
THESIS SUBMISSION

Title: Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements in respect of the doctoral degree with specialisation in Curriculum Studies in the department of Curriculum Studies and Higher Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Free State.

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DECLARATION

I, Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki, declare that the thesis, **Mitigating the COVID-19-induced Learning Loss in Reading in Rural English FAL Grade 10 Classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach**, submitted for the qualification Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) with specialisation in Curriculum Studies at the University of the Free State is my independent work.

All the references that I have used have been indicated and acknowledged through in-text citations and in the list of references.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work to another university or faculty for the purpose of obtaining a qualification.

SIGNED: 

DATE: 27 November 2024

ABSTRACT

Although the global Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) seems to have passed and gone, its rippling effects still echo in the domains of education, especially in South Africa. Globally, the pandemic led to a total shutdown of schools in 2020 and the adoption of remote online teaching and learning pedagogies. While some learners in different parts of the world may have benefited from these interventions, most learners in rural areas of South Africa were left behind owing to various factors, including a lack of remote learning resources and infrastructure. As a result, most learners in rural schools suffered learning loss during COVID-19. Language skills such as reading were severely affected. Using the Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) methodology, this qualitative study explored the use of the Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) approach to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading among Grade 10 English FAL learners in one rural school in the Free State province, South Africa. The Input Hypothesis Theory underpins the study (Krashen, 1981). Two Grade 10 English FAL teachers and ten Grade 10 English FAL learners purposively participated in this case study. The data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The main findings revealed that the FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Evidence for successful implementation points to increased confidence to read, increased motivation to read for pleasure, reading with comprehension, increased imaginative abilities, and expanded vocabulary. The lack of books, a non-functional library, and a neglected reading period were some of the major challenges. The study recommends the inclusion of a reading period in the timetable and the restoration of school libraries to ensure the successful implementation of reading interventions. Guided by these findings, the study developed a model for implementing FVR in English language classrooms in South Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Mitigate, COVID-19, learning loss, reading, rural, English First Additional Language, Free Voluntary Reading, Input Hypothesis,

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my uncle, Nkopane Tsoelipe. Your belief in me has been an inspiration that kept me going when the going got tough.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

FVR	FREE VOLUNTARY READING APPROACH
CAPS	CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT POLICY STATEMENT
PALAR	PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND ACTION LEARNING
IH	INPUT HYPOTHESIS
SSR	SUSTAINED SILENT READING
GSSR	GUIDED SELF-SELECTED READING
DBE	DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION
ATPs	ANNUAL TEACHING PLANS
ICT	INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

CHAPTER ONE

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It has been almost four years since the catastrophic upheavals of COVID-19, but South Africa and the world are still recovering from its rippling effects, particularly in the education sector. A few months after its discovery, COVID-19 transformed into a global pandemic with a debilitating impact on the global economy and sources of livelihood (Azubuike, Adegboye & Quadri, 2021; Sansone et al., 2021). To curb the pandemic, most countries imposed shutdowns of their economies, which led to the immediate discontinuation of traditional schooling. Approximately 1.6 billion learners in 190 countries were affected globally, leaving 94% of the world's school population affected by the closures (Kidman, Breton, Behrman & Kohler, 2022; United Nations, 2020). While traditional schooling was suspended, the governments were confronted with a monumental undertaking of urgently remodelling conventional classroom teaching into online remote learning (Oyedotun, 2020). This transition heralded major disruptions in the teaching and learning process in many developing countries, including South Africa (Ngubane, Mthembu & Hlongwa, 2020; Sansone et al., 2021).

Despite the attempts by the South African government to promote online remote teaching and learning during the suspension of traditional classes, many learners in rural areas were excluded from reaping the benefits of remote learning (Ebrahim et al., 2020; Omodan, 2020). Some of the factors that disadvantaged learners in rural areas included limited access to the Internet, outdated software, learning management systems, and a scarcity of ICT gadgets such as computers, tablets, laptops, and smartphones (Dube, 2020; Makgahlela, Mothiba, Mokwena & Mphekgwana, 2021). These problems indicate that COVID-19 and school closures exacerbated the inherent educational inequalities and enacted further marginalization of learners, especially in rural schools (Sayed et al., 2021). The culmination of all these problems further weakened the learners' academic performance, amplifying the pre-existing learning losses (Avanesian, Mizunoya & Amaro, 2020; Sayed et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the extended school closures translated into monumental learning losses that varied according to country and context. Learning loss can be described as the loss of knowledge learners forget over time, as well as the knowledge they could have learnt if the schools had not been closed (Angrist et al., (2021). For instance, studies in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom discovered that learning loss owing to COVID-19 was equivalent to one-fifth of a school year. The statistics imply that even though many countries strived to minimize the ramifications of the disruptions to learning during the school closures, other countries made minimal or no progress during remote learning (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis & Viruleg, 2020; Engzell, Frey & Verhagen, 2020).

In South Africa, schools also experienced learning loss during the pandemic. For example, nearly three-quarters of the school year was lost in the Western Cape owing to school closures and rotational timetables. This led to a learning loss, adding up to three-quarters of a school year (Van der Berg et al., 2022). The Department of Basic Education Annual Performance Plan (2022/23) revealed that 54 per cent of contact time was lost due to school closures and rotations, resulting in unparalleled learning loss in 2020. In the second half of 2021, 22% of the school time was lost in affluent and urban schools. Contrarily, the situation was worse in historically disadvantaged schools during the COVID-19 lockdown due to the lack of online teaching and learning resources. The learning loss across all grades was estimated at 70%, indicating a massive veil of educational inequalities in South Africa (Department of Basic Education, 2023). Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) contend that these educational inequalities are reflected in the learning outcomes between public and private schools, both at primary and secondary levels. These scholars argue that 75% to 80% of the poorest learners in South Africa rely on dysfunctional public schools, resulting in poor learning outcomes. In comparison, only 20% to 25% of learners attend private schools and functional public schools, achieving relatively better academic outcomes.

At the same time, studies focusing on the repercussions of COVID-19 on second-language learning reported that the pandemic negatively impacted various language skills (Mukhari and Sanders, 2023). Research in the United Kingdom revealed unprecedented learning loss, amounting to 54% in writing skills and 41% in reading (Demie, Hau, Bellsham-Revell & Gay, 2022; Scott, 2021). Similarly, research in South

Africa also revealed that the learning loss due to COVID-19 caused a notable deterioration in reading and writing skills (Gustaffson and Nuga, 2020; Mukhari and Sanders, 2023). The Systemic Tests for Grades 3, 6 and 9 learners in the Western Cape also revealed that language skills fell behind by 40% to 70% due to COVID-19 learning loss (Van der Berg et al., 2022). Meanwhile, a Funda Wande project in the Western Cape also reported significant English language learning loss in lexical comprehension, reading and writing (Ardington, 2021). Early-grade reading tests in the other two provinces, Mpumalanga and Northwest, revealed learning losses of 62% and 46%, respectively (Ardington, Wills & Kotze, 2021). Importantly, these alarming early-grade reading losses revealed that English First Additional Language (English FAL) learners experienced a severe reading loss compared to other languages. On this note, a background report for the 2030 reading panel reported that there is a possibility that COVID-19 has erased a decade's worth of progress in reading outcomes, especially in rural areas (Spaull, 2023). If left untreated, learning loss may have negative long-term consequences, especially on the reading skills of learners (DBE, 2023).

