

Promoting Free Voluntary Reading for English FAL Learners in a Rural Setting: A Self-Directed Learning Approach

Mosebetsi Mokoena

University of the Free State, QwaQwa Campus, Department of Languages in Education, South Africa

Abstract: *This study explores how self-directed learning can promote free voluntary reading for English first additional language learners in a rural setting. Reading continues to be challenging for learners whose native language is not English. Although studies have addressed this challenge, research on applying the self-directed learning approach to promote free voluntary reading for English first additional language learners in a rural context remains scarce. This study provides insights into how self-directed learning skills promote free voluntary reading. A qualitative research approach is followed, and participatory action learning and action research methodology is adopted. Data is generated through focus-group discussions, oral reflections and free attitude interviews comprising the purposively selected eight learners and two teachers of English first additional language. The responses are thematically analysed. The study finds that various challenges prevent English First additional language learners in a rural context from reading voluntarily. The other findings indicate ways to use SDL to promote free voluntary reading. The paper concludes that self-directed learning promotes free voluntary reading for English first additional language learners in a rural setting.*

Keywords: *EFL, free voluntary reading, reading comprehension, rural, self-directed learning*

1. Introduction and Background

In many rural South African schools, the development of the reading skills of many English first additional language (FAL) learners is negatively impacted across the phases and grades. These learners continue to perform poorly in the national and international studies testing their reading skills (Mensah, Pillay, & Sibaya, 2017). For instance, the 2013 Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SAMEQ) results show that the reading proficiency of many South African learners continues to be a concern. Further evidence comes from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2006, 2011 and 2016, and it consistently shows that many English FAL learners struggle with reading. While some can read fluently, most learners do not understand what they are reading (PIRLS, 2016). At the national level, studies continue to illustrate that South African classrooms still have learners who cannot read (Van Wyk & Louw, 2008; Zimmerman & Smit, 2014; Makiwane-Mazinyo & Pillay, 2017; Mensah *et al.*, 2017).

To address this challenge, Makiwane-Mazinyo and Pillay (2017) recommend that English FAL teachers be trained to teach reading. Similarly, in their study in South Africa, Coetzee, Van Rensburg, and Schmulian (2016) point to the need for implementing differentiated instruction to

enhance reading comprehension. However, research on applying the self-directed learning approach to promote free voluntary reading for English first additional language learners in a rural setting remains scarce. This paper brings learners to the fore and argues that they have an active role in improving their reading skills. Thus, this study explores the use of a self-directed learning approach to promoting free voluntary reading for English FAL learners in a rural setting. To achieve this aim, the study asks the following questions:

- What challenges impede rural English FAL learners from reading voluntarily?
- How do rural English FAL learners use the self-directed learning approach to promote free voluntary reading?

2. Literature review

The role of free voluntary reading in the English FAL pedagogy

Free voluntary reading (FVR) can be traced back to the works of Stephen Krashen (1980). In the literature, independent reading, silent sustained reading and pleasure reading are used interchangeably to refer to FVR. According to Grabe and Stoller (2011), this approach involves voluntarily reading a vast amount of material within or slightly above learners' linguistic competence. In the broader sense, FVR facilitates second language acquisition and competence (Krashen, 1988; Cho et al., 2008:69; Bautista & Marulanda, 2018). Fonch *et al.* (2017) found that engaging in FVR activities simplifies the teaching and learning of reading.

Unfortunately, English FAL learners in many rural South African schools do not enjoy these benefits. This paper argues that the SDL approach helps create such an environment in which free voluntary reading is promoted.

The nexus between the self-directed learning approach and free voluntary reading

As a concept, self-directed learning remains a 'loaded' term. In the literature, SDL is often referred to as 'self-education', 'autonomous learning', 'independent learning', and 'self-regulated learning' (Saks & Leijen, 2014). Morris (2019) defines SDL as a learning strategy in which learners are responsible for managing their learning.

