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Mitigating the COVID-19 Induced Learning Loss in Rural Primary Schools: How Do Teachers Prepare English FAL Learners for Self-Directed Learning in the 'New Normal'?

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Abstract: In the post-pandemic era, the ongoing discourses are centered around finding innovative ways to sustain teaching and learning as well as reversing COVID-19-induced learning loss, especially in critical areas, such as reading in English First Additional Language (FAL). As a contribution to these discourses, the current study explored how teachers prepared rural English FAL learners for self-directed learning to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss and to sustain learning in the 'new normal'. The study followed a qualitative approach and adopted phenomenology as a research design, while the Capability Approach was used for theoretical framing. Three teachers of English FAL in one primary school were conveniently selected to participate in the semi-structured focus-group interviews. A thematic analysis revealed that teachers prepared English FAL learners to use self-directed learning by apprising learners of their active role in learning English FAL, identifying learners' weaknesses, strengthening the home-school connection, and encouraging collaboration and problem-solving. These findings imply that self-directed learning could be a useful strategy for mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss and improving reading skills in rural primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the COVID-19 virus at the beginning of 2019 brought to the fore significant uncertainties in all sectors of society, including education. While educational institutions in developed economies were prepared to manage these uncertainties, other developing countries failed to deal effectively with COVID-19 disruptions. In the former, online learning became a viable option to ensure continued provision of and access to quality education despite prolonged school closures (Molnar & Hermann, 2023). As a result, there were no major losses in learning and teaching time for primary school learners. Therefore, incorporating technological pedagogy in primary school education is not a major challenge in

the post-pandemic era or the 'new normal'. However, the same could be true for primary school learners in many developing countries. South Africa, for example, was ill-prepared for the disruptions caused by the pandemic (Maphalala & Ajani, 2023). That is, online learning was not a feasible mode of teaching for many learners in rural South African schools. While many of these schools lacked the infrastructure to carry out online learning, teachers were inadequately skilled to teach through online platforms (Molise & Dube, 2020; Olawumi & Mavuso, 2022). As a result, prolonged school closures became an obvious alternative which left many rural learners with access to little or no education at all (Soudien et al., 2022). On average, they lost 70 percent of their learning (Hoadley, 2020; Molar & Hermann, 2023). The significant losses among primary school learners were related to their reading skills. For instance, a cumulative 46% of learners in grades 1-3 in Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda could not read beyond a single word (Angrist et al., 2021). In South Africa, a survey on reading abilities among early-grade primary school learners revealed that English FAL learners learned no more than half of what they could have learned under 'normal' circumstances (Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021).

Considering this COVID-19-induced learning loss, researchers proposed various interventions to reverse the losses and sustain learning in the 'new normal'. For instance, Angrist et al. (2021) call for targeted instruction and the introduction of structured pedagogy. Gustafsson and Deliwe (2020) endorse policy-driven catch-up strategies, while Olawumi and Mavuso (2022) highlight the need for an ICT integration policy for all schools and programs for teacher development. However, these studies do not endeavor to explore how learners could be empowered to play an active role in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss, especially in reading skills. Specifically, little attention has been given to how teachers could prepare English FAL learners to use self-directed learning to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss and to learn in the 'new normal'. Considering this gap in the literature, this study is guided by the following question, "How do teachers prepare English FAL learners for self-directed learning to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in the 'new normal'?" With this question in mind, this current study explores how teachers prepared learners to use self-directed learning as a strategy to learn and to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in their reading skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Loss in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Rurality

Learning loss is not new, as research on this concept predates the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has examined learning loss resulting from school holidays, labor (teachers) strikes, and other natural disasters (Conto et al., 2021). In their definition of this concept, Angrist et al. (2021) combine the deterioration of knowledge and the opportunity costs of lost learning. In other words, learning loss encompasses knowledge that a learner forgets over a certain amount of time and the amount of learning a student misses as a direct result of the disruptions. For Huong & Na Jatturas (2020), this concept involves a learner losing knowledge or skills related to a specific learning area due to prolonged educational disruptions. Patrinos et al. (2022) refer to this concept as "declines in student knowledge and skills" (p. 1). For this study, this means that during the pandemic, learners lost some academic skills they had already learned and failed to acquire a new set of skills (Mocoviz & Evans, 2022).

