I present the theoretical framework underpinning this study. After that, I discuss the methodology employed in this article. Lastly, I present the findings and conclusion.

Understanding English FAL Teaching in the South African Context

The South African Language in Education Policy (LiEP) (RSA 1997) endorses an additive approach to language teaching and learning in the country's schools.¹ In line with this policy, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) distinguishes between English Home Language (HL) and English First Additional Language (EFAL) in South African schools. Home language (HL) refers to the first language a learner acquires before learning other languages. When offered at this level, the emphasis is on mastering skills (social and cognitive) needed for interpersonal communication for social and academic purposes. First additional language (FAL) refers to a language a learner learns in addition to their home language. At this level, especially for learners in lower grades, the emphasis is on equipping learners with skills necessary for basic understanding and speaking of the language. Later, reasoning, critical thinking, interpersonal and cognitive academic skills, and proficiency are developed continuously in preparation for Grade 12 and beyond (DBE 2011).

To achieve this goal, the EFAL syllabus focuses on teaching various language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Zano 2020, 2). In this case, CAPS recommends several language teaching approaches, such as text-based, communicative, integrated, and process-oriented approaches (DBE 2011). In brief, English FAL teachers are expected to use the text-based approach mainly to help learners understand how different texts are produced, with the ultimate aim of creating their texts in the real world. The communicative language approach aims to equip learners with the necessary tools to express themselves in English in academic and social environments. The task-based approach demands learners to be exposed to real-life situations in which English may be used, while the process-based approach outlines different stages through which different language skills must be taught and developed. Moreover, CAPS recommends that language skills should be taught in an integrated manner in EFAL classrooms (DBE 2011).

¹ Learners may still take English Home Language in addition to their native language ("mother tongue").

Irrespective of the language teaching approach English FAL teachers in rural settings decide to use, the roles of teachers and learners in the process of teaching and learning remain distinct. Teachers facilitate this process (Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam 2012, 74; Payaprom and Payaprom 2020, 60) while creating collaborative and active learning spaces. In other words, teachers cease to be the sole sources of knowledge in the classroom (Alexandra 2013, 205). Instead, teachers guide learners to different sources of information, and they create and increase opportunities for learners to be exposed to English. Teachers also support the development of learners' reading and writing strategies while facilitating contextual and correct use of language (DBE 2011).

Drawing from the principles of learner-centred teaching, the CAPS document places the primary responsibility for learning on learners. According to Du Plessis (2020, 4), learners learn through doing (constructing their knowledge) and collaborating with others in the classroom. They listen to English for comprehension, information and pleasure. Apart from listening, these learners use this language for conversation, artistic expression and creativity, interpersonal reasons, and academic purposes. In addition, they read and view for various reasons, including information, pleasure, and literary appreciation. Lastly, learners' knowledge and understanding of basic language are also necessary (DBE 2011). Overall, these learners are expected to become independent, self-reliant, and self-regulating individuals and groups in the classroom and beyond.

Under normal circumstances, teachers are readily available to support learners and guide them throughout the learning process. However, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic reduced teachers' ability to provide adequate learner support. The COVID-19 safety measures, such as social distancing and limited physical contact between teachers and learners, exacerbated this problem. Given the different teaching approaches and the distinctive roles of teachers and learners in the English FAL classroom, it is essential to note the central role of self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Self-Directed Learning

An important lesson that COVID-19 has taught the education community is that learners should not be too dependent on teachers. The teacher-dependent learners have been negatively impacted by the lack of contact with teachers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In their study, Kapasia et al. (2020) report on the increased levels of depression and anxiety when learners have to learn independently at home. Similarly, many learners struggle to engage in self-study and receive little or no assistance from their families (Mukuna and Aloka 2020; Syaugi, Munadi, and Triyono 2020). This situation makes self-directed learning (SDL) an alternative strategy in unprecedented times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Saks and Leijen (2014), SDL is used synonymously with concepts such as self-education, autonomous learning, and independent learning. Morris (2019) defines SDL as a learning strategy where learners are responsible for managing their learning. For Damayanti et al. (2021, 113), SDL is a learning strategy that allows learners to control their learning while guided and

supported by the teacher. In other words, learners must be given more responsibility for and control over their learning (Mahlaba 2020, 123). However, this does not relegate teachers to the periphery.

