



School Enrichment Programmes to Bolster Self-Directed Language Learning Skills of Students' Limited English FAL Proficiency in Rural

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ABSTRACT

Although English is the language of instruction in many South African schools, most learners are not native speakers of the language. As a result, attaining high levels of proficiency in English first additional language (English FAL) remains a problem for most learners in rural schools. Although many intervention strategies have been explored to address this challenge, research linking school enrichment programs, English proficiency, and self-directed learning in rural contexts remains limited. That is, little is known about how school enrichment programs could be used to bolster the self-directed learning skills of learners with limited English proficiency. Therefore, this qualitative study is guided by a transformative paradigm, the constructivist learning theory and participatory action research methodology to explore the use of school enrichment programs in bolstering learners' self-directed language learning skills to improve proficiency in English FAL. For data generation, three teachers and nine learners of English FAL in one secondary school were conveniently selected to participate in the focus-group discussions and observations. A thematic analysis of data revealed that SEPs bolstered the self-directed language skills of learners by creating a space for remedial assistance in reading, providing a constructivist learning environment, and maintaining extrinsic motivation levels and supportive teacher-learner relationships.



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INTRODUCTION

In line with the Language in Education Policy (LiEP, 1997), South Africa follows an additive bilingual approach to language teaching and learning in schools. In other words, schools are responsible for maintaining a balance between using English as a medium of instruction and preserving and developing learners' home languages. In this case, schools adopt a home language (indigenous) as well as an additional language (English) for teaching and learning purposes. However, indigenous languages are used only as languages of teaching and learning (LoLT) in the first three grades (Grades 1-3) of primary education. Thereafter, English becomes LoLT in all content subjects for the next nine years of basic education (Tshotsho, 2013). This sudden and premature transition from home language instruction to English medium instruction (EMI) compromises the development of basic language knowledge and linguistic skills for many English FAL learners (Bravo & Cervetti, 2014). In other words, attaining the desired levels of English FAL proficiency remains a problem for many learners in rural secondary schools



A lack of sustainable learning environment is another contributory factor to limited English proficiency in rural schools (Casale & Posel, 2011). Therefore, it is important to create a learning environment that supports active learning and fosters self-directed learning among English FAL learners (Umamah et al., 2023). This requires individual schools to find innovative ways of supporting and empowering these learners to become proactive and self-directed in enhancing their proficiency in English FAL. In this instance, school enrichment programs are known for providing learners with personalized support and interventions (Moleko & Arko-Achemfuor, 2020) needed for self-directedness in language learning and proficiency development. Despite this, research linking school enrichment programs, English proficiency, and self-directed learning in rural contexts remains limited. In particular, little is known about how school enrichment programs could be used to bolster the self-directed learning skills of learners with limited English proficiency. This paper is guided by the question: How could school enrichment programs be used to bolster the self-directed language learning skills of learners with limited proficiency?

In response to this question, this study explores the use of school enrichment programs to bolster learners' self-directed language learning skills of learners with limited English FAL proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English FAL Proficiency and Learner Support in Rural Schools

According to Cummins (1996), language proficiency comprises Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The former involves learners' ability to communicate for social and academic purposes, while the latter involves the ability to meet the cognitive demands of using English FAL in educational contexts (Sebolai, 2016; Bravo & Cervetti, 2014). Therefore, language proficiency means that a learner is competent in four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) for the purposes of learning and communicating in social and academic settings. When compared to their counterparts in urban settings, learners in rural settings show low proficiency levels in the English language (Mutua, 2023). In other words, their oral and academic skills in English FAL are negatively impacted (Modise et al., 2023). Many learners struggle to derive meaning from reading different texts, while others have the reading proficiency that does not match the grade to which they have been promoted (PIRLS, 2021). In other instances, (Soruç et al., (2021) report that learners find it difficult to understand information that requires attentive listening. Other studies report that English FAL learners struggle to develop speaking and writing skills (Ngubane et al., 2020; Mthembu, 2021).