The 2020 and 2021 academic years were characterized by the prolonged COVID-19-induced school closures in many countries, including South Africa. In developing countries, schools remained closed for longer periods compared to the developed ones. For instance, schools were closed for eight weeks in the Netherlands, while learners in the United Kingdom stayed at home for three months. These left millions of children, especially in rural communities, struggling with access to education (Conto et al., 2021). The school closures resulted in varied degrees of learning loss in different countries. In their study in the Netherlands, Engzell et al. (2020) reported an average learning loss of 3%. This contrasted with 50% of learning loss in Switzerland (Tomasik et al., 2020). In another study, Conto et al. (2021) found two months' worth of learning loss among disadvantaged (rural) learners in the United Kingdom. In Pakistan, Kaffenberger and Pritchett (2020) preempted the learning loss of over a year by the time a grade 3 learner reaches grade 10. Moreover, Gomez-Franco et al. (2022) found a great possibility of learning loss extending into the educational careers of Mexican learners.

In the African continent, learners in rural schools suffered significant COVID-19-induced learning loss (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022; Molnar & Hermann, 2023). The simulations from the World Bank report showed a decrease in learning-adjusted years of schooling from 4.9 years to 4.5 years in Sub-Saharan Africa (Patrinos et al., 2022). In South Africa, school closures extended over three-quarters of a school year between 2020 and 2021. This resulted in learning loss ranging between 57 and 70% for learners in the Foundation Phase in 2020

(Ardington et al., 2021) while 70% of losses were recorded for learners in the Intermediate Phase (Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021; Van der Berg et al., 2022). Furthermore, Shepherd and Mohohlwane (2022) argued that the COVID-19-induced learning loss reversed the gains and learning progress.

Learning Loss and Reading Skills of English FAL Learners

Although the effects of COVID-19-induced learning loss could be felt in many areas of education, learners of English first additional language have experienced severe learning loss because remote learning fell short in addressing their literacy needs during the pandemic-induced school closures (Angrist et al., 2021; Demie et al., 2022). In their research in the United Kingdom, Rose et al. (2021) found that learners' reading skills were negatively impacted. Kuhfield and Tarasawa (2020) conducted a study among five million grades 3-8 learners in the United States and predicted over 36% regression in their reading skills. In Italy, Bertoletti et al. (2023) reported a significant learning loss in reading amongst learners in grade 5 and 8.

Moreover, a cross-national study predicted that 46% of learners would read below their grade level in five African countries (Angri et al., 2021). In Uganda, Sanderfur (2022) predicted a decline in the reading abilities of rural learners. Studies in South Africa also revealed learning loss in the reading skills of English FAL learners. Ardington et al. (2021) conducted randomized intervention studies in rural primary schools and found a 70% and 80% learning loss in the reading skills of grades 2 and 3 learners, respectively. In another study, Shepherd and Mohohlwane (2021) surveyed early-grade primary school learners to determine their reading abilities and learning loss. In the end, the study found a significant learning loss among English FAL learners due to the pandemic. In a multi-grade study cutting across the public schools in the Western Cape Province, Van der Berg et al. (2022) compared English FAL learners' performance in reading comprehension, writing, and vocabulary across grades 3, 6, and 9. Compared to pre-pandemic performance (2019), the study found significant declines in learner performance in all grades during the pandemic (2021).

A noticeable decline in the prevalence and infection rates of the virus in the latter part of 2021 necessitated the move back to a face-to-face mode of teaching and learning in all South African public schools. This meant that learners had to be promoted to the next grades despite the learning gaps that resulted from school closures since 2020. Moving to the next grade meant that these learners had to begin learning without mastery of the work from the previous grade. This weak foundation puts rural learners in a disadvantaged position which requires

efforts to reverse the losses. The reversal of the learning losses needs active participation from teachers and learners. Consequently, this paper recommends a self-directed learning approach to mitigate this loss among English FAL learners in rural schools.