On the contrary, throughout the SDL process, teachers play a facilitative role and provide the necessary support to their learners (Damayanti et al. 2021, 113; Neak 2020, 63). Also, teachers create the enabling environment for SDL by giving clear instructions, learning goals, resources, and realistic timelines (Wai-Cook 2020, 87). In addition, they equip learners with SDL skills that enable them to learn independently (Alghamdi 2021, 3; Wai-Cook 2020, 87). Learners need to develop these skills, such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking (Yu and Wan Mohammad 2019). This makes self-directed learning not an individual process per se but a collective exercise (Knowles 1975).

Alghamdi (2021, 2) outlines several dimensions of SDL. The social dimension focuses on learners' communication and collaboration with others while engaging in autonomous learning. The individualisation of learning activities, the learning speed of knowledge acquisition, and learning styles are central to the technological dimension. The tasks and strategies learners complete as part of self-directed learning encapsulate the methodical dimension, while learners' personalities and traits constitute the personal dimension of SDL. Similarly, Tan and Ling (2014, as cited in Wahyudi, Artini, and Padmadewi 2021, 94) identify several components of SDL. The first two components focus on developing both learners' ownership in learning and investigative self-management and self-monitoring. The former entails allowing learners to actively design tasks and identify learning gaps, while the latter involves monitoring and supporting learners throughout the learning process. The availability and creation of opportunities for the extension of learning are another important component of SDL. This allows the learners to link the newly learned information to prior knowledge and reflect on the self-learned content (Wahyudi, Artini, and Padmadewi 2021, 94).

Generally, SDL is also known for improving the quality of education (Neak 2020, 65). When carried out appropriately, SDL enhances learners' self-confidence and commitment to learn independently (Alghamdi 2021, 1) For language learners, SDL positively impacts their learning of writing and language acquisition (Al-Sulaity 2017; Haidari, Yanpar Yelken, and Akay 2019). Moreover, there is a link between SDL and improvement in learners' academic performance (Salleh et al. 2019).

Theorising through Resilience Theory

The study adopts Resilience Theory (RT) as a lens. The origins and development of this theory are attributed to the works of Garmezy, Werner, Masten and Rutter (Wang, Zhang, and Zimmerman 2015, 354). In essence, RT seeks to understand and explain the impact of adversity on the lives of individuals, organisations, and communities. Perhaps most importantly, it describes how some people overcome adverse and traumatic experiences better than others (Wang, Zhang, and Zimmerman 2015, 356). In other words, this

theory predominantly features adversity and resilience (Van Breda 2018, 12). The literature lacks a universally accepted understanding of what constitutes resilience (Hendrick and Young 2013, 180). Wang, Zhang and Zimmerman (2015, 354) allude to the two perspectives dominating the debate on resilience. The trait-oriented perspective views resilience as a personal trait, while the process-oriented perspective emphasises the importance of interaction between the individual and the environment in overcoming an adverse event. According to Masten, Best and Garmezy (1990, 459), resilience is “a process of, or capacity for, or the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances”. For Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000, 543), resilience involves achieving positive adaptation amid significant adversity. In other instances, resilience refers to “the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events” (National Research Council 2012).

Smith-Osborne (2007) and Bolton et al. (2017, 4) postulate that risk factors increase the conditions of vulnerability. A COVID-19 pandemic is a high-risk event that disrupts all aspects of life, including education (Pflugger et al. 2021, 2). Like all other systems, education goes through different phases due to the disruptions caused by this virus. According to Resiliency Theory, there is a need for the system to prepare and plan, absorb, recover, and adapt (Linkov et al. 2013). Similarly, Petterson and Kelleher (2005 cited in Ledesma 2014, 4) identify four phases of the resilience cycle: a deteriorating phase, an adapting phase, a recovery phase, and a growing phase.