Generally, there is a lack of effective support system for learners in rural schools, and this compromises quality teaching and learning of English FAL (Omodan & Makena, 2023). In some cases, the support needs of English FAL learners are overlooked and ignored (Beck & Allexshat-Snider, 2002). Studies also indicate that many teachers struggle to cope with curriculum demands and time constraint to provide adequate learner support (Barnes et al., 2018; Gosselin & Sundeen, 2019; Beckers et al., 2019). For other studies, inadequate training of teachers and lack of resources exacerbate the challenge of English proficiency among rural learners (Cuong, 2021; Makokotlela, 2022). For example, O'Neal et al., (2008) postulate that rural English FAL teachers lack the capacity to tailor lesson delivery and instruction to respond to the needs of their learners in the classroom. Moreover, they rarely expose English FAL learners to reading and viewing activities because of limited educational resources (Mkhize & Davids, 2023; Ang et al. 2023).

In their concurrent views, (Mahlomaholo, 2012) and Yu et al., (2022) posit that creating sustainable learning environments is critical for improving the quality of teaching and learning in rural schools. Furthermore, these environments foster self-directedness and independence in learning and knowledge creation (Mulyadi et al., 2023). Most importantly, they promote learner

support. Learner support involves the provision of personalised support, funding, and services to overcome learning barriers and promote self-directed language learning (Moleko & Arko-Achemfuor, 2020). In other words, as Pan and Chen (2021) assert, learners require cognitive and non-cognitive support in the language learning process. Therefore, considering that rural and urban learners do not receive learning support of the same quality despite being subjected to similar curricula (Moleko & Arko-Achemfuor, 2020; Cekiso et al., 2022), there is a need for alternative and innovative ways to support language learning in rural schools. Ruecker (2021) asserts that the learner-support initiatives must embrace local knowledge and expertise, while Beckers et al. (2019) advocate for programmes that promote self-directedness in language learning. The current study argues that these perspectives are encapsulated in school enrichment programmes. In other words, SEPs provide an opportunity for all stakeholders to create a sustainable learning environment, use their local expertise, and promote self-direction to address low English FAL proficiency levels among rural learners.

School Enrichment Programmes and Self-Directed Learning

Depending on the context, the concept 'school enrichment programmes' is used interchangeably with out-of-school enrichment programmes, out-of-school-time programmes, supplemental instruction, afterschool enrichment programmes, afterschool programmes, and instructional enrichment programmes (Naidoo & Paideya, 2015; Hodges et al., 2017; Helms, 2021; Yu et al., 2022; Yu & Poehner, 2023). Helms et al. (2021) define SEPs as educational programmes in which disadvantaged (i.e., rural) learners participate after they reach their normal school time to empower themselves to attain academic success and personal development. Moleko & Arko-Achemfuor (2020) categorise SEPs into extracurricular activities, mentoring and culturally based programmes, and extra lessons. They can also be conducted in various formats, such as summer camps, Saturday programmes and afterschool activities (Hodges et al., 2017).

In addition to providing a support structure for learners in rural schools (Dimitriu et al., 2020), SEPs also enhance language learning and proficiency. Hodges and colleagues (2017) conducted a study to investigate the effect of an out-of-school enrichment programme on the academic achievement of high-potential students from low-income families. Their study noted a positive effect on the standardised scores of the English language. Pensiero and Green (2017) reported reading achievements for primary and secondary grades. Furthermore, the evidence from a randomised controlled trial evaluating a parent-delivered early language enrichment programme indicated significant gains in the language and narrative skills of learners (Burgoyne et al., 2018). In another study, Yu and Poehner (2023) compared the performance between English language writing abilities of individuals in the enrichment group and those in the standard instruction in the control group using a dynamic assessment. The results of this study indicated improved performance in the former group after the intervention.

Also, SEPs have become spaces for fostering self-directed language learning skills for learners in rural schools (Naidoo & Paideya, 2015). Self-directed learning (SDL) remains an important skill in the 21st century that is associated with behaviours such as self-regulation, self-sufficiency, and self-control (Makokotlela, 2022; Murniati et al., 2023). In the educational context, it is described as a strategy that encapsulates and instils a sense of control, ownership, and responsibility in the learning process (Silen & Uhlin, 2008). The direct and indirect promotion of SDL is common in school contexts (Dignath & Veenman, 2020). Whether promoted directly or otherwise, SDL thrives on the facilitation and scaffolding by teachers (Li et al., 2023). In the process, teachers create sustainable and supportive learning environments that align with learners' levels of self-directedness (Van Duin et al., 2023). SDL empowers learners to become flexible and creative when they collaborate with others to solve language related problem (Bailey, 2014; Han, 2023) such as limited English proficiency. In their study, Hafizah Adnan and Sayadi (2021) found a positive relationship between students' levels of self-directedness and