Standard features make SDL an appropriate approach to promote FVR for English FAL learners in a rural setting. They include autonomy to choose, motivation and learner support. SDL is learner-centred in that learners develop the skills to learn without depending too much on the teacher (Amani, 2021). In other words, learners choose what is essential to helping them to learn successfully (Bautista & Marulanda, 2018). Creating an effective learning environment is central to FVR and SDL. According to Du Toit-Brits (2021), SDL requires an environment that enables learners to participate actively in the learning process. The SDL and FVR support learners through teacher modelling and scaffolding. In the classroom, modelling is essential for developing learners' literacy skills, such as reading (Fisher & Frey, 2015). Also, it effectively motivates learners to engage in FVR (Loh, 2009).

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach and followed the participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) methodology. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges impeding rural English FAL learners from reading voluntarily to improve their reading skills. In other words, it allowed for understanding these problems from the participants' viewpoint (Cohen et al., 2018).

Data generation and methodological implementation

In this case, data was generated through focus group discussions, oral reflections and free attitude interviews. The PALAR methodology followed a two-cyclic and systematic process comprising several stages: The unfolding of cycle 1 was as follows: problem identification stage, vision building, context analysis, and action learning. The second cycle comprised the following steps: Action: Implementation of new learning, more learning, more action: Implementation of improved learning, more reflections and celebrations.

Participants

The study occurred in one rural high school, and eight English FAL learners in Grades 10 and 11 and two teachers of English FAL participated in this research.

4. Data presentation and analysis

The study adopted qualitative data analysis. In this regard, data were analysed through the technique of thematic analysis. This assisted in recognising and analysing patterns of meaning in the data. In this regard, data was coded, and the codes were then organised into themes closely related to the research questions (Maree, 2016).

5. Challenges impeding rural English FAL learners from reading voluntarily

5.1. Lack of support and limited exposure to reading materials

Most self-directed and initiated activities, such as free voluntary reading and self-directed learning, require support. In other words, it is essential to provide temporary support to learners until they become fully independent to direct their learning, engage in voluntary activities, and acquire reading skills (Salem, 2016). Moreover, the collaboration between home, school and community plays a vital role in the general development of reading culture and literacy (Mcquillan & Au, 2001). However, during FAI and oral reflections, it emerged that the learners in this study did not receive enough support and motivation in their homes to read voluntarily to improve their reading skills. For example, the following assertions emerged:

Teacher QR: *These learners don't receive support, and they also lack role models. If you ask them a simple question about any issue that happens in the current newspapers, they do not know.*

The participants identified rurality as another challenge limiting their access to print-rich environments outside the school. Rural areas lack functional school libraries (DBE, 2011; Mojapelo, 2016). Where these libraries happen, the books there contain outdated, irrelevant, unappealing information to the learners' interests (Paton-Ash & Wilmont, 2015). In other cases, the available reading material is inadequate. This was the case at the school under study. The following points were raised during the focus group discussions:

Teacher QR: *The manner in which they struggle with reading shows that they have limited exposure to reading materials at home. Of course, there is a local library, but they seldom borrow books from it...our school library is in shambles, as you know.*

The above extracts demonstrated rurality's impact on access to information and reading material needed for free voluntary reading. In particular, a lack of support from outside the school hampered rural English FAL learners from reading voluntarily to improve their reading skills. Similarly,

receiving support from inside the classroom appeared to be another challenge facing rural English FAL learners' voluntary reading.

5.2. Lack of role models and motivation to read

Motivation and modelling feature predominantly in self-initiated and directed activities such as free voluntary reading. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are essential for successfully promoting these activities (Fields, 2017). Modelling by significant others, such as teachers, is likely to enhance learners' levels of motivation and self-efficacy in the classroom. It also enhances learners' interest in reading voluntarily (Boerma et al., 2015). However, this study found that learners lacked the motivation to read voluntarily to improve their reading skills. The following extracts were essential to note:

Learner AB: *Our teachers do not motivate us to read. I mean, you hardly see a teacher reading a newspaper here at school.*

In the above extract, they linked the low motivation levels to the absence of positive role models (teachers) around the school. In other words, it was difficult for these learners to initiate and direct their voluntary reading without seeing their teachers doing the same.