Nonetheless, Don et al. (2020) contend that with focused and intentional catch-up reading strategies, COVID-19-induced learning loss, particularly in reading skills, can be recovered over time. This points forward to an urgent need to mitigate the effects of the learning loss so that learners can catch up with the improvement of their reading skills. Therefore, this study illustrates how the Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) strategy can be utilised in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The FVR approach has been praised for developing learners' vocabulary and grammar skills while they enhance their reading skills (Chew & Krashen, 2017).

Within the FVR, the study adopted the Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) strategy (Krashen, 2018). The SSR is an in-school reading approach where a few minutes from the language class are devoted to silent reading. During the silent reading time, learners are free to read any materials of their choice as long as they are appropriate for the learners' age and content. Teachers monitor reading resources that learners choose to read. However, no written or oral reports or any form of accountability is required from learners (Krashen, 2018). This is done with the belief that learners will

gradually develop good reading habits such that, over time, they are motivated to read for pleasure or for academic purposes at any time convenient to them. The benefits of FVR, especially in second language contexts, are well documented in research studies.

Recent studies on SSR demonstrate that this approach is more effective in improving learners' reading comprehension than straightforward reading instruction that uses academic grammar methods (Mcquillan, 2019). Further studies reveal that the reading skills that learners had developed through SSR had a positive influence on the learners' listening, speaking, and writing skills (Cho & Krashen, 2019; Efendi & Deyani, 2022; Lee, 2019; Renandya et al., 2019). Despite these documented successes, there is a paucity of studies in South Africa on implementing FVR to mitigate learning losses in reading, especially in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. A study conducted by Mokoena (2022) in a rural context in the Free State promoted FVR for EFAL learners with an emphasis on the Self-Directed Learning (SDL) approach. Another study by Mokoena and Tsotetsi (2021) explored the FVR and reading comprehension in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Both these earlier studies highlight the potential of FVR in English FAL South African contexts. It is hoped that this study of mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms through the FVR approach will make significant contributions to literature and thus close the gap. The following section articulates the statement of the problem.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Research reveals that COVID-19-induced school closures severely affected learners in rural areas, resulting in learning loss (Avanesian et al., 2021; Molnar & Hermann, 2023; Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023). Reports in South Africa reveal that even though teachers leaned more towards teaching reading skills during the school closures, teaching these skills was still challenging since learners still struggled to read and understand simple sentences (Gustaffson and Nuga, 2020). At the same time, Hoadley and Galant (2022) also reported that not only reading comprehension experienced learning loss, but writing skills also revealed huge learning loss. These gloomy findings were also confirmed by the recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2021 report, which indicated that even though South African learners

improved their reading skills to 81% from 78% in 2016, the country remains at the bottom of the ranking when compared with other countries (Mullis et al., 2023). In essence, COVID-19 exacerbated long-standing disparities in the reading skills of South African learners, more especially those in historically disadvantaged rural schools. This dire situation calls for action from all educational stakeholders, especially the teachers, so that the rippling effects of COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading can be curtailed with utmost urgency. In fact, this situation underscores the necessity for teachers' persistent and unrelenting attempts to implement methods and techniques that could mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading, especially in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Therefore, this study recommends the FVR as an indispensable strategy to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The following section explores the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

1. 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that underpins this study is Krashen's Input Hypothesis theory (1981). Krashen used the term Monitor Model to encompass the five hypotheses he employed to explain second language acquisition. Named in no particular order, the five hypotheses are as follows: the natural order hypothesis, the acquisition hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the monitor hypothesis (Krashen, 1981). Of these, the Input Hypothesis (IH) remains the most integral. According to the IH, learning a language is a subconscious process that resembles how children acquire their mother tongue (Krashen, 1985). In this case, Krashen argues that exposure to contextually appealing, comprehensible input helps language learners develop their language skills (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, language acquisition, which is demonstrated through productive skills (speaking and writing), depends on increased exposure to receptive skills (reading and listening) (Abukhattala, 2013).

In reviewing the role and relevance of the Input Hypothesis in second language acquisition today, Yas (2022) concludes that the IH still holds a significant position in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching. In support of this view, Alahmadi (2019) also contends that input is an undisputable requirement for second language acquisition. These views rendered the IH a viable option for providing

opportunities for the learners who participated in this study to improve their reading skills, thereby mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

The IH is relevant in this study since it aims to explain how second language learners acquire a language skill, reading, through the FVR approach to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. In line with IH, FVR advocates learners' exposure to fascinating and comprehensible reading materials to help them become better readers (Higgs, 1985; Gong, 2023; Krashen, Lee & Lao, 2018). Thus, this study believes that learners will acquire not only reading skills through IH but they will also acquire comprehension skills due to continuous language inputs through exposure to comprehensible reading opportunities (Krashen, 2021). In this way, FVR, within the IH framework, will not only help learners become better readers, but it will also assist in improving other associated reading skills without heavily depending on formal instruction.

1. 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following primary research question serves as the study's guide:

How can the Free Voluntary Reading approach be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?

To answer this main question, the ancillary questions below guided this study:

- How did COVID-19 impact reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?
- What strategies do teachers use to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?
- How can teachers implement the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in the EFAL Grade 10 classroom?
- What challenges may impede the use of the FVR approach in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?
- What are the benefits of implementing FVR to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?

1.5. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study's primary aim is to explore how the Free Voluntary Reading approach can be implemented in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The study seeks to achieve the following objectives.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine how COVID-19 impacted reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To determine the strategies teachers use to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To explore the implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To identify challenges that may impede the implementation of the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To explore the benefits of FVR in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

1.6. DEFINITION OF OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS

The following operational concepts will be used in this study.

1.6.1. Mitigate – According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024), the term mitigate means to make the impact of something less severe or painful. The aim of this study is to lessen the impact of learning loss in reading owing to COVID-19 in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Free Voluntary reading was used to achieve this aim.

1.6.2. COVID-19

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a highly contagious and deadly form of “pneumonia which is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)” (Ma, Shen, Sun, Xu, Hou, Wu, Fang, Li & Qian, 2021). This name was coined because of the genetic relation to the coronavirus behind the 2003 SARS outbreak (World Health Organization, 2020).