their readiness to incorporate self-directed learning in English writing skills. In another study investigating the effects of self-directed learning on EFL learners' writing performance, Aghayani and Janfeshan (2020) noted significant differences in learners' writing performance after self-directed language learning method. Other studies from different countries (Ramadhani & Kesuma Siregar, 2019; Sriwichai & Inpin, 2018) have drawn similar conclusions. Furthermore, Zhao and Lertlit (2023) confirmed the positive relationship between self-directed language learning and improvement in reading skills.

Theoretical Approach: Constructivist Learning Theory

According to constructivist learning theory (CLT), learners' lived experiences play a critical role in meaning-making and knowledge construction (Fernando & Marikar, 2017; Chuang, 2021). In CLT, meaning-making is equated to learning, which requires learners' active involvement with the learning material (Mogashoa, 2014). Learning occurs when learners actively link their experiences and background knowledge to new information in their minds (Bada, 2015). For active knowledge construction to occur successfully, the issue of context becomes critical because learning is often understood in context (Mogashoa, 2014). In this regard, a constructive learning environment creates an opportunity for teachers and learners to participate and share responsibility in knowledge construction (Wang, 2014).

The nexus between CLT and self-directed language learning makes CLT an appropriate theoretical approach for this study. Both CLT and SDL promote learner-centredness and autonomy in language learning (Wang, 2014). In other words, learners are self-directed in knowledge construction (Chuang, 2021). Similarly, teachers are encouraged to play a facilitative role and guide learners toward language learning (Sasan & Rabillas, 2022). Moreover, CLT recognises the role of motivation in language learning (Rufii, 2015), and the same is the case for SDL (Cheng & Lee, 2018). Apart from this, both CLT and SDL emphasise the learning context in which language learning must take place (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). In the context of this study, SEPs are learner-centred, and learners engage in them voluntarily. In this regard, teachers created a constructive learning environment and facilitated learners' endeavours to improve their proficiency in the English language. That is, teachers played a central role in organising and structuring the programme, collecting reading materials, supervising, and monitoring learner activities throughout the duration of the programmes. The main goal of these programmes was for educators to assist learners in improving English proficiency.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approaches and Methods

This study followed a qualitative participatory action research methodology and adopted a transformative paradigm. PAR is an inclusive methodology in which all stakeholders (co-researchers) carry out a research project together. To ensure transformation in knowledge production, members of a power-neutral team decide on the problem to be researched, how it must be researched, and how it benefits all the affected parties (Tetui et al., 2017). Furthermore, PAR 'localises' knowledge production as it builds the capacity of local and often marginalised people to utilise their power and local resources (assets) to generate solutions for and by themselves. This is contrary to relying on the 'powerful outsiders' who arguably dictate to them and exploit their indigenous knowledge. Therefore, as an iterative process, the PAR model has five interrelated phases: problem diagnosis, action planning, taking action, evaluation and specifying the learning achieved.

Participants and Sampling

The research team included three teachers and nine learners of English FAL from one rural secondary school. These co-researchers were conveniently sampled because they were teachers and learners of English FAL at the school. Demographically, the sample comprised two male

teachers and one female teacher between 30 and 45 years of age. About teaching experience, all of teachers had taught English FAL for more than 5 years at this school. In addition, each held a Bachelor of Education degree. There were also 6 female and 3 male learners of African descent aged between 15 and 17 years old in Grades 10 and 11.

Data Generation

The data were collected through participant observations and focus group discussions (FGDs). This process followed the four stages of PAR: problem diagnosis, action planning, taking action, evaluation and specifying the learning achieved. These steps were implemented over a period of 12 weeks, during which 12 meetings were held. The procedure is summarised as follows:

Procedure

Preparation: Following the informal conversations that the researcher had with some teachers of English, the researcher decided to apply for permission to conduct the current study to ensure compliance with ethical issues. Permission was granted by the provincial Department of Education and the university ethics committee. At the school level, the researcher asked for a meeting with English FAL teachers in grades 10 and 11 at the high school to invite them to participate in the study. Finally, the researcher obtained access to a secluded area in the school to conduct the study.