6. Ways in which the self-directed learning approach may promote free voluntary reading.

6.1. Creating reading stations and a stimulating classroom environment

The study found that learners could direct their learning to read voluntarily where a print-rich environment was created. In this case, the participants made the following suggestions:

Learner GH: *I would suggest that we keep a box for each class. In this box, we keep old newspapers and magazines and other books that we may find interesting. This will help us to read while others are making noise when there is no teacher in class.*

From the above extract, promoting free voluntary reading through self-directed learning requires stimulating classrooms. We asked learners to bring and paste posters and big pictures onto the classroom walls. These were pictures depicting celebrities and influential people reading. The team members introduced the "little libraries" in the English FAL classrooms to increase the accessibility and availability of reading materials in the classrooms. The team created what we called 'Reading boxes' in each English FAL classroom. These boxes contained old newspapers and magazines, which learners were asked to collect from their homes and the school library. With the reading stations and a print-rich classroom environment, learners began spending time reading voluntarily instead of waiting for the teacher to bring something that needed to be read. This was consistent with the assertions that learners are more likely to be stimulated in a classroom where functional signs, symbols, and books are visible at all times (Neuman, 2004).

6.2. Increasing teacher modelling

The study found that increased teacher modelling enabled the self-directed learning approach to promote free voluntary reading. This became particularly important because the participants identified limited vocabulary as one of the barriers to free voluntary reading. During the focus group discussions, the following assertions were made:

Learner MN: *You know, if you see another person reading a book, you also develop the interest to read. And again, teachers are the role models we should see them read. It does not help that we are the only ones who read in class. Teachers must read too.*

We agreed that every Thursday would be dubbed “Reading Thursday.” The idea behind this project was that each English FAL teacher would set aside one hour for reading. This activity involved English FAL learners selecting reading materials from the ‘Reading boxes’ in their classroom and the school library. Before the commencement of each reading session, the English FAL teacher would read one text and demonstrate to learners how to use reading skills. In this case, learners watched when the teacher scanned and skimmed the text for information. In addition, the two English FAL teachers felt it necessary to empower learners with knowledge about dictionary use. This would help English FAL learners to develop the habit of dictionary use. Then, the teachers demonstrated dictionary use and various word-attacking skills. The focus was on deciphering the words and understanding the context in which such words were used.

7. Findings

7.1. Challenges

Lack of support and limited exposure to reading materials impeded voluntary reading among English FAL learners. As was the case in this study, lack of support and inadequate reading material led to poor reading habits (Yaji et al., 2017). Studies indicate busy schedules, low literacy levels and low self-efficacy among rural South African parents as factors contributing to the lack of interest in their children’s academic activities (Mcube, 2010). Perhaps, future studies need to explore innovative ways of igniting rural parents’ interest in their children’s academic activities amid these challenges. In addition, the participants in this study lacked the motivation and role models to inspire them to read voluntarily.

7.2. Remedies

The self-directed learning approach required a print-rich environment to enable rural English FAL learners’ voluntary reading. This also confirmed a positive relationship between increased access to reading material and reading frequency (Macquillan and Au (2001). They also indicated the freedom to choose from this variety of reading materials as another factor motivating them to read voluntarily and desire to improve their reading skills in the classroom. Other studies found that these self-selected texts lead to the success of free voluntary reading initiatives (Krashen, 2016; Ferede and Nchindila, 2017; Bautista & Marulanda, 2018:53). These self-selected reading materials also encouraged learners to become lifelong readers with improved reading competence (Astuti, 2014).

Lastly, the study found that rural English FAL learners could direct their learning and read voluntarily when teachers modelled reading, reading strategies, word-attacking skills and dictionary use. This was consistent with the observation that modelling enhanced learning and improved learners’ engagement in self-initiated activities such as free voluntary reading (Salem, 2016). Other studies also found that teacher modelling improved learner achievement and reading comprehension (Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Fisher & Frey, 2015).

8. Concluding remarks

The inferences drawn from the data, theories and literature illustrate how the self-directed approach can promote free voluntary reading for English FAL learners in a rural context. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the social inequality that often negatively impacts the provision of quality education in rural schools. These deficiencies (inadequate and dysfunctional libraries etc.) aggravate teacher dependency. As a result, the development of language skills such as reading continues to lack behind. Instead of seeking solutions from the periphery, the participants in this study collaborated and used the self-directed learning approach to promote free voluntary reading to improve their reading skills.

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