1.6.3. Learning loss

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2021:11) defines learning loss as “any loss of knowledge or skills and/or deceleration of or interruption to academic progress, most commonly owing to extended gaps or discontinuities in a student’s education.” The report also explains that two terms are usually associated with the term learning loss; the first is ‘forgetting’, which happens when a learner forgets the language they previously acquired. The second term is ‘forgone’ learning, which refers to the learning that should have taken place had the schools not closed. Additionally, Angrist et al. (2021) explain learning loss as the difference between what students know and what they would have known had they not stayed at home due to the school shutdowns. Learning loss in this study refers to a combination of both forgone learning and the information that has been forgotten due to extended periods of not being at school.

1.6.4. English First Additional language

DBE (2011), through the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, defines English First Additional Language as a language that learners develop in addition to their mother tongue - Home Language. However, in the case of English, many learners in South Africa are speakers of South African indigenous languages like Sesotho, isiZulu, Sepedi, and so on, while they have English First Additional Language (EFAL) as a curriculum subject and a language of instruction beyond the fourth grade. Since most schools do not offer the home languages of all learners, the terms Home Language and First Additional Language refer to the proficiency level at which the language is provided. The assumption for the First Additional Language is that learners do not possess any knowledge of the language when they arrive at school. Therefore, learners are gradually given the support that elevates them to the required level of proficiency. This means the support offered for the First Additional Language would be different from the support offered to Home Language learners, who already have the knowledge of the language when they arrive at school.

1.6.5. Rural

The conceptualisation of rurality is a complex phenomenon that embodies multiple definitions. While the term was initially used to refer to a place that is not urban, so

much has changed, and so has the conceptualisation of rurality (Nelson, Nguyen, Brownstein, Garcia, Walker, Watson & Xin, 2021). In South Africa, while the term may refer to large stretches of commercial agricultural lands held under freehold tenure and mimicking conventional Western views of rural areas, it also embodies settlements scattered across communal lands with a unique rural identity (Mubangizi, 2023). Hlalele (2014:462) defines rural as areas made up of “communal lands, farmland, peri-urban areas, informal settlements and small rural towns where people have a number of possibilities to live from the land.” Another definition by Business Tech (2018) considers rural areas as densely populated areas which are end-products of colonial and apartheid-propelled land settlements. This last definition will be the one adopted for the context of this study.

1.6.6 Reading

Reading is a process that requires readers to engage in complex cognitive processes to decode meaning from written symbols. Reading is a tool for enhancing language acquisition, communication and sharing information and ideas (Arcos, 2018). Therefore, reading is a purpose-driven activity whose ultimate goal is for learners to read a variety of texts with understanding to serve their interests. It does not only create opportunities for language learning, but it also allows learners to read for content with a critical mindset (Arcos, 2018, Darmawan, 2016).

1.6.7. Free Voluntary Reading

Sometimes termed pleasure reading, Free Voluntary Reading is a term that refers to the kind of reading one does because they want to. It is a type of reading that promotes pleasure over accountability. This means reading without the burden of writing book reports or summaries (Krashen 2021). Krashen (2004) argues that recreational or pleasure reading is instrumental in improving our reading proficiency, expanding vocabulary and the ability to manage intricate grammatical structures. Free Voluntary Reading is often conducted as an in-school free reading (sustained silent reading), where about 15 to 20 minutes are dedicated only to reading. Learners choose the material they want, and the time is devoted only to reading silently. As will be shown later, this approach has been found to be instrumental in language and reading development (Krashen 2003).

1.6.8. Co-researchers

Since the study used Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), the participants in this study are referred to as co-researchers. One of the core aims of PALAR is to do research for transformational change with people rather than on people (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). For this reason, the participants are regarded as equal partners involved in the co-creation of knowledge with the researcher. This means that the researcher must become an integral member of the people the research focuses on and assume an equal status with them (Wood, 2019). Therefore, the two Grade 10 English FAL teachers and the ten Grade 10 English FAL learners who participated in this study are referred to as co-researchers, hence the usage of the term throughout the study. In cases where a distinction is made between learners and teachers, the terms 'learner co-researchers' and 'teacher co-researchers' are used.

1.7. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1.7.1. Research Approach

The qualitative research approach underpins this study. Perceiving how people construct their world and how they evaluate and assign meaning to their experiences is the main goal of the qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Leavy, 2014). Through this naturalistic outlook, I was able to conduct the study in the co-researchers' natural environment to uncover how the pandemic affected them and how they adjusted their teaching and learning of reading post the pandemic (Leavy, 2017). The qualitative inquiry was more appropriate in this study since the primary objective was to comprehend and interpret phenomena within the framework of meaning the co-researchers articulated without drawing conclusions about causality or generalization (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Therefore, the qualitative approach enabled me to acquire a more profound comprehension of the co-researchers' perspectives regarding the best way in which FVR could be implemented and their experiences after the implementation.

1.7.2. Research Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm guided this study. The central tenet of interpretivism is that since reality is bound by social context, co-researchers interpret reality in different ways (Nel, 2018). As a result, interpretivism enables researchers to comprehend and

see the world through the lens of their co-researchers, who draw on their experiences and perceptions which are based on context (Bastalich, 2020; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Interpretivism was appropriate because the study aimed to understand the extent to which COVID-19 affected teaching and learning in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The study particularly concentrated on the learning loss learners incurred in reading. Cognisant of these experiences, the study sought to illustrate how FVR could be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Therefore, the interpretive lens enabled me to comprehend the teachers' and learners' experiences and the subjective meanings they ascribed to their social environment by collaborating and conversing with them (Wahyuni, 2012).

1.7.3. Research Design

A single case study design was chosen for this study. A case study, according to Yin (2018), is a thorough examination of a current occurrence in its natural setting, especially when it is impossible to distinguish between the phenomenon and the setting. The learning loss brought about by COVID-19 is a modern occurrence that varies depending on context. As a result, the study was conducted in a single rural school to explore the co-researchers' experiences and collectively determine solutions specific to rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. A single case study design was appropriate since it allowed for a thorough comprehension of the case of implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms (Gustaffson, 2017).

1.7.4. Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)

PALAR is a methodology that guided this study. PALAR is an extensive, integrative approach that encompasses similar principles and values including participation, cooperation, community of practice and synergy. It is based on combined concepts of action learning and action research. Consequently, the participants in the PALAR methodology are regarded as co-researchers owing to their active and meaningful engagement in discovering how to solve their own issues (Zuber-Skerrit, 2015). PALAR advocates research that aims to understand the challenges of life and the potential context-bound solution to these challenges (Schiller, Jaffray, Ridley & Du Plessis, 2021). The eight essential components of implementing a PALAR project

were modified to align with the context of the study. This adaptation culminated in the following stages: problem definition and needs analysis, start-up workshop, independent project work, midway workshop, project work continued, and finally, concluding workshop, presentation and celebrations (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). These stages are elaborated on in detail in Chapter Three.

