Original Paper

Essay Writing Challenges of Grade 12 Learners of English as a First Additional Language in the Rural District of Vhembe, South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, stakeholders often express concern about common mistakes learners make when writing essays in English. Effective writing skills require attention to grammar, word choice, coherence and clarity. This study addresses the specific challenges Grade 12 learners in the rural district of Vhembe, South Africa, face when writing essays in English. Using a qualitative approach and a case study design, 15 participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data collection included both primary (key informant interviews) and secondary (literature review) sources. Thematic content analysis revealed critical factors contributing to learners' challenges: Limited language exposure, inadequate parental involvement, ineffective teaching methods, and grammar challenges. To address these challenges, the study suggests that technology should not replace traditional spelling practice, although it can be supportive, dictation and spelling tests are still essential for consolidating spelling skills, the need for intensive guidance and targeted interventions. Regular feedback and individual support are crucial. Teachers should strictly adhere to language policy and theory to ensure consistent writing practice for learners. It is imperative to address the imbalance between writing practice and teacher preference. In this way, common grammatical errors can be mitigated and Grade 12 students can be empowered to excel in English essay writing.

Keywords: Challenges, English, essay writing, grade 12, rural, teacher

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving technological age, mobile devices serve multiple purposes: they facilitate email communication, enable interaction with social media, serve as an alarm clock to start the day, and provide access to news and information. Yet despite these technological advances, many learners continue to struggle with essay writing (Dunn 2021). To truly master a language, learners need to master four key skills: Listening, speaking, reading and writing (Trang and Khoa 2021). Among these skills, writing is often perceived as particularly complex and requires a balanced approach that includes grammar, word choice, coherence and clarity (Ngubane, Ntombela and Govender, 2020; Suvin 2020; Dunn 2021; Trang and Khoa 2021; Khan 2022). Kirby and Crovitz (2013) state that learners face various challenges when writing. These challenges include language disorders, grammar problems, vocabulary limitations, and similar issues (Bouzar 2021). For educators, teaching writing can be both challenging and enriching. Writing proficiency reflects a learner's mastery of a language and ability to express ideas accurately and coherently. Despite the inherent difficulties, eliminating vocabulary gaps, inappropriate word choice and structural problems remains crucial to the coherence of written work.

Writing has always been a great challenge, even at university level. Ngubane and Ntombela (2022) emphasize that writing errors are inevitable for second language learners. However, in the context of rural South Africa, where English is often a second language, additional hurdles arise. Although the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) encourages teachers to guide learners towards more sophisticated writing, in practice there are always problems. To summarize, the challenges Grade 12 students face in essay writing go beyond language skills. These include, resource constraints,

overcrowded classrooms, poor teaching methods and basic deficits in English as a first foreign language (EFAL) (Fankomo 2022). Overcoming these obstacles requires concerted action by educators, administrators and policy makers to create an environment that promotes effective writing development (Fankomo 2022). Writing is a fundamental skill that enables learners to express their thoughts, communicate effectively and engage with the world. Dockrell and Arfé (2020) highlight four key writing principles that can improve learners' writing skills: Frequent practice: encouraging learners to write regularly helps to build confidence, fluency and competence. By providing ample opportunity for practice, educators can promote growth in writing skills. Personal meaning-making: Recognizing that writing is a deeply personal process allows learners to connect with their own experiences, feelings, and perspectives. When learners find meaning in their writing, they are more motivated and engaged. Systematic formative feedback: Constructive feedback is crucial for improvement. Teachers should provide timely and targeted feedback to guide learners towards better writing practices. This feedback loop supports continuous learning. Emulate high-quality examples: Exposure to well-written essays and texts inspires learners. Despite these valuable principles, there are always challenges. Teachers often struggle to reconcile theory and language policy in their lessons. To address these issues, teachers need to assess learners' current performance levels and adjust their support accordingly.