There are three models of resilience that can be used to respond to the conditions of adversity. These include compensatory, protective and inoculation models. The compensatory model uses promotive factors to minimise the impact of adversity (Ledesma, 2014, 3; Zimmerman, Steinman, and Rowe 1998). Accordingly, Garmezy, Masten and Tellegen (1984) place assets and resources at the centre of the protective model. To mitigate the effects of adversity, access to assets that promote competence is crucial (Yates, Tyrell, and Masten 2015, 777). With the inoculation model, Wang, Zhang and Zimmerman (2015, 356) argue that subsequent exposure to risk reduces the impact and negative consequences. The provision, activation and availability of resilience-enhancing efforts and support remain critical (Yates, Tyrell, and Masten 2015, 777).

A resilience-guided study is concerned with supporting the unrepresented and marginalised groups (Bryan 2005) and creating spaces for their voices to be heard (Van Breda 2018, 12). The challenges specific to rural schools arguably increase the vulnerability of learners and teachers in these schools. This study created a platform for these marginalised teachers to express their frustrations about COVID-19 adversity and its impact on self-directed learning. It also explores how they enhanced learners’ self-directed learning during the half-capacity COVID-19 national lockdown.

According to Van Breda (2018, 11), a study underpinned by Resilience Theory asks questions about the impact of adversity on people’s lives. In essence, this study explores

the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural learners' self-directed learning. Moreover, the resilience-guided study refutes the deficit-based models of interventions that render rural people helpless (Yates, Tyrell, and Masten 2015, 777). On the contrary, it capitalises on the strength of the individuals and communities (Ungar 2008, 27; Yates, Tyrell, and Masten 2015, 773). Lastly, Ungar (2008, 25) argues that resilience theory-guided research is action-oriented. In this regard, the participants in this study were proactive in confronting the challenges and risks negatively impacting on rural English FAL learners' self-directed learning during the half-capacity COVID-19 national lockdowns. In addition, the participants in this study identified the challenges and devised potential strategies to palliate the effects of the pandemic on learners' self-directed learning.

Methodology

This study was positioned within the interpretivist paradigm and followed a qualitative approach. The interpretive paradigm enabled an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and the meanings they attached to these experiences (Creswell and Creswell 2017). The qualitative approach allowed the participants in this study to express themselves and share their experiences. Data was generated through online interviews and document analysis.

Participants

In addition to being students enrolled in a Bachelor of Education Honours programme, the participants were in-service teachers in 15 rural high schools across two provinces in South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State. They were teaching English FAL in Grades 10 and 11. Six teachers from KwaZulu-Natal and nine from the Free State were conveniently sampled for this study. This sampling method was appropriate because all the participants were enrolled in a postgraduate Language Education module at one rural university where the researcher worked. This provided easy access and proximity to the researcher.

Implementation

As part of their coursework, the participants were given an assignment that took over three weeks to complete. In this assignment, participants were given a series of activities that the researcher designed. They were instructed to provide learners with these activities and allow them to complete the tasks independently. For the first activity, learners were required to write an introductory paragraph on a given topic that would be interesting to learners. Rural English FAL learners' writing challenges necessitated focusing on this language skill. The task was based on speaking. Learners were instructed to prepare a speech for oral presentation in class. In preparing their speeches, they were required to gather information about the given topic from various sources independently.

Data Collection

This study was conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. It was impossible to use any data collection tool that required physical contact and proximity between the researcher and the participants or between the participants. Document analysis and online interviews became appropriate tools to collect data in this study. The participants' documents (assignments) were analysed to answer the first research question. Online interviews were conducted to answer the second research question. As stated, these two techniques worked effectively where data collection was not feasible (Bowen 2009, 31). However, Hodder (2000) cautions against the risk of misinterpreting the content and purpose of the documents under analysis. In addition to generating data for the second research question, online interviews were conducted to verify and validate the content of the documents the participants had submitted.