PALAR was relevant in this study because the aim was to engage the co-researchers collaboratively in identifying the debilitating effects of COVID-19. The collective identification of the problem revealed the need for intervention strategies, thereby taking the co-researchers on a journey of identifying the context-specific implementation of the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. This initiative transformed the experiences of the co-researchers, as will be indicated in Chapters 4 and 5 of the study. The collaborative involvement of the co-researchers rendered PALAR a people-oriented approach to inquiry, which enhanced the sustainability of the FVR implementation since the co-researchers regarded themselves as proactive contributors to their own and the community's well-being (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

1.7.5. SAMPLING

Purposive sampling was used for the selection of the co-researchers who would provide information that addressed the study's objectives (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Taherdost, 2016). Under purposive sampling, the study employed homogeneous sampling to concentrate on co-researchers with comparable characteristics. These qualities could relate to experience, sex, age, or occupation (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Therefore, the study solicited two Grade 10 English FAL teachers with at least three years of teaching experience and ten learners from four Grade 10 English FAL classes. As a research site, the school was conveniently selected for proximity and ease of access (Golzar, Noor & Tajik, 2022).

1.7.6. DATA GENERATION

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with two Grade 10 English FAL teachers. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to utilise open-ended questions, along with probes, to obtain in-depth information from the co-researchers (Adams,

2015; DeJonckheere & Vaugh, 2019). Focus group discussions were also employed to generate data from ten Grade 10 English FAL learners. Focus groups are targeted discussions led by a facilitator who encourages interaction and directs the conversation. They typically consist of six of ten individuals from similar backgrounds (Jordan Civil Society, 2012). The semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted before the concluding workshop. Training workshops and the cyclic nature of plan-act-observe-reflect in PALAR allowed observational evidence and reflective data (Fletcher, 2015; Louw & Wood, 2018). Observations were mainly employed to generate data relating to the classroom observations during the implementation of FVR. Apart from these data generation methods, data were also generated through the PALAR workshops, the start-up workshop and the mid-way workshop. A detailed explanation of these stages is provided in Chapter Three. Using these various data generation tools allowed me to make observations and explore the co-researchers' feelings, thoughts and sometimes sensitive issues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). For such sensitive information, the study exercised stringent measures to ensure that the co-researchers remained anonymous and that no information in the study could be used to connect them to the data (Afrin, 2018).

1.7.7. DATA ANALYSIS, REPORTING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

The data analysis in this study followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis. In the first phase, I had to read the data several times to develop familiarity. The generation of initial codes followed this first phase. Thereafter, I established patterns in the codes to search for themes. Then, the themes were reviewed, defined and ascribed names. Finally, a written report was produced.

1.8. TRUSTWORTHINESS

This study established trustworthiness by following the principles of credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability. Credibility was demonstrated through the crystallisation of semi-structured interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and PALAR workshops to facilitate a thorough comprehension of the phenomenon under study (Shenton, 2004). For transferability, the study provided detailed descriptions for readers and researchers to establish if the findings could be transferred to other contexts (Nowell et al., 2017). An audit trail was kept to detail all the steps and processes followed in the study. This process was carried out to

demonstrate the consistency of the research processes to the research design and the alignment between the results and conclusions to demonstrate if they could be followed and duplicated (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moon et al., 2016).

1.9. VALUE OF THE STUDY

The study significantly advances strategies that can be used in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. Transcending the boundaries of COVID-19, the primary goal was to promote strategies that could assist learners in rural schools to develop resilience and self-reliance. Such strategies are helpful not just for solving the present issues but also in preparation for unseen disasters in the future that could disrupt the learner's education.

1.10. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The University of the Free State, the Free State Department of Education and the Thabo Mofutsanyana District Department of Education were consulted for ethical clearance prior to data generation. Additionally, the principal of the school was also asked for approval to conduct the study. To guarantee integrity and collaboration, the co-researchers were given a thorough explanation of the project. Consent forms for voluntary participation were also requested to be signed by co-researchers. Furthermore, consent forms were also given to parents so that learners could take part in the study. The co-researchers and the research site were identified under pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

1.11. LAYOUT OF CHAPTERS

This study is divided into six chapters:

- Chapter one: Introduction and background of the problem. This chapter provides background information relating to COVID-19-induced learning loss, particularly in second language learning, and the need for the study to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- Chapter two: Theoretical framework and literature review. This chapter explores the theoretical framework that guides the study – Input Hypothesis. Literature on Free Voluntary Reading and its significance in mitigating COVID-

19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms is also explored. The chapter also provides a literature review relating to the objectives of the study.

- Chapter three: Research design and methodology. This Chapter discusses and demonstrates how the research design and methodology were applied to generate and analyse data.
- Chapter four: Presentation and analysis of data. This chapter provides a detailed presentation of the findings of the study and the analysis of those findings. These findings are classified into themes and sub-themes that demonstrate how the findings align with the objectives of the study.
- Chapter five: Discussion, and interpretation. An in-depth discussion and interpretation of the findings presented in chapter four is provided in this chapter. The theory that underpins the study and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two are used for the discussion and interpretation.
- Chapter six: Recommendations and conclusions. This chapter presents the summary of the findings, implications for practice and limitations of the study. Based on these limitations, recommendations for future research are also made. Additionally, the chapter also explains the contributions this study makes to knowledge.
- Chapter Seven: This chapter presents the proposed strategy for implementing Free Voluntary Reading

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the introduction and background to the study. The study focuses on mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms through a Free Voluntary Reading Approach (FVR). The central aim of this chapter is to explore how the FVR approach can be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms in the Free State province. This chapter explores the theoretical framework that underpins this study, the Input Hypothesis, its implications and its relevance to the study. The chapter will also explore the Free Voluntary Reading Approach, its significance, and how it relates to foreign or additional language learning, particularly in reading classrooms. The connection between Free Voluntary Reading and the Input Hypothesis will also be explored. Lastly, the chapter also engages in an elaborate literature review, which helped to locate this study in the field of research.

2.2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that underpins this study is Steven Krashen's theory of second language acquisition – the Input Hypothesis. Krashen (1981) developed the Monitor Theory to explain second language acquisition. The Monitor Theory comprises five hypotheses that give insight into second language learning, including the role of reading in a second language. These five hypotheses are: the acquisition learning hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis and the affective filter hypothesis. Of these five hypotheses, the Input Hypothesis, which is the most relevant to the study, remains integral to Krashen's overall theory of second language acquisition (Krashen 1985).