Nchabeleng (2020) highlights the difficulties of assessing writing skills in English as a first additional language. The complexity of assessing language skills exacerbates the problem. Dunn (2021) argues that learners can improve their writing skills through consistent practice at home and in a positive school environment. Arya (2023) and Naik (2023) argue that extensive reading is an effective strategy for improving essay writing skills. Social constructivism theory states that individuals construct knowledge by reflecting on their experiences (Schreiber and Valle 2013). Applying this theory, we recognize that learners' difficulties in essay writing are shaped by their unique contexts and interactions. The rural district of Vhembe provides an interesting setting to examine these challenges due to its unique socio-cultural and educational settings. Frequent complaints from teachers (Belkhir and Benyelle 2017) underscore the urgency of addressing these issues. By scientifically investigating the essay writing challenges faced by Grade 12 English language learners, we aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice, benefiting both students and educational stakeholders. Therefore, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions and sub-questions:

Research question

- What specific challenges do Grade 12 learners with English as their first additional language face when writing essays in the rural Vhembe District in South Africa?

Sub-questions

- What are the effects of language proficiency on essay writing performance in grade 12 students
- What strategies are in place to address the challenges faced by Grade 12 students with English as their first additional language when writing essays in the rural district of Vhembe in South Africa?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Challenges for Grade 12 learners with English as their first additional language in essay writing in rural Vhembe District

Learners in rural areas, particularly in the Vhembe district of South Africa, face several challenges when writing essays in English as a First Additional Language (EFAL). Rural schools often have limited access to teaching materials, including books, reference materials and technology. This scarcity affects learners' ability to research and gather relevant information for their essays (Moresebetoa, 2016). The high student-teacher ratio in rural schools can hinder individualized attention. In large classes, it can be difficult for learners to receive individualized feedback and support, which affects their essay writing skills. In some cases, teaching methods do not effectively address the specific needs of EFAL learners. Teachers often struggle with the limitations of traditional teaching methods. Due to the heavy workload in the various subjects, including literature, it is difficult to schedule enough time for writing lessons. As a result, students receive little feedback on their writing efforts. To overcome this challenge, teachers need to find a balance between traditional and modern teaching strategies. Teachers may lack

training or resources to implement effective strategies for teaching essay writing (Fankomo 2022). Weak foundational skills (such as grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure) are crucial for essay writing. If learners lack these basic skills, they may struggle to express their ideas coherently and accurately (Nchabeleng 2020).

Learners often struggle with incorrect spellings and word choices. Some even try to explain their mistakes in their native language in parentheses. Nchabeleng (2020) highlights difficulties with spelling, diction, punctuation, paragraphing and syntax. Ariyanti (2016) emphasizes that cultural differences and mother tongue influence learners' writing skills. Their daily interactions are mainly in their mother tongue, which affects their English proficiency. Terzioğlu and Bostanci (2020) describe overgeneralization as the use of language structures that deviate from conventional mechanisms. Learners may misapply rules due to their native language interference. Muhammad, Ashraf and Muhammad (2016) point out the challenge of finding reliable sources of information. Access to relevant content is crucial for the development of strong writing skills.

In recent years, research consistently shows that parental involvement has a significant impact on student achievement and overall well-being. Unfortunately, parental involvement remains inadequate in many communities. Parents can struggle to find time due to work commitments, financial constraints or other challenges. In rural areas, where resources are limited, this problem is even more pronounced. As a result, students miss out on valuable opportunities for growth and development. Studies by Silinskas and Kikas (2019) show that students whose parents are actively involved tend to perform better in school. Parental involvement allows families to share their unique cultural background with the school. By participating in school activities, parents gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum and the challenges their children face. This cultural exchange enriches the educational experience for all involved. Curriculum planners play a critical role in promoting parental involvement. They can organize workshops for parents that focus on their role in supporting their child's education. Topics could include effective study habits, communication skills and understanding the curriculum. Schools should maintain open communication with parents.