Self-Directed Learning in the Language Classroom

Self-directed learning (SDL) is associated with autonomous learning, self-regulated learning, and self-sufficiency (Knowles, 1975). SDL has also been conceptualized through different models. One example of these models is the Person-Process-Context (PPC) model (Hiemstra & Brockett, 2012). This model focuses on the multifaceted nature of SDL. In this regard, it calls attention to the psychological, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions of context to understand SDL. In other instances, motivation occupies an important space in the success of SDL and language acquisition. Linked to the PPC model, the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be met for a learner to become motivated to engage in SDL (Ford, 2019). Autonomy in a language classroom involves engaging in voluntary actions to improve one learning outcomes, while competence refers to a learner's confidence in their ability to complete the given tasks (Nunez & Leon, 2015). In contrast, relatedness focuses on interpersonal relationships a learner has with others in the classroom (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017). Deci and Ryan (1985) identify intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation. The former involves taking self-initiated actions because of their perceived personal value and importance, while the latter acts in response to external pressures or demands (Komiyama & McMorris, 2017; Muñoz-Restrepo et al., 2020). The high motivation levels of English FAL learners will likely lead to increased autonomous behavior and academic performance (Cheng & Lee, 2018; Yurdal & Toraman, 2023). In other words, learners may recognize the amount of learning loss they suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore their motivational strategies to mediate this loss.

21st-century learners require a facilitative and supportive learning environment. Teachers can facilitate and support learners' self-directed learning efforts in several ways. They can teach learners about different strategies without much emphasis on how such strategies could be used. Alternatively, they may explicitly teach learners different strategies and provide them with contextual information about the use and benefits of such strategies (Brown et al., 1981). They can also help learners to become responsible and control their learning (Gibbons, 2002). In other words, self-directed learners set goals, devise strategies to achieve these goals, and evaluate their performance (Kim et al., 2015). They are also taught problem-solving skills and

they become eager to experiment with different strategies to address their learning challenges without depending too much on the teacher (Sadeghi et al., 2014; Du Toit-Brits, 2019). Furthermore, teachers create opportunities to prepare learners for lifelong learning. This requires learners to become motivated, self-disciplined, and self-confident to learn independently and manage their educational needs (Du Toit-Brits & Van Zyl, 2017; Du Toit-Brits et al., 2021). Lastly, teachers create conditions that enable learners to identify and manage the resources that help them to learn independently. Resources are essential in assisting self-directed learners to achieve their desired learning outcomes (Du Toit-Brits, 2015). Dignath and Veenman (2020) showed a positive correlation between teachers' instruction of SDL strategies and the increased likelihood of students' use of SDL and its associated strategies. Their results also revealed a positive correlation between teachers' beliefs and SDL practices.

Supportive Measures for Teaching And Learning English FAL in the Post-Pandemic Era

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated new paradigm shifts in the pedagogical practices of teachers around the world. In the post-pandemic era, digital pedagogies are common in many classrooms, inclusive of English FAL. These pedagogies instill critical thinking, problem-solving, collaborative learning, and self-directed learning among learners (Sikhakhane et al., 2020). In addition to being learner-centered, digital pedagogies keep learners active and motivated to discover and learn new things under the facilitated role of the teacher. Synchronous and unsynchronous learning environments have been created to ensure effective teaching and learning in the post-pandemic era. This means that learners attend live classrooms where there is real-time interaction with the teacher or they have the lesson recorded and presented to them in different formats (Dhawan, 2020). These modes of teaching are used to augment the traditional face-to-face interactions in the classroom (Mmakola & Maphalala, 2023). Increased access to reading material and educational tools are some of the benefits of hybrid or blended teaching and learning modalities (Mese & Dursun, 2019). Such access to information could enhance the efforts of teachers and learners to mitigate learning loss. In addition, when exposed to blended learning, English FAL learners demonstrate high levels of comprehension, and self-directedness (Pratiwi & Sumarni, 2023).

Although strives have been made to sustain teaching and learning in the post-pandemic era, South Africa is still yet to fully embrace digital pedagogies. In fact, Maree (2021) argues that managing teaching and learning through digital pedagogies is almost impractical in South Africa. For Damoah and Omodan (2022), the lack of official guidelines regarding the

implementation of blended learning in the post-pandemic era compounds this situation. Other contributory factors to the slow adoption of digital pedagogies include poor technological infrastructure, teachers' low digital competency, and access to resources (Ajani & Gamede, 2021; Olawumi & Mavuso, 2022). The findings of the study by Sikhakhane and colleagues (2020) indicated the prevalence of teacher-centered pedagogies in many rural classrooms. In another study, teachers expressed the determination to adopt and continue blended learning in the post-pandemic era, but this was hampered by the lack of intensive training on digital pedagogies and limited access to technological devices (Dlomo & Ajani, 2022; Damoah & Omodan, 2022).