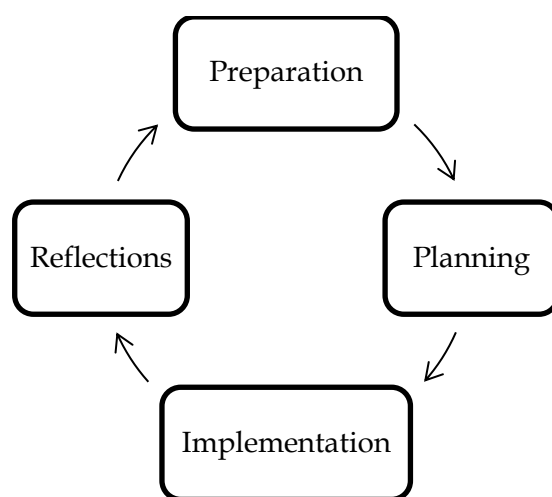


Figure 1. Flowchart of the stages of PAR methodology

Planning: The first meeting was an information session where the researcher introduced himself to the co-researchers. The meeting followed the FGDs approach, as the researcher used prompts to gain information about learners' English proficiency at the school. It emerged that poor English proficiency negatively impacted learners' academic performance, not only in English FAL but also across all other subjects at school. The educators were also asked about the different interventions that they employ to support their learners. In response, they identified many challenges that prevented them from addressing these problems. They also indicated that most educational resources were channelled to Grade 12 learners, while those in Grades 10 and 11 were neglected. As a result, it was difficult to support learners who struggled with reading or writing. Some learners faced challenges understanding the information, while others failed to express themselves competently in English. Among these, were learners with poorly developed vocabulary. However, they indicated the willingness to find ways to support these learners and improve their proficiency in the English language.

Using FGDs, we devised a plan to address the problem of limited English proficiency. The second meeting was held three weeks after the one on problem prognosis. This meeting focused on two aspects: training on PAR and training on SDL. The researcher organised a presentation workshop on PAR for all the co-researchers. The researcher introduced and explained PAR as a research methodology. The researcher also explained the PAR process in detail, emphasising teamwork and power-balanced participation. Furthermore, the researcher explained the benefits of using PAR methodology in the context of rurality and the state of marginalisation. In this regard, much emphasis was placed on the different roles that co-researchers could play in addressing the problems of limited English proficiency among learners. This point seemed to be interesting to the co-researchers, especially after realising that they would be playing an active role in supporting learners' self-directed language learning skills.

The research team decided to adopt the SEPs model, which was already in use for the Grade 12 learners and adapted it for learners in Grade 10 and Grade 11. As part of adapting the model, we focused mainly on strengthening learners' self-directed language skills so that they could use these skills to improve their English proficiency. This also required restructuring of the model to improve its quality and effectiveness. The team mapped out the plan of action and allocated different roles to all the team members. One of the important roles included the training identification and training of learners, while other members volunteered to collect reading materials from outside the school. Team members spent one week identifying and selecting learners with limited English proficiency. In the end, nine learners were identified and included in the study. Four learners were in Grade 10, while the other five were in the eleventh Grade. These learners and the three teachers were invited to a workshop in which the researcher trained them on self-directed learning and its implementation. Although the learners were trained by the researcher, we agreed that they would receive training from the researcher and teachers continuously for the duration of the study. Finally, all the members of the team (learners) collected the reading materials in various places and brought them to the research site.

Implementation: The next phase of the study involved the implementation of the restructured and adapted model of SEPs. Through participatory observations, the focus was on learners' use of self-directed language skills to improve their English proficiency. In this regard, they completed various activities based on different language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These activities continued uninterrupted for three weeks during the SEPs. The assigned activities were completed by learners individually and in small groups. For instance, they read tailor-made texts and responded to a series of questions focusing on various grammatical structures. These passages were evaluated by the researcher and teacher co-researchers. The learners were given an opportunity to discuss the questions and responded in writing. They also collected dictionaries and thesauruses from local libraries to complete the activities that sought to assess vocabulary and reading comprehension. Regarding listening and speaking, they listened to a series of recordings of different words. The intention was to help them with pronunciation and vocabulary building. After listening to the words, they were requested to use dictionaries and thesaurus from the local library to look up the meaning of different words. This was then followed by writing exercises where the learners constructed their own paragraphs. These were then read to and listened to by the entire group during the FGDs.