Learners often struggle with grammatical problems when writing. These difficulties can hinder effective communication. In fact, writing is widely regarded as one of the most complex skills to master (Huwari and Al-Khasawneh 2013). To overcome these grammatical limitations, learners need to focus on improving their grammar skills, especially when using English in educational settings. An extensive vocabulary enables learners to express their thoughts clearly in both oral and written form. Learners often struggle with a limited choice of words. To overcome this, they can: Use electronic dictionaries to discover synonyms, antonyms and idiomatic expressions. Read extensively to learn new words and expressions and gradually expand their lexicon. In summary, by tackling grammar problems, understanding the writing process and actively improving their vocabulary, learners can improve their writing skills and communicate more effectively.

To overcome these challenges, educators should consider support techniques, encourage interactive learning and provide targeted support to improve learners' essay writing skills (Fankomo 2022). The impact of students' home language on their English writing skills can be significant. Students may adopt structures or patterns from their heritage language, which affects their essay writing skills (Moresebetoa, 2016). Sometimes teachers who are not EFAL teachers are responsible for teaching writing, which leads to inconsistencies in teaching and feedback. There could be a discrepancy between what students learn at the elementary level and what is expected at the intermediate level. Bridging this gap is essential for smoother development of writing skills. Implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) can impact how writing is taught and assessed. Teachers need to align their practices with CAPS requirements (Moresebetoa 2016). In summary, addressing these factors through targeted interventions, teacher training and improved resources can help Grade 12 students overcome their difficulties in writing essays in English as a first additional language (Moresebetoa, 2016). By addressing these issues, we can also empower Grade 12 students in rural areas to improve their EFAL skills and write essays successfully.

2.2 The effects of language proficiency on essay writing performance in grade 12 students

There are effects of language proficiency on essay writing performance of Grade 12 students. Lopez

(2023) points out the relationship between language learning strategies and writing performance of Grade 12 students. The majority of Grade 12 students utilized various language learning strategies, particularly metacognitive and social strategies. These strategies play a role in their writing performance. Despite some errors in writing technique, learners' scores were in the "good' category when assessing their written performance. This indicates that language skills do have an impact on written performance, but not necessarily a significant one. Of all the strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies were associated with learners' writing performance. Teachers can encourage students to practice memory strategies and promote awareness of language strategies, especially compensation strategies. In summary, while language skills have an impact on essay writing performance, learners can still perform well with effective strategies and support. Teachers and curriculum developers play a crucial role in improving the writing skills of Grade 12 students (Lopez 2023).

2.3 Strategies to improve essay writing skills

Good research skills are a crucial component of essay writing. The ability to find, evaluate, and use sources effectively can help you write well-informed and well-structured essays. Arya (2023) and Naik (2023) argue that extensive reading is another effective strategy for improving essay writing skills. By exposing yourself to a variety of writing styles and genres, you can learn different techniques and approaches to writing that you can then apply to your own work. Pay attention to how writers structure their arguments, how they use language to convey meaning, and how they engage readers. By analysing these elements of good writing, you can incorporate them into your own work and improve your writing skills. Naik (2023) emphasizes continuous practice to improve essay writing. Practicing essays is especially good if you constantly struggle to formulate a logical argument, have writer's block, or find it difficult to organize your thoughts on paper. Arya (2023) argues that writing is rewriting. Revise and edit your first draft. Check for clarity, coherence, grammar and spelling errors. Consider professional editing services if needed. Seek feedback and learn from criticism: share your work with peers, teachers or writing groups. Be open to constructive criticism and learn from it. Be aware of your strengths and areas for improvement. Practice writing about different topics: Challenge yourself by writing about different topics. Experiment with different essay formats (e.g. argumentative, descriptive, and persuasive). The more you practice, the better you will become.

Effective teaching and learning requires that learners participate in writing activities in an active, motivated and organized way. Teachers should adhere to educational theories and language policies when designing writing activities. Moses and Muhammed (2019) recommend emphasizing the practical benefits of effective writing, such as improving communication and critical thinking. Dockrell and Arfé (2020) suggest four guiding principles: Frequent practice: regular writing strengthens skills and builds confidence. Personal meaning-making: Encourage students to connect writing to their own experiences and interests. Formative feedback: provide constructive feedback throughout the writing process. High-quality examples: Show learners well-crafted writing examples to imitate. Dunn (2021) suggests considering Flower and Hayes' (1980) cognitive processing model, which includes three stages: Planning: preparing and organizing thoughts before writing. Translating: Converting ideas into written language. Revising: reflecting on and improving the first draft.