Data Analysis

Throughout these tasks, teachers supported learners and gradually withdrew the support to allow them to complete the tasks independently. However, teachers also asked learners to report any challenges they encountered when completing these activities at home. This allowed teachers to devise strategies to lessen the impact of the pandemic on learners' self-directed learning. After that, the teachers were required to write and submit an assignment on the following question:

- What COVID-19-induced challenges are preventing your learners from completing the tasks independently?

The researcher analysed these documents (assignment scripts) to elicit the responses to this question. The researcher also conducted an online interview for the teachers to respond to the following question:

- What strategies did you employ to enhance learners' self-directed learning in your class during the COVID-19 pandemic?

For analysis, the documents were retrieved from Blackboard and read, while data generated through online interviews was transcribed to "elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge" (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 67). In both contexts, data was analysed qualitatively using the thematic analysis technique and inductive approach. The analysis was carried out in line with the guidelines recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). These included: familiarisation with the data, identifying significant codes, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing a detailed description, producing a fundamental structure, and seeking verification of the basic design as the processes in analysis. Throughout, the utterances and written texts of the participants were quoted verbatim for analysis. The generated data was also shared with the participants to increase a sense of ownership of the research and its findings.

Ethical Considerations

Students were informed that their assignment would form part of a research study. In the actual assignment document, they were given an option to attach their signatures as consent for their assignments to be used for research purposes. It was mentioned, however, that participation was voluntary. It was also emphasised that participation or non-participation in this study would not affect students' final grades. Finally, permission was received from the university's ethics committee to conduct this study.

Limitations of the Study

This study presented the following limitations: the study's findings cannot be generalised to teachers in other rural contexts, as only 15 rural English FAL language teachers participated in this study.

Findings and Discussion

The researcher retrieved participants' assignments from Blackboard for the first research question. The data generated from these documents revealed the challenges that affected rural English FAL learners' self-directed learning. These were then categorised into different themes: a lack of motivation and a negative attitude towards self-directed learning, closure of learning facilities and lack of learning material, overdependence on the teacher, poor physical learning environments, and limited parental support. Some of these challenges were already in existence before the pandemic. In other words, the advent of COVID-19 only aggravated the challenges and their impact on English FAL learners' self-directed learning.

The study also reported various strategies that English FAL teachers used to enhance learners' self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included strengthening home-school partnerships, providing emotional support, and simplifying learning activities.

COVID-19 Induced Challenges

Theme 1: Lack of Motivation and Negative Attitude towards Self-Directed Learning

Learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation remain crucial for effective learning and acquisition of an additional language, such as English FAL (Cheng and Lee 2018; Dincer and Yeşilyurt 2017). In other words, under "normal" conditions, learners have different motivation sources, making them eager to learn and explore independently. Self-motivation is important for successful independent learning (Xiao and Yang 2019). However, the COVID-19-induced learning conditions negatively impacted rural English FAL learners' efforts to learn independently. As a result, they lacked the motivation to direct their learning. The following statements reflect the opinions of the teachers:

I have noticed about the learners after the national lockdown, most have lost motivation. ... The learners can't use the teacher as a resource because contact with the learner is not allowed, so teachers cannot assist learners individually. (Teacher 15)

Self-motivation and interest in doing their schoolwork independently were a bit challenging for them. (Teacher 4)

Following the national lockdown, when learners started attending school on a rotational basis, they lacked the motivation to learn independently. In addition, the need to comply with the COVID-19 safety measures, such as social distancing, made it difficult for teachers to provide much-needed support and scaffolding. Besides not receiving external support, the teachers also noticed that learners were not intrinsically motivated and had negative attitudes towards independent learning.