Lessons Emerging from the Review of Literature

The reviewed literature revealed that the pandemic impacted the provision of quality education in many countries across the world. However, when compared to schools in developed countries, many rural schools in developing countries were not prepared to manage the disruptions caused by the pandemic. As a result, learners in developing countries suffered a significant loss in learning, with the most noticeable loss in English FAL learners' reading skills. This was necessitated by the fact that in most cases it was impractical for rural schools to adopt online learning. This was due to poor infrastructure, and inadequate training of teachers and learners regarding the use of online learning pedagogies.

Another issue that emerged from the review literature related to different interventions to reverse the losses and sustain learning in the 'new normal.' Other studies explored the effectiveness of SDL in language learning where the emphasis was on the need for teachers to instill in learners a sense of responsibility and control of their own learning. However, they did not investigate how self-directed learning could be used to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss and to sustain learning in the 'new normal'. Although the literature also revealed different interventions to reverse the losses and to sustain learning in the 'new normal,' there still exists the need to explore ways in which learners could be empowered to play an active role not only in reversing the learning loss in reading but also in sustaining learning in the post-pandemic era. Considering these gaps in the literature, the current study focuses on how learners could be empowered to use self-directed learning to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss and to sustain learning in the 'new normal'.

Theoretical Perspective: The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach (CA) originates from the works of Amartya Sen (1980), and it continues to gain traction in academic discourses (Hart, 2012). Its focus on well-being and promoting individuals' quality of life makes this approach more relevant to educational contexts worldwide. It aims to promote all aspects of human development and flourishing by incorporating various environmental and social conditions to advance human capabilities (Voget-Kleschin, 2013; Heckman & Corbin, 2016). To achieve this, *functionings* and *capabilities* feature predominantly in the CA (Ibrahim, 2006). Capabilities refer to the freedoms and opportunities an individual attains or is given to achieve what they perceive as valuable (Alkire, 2005; Qizilbash, 2022). The formulation of human capabilities is based on what Sen calls *functionings* and freedom. The functionings are further categorized into *'beings'* and *'doings'*. While 'beings' refer to what the individual can become, 'doings' denote the things an individual achieves (Sakata, 2021). According to Walker (2005), freedom entails an individual's ability to pursue and achieve their goals despite the circumstances.

The CA also identifies and removes obstacles against well-being that impede human development and flourishing. In this study, COVID-19-induced learning loss negatively impacts rural English FAL learners' well-being and hampers their academic development. It also focuses on personal, social, and environmental conversion factors to address challenges facing human well-being (Robeyns, 2005). Moreover, this approach allows people to use their abilities and resources to achieve the desired outcomes (Voget-Kleschin, 2013; Heckman & Corbin, 2016). Furthermore, the CA creates a space for marginalized people to do what they can do (Walker, 2005). In this case, they use the gained capabilities to participate in education. Similarly, SDL requires learners to develop various skills, including collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking (Yu & Wan Mohammad, 2019). In the English FAL classroom, learners can use various self-directed learning skills (personal conversion factors) to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.

According to the CA, opportunities must be created for learners to freely choose what and how they want to learn (Wood & Deprez, 2012). This is in line with the components of SDL. The first two components focus on learners' ownership, self-management, and self-monitoring in learning. Developing learners' ownership in learning involves creating opportunities to design tasks and identify gaps in their learning. In other words, this paper argues that it is essential for rural English FAL learners to be equipped with various SDL skills to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss. Throughout this process, SDL requires teachers

to monitor and support learners. This involves giving clear instructions, learning goals, resources, realistic timelines, etc. (Wai-Cook, 2020).

METHODS

This study is situated within the interpretive paradigm and adopts a qualitative research approach, and phenomenology as a research design. This approach requires the researcher to identify the similarities, elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge from the themes as they emerge to address the research question. For Braun and Clarke (2006), 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 are important steps in the process of data analysis.

Research Design

This study is situated within the interpretive paradigm and adopts a qualitative research approach, and phenomenology as a research design. Interpretivism emphasizes the need to view and understand the phenomena through the eyes of the participants. In this study, it was important to understand how teachers prepared rural English FAL learners to use self-directed learning to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. Using a qualitative research approach augmented this understanding as it enabled the analysis of participants' perceptions (Creswell, 2014) about the effectiveness of SDL in reducing learning loss. Similarly, phenomenology facilitated the understanding of the participants' lived experiences and their understanding of how COVID-19-induced learning loss impacted the reading skills of the learners in the classroom. Through the semi-structured focus-group interviews, these teachers shared their insights regarding how they prepared learners for self-directed learning as a strategy to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in the 'new normal.'