Educators can participate in online forums, attend webinars and follow educational blogs to keep up to date with new technologies. Edwards (2021) emphasizes the connection between real-world tasks and a positive attitude towards technology. When students use technological devices for authentic purposes — such as composing emails, creating multimedia presentations or collaborating on shared documents — they develop a positive attitude towards technology. This positive attitude carries over to their writing endeavours. Dunn (2021) emphasizes the need for teachers to enrich student learning through effective strategies and technological tools. Teachers can utilize online platforms to create engaging writing prompts. These prompts encourage creativity, critical thinking, and exploration of various topics. Again, to eliminate poor teaching practices and improve feedback, a multifaceted approach is needed. By combining personalized strategies, visual elements, and timely, constructive feedback, teachers can empower learners to be successful in their writing efforts (Joseph 2023; Ugwu 2023).

3. Theoretical framework

The theory on which the study is based is the theory of social constructivism by Vygotsky (1978). Social constructivism theory is based on the idea that people construct their knowledge (Schreiber and Valle 2013) and understanding of the world through experiences and reflect on these experiences (Giesen 2008). Furthermore, the theory views learning as a process in which learners learn through social engagement and active participation. Applying this theory would help to overcome learners' writing difficulties by engaging learners in writing activities so that they can participate fully and develop confidence and mastery of writing skills. The teacher plays a supportive role in a constructivist classroom where learners construct their knowledge. According to Kaur (2017), in constructivist perspectives, teachers play the role of a facilitator who guides and motivates learners. Constructivism assumes that learners should be actively involved in learning, while the role of teachers is to support learners in their learning activities (Williams 2018). In this sense, Ndon (2011) agrees that in a constructivist classroom, the teacher creates a conducive environment in which learners learn freely and collaboratively with authentic materials.

In addition, the following principles, which underpin Vygotsky's theory, can be applied in addressing the challenges learners face when writing essays: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Scaffolding, More Knowledgeable Others (MKO), and Social Interaction. ZPD refers to the gap between the knowledge learners possess and the knowledge they receive from others when they interact socially (Raymond 2000; Warschauer 2005). In ZPD, the teacher supports learners when tasks are more challenging. As learners develop competence, the teacher begins to withdraw or provide less support (Benson 2004). In this way, learners can gradually develop their essay writing skills and it also helps them to reflect on their writing and thus develop mastery of this skill. Learners would gain more knowledge about this skill through social interactions. Scaffolding refers to the method in which learners collaborate with more able peers to accomplish tasks (Culatta 2011). The teacher or more able peers can support learners in the necessary steps of essay writing to improve their learning. The teacher can only provide more support if a learner has difficulty with the writing steps or other aspects of writing, such as vocabulary, grammar, spelling, use of idioms, rhetorical devices, and developing ideas in writing (McPherson 2013). In addition, the teacher can guide writing by allowing learners to collaborate with peers and work independently when they have mastered the text. This would help learners develop confidence and show interest in performing written activities. The teacher also needs to break the activities down into smaller tasks. For example, when teaching essay writing, he can show learners how to gather information first, write the introduction, then the body and finally the conclusion while focusing on other aspects of writing. In addition, an MKO is someone who is more knowledgeable or capable than the learner (McPherson 2013). MKOs can be other learners, books and teachers through whom learners can gain knowledge about their essay writing skills. De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) point out that intellectual growth requires social interaction and collaboration between novice writers, experts, and within the learner's ZPD. Learners improve their thinking skills in academic writing through interaction with the MKO (Raymond, 2000; Kim 2001). Social constructivism emphasizes the development of ideas and attitudes within a community context (Kepe 2014). A critical understanding of the nature of English writing and its role in communication is essential for learners and teachers.