2.2.1. The Input Hypothesis Theory

Firstly, Krashen (1982) asserts that the Input Hypothesis is rooted in language acquisition, not language learning. Secondly, Krashen contends that language acquisition is enhanced by being exposed to and understanding the language structures that are slightly above one's current level of competence ($i + 1$), where i

refers to the acquirer's current level of competence. This explains that in the acquisition process, we improve from i , our current level of linguistic competence, to $i + 1$, the next level slightly above our current level. In order to progress to the next stage of linguistic competence in the acquisition process, the acquirer has to understand the input language, which contains the linguistic structures of the following stage (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). What enables the acquirer to understand and move to the next level is the linguistic competence the acquirer already possesses, as well as the extra-linguistic knowledge, which comprises our extensive knowledge of the world and of the situation or context of the target language (Krashen, 1985). For children, for example, the context is provided by a caretaker, usually a parent, who restricts their talk to the here and now, the child's current domain. Like parents in the previous example, teachers in the second-language reading classrooms provide the context by using visual aids which also enhance extra-linguistic knowledge. In other words, the meaning making which is created by the context is central to language acquisition (Krashen and Terrell, 1983).

Later on, in 2003, Krashen used the term Comprehension Hypothesis to refer to the Input Hypothesis. The rationale behind this was that the Comprehension Hypothesis (CH) is a more synonymous reflection of what the hypothesis says – we acquire language when we comprehend what we are reading or listening to. For convenience, this study will use the term, Input Hypothesis. One of the questions that Krashen seeks to answer is how the comprehension / Input Hypothesis relates to literacy. Krashen believes that reading enhances our reading and spelling proficiency and vocabulary expansion. Reading also improves our ability to use appropriate writing styles and complex syntax. The argument that this study is making is that the Grade 10 English FAL learners are likely to have acquired some basic second language structures and some knowledge of the world, which could be beneficial in helping them understand the input that is slightly higher than their current level of linguistic competence. Hence the input theory applies to explore the phenomenon in this study. In other words, understanding the input that is slightly higher than their linguistic competence provides opportunities for the acquisition of vocabulary and language structures, which in turn helps them become better readers (Krashen & Bland, 2014).

Nevertheless, Krashen (2012), argues that there are three stages in the development of linguistic competence. These stages are discussed below.

Stage 1. For the mother tongue, this stage involves listening to stories and books being read to. For second language acquisition, the first stage is a language class that is rooted in providing an abundance of compelling comprehensible input.

Stage 2. For both the first and second language, self-selected reading becomes the essential component of stage two. Reading at this stage has to be geared towards narrow reading on favourite authors, genres and topics of interest. This level of recreational reading gradually prepares readers to read more challenging texts with understanding. This makes the academic language more comprehensible. Thus, recreational reading bridges the gap between conversational and academic language. This stage was more relevant in this study for rural Grade 10 English FAL learners since the goal was to ease learners into reading until they developed reading habits that would make them read on their own or when they were at home. This would create more exposure to comprehensible input which is essential for language acquisition.

Stage 3. Academic or specialized reading is when readers advance to a stage where they discover the areas in which they prefer reading, which are more compelling. Readers still read as enthusiastically as they did in stage two, with the difference being that the texts they are reading are more challenging. This is a type of recreational reading focused on self-selected narrow interests of the reader on more challenging texts. Language and literacy competence develop unexpectedly and unintentionally. It is this gradual development of language and competence that is required to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.2.2. Optimal Conditions for the Input Hypothesis

Mason and Krashen (2019) argue that for language acquisition to take place, input has to be optimal. The Optimal Input hypothesis infers that language is acquired from input, not output, and this leads to subconscious language acquisition. Therefore, Krashen & Mason (2020) insist that optimal input must have four characteristics, as explained below.

The first characteristic is that optimal input has to be comprehensible. This does not necessarily mean that every word has to be understood. As explained earlier, input is comprehensible and useful for language acquisition when it contains some incomprehensible structures slightly above the acquirer's current level of competence. This is essential in this study because allowing learners to self-select the books they understand creates room for comprehensible input.

Secondly, optimal input has to be highly interesting. It should be so compelling that one forgets that they are reading in or listening to another language. If the input is comprehensible and compelling, acquirers may not even be aware of the incomprehensible bits in the input. This condition was very important in this study because learning becomes meaningful when learners are having fun, especially when they are not even aware that they are learning or acquiring the English language. This, then, could be an exciting way of mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.

Optimal input comprises rich language that aids in how the events unfold in a story or text being read. The language used in the story should help readers understand the incomprehensible bits, thereby enabling the reader to acquire these new aspects of language.

Thirdly, language acquisition is a moderate process. Whenever the acquirers experience unfamiliar structures in a comprehensible context, they acquire a small amount of meaning (and form). This explains why optimal input has to be plentiful so that it can provide many opportunities for language acquisition. This was helpful in this study so that the provision of sufficient reading materials could be ensured. It is clear that if the input is limited, it will handicap the language acquisition process. Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms, therefore hinged on the abundance of comprehensible input.

2.2.3. Implications of the Input Hypothesis for Reading Development

The preceding section demonstrated the constructs of the Input Hypothesis. This section reflects on the implications of the Input Theory in the classroom. As a point of

departure, Krashen and Terrell (1983), postulate that the Input Hypothesis is critical because it addresses how language is acquired both through theory and practice. Although theory is an essential component, its practicality is also a crucial element that helps practitioners and researchers put the theory into practice.

According to Krashen & Terrell (1983), the Input Hypothesis posits that reading and listening comprehension are fundamental components of language programmes and fluency in speaking and writing a second language will develop naturally over time. This fluency cannot be gained through instruction, but it emerges after the acquirer has developed enough competence through understanding. The role of the second language teachers, therefore, is to ensure that learners comprehend what is being said or what they are reading. If there is sufficient input, $i + 1$ will automatically be covered. This gives the learner the opportunity of $i + 1$, while also reviewing previously acquired structures. Therefore, effective second language teaching methods are those that primarily focus on providing comprehensible input with emphasis on the message, not grammatical form. Such methods should also give room for silent reading, during which speech is delayed or optional. Students are not obliged to produce utterances until they are ready. The focus of this study is to provide input for the learners and then give them time to read and develop reading competence. The results will emerge when they are ready. Therefore, time and patience are of the essence.

It is evident that comprehension is the crux of the Input Hypothesis. Krashen and Terrell further emphasize that the best way to teach language is when it is used to convey meaning, not when it is directly taught for conscious learning. This is where visual aids could be used to help learners understand. Pictures and other visual aids provide for second language learners what the “here and now” does for a child. They provide the extra-linguistic context that assists the acquirer in comprehending and thereby acquiring language.