Participants and Sampling

Three English FAL teachers were conveniently sampled to participate in this study in the semi-structured Focus Group Interviews. The sample comprised two females and one male teacher. Furthermore, they were teaching grades 4, 5, and 7 respectively and each classroom had an average of 45 learners. This cohort of learners has been directly impacted by the pandemic since 2020 as they progressed through different grades. In addition to being easily

accessible to the researcher, all the participants were teaching English FAL in one rural primary school and had experiencing in teaching this language.

Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative approach supports the use of data collection tools that allow the participant to have a voice (Cohen et al., 2017). In this study, data was generated through semi-structured Focus Group Interviews (FGI) which were conducted in one location convenient for all the participants. The open-ended questions during the interviews allowed the participants an opportunity to express their opinions openly. All ethical considerations were observed before and throughout the data collection process.

Data from the semi-structured focus-group interviews were transcribed and then analyzed thematically using a qualitative inductive approach in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations. The aim was to identify the similarities, elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge from the themes as they emerged to address the research question. This process involved 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.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was sought from the institution. Permission was requested from the relevant departments of education directors. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. All participants signed consent forms and they knew that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study without any negative consequences.

FINDINGS

Biographic Data

Table 1. Biographic data of participants, gender, age-group, years of experience, and grade taught

Gender	Males	1	**Years of experience teaching**	5-10 Years	1
	Females	2		10-20 Years	2
Age-group (years)	18-30	1	**Grade taught**	Grade 4	
	30-40	1		Grade 5	
	40-50	1		Grade 7	

Table 1 reflects that three participants taught English FAL at the school under study, two females and one male. One participant had teaching experience of between five and ten years, while the two participants had between ten and twenty years of teaching experience. The participants were in the 18-30, 30-40, and 40-50 age groups, respectively. Each participant was responsible for teaching English FAL in each respective grade.

Themes from Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed data from the semi-structured focus-group discussion to address the study's research question: "How do teachers prepare English FAL learners for self-directed learning to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in the 'new normal'?" The generated data revealed that teachers used several ways to prepare learners for self-directed learning. In this regard, these learners were expected to use self-directed learning to improve their reading skills, thus mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The findings were then categorized into different themes: Apprising learners of their active role in learning English FAL, identifying learners' weaknesses and strengthening home-school connections, exposing learners to language-learning problems, and encouraging collaboration.

Theme 1: Apprising Learners of their Active Role in Learning English

For self-directed learning to occur, there is a need for learners to play an active part, instead of being passive recipients of information in the classroom. As a result, the participants were asked about how they promoted active learning when preparing learners for self-directed learning in the classrooms. The following assertions were noted:

> "The type of learners we have and the community they come from require that we constantly motivate them. In that motivation, we emphasize the importance of education and tell them what is expected of them as learners in terms of learning English FAL and other subjects here at school." (Teacher 3)

> **"**Some of the learners are aware that they are struggling when it comes to reading. I tell them that I will not do everything for them or with them, so it is important for them to know how to do things themselves, especially for learners who are performing very poorly." (Teacher 1)

> **"**I am always there to help where there are challenges, sometimes you find a learner who is struggling to pronounce a word or even to read fluently. I also ask other classmates to help. This motivates for learners to take part in helping each other improve their reading skills." (Teacher 2)

The study found that teachers resorted to motivating learners about the role they could play in improving their reading skills. In other instances, learners also motivated each other in the classroom. The need for continuous motivation came as a result of inadequate support learners received in their immediate environment and their homes. Other than this, the participants also revealed that the lack of adequate reading materials negatively impacted learners' motivation to read and improve their reading skills.

The participants were also asked about ways in which they created print-rich environments to improve learners' motivation to read independently. The following remarks were made:

> **"**For my learners in grade 7, we have a reading hour where I randomly select a learner to get either a book or a newspaper article from the reading corner and read for the entire classroom." (Teacher 2)

> "This is why, you may have noticed, we created reading corners where learners can access books anytime. This is to try to expose them to lots of books so that they get motivated to read and improve their reading skills." (Teacher 1)

It emerged that teachers used various strategies to promote reading among the learners. Reading corners were created where learners could access reading material at any point in the classroom. In other cases, the study found that teachers set aside time for reading. According to the participants, the main aim of the reading hour was for learners to spend time reading without significant intervention from the teacher. This process assists learners in developing and using self-directed learning skills to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss.