Constructivist theory is closely related to activity theory, especially when considering writing activities. Activity theory provides a theoretical framework for analysing and understanding human interaction through tools (Hashim 2007). In the context of writing, these tools refer to language — the medium through which meaning is created and conveyed. The reader must recognise and understand this meaning from the perspective of the writer. In practise, activity theory means that teachers should assign writing tasks to learners. In this way, learners engage with the correct and coherent language (tools) in their essays. This approach promotes effective communication and expression. In addition to activity theory and social constructivism, we come across the social learning theory (SLT) of Albert Bandura (1977). SLT assumes that people learn from daily interactions with others, which leads to changes in behaviour. Observing positive behaviours in others often prompts individuals to adopt similar behaviours. This concept of assimilation by imitation plays a central role in SLT. For educators, SLT offers insights into effective teaching methods. For example, rewarding learners can motivate

others to imitate the rewarded behaviour.

Teachers should also encourage interaction between learners through group activities and peer teaching. This allows learners to observe and learn from each other's experiences. The situational language teaching (SLT), as described by Nabavi (2012), provides teachers with guidance on effective teaching methods. The concept of observational learning within SLT significantly influences teachers' decisions. In order to modernize their approach, teachers should move away from traditional methods and integrate visual aids into their lessons. In this study, teachers were encouraged to abandon the traditional chalk and board style of teaching. Instead, they were encouraged to use pictures and videos to facilitate learners' descriptions. Descriptive essays, a common type of written assignment, often present challenges to learners as they struggle to express their ideas effectively.

4. Research design and methods

In this section, the researcher explains the research design and methods used for our study. Based on the interpretive paradigm, the researcher choses an exploratory case study with a qualitative research design. The aim was to explore the challenges faced by Grade 12 students and to investigate their perspectives, experiences, meanings and opinions. Qualitative research was the cornerstone of the researcher's investigation. The researcher sought to obtain rich, contextually relevant information through in-depth data collection techniques. These techniques included semi-structured key informant interviews and literature reviews. By choosing a qualitative approach, the researcher was able to capture the nuances and complexity of the central phenomenon. The case study is explored using in-depth, detailed data collection techniques that incorporate a variety of contextually rich sources of information, such as semi-structured key informant interviews and literature reviews (Mohajan 2018; Qwabe, Maluleke and Olutola 2022). This study was conducted in the Vhembe district, one of the districts in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The population studied comprised all Grade 12 learners in this district. Purposive sampling was used to select the study sites and participants. The aim was to gather pertinent information that would deepen the researcher's understanding of the challenges faced by Grade 12 learners.

The researcher selected the five lowest performing schools in the district for 2022. These schools were intentionally selected to ensure a diversity of limited resources and achievement levels. All selected schools were located in rural areas and offered only academic subjects. The researcher spoke to five former principals of the target schools in Vhembe district. Their wealth of experience and insights as former principals provided valuable context. The researcher interviewed five retired English teachers (Paper 3) who had taught Grade 12 students. Their expertise in English as a first additional language (FAL) was crucial. The researcher also interviewed five former learners from the target schools. Their perspective as students who had overcome the challenges of Grade 12 was crucial. The rationale for selecting participants was as follows:

- Former principals: their first-hand knowledge of school operations and policy enabled the researcher to gain insights into the broader educational context.
- Retired English teachers: their experience of teaching English FAL Paper 3 enabled to the researcher to explore the linguistic challenges faced by students.
- Former learners: By involving former learners, the researcher was able to incorporate their life experiences and shed light on the learners' journey.

In summary, the research design and methods were carefully crafted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Grade 12 students in Vhembe District. Qualitative research relies on robust data collection methods and rigorous analysis to ensure the validity of the findings. In this regard, the researcher discussed the importance of a pilot study, the technique of thematic data analysis and adherence to a systematic process. The accuracy of data collection tools has a significant impact on the validity of qualitative research. For this reason, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main study. An external teacher, independent of the main study, tested the semi-structured interview instrument. It turned out that the interview was too long due to telephone interviews. The questions were therefore shortened to enable more targeted and efficient data collection.