According to the Input Hypothesis, speaking is not a necessity for acquiring a language. Language is acquired from what we read or hear, the messages that we understand, not what we say. Therefore, spoken fluency will be enhanced when we focus on listening (Krashen & Terrell 1983). Thus, speech is the end product of language acquisition. Practising speaking will not improve the acquisition of language.

The only way speaking aids acquisition is that it invites conversation which can be a good source of comprehensible input. This input will come from another speaker (Krashen 2003).

2.2.4. Significance of the Affective Filter in the Input Analysis

Although Krashen's account of the Input Analysis emphasizes the role of comprehensible input containing $i + 1$, he acknowledges another hypothesis, the Affective Filter, which is crucial for language acquisition. According to Krashen (1985), the acquirer has to be open to the input. The Affective Filter is a mental block that prohibits one from completely using the comprehensible input they are exposed to for language acquisition. When the Affective Filter is high the acquirer may understand what he reads or hears, but the input will be ineffective. This happens due to lack of motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. When the filter is low, there is no fear of possible failure in language acquisition, and this makes the input effective for language acquisition. The acquirers whose attitudes are not conducive to second language acquisition will seek less input. Their Affective Filter will be so high that even if they comprehend the message, the input will be denied access to the section of the brain that governs how we acquire language (language acquisition device (Krashen, 1982). This information is crucial in this study since it points out that teachers have to help learners overcome their fears or insecurities that may prohibit the reception of input. In this study, dealing with the learners' insecurities, lack of motivation, self-confidence and anxiety were given priority. Learners had to know the importance of reading in Second language acquisition. They also needed to be made aware that mistakes are part of learning and that they should be patient because when the time is right, when they have developed enough competence, language will emerge on its own. It is this development and confidence that would help them become better readers who are able to read more challenging texts leading to even more improvement. Thus, this gradual improvement would help mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.

Therefore, the information relayed above leads to the following conclusion, according to Krashen (1985). Second language acquisition is enhanced by receiving comprehensible input with the Affective Filter low enough to let the input in.

2.2.5. The Criticism of the Input Hypothesis

Despite the influence the Input Hypothesis has garnered in second language learning, several criticisms have been levelled against the theory. The first criticism is that the Input Hypothesis is not clear about the quantity of comprehensible input required for optimal impact on language acquisition (Zafar, 2009 & Liu, 2015). MacLaughlin (1987), one of Krashen's harshest critics, argues that Krashen does not clarify how the concept of comprehensible input, as expressed through $i + 1$, can be measured or applied consistently. Secondly, scholars also argue that by oversimplifying the nature of input needed for language acquisition, Krashen fails to account for the role of the complex and variable nature of real-life language use (Liu, 2015). The last criticism is that the effectiveness of the comprehensible has been so overstated that it has ignored the role of output in language acquisition (Swain, 1993).

Despite all the criticism, Yas (2022) contends that Krashen's theory of second language acquisition, of which the Input hypothesis is a critical component, made a revolutionary impact in second language learning, proving its validity today. Other scholars also agree that the central tenet of the Input Hypothesis, which is that acquisition happens through comprehensible input, is still relevant after more than forty years since the inception of the theory. The relevance is marked by the significant impact it has made to second-language learning (Jegerski, 2021 & Chen, 2022). On the concept of $i + 1$, Bailey and Fahad (2021) also rebut that, even though the concept might be challenging for researchers, it has been largely embraced because it provides a mandate for teachers. These views confirm that Krashen's comprehensible input is the core of second language acquisition, thereby justifying the relevance of the theory to this study. The efficacy of the Input Hypothesis in practice and research, as discussed in the section that follows, further proves the relevance of the theory to this study.

2.2.6. Input Theory in Practice and Research

Bailey and Fahad (2021) believe that Krashen's theory of Input Hypothesis has given teachers a foundation on which they can provide learners with various opportunities to understand the target language. Therefore, teachers have embraced this theory because they learn how to support their learners as they make sense of new language patterns. The only problem is that, although research into second language learning

can equip teachers with strategies for effective language teaching, they are often left to figure out the implications of research and its significance for them and their learners on their own. Support for teachers from the research perspective is therefore crucial. That is why the main aim of this study was to involve both teachers and learners as co-researchers so that they could be co-creators of knowledge in how significant the Input Hypothesis could be through the Free Voluntary Reading approach in mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. In support of the role of input in second language acquisition, Lichtman and Van Patten (2021), argue that the basic role of input, the acquisition learning distinction and ordered development have made a transition from being regarded as “good ideas” to irrefutable observations about second language acquisition. Perhaps this argument can be justified by the influence of Krashen’s ideas in second language learning research, as briefly demonstrated below.

Several recent studies have found the Monitor theory, and the Input Hypothesis, in particular, to be essential for language acquisition. A study by Mason, Smith and Krashen (2021), based on story listening and guided self-selected reading reveals huge gains in second language acquisition even in a short-term course since optimal input was provided. Findings by Bahrudin and Febriani (2020) also reveal that acquiring a second language is greatly influenced by the appropriate input, the presence of the native speakers, the linguistic environment and careful monitoring. Other studies also applied the Input Hypothesis with favourable results in oral English teaching, reading comprehension, and motivation (Huang, 2018; Keshmirshekan, 2019; Kasap & Peterson, 2018). A study on an English Language multimedia teaching model based on Krashen’s theory of comprehensible Input Hypothesis reveals that the Krashen-based model is more efficacious than traditional teaching modes in bolstering student’s interest and self-confidence in learning (Yuan, 2018). Most interestingly, a study observing the application of the Input Hypothesis in English language teaching in junior high school discovered that most of the teaching strategies employed by the teachers were more theoretically linked to the Input Hypothesis, even though the teacher had never learned about the Input Hypothesis (Ying, 2019). Therefore, it was critical, in the context of this study, to implement and bring to light, research-proven approaches that could be used to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

The findings discussed above reveal the significance of the Input Hypothesis in second language acquisition, thereby justifying the need to implement the Free Voluntary Reading approach to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Implementing such a strategy can even transcend the scope of this study to make teachers aware of the significance of using the Input Hypothesis as a guide to help learners acquire the English language and develop the level of proficiency that could serve as a preparational foundation for academic English at the institutions of higher learning.

2.2.7. Relevance of the Input Hypothesis to the Study

The study sought to use Free Voluntary Reading to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. As will be discussed in the following section, the FVR approach is founded in the Input Hypothesis. It advocates the creation of time for learners to read comprehensible input so that they can gradually begin to develop language. Developing language, in turn, improves their ability to read with understanding, thereby becoming better readers. This made the Input Hypothesis highly relevant and significant in this study. This theory is also crucial as it explains that exposing learners to comprehensible input is the most effective way of helping learners become better readers. As explored earlier, we develop vocabulary, the ability to spell words correctly and to handle complex structures through reading. Thus, the Input Hypothesis removes the burden of instruction from the teachers as it presents a more flexible alternative for improving the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of learners. When the input is comprehensible and compelling, it motivates the learners to read more. They can even take reading beyond the classroom during leisure time. The more they are exposed to comprehensible input, the higher the possibility of acquiring language, thereby leading to improved reading ability.