Theme 2: Identifying Learners' Weaknesses and Strengthening Home-School Connection

The participants were asked about the kind of support learners received inside and outside the classroom to facilitate the reversal of the learning loss in reading skills in the post-pandemic era. This question was asked because the learners faced the challenge of inadequate reading resources which demotivated them to read independently. In their responses, the participants stated the following:

> "We need to identify our learners as early as possible; by the first term, we should know them, their strengths and weaknesses and apply teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches." (Teacher 2)

> "We use pictures to illustrate the topic to learners. This becomes easier for them to understand what they are reading. In my previous activity, I gave them an activity that required them to identify the odd one in the picture. This way learnt how to read words." (Teacher 3)

> "I give them stories to read at home and instruct them to explain the contents of the story to other learners the following day. For instance, I ask them to summarise the story." (Teacher 1)

The extracts above revealed that teachers identified learners with poorly developed reading skills. That is learners whose reading abilities had been severely impacted by the prolonged school closures. According to the participants, it was important to note the strengths and weaknesses of each learner. In other words, to identify the areas in which such learners needed support and how this intervention could be tailored to their learning styles. In this case, the study found that supporting learners' learning styles makes learners aware of the various ways in which they can seek information that they could use to improve their reading skills, thus mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss.

Outside the classroom, it emerged that the participants also realized the critical role that parents and other stakeholders play in inculcating self-directed learning skills among learners. In other words, they realized that self-directed learning must not be confined to the classroom. Therefore, strengthening a school-home connection was viewed as important when preparing learners for self-directed learning. In this case, learners were given activities that compelled them to search for information at home. This also prompted learners to look for family members' intervention and assistance with their reading challenges that resulted from the COVID-19-induced learning loss.

Theme 3: Encouraging Collaboration and Problem-Solving

In another question, the participants were asked to explain how they prepared learners to use self-directed learning to integrate work from the previous grade and the work prescribed for the current grade. This question came against the backdrop that prolonged school closures disrupted the 'normal' curriculum coverage in many rural schools. Consequently, the expectation is that teachers integrate the aspects that were not previously covered into the current grade. The following remarks were made:

> "Another strategy involves giving learners the work of the previous grade as part of their homework while simultaneously focusing on the current curriculum. For example, let's say a learner was expected to have studied pronouns in the previous grade, but that could not happen due to COVID-19-induced school closures. Now I give these learners work on pronouns that they need to complete on their own. Of course, I give them examples in class for them to be able to learn more on their own." (Teacher 2)

> **"**I realized that some of the grade 3 work has been added to the 4th grade. This is one of the strategies used to fill in learning gaps. Our ATP (Annual Teaching Plan) has also included the work from the previous grade." (Teacher 1)

> **"**Sometimes, I divide learners into different groups and give them stories to read. Each group consists of learners with different language proficiency. The one with poor proficiency directly with me, while the other ones work independently." (Teacher 3)

The data revealed that learners were expected to simultaneously learn work for two different grades (previous and current grade). According to the participants, the Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) from the Department of Basic Education also integrated work from two different grades. The participants concentrated on the curriculum demands for the current grade, while learners were expected to independently learn the previous grade's work. In this case, the study found that homework and collaborative learning were used to prepare learners for self-directed learning. Learners with different reading proficiencies were encouraged to work together and learn from each other instead of depending on the teacher. Placing learners in different groups also promotes cooperation and it improves intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learners to address the COVID-19-induced learning loss. In most cases, according to the participants, these learners would be expected to present their work in class.

DISCUSSION

This paper explores ways in which teachers prepared English FAL learners to use self-directed learning as a strategy to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in the 'new normal.' The participants emphasized the importance of motivation and active participation when preparing learners for self-directed learning. The participants in this study became the main source of external motivation for learners. Concurrently, recent studies (Cheng & Lee, 2018; Yurdal & Toraman, 2023) also indicate that the high motivation levels of English FAL learners likely lead to increased autonomous behavior and academic performance. It was also found that teachers created conditions that enhanced learners' motivation to play an active role