Reflection: In the following week, the FGDs session was conducted to explore the experiences of the teacher-co-researchers. The learner co-researchers participated in the FGDs for the same purpose. This allowed for the identification of areas that needed improvement. Although teacher-co-researchers did not raise major issues, they were concerned about some learners' low levels of motivation to continue attending SEPs. For the learner co-researchers, their experience was negatively impacted by the quality of the reading text they were given. Difficulty understanding the material and unfamiliarity with the words used in the texts were

cited as challenges. However, the reading material was not refined, as the researcher and teacher co-researchers felt that the material was CAPS compliant and appropriate for learners' levels of comprehension. In contrast, there was a need for learners to receive more training on self-directed learning language learning skills.

Following the intensification of training on learners' self-directed language learning skills, the current study presents the role that school enrichment programmes could play in bolstering self-directed language learning skills of learners with English-limited proficiency in rural contexts.

Data analysis

Data from the FGDs and participant observations (field notes) were transcribed and then analysed thematically using a qualitative inductive approach in line with Braun and Clark'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 familiarising 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 of analysis. All ethical considerations were observed, co-researchers' utterances were quoted verbatim, and consent for voluntary participation was sought and granted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Research Data from Participants

Three themes emerged after the analysis of the data. They include, creating a space for remedial assistance in reading, providing a constructivist learning environment, and maintaining high extrinsic motivation levels and supportive teacher-learner relationships. These themes are discussed in the next paragraphs.

Theme 1: Creating a space for remedial assistance in reading

When asked about the role SEPs played in promoting self-directedness among learners, the co-researchers believed that these programs could be used as spaces for reinforcing language teaching and learning. The following remarks were made:

1. **Teacher 1:** *On that point, I think that always encouraging dictionary use has really helped a lot. I can also say that we did a great job by revisiting and reteaching word-attacking skills. This becomes more helpful during exams and tests when dictionaries are inaccessible.*
2. **Teacher 2:** *I concur with what my colleague has just said. I am also seeing changes after addressing the issue of reading skills and attitudes towards reading. They now read more than they did before. English is no longer viewed as a difficult language with difficult words, and I think they are beginning to enjoy reading more books and newspapers with understanding. In addition, they can respond to any questions assessing their reading comprehension.*
3. **Teacher 3:** *What I have noticed is that now their keen interest to read, and that was not the case before this project. As far as I can see, there is reduction in many spelling errors, problems relating to vocabulary and negative attitudes towards reading. I think that the frequent use of dictionaries as well as the application of reading skills and word-attacking skills have contributed to this improvement that we all see.*

According to this participant, SEPs afforded them an opportunity to re-teach reading and comprehension strategies. Otherwise, it could have been impractical to teach reading strategies during normal class time due to workload and over-crowded classrooms. Without knowledge and appropriate use of reading and comprehension strategies, it becomes difficult for learners to improve their English FAL proficiency. The co-researchers responded to the question of whether SEPs improved learners' self-directed language learning skills. They highlighted that SEPs were useful in preparing learners for the independent application of different skills to

improve their English proficiency. Data from the fieldnotes also indicated that learners completed various activities based on different language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These activities continued uninterrupted for three weeks during the SEPs. The assigned activities were completed individually and in small groups. For instance, they read tailor-made texts and responded to a series of questions focusing on various grammatical structures. They used word-attack skills and dictionaries more frequently on their own to improve their spelling and vocabulary. This resulted in increased interest and changed attitude towards reading.

Theme 2: Create a constructivist learning environment

The co-researchers were also asked about the conditions under which they believed SEPs could succeed in bolstering self-directed language learning skills of English FAL learners. They stated the following:

1. **Teacher 2:** *Classes must also be supervised in the evening. [The situation is that] when learners are attending the evening studies; there are only two or three people to monitor and supervise them.*
2. **Teacher 3:** *When we look at the issue of the environment again, our environment is contributing a lot to things that are happening locally here, and these things make learners lose interest in studying or taking this programme seriously. This renders this programme ineffective.*

The co-researchers expressed the importance of ensuring learner safety during their participation in the programmes. They argued that for SEPs to be effective it is essential to create a safe learning environment in which learners learn. They also highlighted the role that different stakeholders could play in monitoring and supervising learners when they engaged in self-directed learning activities. By virtue of being in a rural area, learners are vulnerable to the risks associated with poor supervision. Other co-researchers argued that it is important for learners to display high levels of discipline for SEPs to succeed in promoting learners' self-directed language learning skills:

1. **Teacher 3:** *Among other things one needs to look at the so called the discipline with regard to our learners. We need to have a discipline so that our plan will function in such a way that learners will not be giving us problems.*
2. **Teacher 1:** *We need to have a discipline so that our plan will function in such a way that learners will not be giving us problems.*

Another participant believed that involving parents in the programmes could significantly improve the success of SEPs and assist learners to improve their English proficiency. The utterances by Teacher 2 were as follows: *We must include the parents in the programme! I don't remember us talking to the parents about career guidance or this programme.*

Moreover, data from the FGDs and fieldnotes revealed that teachers believed that self-directed learning skills could be promoted in a learning environment that promotes active learning and learner participation. In this case, learners received more training on the application of SDL to enable them to play an active role in improving their proficiency in English FAL. There were instances where learners were observed initiating and continuing learning activities without instructions from the researcher and the teacher-co-researchers. Some learners voluntarily collected reading materials from their homes and from a local library. In other instances, learners were observed discussing among themselves and assisting each other without the intervention of other co-researchers. This was particularly salient during oral presentations and reading sessions where emphasis was put on the correct pronunciation and articulation of words. Additionally, regarding listening and speaking, they listened to a series of recordings of different words. The intention was to help them with pronunciation and vocabulary building. After listening to the words, they were requested to use dictionaries and thesaurus from the local library to look up the meaning of different words. This was then followed by writing exercises where the learners constructed their own paragraphs.

Theme 3: Maintaining high extrinsic motivation levels and supportive teacher-learner relationships

During the FGDs, the co-researchers were asked to discuss the influence of SEPs on learner motivation and stakeholder relationships. This question was critical in the sense that these both SEPs and self-directed learning thrive on motivation and supportive relationships in a learning environment.

1. **Teacher 1:** *Having support from everyone motivates us to do our best in the programme, and if learners see that we all do the same thing and we have similar aims they are more likely to cooperate. Motivating learners to read has really gone a long way in helping us. What I have noticed is now their keen interest to read and that was not the case before this project.*
2. **Teacher 2:** *Creating such relationships helped us stay focused and working together to help our learners develop the skills to learn independently and improve their proficiency.*
3. **Teacher 3:** *They enhance understanding and harmony between us as members of the SMT and teachers. Similarly, they positively impact how teachers and learners relate to each other in the programme.*

SEPs created an opportunity for stakeholders (teachers and learners) to spend more time after school. Participation in SEPs strengthened support among English FAL teachers and enhanced their sense of collegiality among them. That is, they engaged in co-planning of lesson delivery, teaching and designing of various activities that learners completed during the project. This collaboration allowed them to share ideas and different strategies to strengthen their language learning skills toward attaining high levels of proficiency in the English language. They also collaborated in drawing plans to enhance the quality of these activities. Similarly, SEPs created harmony between teachers and learners. According to the teacher co-researchers, they had an opportunity to focus their attention and supported learners beyond the classroom and school time. This close relationship motivated the learners to actively complete the tasks assigned to them.

Discussion

In this study, the research team adopted and tailored preexisting SEPs for learners in grades 10 and 11. The aim was to use tailored SEPs to bolster the self-directed language learning skills of learners with limited English proficiency with the view that these learners would use these skills to improve their proficiency in the language. In tandem with other studies (Ngubane et al., 2015; Ang et al., 2023), the co-researchers in this study confirmed low levels of proficiency in English FAL as a challenge facing rural high school learners. In response, the research team drew up a plan to enhance learners' self-directed language learning skills to improve their English FAL proficiency. In the main, the plan involved strengthening the quality of SEPs through restructuring and training learners on self-directed learning. Following the implementation of the adapted model, it was found that SEPs bolstered learners' self-directed language learning skills by creating space for a remedial support in reading. In this regard, teachers got the time to re-teach language skills, dictionary use and word-attack techniques, and this proved to be effective in motivating learners to take the initiative to complete a range of learning activities. This contrasted the observation that English FAL teachers lacked the time for learner support (Barnes et al., 2018). Perhaps, this difference could be attributed to teamwork and fair allocation of responsibilities in the SEPs. Teamwork also reduced the excessive workload that often face teachers in rural schools (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Re-teaching and teamwork resulted in change in learners' attitudes towards reading and the English language. Similar findings have been reported in other studies after the SEPs intervention (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). These findings indicate that SEPs should be implemented and designed in a flexible way which creates space for collaboration and learner support in order to successfully promote self-directed language learning skills in rural English FAL classrooms.