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method known for its flexibility. In this study, the

researcher used an inductive approach so that themes emerged directly from the data. Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step process guided our thematic analysis:

Step 1: Familiarization

The researchers delved into the data by going through the transcripts multiple times. They categorized the content based on the study objectives. The audio recordings were carefully transcribed into verbatim transcripts to preserve the richness of the participants' statements.

Step 2: Coding

Concise labels or "codes" were assigned to specific text fragments. These codes served ethical purposes and protected the identities of the participants. Relevant data fragments were identified by matching them to the research questions.

Step 3: Generation of themes

The researcher analyzed the coded data, identified patterns and developed themes. Codes that lacked specificity or relevance were removed from the dataset to ensure thematic accuracy.

Step 4: Reviewing the themes

The selected themes succinctly summarized the information. The researcher carefully reviewed and compared all data sets to ensure that the selected themes adequately reflected the participants' experiences.

The pilot study not only served to refine the data collection process, but also contributed to the overall validity of our qualitative research. By adhering to a systematic thematic approach to analysis, we were able to ensure that our findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives. In summary, a well-conducted pilot study and rigorous thematic analysis increased the validity of the qualitative research and enabled us to draw meaningful conclusions from the data.

Step 5: Define and name the themes: The researcher confirmed each theme along with the associated data. They assigned short, descriptive names to these themes.

Step 6: Writing the report: Finally, the researcher wrote the report on the thematic analysis. This study aims to address the specific challenges Grade 12 learners in the rural district of Vhembe, South Africa, face when writing essays in English. Qualitative techniques, including key informant interviews and literature, were used to gather relevant data. Themes that emerged included

5. Findings and discussion

Themes that emerged included:

Theme 1: Challenges for Grade 12 learners with English as their first additional language in essay writing in rural Vhembe District

This section attempts to answer the following sub research question: What specific challenges do Grade 12 learners with English as their first additional language face when writing essays in the rural Vhembe District in South Africa? The study revealed that limited use of language in essay writing in grade 12. The majority of participants highlighted that their lack of language exposure contributes to imbalances in their writing skills. As examples of what participants said, the following comments are provided to complement the introduction:

FL1 (former learner): "We were poorly trained in essay writing." FP1 (former principal): "The limited use of language is a challenge in essay writing" in Grade 12" FT2 (former teacher): "Teachers need some kind of workshop to learn strategies for essay writing." FP2: "Students need to be encouraged to write essays on a weekly basis."

The paragraph and quotes illustrate the limited use of language in essay writing in Grade 12. Candilas (2016) asserts that exposure to the target language is often limited. This lack of teacher training contributes to the difficulties faced by both teachers and students. Schreiber and Valle (2013) emphasize that applying Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism could help overcome

learners' writing problems. By engaging students in writing activities, they can fully participate and develop self-confidence and mastery of writing skills. At the same time, learners should be encouraged to write essays regularly. In this way, they can gradually improve their writing skills and close the gap in language acquisition.

Again, the study revealed insufficient parental involvement in the education of learners. To substantiate the inadequate parental involvement in learners' education, the following comments are given as examples of participants' statements:

FT3: "The lack of parental support remains a challenge" FP3: "Parents often fail to actively support their children's learning." FL2: "There is a noticeable lack of parental involvement in learners' education." FP4: "There are gaps in literacy and resources: illiterate parents may not realize the importance of buying books and newspapers for their children to read."

Again, the majority of principals commented as follows: *"Parents are required to check and sign for students' books daily, but few parents do so. When parents' meetings are called, few parents attend, making it difficult for teachers to help and motivate students"*

Participants' responses in the above quotes show that parents' involvement in students' education is insufficient. To improve students' essay writing skills, it is important to close the gaps in parental involvement. Encouraging parents to be actively involved in their children's education can lead to better results. Research by Silinkas and Kikas (2019) suggests that active parental involvement has a positive impact on learner achievement and motivation. Many parents believe that teachers are solely responsible for the educational success of their children. Some parents are working and find it difficult to devote enough time to guide and support their children in their schoolwork.