Theme 2: Closure of Learning Facilities and Lack of Learning Material

Long before COVID-19 hit the country, the problem of poorly resourced rural schools in South Africa had been widely highlighted in policy documents (DBE 2012, 2018)² and academic papers (DBE 2012, 8; DBE 2018; Du Plessis and Mestry 2019; Myende and Hlalele 2018, 25). These schools lack functional libraries, access to a reliable power supply (DBE 2013, 8), and ICT infrastructure, and others struggle with poor network coverage, internet speed and connection (Leichty 2021, 13; Mukuna and Aloka 2020, 138). The advent of this virus simply escalated this already volatile situation in many rural schools. In particular, the closure of learning spaces such as public and school libraries due to COVID-19 negatively affected English FAL learners' self-directed learning. As a result, these learners did not have the opportunity and support to learn independently. In other words, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic simply exacerbated the dire existing situation in many rural English FAL classrooms. The following reflections are indicative of the lack of learning facilities and their impact on self-directed learning:

In rural areas, there are few or no library facilities to entice learners to engage in self-directed learning. ... Other facilities had to be closed to prevent the spread of Corona. (Teacher 7)

Many facilities were closed, such as libraries. Learners couldn't consult anywhere to enhance their learning. (Teacher 1)

In rural contexts, there are no buildings such as libraries where learners can get material, resources, tutors or other pupils who can help. (Teacher 2)

Rural learners' homes are often overcrowded (Prinsloo 2008; Singh, Mbokodi, and Msila 2004, 303). Consequently, rural learners do not have enough spaces in which they

² The Rural Education Policy (DBE 2018) and *Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025* (DBE 2012).

can learn independently. The national lockdowns necessitated the closure of learning spaces such as community and school libraries. While this was done to prevent the spread of the virus, it made autonomous learning extremely difficult.

Besides the closure of public learning spaces, these learners faced limited access to books in their homes and schools (Krashen 2016, 2; Mugambi 2015, 554). The following views were expressed:

One of the challenges that prevented learners from engaging in self-directed learning was the lack of learning materials. ... The issue could be that there are no books, and some have to share, and now that it's COVID, they aren't allowed to share books because of the fear of contracting the virus. (Teacher 3)

Learners cannot take textbooks home to do self-study as there are not enough, which becomes very difficult for learners to continue with schoolwork without any learning material or activities to help them. (Teacher 2)

Learners often get learning material and resources at school, which in rural schools remain at school because of the limited number of materials. (Teacher 4)

Although rural South African schools struggled with shortages of reading materials before, the situation in many schools seems to have deteriorated since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before this outbreak, learners in rural schools could share and distribute limited reading materials. Textbooks would rotate among learners in a classroom. However, the need to comply with the safety protocols of COVID-19 stopped these practices. Learners were not allowed to take learning materials home. This made self-directed learning difficult for English FAL learners in rural settings.

Theme 3: Overdependence on the Teacher

Learners' self-efficacy plays an important role in promoting active participation in the learning process. Most specifically, autonomy, competence and relatedness influence learners' participation in self-directed learning (Deci and Ryan 1985). However, learners in rural communities often have low expectations of one another's success and this often discourages their participation in self-initiated and directed activities. At some point during the pandemic, rural schools adopted rotational school attendance due to overcrowding, limited learning facilities, insufficient learning material, and the need to comply with the COVID-19 safety protocols in the classrooms. This effectively meant that while one group of learners attended school lessons, the other group was expected to learn independently. In other words, these COVID-19-induced learning conditions negatively impacted their competence to learn autonomously. As a result, learners' reliance on their teachers became more evident. This is what the teachers had to say:

Learners in rural schools have become so accustomed to being instructed on what to learn and what not to learn at a specific time that they find it increasingly difficult to manage their learning. (Teacher 10)

Without the guidance of a teacher in the English subject, skills such as reading, writing or spelling cannot be done without the help of someone. ... But without a teacher or someone to work with they cannot do self-directed learning. (Teacher 2)