Based on the data from the fieldnotes and FGDs, the study also showed that SEPs bolstered learners' self-directed language learning by creating a constructive learning environment. This environment promoted active learning and self-directedness among learners. Such an environment is aligned to CLT which emphasises the need to create conditions that promote active learning and self-directedness in language learning (Wang, 2014; Chuang, 2021; Sasan & Rabillas, 2022). Data from the fieldnotes revealed that learner co-researchers looked for and collected the resources that helped them complete activities given to them. In other instances, learners were observed discussing among themselves and assisting each other without the intervention of teachers. This was particularly salient during oral presentations and reading sessions. These self-initiated exercises were unique to this study, as they revealed that learners were ready to use self-directed language learning skills to improve their English proficiency. This could be attributed to the SDL training and persistent motivation that learners received while participating in the study. Furthermore, the PAR workshops seemed to have also increased learners' sense of responsibility and awareness towards actively changing their own circumstances, rather than waiting for solutions from the periphery. In other words, motivation and training must feature predominantly in SEPs to foster self-directed language skills among English FAL learners in rural contexts.

Additionally, other studies have reported that learners in rural communities lack safe spaces in their homes to engage in self-directed language learning (Singh et al., 2004). When left unsupervised, vulnerable learners are prone to various forms of abuse and other antisocial behaviours (Hobbs & Vinluan, 2005). Similarly, ensuring learner safety through effective supervision and monitoring was highlighted as one of the conditions for SEPs to successfully bolster learners' self-directed language learning skills. Research indicates that effective supervision motivates learners to participate longer in SEPs and it promotes learners' safety (Huang et al., 2011; Pillay, 2021). In this study, it was believed that involving parents in SEPs could significantly improve learners' active participation and a sense of safety as there would be less disruptions due to ill-discipline. In other words, SEPs could be used as spaces that not only promote active learning, but also as spaces where learners feel less vulnerable and have access to quality learning activities and materials (Rattigan-Rhor & He, 2020).

Finally, the study found that SEPs bolstered learners' self-directed language learning skills by maintaining high extrinsic motivation levels and supportive teacher-learner relationships. During the reflection sessions, the teacher-co-researchers stated that learners had expressed concerns about the quality of some activities they were required to complete. In response to these concerns, further training on self-directed language learning skills was provided. This indicated a close and supportive relationship that had developed between teachers and learners during the SEPs. The significant role of teacher support during SEPs in the context of SDL has also been highlighted in other studies (Schweder and Raufelder 2019; Mulyadi et al., 2023). This was important since research indicated that learners in rural schools rarely receive psychosocial support, or their needs are completely ignored by their teachers (Omodan & Makena, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to maintain positive relationships between teachers and learners during SEPs. Maintaining these relationships helps in keeping learners motivated to engage in self-directed learning activities, while they require teachers to collaborate in lesson-planning and design of various learning activities to promote self-directed language skills in their classrooms. In terms of CLT, this concurs with the facilitative role that teachers play toward language learning (Sasan & Rabillas, 2022). Further, by collaborating, as PAR concludes, teacher 'localised' knowledge production and utilised their power and local resources to address the problem of poor English FAL proficiency through SEPs and self-directed language learning skills.

CONCLUSION

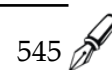
Considering these findings, this paper concludes that when structured and adapted properly, SEPs play a critical role in bolstering learners' self-directed language learning skills for learners in rural contexts. Consequently, learners could use these skills to improve proficiency in the English language. In other words, it is important for rural schools to use SEPs as one of the innovative ways to supporting and empower learners to become proactive and self-directed in language teaching and learning. These findings of this study indicate the need for policy makers to offer training on SDL and the implementation of SEPs to learners and teachers in rural schools. However, due to a small sample used in this study, it is almost impractical to generalise these findings to all rural secondary schools. Therefore, it remains essential for studies using large samples and triangulated methodologies to further explore this area of research.

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