Furthermore, it emerged from the study that ineffective teaching methods in essay teaching are the order of the day. The study found that teachers use ineffective teaching methods. In addition, the study revealed that teachers do not adhere to theory and language policy. Furthermore, the study reveals a discrepancy between teachers' adherence to theory and language policy. The following participants commented on this:

FP1: 'Learners need to work on reading and writing tasks in groups so that they enjoy and value learning'. FT2: "Most learners seemed passive and did not understand what was really going on." FP4 emphasized the need for collaborative reading and writing tasks in groups to create an environment where learners value and appreciate their learning experiences" FT2: "Teachers need to strategically rethink and change their teaching methods." FT4: "Some learners refrained from asking questions even when the instructions were unclear to them."

The results suggest that learners' grammar difficulties are due to ineffective teaching and learning methods. Pineteh (2012) claims that ineffective teaching methods contribute to grammatical errors. The DBE (2011) emphasizes the importance of following the CAPS to ensure that learners progressively develop their writing skills. Arguably, we can empower learners to overcome grammatical obstacles and improve their writing skills.

In addition, the majority of teachers cited grammatical issues as the biggest problems with essay writing: Subject-verb agreement, punctuation, sentence and paragraph structure, cohesion and coherence, and spelling. For example, learners confuse past and present tenses or use irregular verbs incorrectly. Without a solid understanding of verb concepts, students unintentionally introduce errors into their advanced texts.

FT5: "Grammar is a big problem that my students struggle with. They make a lot of mistakes that detract from the meaning of the written work. Some students do not have dictionaries and textbooks and have to wait for some that they can borrow" FP2: "Challenges in students' grammar knowledge when writing essays" FL2: "Also, learners have difficulties with prepositions, resulting in sentences that lack clarity and coherence."

In support of the above statement, Nchabeleng (2020) points out that learners have problems with spelling, diction, punctuation, paragraphing, syntax, lack of thematic understanding, creativity and coherence. According to Fitrawati and Safitri (2021), teachers can help students improve their writing

skills and produce coherent, error-free essays. Using students' own writing, teachers can discuss grammatical concepts and address specific errors. Students should be encouraged to apply grammar rules immediately during the revision and correction stages.

Theme 2:   The effects of language proficiency on essay writing performance in grade 12 students

This section attempts to answer the following sub research question: What are the effects of of language proficiency on essay writing performance in grade 12 students?   The study reavealed that there are effects of language proficiency on essay writing performance of Grade 12 students. The following are responses from participants:

FL1: "The Grade 12 students utilized various language learning strategies." FP3: "Cognitive strategies and compensation strategies were associated with learners' writing performance." FT2: "Language skills have an impact on essay writing performance, learners can still perform well with effective strategies and support."

The above responses indicate that there are effects of language proficiency on essay writing performance in grade 12 students. Lopez (2023) maintains the relationship between language learning strategies and writing performance of Grade 12 students. These strategies play a role in their writing performance. Despite some errors in writing technique, learners' scores were in the "good' category when assessing their written performance. Teachers and curriculum developers play a crucial role in improving the writing skills of Grade 12 students.

Theme 3: Strategies for improving essay writing skills

This section attempts to answer the following sub reach question: What strategies are in place to address the challenges faced by Grade 12 students with English as their first additional language when writing essays in the rural district of Vhembe in South Africa? The findings revealed some strategies for improving essay writing skills. The study highlights that the implementation of effective strategies is critical to improving essay writing skills. The findings show that the scaffolding approach is the guiding principle for essay writing. It is evident from the study that teachers play a pivotal role in enhancing the essay writing skills of Grade 12 students. The following statements reflect the opinions of the participants:

FT1: "When students develop strong writing skills, they not only achieve academic excellence, but also actively contribute to their community and their future adult lives."   FP2: "Teachers should take time to teach students and let them write more so that they get used to writing instead of being confronted with something they never learned in the exam room." FL2: "It is important to teach the students and let them write extensively." FP4: "Familiarity with writing prevents them from feeling overwhelmed in exams." FL4: "Teachers should give students writing tasks and provide them with intensive guidance and correction."