Learners, especially ... from rural schools, require a push or assistance from the teachers as they are used to teaching methods that require teachers to demonstrate charts. (Teacher 12)

It was revealed that rural English FAL learners were struggling to learn independently. Sometimes they could not cope with the work they needed to learn. In other cases, a lack of support from teachers due to the COVID-19 restrictions made it impossible for these learners to learn independently. The advent of the pandemic highlighted teacher dependency. In other words, although CAPS subscribes to the tenets of learner-centred teaching, learners still lack the necessary skills to learn independently. Thus, the development of language skills was negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Theme 4: Poor Physical Learning Environments and Limited Parental Support

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shifting of roles in the teaching and learning process. Parents became primary support providers to learners when teachers were unavailable due to the pandemic (MacCormack et al. 2022, 4). In other words, parents took over the role of teachers concerning the facilitation and construction of knowledge. This was especially necessary in cases where the administration and use of remote learning were either limited or absent. However, studies show that rural parents struggle to provide this support to their children. This may be due to their busy schedules and work commitments and distrust of school (MacCormack et al. 2022, 3). In addition, some parents lack self-efficacy in teaching and influencing decisions as far as their children's education is concerned (Mncube 2010; Singh, Mbokodi, and Msila 2004). This perceived deficiency prevented these parents from promoting self-directed learning among their children during the pandemic. When unsupervised, learners often struggle to study independently (Jones and Forster 2021). This is evident in the teachers' following responses:

Learners from rural areas do not get enough support, especially from their parents, because most parents are not learned. (Teacher 15)

Parents or siblings of these learners often think teaching and learning are only done in school and it is the responsibility of the teacher. ... Without the parents' intervention it is hard for children to group themselves and start doing schoolwork together. (Teacher 4)

According to the above extracts, rural learners did not receive much support from their parents to learn independently. The parents did not see it as essential to provide such support because this was considered the teachers' responsibility.

Apart from shifting roles, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic also shifted learning spaces. In other words, the primary functions of a home have changed drastically since the emergence of this pandemic. Learners' homes have increasingly become areas for online and virtual pedagogies. In addition, they have also become contested spaces in which learners learn, and parents work remotely. The competing functions are also exacerbated by overcrowding, which often characterises rural homes (Singh, Mbokodi, and Msila 2004). These learners had to share these spaces with others (for example siblings) who could not go to school or work due to the COVID-19 restrictions. In such a situation, learners may feel less in control of their behaviours and incapable of completing the given activities (Komiya and McMorris 2017). The responses below confirm this observation:

[There is a] high number of child-headed families in South Africa; there is no adult to support and advise the child. ... Young children are burdened with the responsibility of caring for your siblings when parents go to work. (Teacher 9)

Another challenge which may be faced by learners is the lack of space to study. ... They can use their rooms to study. ... Some even stay in two rooms where the whole family sleeps in one room. (Teacher 10)

The next thing we know a parent wants to send the child to the shop or fetch something for them and that messes with the time that they should be spending studying. (Teacher 13)

While COVID-19 may have forced rural learners to learn independently at home, the conditions in their homes were not conducive to learning. In some instances, no space within the house was designated for learning purposes. In addition, overcrowding is common in many rural homes. In other cases, some homes were headed by children themselves. The elder child (learner) looked after the siblings in such a situation. Learners spent time doing house chores in homes where the parents were available instead of studying.