in improving their reading skills. This aligns with the Capabilities Approach's emphasis on the importance of creating conditions in which people can use their abilities and resources to achieve the desired outcomes (Voget-Kleschin, 2013; Heckman & Corbin, 2016). Similarly, Du Toit-Brits (2015) places the availability of resources at the centre of SDL. In this case, the participants ensured that learners had increased access to reading materials in class. With increased exposure to reading resources, learners became aware of their role in reversing the COVID-19-induced learning loss. They engaged in reading corners which also motivated them and ignited their passion to read independently. This concurred with the view that when learners are motivated, they become eager to experiment with different strategies to address their learning challenges without depending too much on the teacher (Sadeghi et al., 2014; Du Toit-Brits, 2019). The success of self-directed learning in enhancing English FAL learners' sense of responsibility toward reading has been reported in other studies (Sriwichai & Inpin, 2018; Moradi, 2018; Alghamdi, 2021). Although there may be some concordance between the findings of these studies and those of the current study, it was surprising, however, for primary school learners to develop a sense of responsibility toward improving their reading skills at such a tender age. Although the challenge of lack of reading materials has been reported in a negative light in many studies, the findings of the current study indicated that the lack of resources propelled teachers to become innovative in preparing learners to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss. Given that sustaining education through online pedagogies is still a far-fetched reality for many rural schools in the 'new normal' (Damoah & Omodan, 2022; Maree, 2021), the participants in this study may have learned from the pandemic that being innovative and able to improvise is critical when preparing learners for self-directed learning in the 'new normal.' In the end, these findings demonstrated that through improvisation, teacher modeling, use of pictures, and other teaching aids, learners can improve their reading abilities independently or without too much teacher-dependency.

The participants also highlighted the need to identify learners' weaknesses and strengths when preparing them for self-directed learning. This comes from the realization that prolonged school closures impacted learners' reading skills differently. The participants put in place measures to support learners' endeavours to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss through self-directed learning. This included exposing learners to different ways of learning and finding information independently. The participants also designed and presented their reading lessons in a manner that catered to the different learning styles of learners in the classroom. The emphasis on considering learners' learning styles when preparing learners for

SDL was found in other studies (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). This finding reinforces the need for English FAL teachers in rural schools to embrace learner-centred approaches and self-directed learning, and create space for blended pedagogies. Incorporating these pedagogies not only increases access to reading resources (Mese & Dursun, 2019) but also caters to learners' diverse learning styles and capabilities while at the same time fostering SDL skills which learners could find useful in mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss. Additionally, strengthening a school-home connection was viewed as important when preparing learners for self-directed learning. According to the participants, learners also received information and assistance from their parents and other family members. This sharply contrasted with the notion that rural parents are reluctant to participate in their children's education (Moleko & Arko-Achemfuor, 2020; Renganathan, 2023). These finding indicates that inculcating self-directed learning skills among rural English FAL should be a shared responsibility of all stakeholders to successfully reverse the learning loss suffered during the pandemic.

Finally, the participants stressed the role of self-directed learning in assisting learners to integrate work from the previous grade and the work prescribed for the current grade. In this case, homework and collaborative learning were used to prepare learners for self-directed learning. Du Plessis (2020) indicated that collaborative learning played an important role in English FAL classrooms. In this study, learners with different reading proficiencies were encouraged to work together and to learn from each other instead of depending on the teacher. Similarly, Sadeghi et al (2014) found that when learners understand their roles, their dependency on the teacher gradually diminishes. This further reinforced the Capability approach's notion of freedoms and opportunities an individual attains or is given to achieve what they perceive as valuable (Alkire, 2005; Qizilbash, 2022). In the end, when preparing learners for self-directed learning, it is critical to equip them with problem-solving skills. The idea is that they take the initiative to solve problems without being dependent on the teacher. In other words, learners must play an active role in problem-solving activities that are aimed at improving their reading skills, thus mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how teachers prepared rural English FAL learners to use self-directed learning to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. Based on the data, theories, and the reviewed literature, the extrapolations illustrate how self-directed skills

could be used to mitigate COVID-19-related learning loss in reading. This evidence confirms that rural English FAL learners suffered learning losses in reading due to prolonged school closures due to the pandemic. Although the virus has been suppressed and learners attend school 'normally', the need to reverse the learning loss in reading remains critical in the post-COVID-19 era. This, therefore, requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders in education, including teachers and learners, to mitigate COVID-19-related learning loss.

LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD

The study was conducted in one rural primary school in the Free State Province, South Africa. In addition, only three teachers of English FAL participated in the study. These two factors make it difficult to generalize the findings of this study. For future research, there is still a need to conduct a similar study using a large sample, an increased number of schools, and methodological triangulation.

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