Again, the majority of former principals encouraged teachers in this way: *'Learners should write essays weekly. They should also write for fun. Learners also need sufficient learning materials to help them learn such as dictionaries, textbooks, study guides and other learning materials that will help them acquire grammar, vocabulary and other aspects of the language so that they do not rely solely on the teacher but can develop their own independence."*

The above responses suggest strategies to support Grade 12 learners in mastering essay writing. Arya (2023) and Naik (2023) argue that extensive reading is another effective strategy for improving essay writing skills. Again, Dunn (2021) emphasizes the need for teachers to enrich student learning through effective strategies and technological tools. Similarly, Dockrell and Arfé (2020) suggest four guiding principles for writing instruction: providing learners with opportunities to practise writing frequently; recognising that writing is a form of personal meaning-making (metacognition); providing learners with systematic formative feedback; and giving learners high-quality examples to emulate in their own writing. Teachers play a central role in supporting the essay writing skills of Grade 12 students, and by implementing these strategies, teachers can empower learners to overcome challenges and excel in their writing endeavours.

6. Limitations of the study

This research study took place in the Vhembe district of Limpopo Province, South Africa, where five secondary schools were selected as a sample and participants took part in data collection. The study interviewed 15 participants, which can be considered a relatively small sample size. In addition, all participants were from the same school district, which resulted in homogeneity in their experiences with the curriculum. Future studies should strive for a more diverse group of participants in order to capture a broader range of perspectives. Given the qualitative nature of this study, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to the broader population. While the findings offer valuable insights, they cannot be directly applied to all secondary schools in the region. The study focused exclusively on five secondary schools in the Vhembe district. Consequently, the results may not represent the entire population of secondary schools in the Limpopo province. Future research should include students from different districts in the province to improve the applicability of the results. The study encountered varied responses from participants, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the curriculum phenomenon. However, the inclusion of a larger number of schools and participants could have further enriched the results. Researchers should consider including a wider range of schools to gain a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum dynamics. In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights into the curriculum experiences in Vhembe district, researchers should recognize its limitations and explore this topic further in a wider range of schools. In doing so, we can improve our understanding of curriculum practices and their impact on student learning outcomes.

Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this study was to investigate the challenges Grade 12 learners face in essay writing in the rural district of Vhembe in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Using an interpretive paradigm, the theory of social constructivism (developed by Vygotsky in 1978) was applied to examine these challenges. Learners in this region lack important resources such as dictionaries, textbooks, and study aids. This lack hinders their grammar and vocabulary acquisition and affects their overall writing skills. Given the limited support at home, teachers play a crucial role in improving learners' academic writing skills. They should actively involve students in the writing process and provide targeted feedback. Allocating extra time for writing instruction can be of great benefit to learners. Targeted practice and guidance can help them overcome barriers to essay writing. Encouraging extensive reading is crucial. Exposure to a variety of texts improves vocabulary, comprehension and other linguistic aspects that are important for effective essay writing. Teachers should move from a traditional, knowledge-centred approach to one that actively engages learners. Engaging students in critical thinking, collaborative discussions and self-directed learning can lead to positive outcomes. Language advisors and educators should implement monitoring systems to ensure comprehensive instruction for all four English language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Researchers and educators should explore innovative strategies to address writing difficulties. These could include technology integration, peer collaboration, or community-based initiatives. In summary, by addressing resource deficiencies, empowering teachers and promoting a learner-centred approach, the writing skills of Grade 12 learners in rural Vhembe District can be improved. These recommendations are aimed at creating a conducive and effective learning environment.

request. Due to restrictions, the data are not accessible.

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