Strategies Enhancing Self-Directed Learning

Theme A: Strengthening Home-School Partnerships

The advent of the pandemic brought home-school partnerships to the fore (Luo, Berson, and Berson 2022, 12). Mainly, these partnerships ensured that tasks were completed and learners received academic and psychosocial support (MacCormack et al. 2022, 3). Moreover, these partnerships positively impacted learners' behaviour and engagement with learning activities (Jones and Forster 2021, 135). Similarly, the teachers in this study capitalised on these partnerships to lessen the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-directed learning. For instance, they stated the following during the online interviews:

I collaborate with families by talking to parents about different activities that learners need to do and how they must try helping them at home. ... I created a WhatsApp group with those who have cellphones and access to internet. (Teacher 2)

I asked all English learners' parents to play an important role during the school closure, which included helping to ensure that their children follow the syllabus as well as emotionally aiding their children to retain their inspiration ... where they could conveniently be disheartened from studying independently due to the absence of peer influence. (Teacher 3)

I prepared all the learning activities and gave each learner to take home and ask anyone at home to help. I also took their parents' cellphone numbers and contacted parents to explain the activities if they did not understand. (Teacher 4)

Convincing the parents to help the learners is also a successful way to ensure learners practise self-directed learning. ... Communicating with parents makes them limit the duties and chores they give to learners and observe them while studying. (Teacher 7)

These teachers recognised the role school-home partnerships play in promoting learners' autonomous learning. Maintaining constant communication between learners' homes and schools through online platforms enhanced this relationship. In this case, family members constantly communicated with the teachers about the tasks and how they should be completed. In other words, these family members played a facilitative and monitoring role while learners completed the activities independently. This was quite important given that most learners could not study without supervision (Jones and Forster 2021). Moreover, providing guidelines about how some activities should be completed and specifying the parents' role made it easy for family members to provide the necessary support to promote English FAL learners' self-directed learning. Furthermore, the solid home-school partnership resulted in parents reducing the amount of time spent on daily chores that learners were expected to complete throughout the day, thus promoting self-directed learning.

Theme B: Providing Emotional Support

Self-directed learning may be an overwhelming experience for many learners. This is especially true for learners who have never engaged in it before. For instance, rural learners in South Africa never learnt without teachers' support for prolonged periods before the pandemic. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic compromised learners' well-being. As a result, they needed to be supported on all fronts: mental, emotional and physical (Wai-Cook 2020, 87). This was important because these learners became more susceptible to depression and anxiety during the pandemic (Holzer et al. 2021, 6). Under such conditions, ensuring well-being among English FAL learners proved important for positive development and independent learning (Holzer et al. 2021, 1). During the online interviews, the participants in this study said the following:

I provided emotional support to my learners, which resulted in more positive attitudes and dispositions toward learning. (Teacher 3)

I tried by all means to find ways to help my learners stay motivated during the pandemic by sending recordings, images and videos whereby I motivated them. (Teacher 6)

I believe that peer learning will motivate them to want to learn more and be like their classmates. (Teacher 8)

From the above utterances, it is evident that providing emotional support was crucial for lessening COVID-19's impact on learners' self-directed learning. In addition, teachers also used extrinsic motivation to moderate the impact of the pandemic on these learners. With this support, learners' competence, relatedness and autonomy were positively impacted. In other words, they viewed their self-directed initiatives and learning as effective. As a result, they could master and complete the given tasks. Also, the support allowed learners to complete the activities themselves voluntarily. Receiving support from teachers and family members enhanced learners' feelings of responsibility towards directing their learning during the pandemic.

Theme C: Simplifying Learning Activities

Before the pandemic, English FAL learners relied on teachers to provide clear instructions about the tasks that needed to be completed in class. In addition, the teachers provided appropriate resources and set goals and deadlines for completing these tasks (Wai-Cook 2020, 88). Without such support during the pandemic, rural English FAL learners found self-directed learning challenging. For instance, Mukuna and Aloka (2020, 142) state that rural learners struggled to independently complete and submit the given tasks due to their complex nature and a lack of support from their significant others (parents). According to the participants in this study, the advent of the pandemic required that they simplify the activities to promote learners' self-directed learning. The excerpts from the online interviews reveal the following:

I had to emphasise that learners can write only what they understand. (Teacher 9)

Learners were given activities according to their cognitive level. (Teacher 12)

I made sure that I simplified those activities. ... All group activities were changed to individual activities to make it easy for learners to work independently. (Teacher 15)

In the above interview excerpts, the participants reveal that they had to allow learners to complete only the less complex activities. In addition, the tasks were set according to learners' cognitive levels, and this increased learners' likelihood of completing the tasks independently.