The Grade 10 English FAL Curriculum and Policy Assessment Statement (2011) states that learners should have reached reasonable levels of English FAL proficiency in interpersonal and cognitive academic skills by the time they reach Grade 10. However, the reality is that many learners still struggle to communicate effectively at this stage. Thus, the COVID-19-induced learning loss may have exacerbated

problems that already existed. With the success indicators of the Input Hypothesis in second language acquisition, COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading could be mitigated through the FVR approach to help meet the curriculum's demands of giving support to the learners so that they can acquire English language and develop a high level of proficiency that enables them to read more challenging texts.

Since theory filters through research, the rationale for implementing FVR reading is influenced by the need to provide comprehensible and compelling input to create opportunities for learners to acquire language. Thus, the availability of books is a prerequisite for the Input Hypothesis to function. Creating time and space for learners to read also fulfils the conditions for putting the theory into effect. Even the methodological decisions should be considered with the theory in the background. For example, it was crucial to determine if the PALAR methodology would provide guidelines that would optimize conditions for the Input Hypothesis to function. The analysis of data reveals whether the intervention lived up to the expectations and helped learners improve their language skills. In this way, the findings may prove or disprove the effectiveness of the theory as will be demonstrated in Chapter 5 of the study.

As discussed above the Input Hypothesis posits that learners cannot be fully proficient through grammar-based instruction. Giving learners the opportunity to acquire language subconsciously may be an ingenious approach that could help learners develop autonomy and resilience in times of pandemics like COVID-19. Teacher-reliant forms of instruction and learning mean that learning could effectively take place mainly in the classroom under the guidance of a teacher. What happens when learners leave the classroom if they have not been exposed to approaches that would initiate them into self-learning? The Input Hypothesis can be a fun way of acquiring language, thereby leading to an improved ability to understand what they read. If learners are fascinated by what they read, they are likely to read more, and the more they read, the more they develop the ability to use language. In this way, COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading could be mitigated in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.3. THE BENEFITS OF READING IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Before delving into the literature on Free Voluntary Reading, this section presents the literature on the general benefits of reading in second language learning. Like other reading programmes, FVR is also founded on the well-established benefits of reading. Therefore, it is imperative to begin by discussing the benefits of reading, which lay the foundation for most reading interventions.

Reading, as a receptive skill, is highly effective in second language learning since it is both beneficial for reading itself and for writing skills. Allington and MacGill-Franzen (2021) argue that reading positively impacts students' achievement. Once reading proficiencies have been developed, the increased extensive reading that might follow results in improved reading achievement. Thus, increased reading leads to reading proficiency. Wilhelm (2016) also agrees that reading, particularly for pleasure, helps to foster competent and life-long reading. Thus, the more one reads, the more they become good readers. This is the reason why this study regards Free Voluntary Reading as an invaluable approach to mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. The most important fact is that as reading proficiency increases, it also promotes chances for language acquisition as learners are exposed to comprehensible input through reading.

Reading also enables learners to acquire critical thinking skills and reading comprehension skills. This development is instrumental across all disciplines. Since the benefits of pleasure reading are not only bound to the classroom, students can use the skills acquired through reading in adulthood, in the workforce and in society (Whitten, Labby & Sullivan 2016). Studies by Kazemi (2021) and Bernal and Bernal (2020), found that reading for pleasure results in improved comprehension skills. Reading for pleasure is also a central tenet of the Free Voluntary Reading. The findings in these studies reveal significant improvements in analyzing and understanding texts, increased confidence levels for reading in English and improved general language learning. Kazemi (2021) also highlights that perhaps the most important fact is that reading allows learners to be subconsciously engaged in the learning process effortlessly and without stress. This is crucial for language learning. Thus, the ability to read is crucial for language learning, and it is generally accepted that those who perform well are proficient readers (Lalicic & Dubravac, 2021).

Furthermore, reading is regarded as a foundation for developing productive skills such as writing and speaking. According to Aisyiyah and Hakimi 2020, reading provides exposure to a variety of words and sentence patterns in the target language. This exposure is critical for language development since avid readers have a richer vocabulary and are able to use words more accurately in relation to context and register. Therefore, this provides a golden opportunity for mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms without heavily relying on instruction from the teachers. Not only does reading enhance the acquisition of new vocabulary, but it also reinforces previously learned vocabulary (Kazemi 2021). Evidently, the end product of these reading benefits is the increased competency in English language learning, which enables learners to express themselves in writing. In this regard, Mabrooka and Riyath (2019) highlight that good readers usually produce better pieces of writing. Current research also supports this notion, that good readers are usually better writers. A study by Atayeya, Setyo, Kassymora & Kosbay, 2019, explored the impact of reading on the students' writing ability, and the findings revealed that reading habits profoundly improve the student's academic writing skills. Another study by Mabrooka and Riyath 2019, which incorporated story reading in English language secondary schools, also reported a significant improvement in essay writing, indicating that reading positively affects students' writing performance. The findings of many other studies have also proven that reading is an invaluable weapon in enhancing learners' writing skills (Aida & Widiyati, 2020; Karasu & Tunaboynu, 2022; Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen, 2022; Linuwih & Winard, 2020; Wati, 2021; Nugrahani & Wati, 2022; Mahmoud, Quora & Hassan, 2020; Skenderi & Ejupi, 2017).

Reading also helps learners become imaginative. According to Kucirkova & Cremin (2020), the excitement derived from reading enhances the imagination. Therefore, meaningful reading involves the use of imagination to comprehend texts. It is a multi-faceted concept that enhances comprehension by connecting words in the text to pictures, smells, sounds, tastes and touches. Thus, imagination-aided comprehension enables readers to engage in the world painted through the text. Apart from deepening the understanding of the text being read, being immersed in the fictional lives of characters evokes imaginations that assist readers in learning about themselves and

other people, thereby developing feelings such as empathy, respect and passion (Kind, 2020 & Peltari, 2017).