Discussion

This study explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-directed learning in South Africa. In particular, drawing from teachers' experiences, it explored how the pandemic impacted English FAL learners' self-directed learning in rural settings. The study's findings revealed that COVID-19 presented challenges to rural English FAL learners' self-directed learning. These included a lack of motivation and a negative attitude towards self-directed learning, closure of learning facilities and lack of learning material, overdependence on the teacher, limited access to information and communications technology platforms, poor physical learning environments, and limited parental support. The study also reported various strategies that English FAL teachers used to enhance learners' self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included strengthening home-school partnerships, providing emotional support, and simplifying learning activities.

The study found that English FAL learners lacked the motivation to learn independently when their teachers were unavailable due to COVID-19. In this regard, they lacked the courage to complete the activities independently. This demonstrates that they had low self-efficacy and lacked the competence required for successful self-directed learning. These findings are in tandem with what other researchers found about learners in South Africa and elsewhere (Cheng and Lee 2018; Choi 2021; Mukuna and Aloka 2020). The data also revealed that the closure of learning facilities due to the pandemic impeded English FAL learners' self-directed learning. As a result, this added to the already limited access to learning materials.

Furthermore, it emerged that an overdependence on teachers prevented English FAL learners from directing their learning. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher-centred strategies dominated language classrooms in South Africa (Pretorius 2002; Zimmerman and Smit 2014, 1). Learners remained passive recipients of knowledge. Finally, the study revealed that the COVID-19-induced national lockdown caused family members of English FAL learners to stay home or work from home for extended periods. This resulted in family members and learners competing for the already limited space in their homes. In addition, the houses were also crowded, hindering learners from learning independently. The findings reporting on overcrowding in rural learners' homes are not new (Singh, Mbokodi, and Msila 2004).

Furthermore, the COVID-19-induced national lockdown required some parents to work overtime. Consequently, they could not support their children with school activities to promote autonomous learning. This confirmed the earlier findings that rural parents struggled to participate actively in their children's education even before the pandemic (Mncube 2010; Singh, Mbokodi, and Msila 2004).

In terms of strategies, the study found that strengthening home-school partnerships enhanced English FAL learners' self-directed learning during the pandemic. In this case, the teachers communicated with learners' parents and guardians about the given tasks

and the expectations. In other words, they shared guidelines about how these tasks could be completed. In this regard, Luo, Berson and Berson (2022, 135) and MacCormack et al. (2022, 1) found that the relationship between home and school was strengthened. The relationship allowed parents and family members to play a facilitative role while learners completed the tasks and learnt independently. The facilitative role learners' family members played was unexpected because this role was often reserved for teachers (Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam 2012; Payaprom and Payaprom 2020).

Providing emotional support to English FAL learners proved effective in enhancing learners' self-directed learning during the pandemic. In this study, the participants relied on the extrinsic motivation of the learners. In this case, they shared recordings, images and videos with learners' families through WhatsApp groups. These were then shared with the learners to keep them motivated to learn independently. Lastly, the study found that simplifying learning activities enhanced learners' self-directed learning. The participants in this study designed the learning activities according to the learners' cognitive levels. In addition, learners were allowed to focus on activities they understood well at home.

Conclusion

The inferences drawn from the data, theories and literature point to the various COVID-19-induced challenges that impeded self-directed learning in South Africa. The challenges imply that learners in rural schools are not yet ready to learn independently for extended periods. They lack motivation, support and learning environments that promote self-directed learning. On the other hand, rural English FAL teachers remain resilient to the adversity of the pandemic. In this regard, they possess various strategies to enhance learners' self-directed learning.

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