The information given above proves that reading is highly beneficial for improving both the reading and writing skills of learners, particularly since they are not confined to reading only when they are at school. On this note, Aisyiyah and Hakim (2020) emphasize that since learners can engage in reading independently, reading has been lauded for developing autonomy in learners, which is important for foreign language learning. Thus, autonomous learners are motivated to learn and improve their language skills. They strive to engage in communication in English, even though their environments mainly comprise non-native speakers. Therefore, I argue that reading (Free Voluntary Reading) could be highly beneficial in enhancing the learners' language skills, thereby mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.4. LITERATURE ON THE FREE VOLUNTARY READING (FVR)

Krashen first advocated for the significance of Free Voluntary Reading in the first publication of 'The Power of Reading' (1993), with the second edition coming in (2004). Free Voluntary Reading, also termed pleasure reading, recreational reading or self-selected reading in some cases, is the type of reading that one does because they want to. They are not forced to read, but they willingly engage in the reading process for recreational purposes. The implication here is that there is no expectation of accountability. Learners are not expected to write book reports or answer questions based on what they have read. They do not even have to look up every vocabulary word in the dictionary. FVR simply means putting aside a book one does not like and selecting another one they like better (Krashen 2004a).

Modelled along the Input Hypothesis, FVR is rooted in the theory that language acquisition is not a result of instruction, studying or memorizing vocabulary. Human beings acquire language when they understand it. Thus, in reverse, grammar and vocabulary are an outcome of receiving input (Krashen 2021). The argument is that the acquisition of both the first and the second language, including vocabulary, is enhanced by mainly listening to and reading captivating comprehensible input (the messages we understand) (Krashen, Lee & Lao 2018). Therefore, FVR is regarded as

a powerful tool to improve language and literacy development with a strong influence on vocabulary expansion, reading comprehension and writing. Since FVR is meant to be enjoyed, it may be beneficial in assisting learners to make a transition from elementary level to authentic language use and also from conversational ability to academic ability (Krashen 2003). The authentic language use can be reflected in the improvement of the comprehension of complicated phrases and the skill to write coherent prose. The underlying motive in advocating FVR is that children become better readers by reading (Krashen 2006). Therefore, the solution to second language learning problems is to give students access to a wide range of exciting and comprehensible reading materials and to create time for them to read. It is imperative to ensure that exciting reading materials are available (Krashen 2003). The goal of this study was also to expose learners to a wide range of compelling and comprehensible reading materials that would help them develop reading habits, thereby leading them to become better readers equipped with skills that will help them speak and write proficiently.

FVR can be implemented through two approaches: Sustained Silent Reading and Self-selected reading.

Sustained Silent Reading refers to the in-school reading where ten to fifteen minutes of each school day is devoted to reading. Learners are free to read whatever they wish to read, including comics, novels, and magazines. In Sustained silent reading, learners are not expected to write book reports and assignments. Nothing is graded. There are no strict requirements for them to finish reading if they wish not to. They are also free to choose any other material they want to read. At this time, teachers and library media specialists are also expected to read for pleasure (Krashen 2006). Sustained Silent Reading differs from Extensive Reading because, in Extensive Reading, learners are expected to give a brief account of what they have read. For example, a summary or a short description of what was read (Krashen 2003). The results of Sustained Silent Reading may not be immediately evident since it takes time for learners to find preferable reading materials. It also takes time for them to have done enough reading to make progress obvious. In the context of this study, the ultimate goal of SSR was to help learners develop a taste for reading and to inspire the once-hesitant reader to become someone who engages in ample reading even outside of school (Krashen

1997). Thus, SSR would increase the desire to read more, and this is the requirement for language acquisition to take place.

Another approach is the Self-selected Reading. Krashen (2004b), explains that self-selected reading differs slightly from Sustained Silent Reading. Unlike sustained silent reading where about ten to fifteen minutes is set aside for learners to read, Self-selected reading programmes devote the whole class period to reading. Teachers occasionally set up conferences that give learners a platform to discuss what they have read. These conferences may also be used to discuss problems that learners may have encountered while reading. Further additional reading can also be recommended (Krashen 2018).

Furthermore, Krashen (2011) believes FVR is anchored on the four hypotheses elaborated below.

2.4.1. The forgetting hypothesis

Krashen argues that language acquisition happens when we are so absorbed in the message that we forget that it consists of grammar and vocabulary or that it is a foreign language. For this hypothesis to stand, the message must be comprehensible, interesting and compelling. Thus, paying attention to the message could help reduce anxiety, given that anxiety has to be low for effective language acquisition. Therefore, the aim of this study was to allow learners to choose the books they might likely enjoy. This would help them to be so absorbed in reading that they would not even be aware that as they read, they are acquiring language.

2.4.2. Effortless Reading Hypothesis

Optimal reading for language acquisition is based on a reading that appears more entirely comprehensible without having problems. When reading is effortless, readers become absorbed in the message. This only happens when comprehension forms the foundation for reading. Allowing the co-researchers in this study to read books they found comprehensible would help them to be absorbed in reading with no anxieties that are usually associated with reading books they do not understand.

2.4.3. The Unawareness Acquisition Hypothesis

This hypothesis claims that if the input is comprehensible and compelling, the readers may not even be aware that they improve as they read. What they are interested in, is reading exciting books. When the readers become so absorbed in the book that they forget they are reading in a foreign language, they are usually unaware that they are actually acquiring a language.

2.4.4. The Comprehension-Checking Hypothesis

Tests on checking comprehension could discourage students from reading as they break the reading flow and shift focus to testing procedures. This could lead to less comprehension.

In the context of the information given above, the best way to motivate learners to read is to ensure that they have access to an abundance of fascinating, comprehensible reading materials and also create time for them to read (Krashen 2003). Therefore, our seriousness about promoting and encouraging literacy development should be reflected in our commitment to providing reading materials even though children in poverty-stricken areas have less access to books, leading to comparatively poor reading. In this study, Sustained Silent Reading was implemented to instil a reading culture in the learners. It is commonly accepted that learners who continually engage in pleasure or leisure reading during school closures show improvement in their reading proficiency and academic achievement. Such reading habits also help learners develop autonomy - a self-directed approach to learning (Krashen, 2004). When learners develop reading habits, they can read even when they are not at school. All teachers need to do is support them and help them find the right books. Thus, they will eventually transform into Self-directed reading when they are not at school. This could be significant in being exposed to abundant, comprehensible, and compelling input. This kind of exposure can be crucial for developing language skills, thereby mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms.

2.5. RESEARCH ON FREE VOLUNTARY READING

While some people might doubt the significance and impact of FVR, it has been established that forms of reading such as fiction reading and longer texts correlate to

reading proficiency and academic achievement more than other forms of reading (Jerrim & Moss, 2019, Torppa, Niemi, Vasalampi, Lerkkanen, Tolvanen & Poikkeus, 2020). Research shows that FVR has been profoundly applied in research focusing on second language learning with positive results. A study by McQuillan (2019) comparing direct instruction and FVR found, that FVR was six times more effective than explicit teaching of academic vocabulary. A case study of a second language learner who engaged in FVR also revealed significant gains. After reading and listening to stories containing rich language, her expression and confidence in English increased significantly. Other studies also reveal significant results in overall language improvement, especially in grammar and reading comprehension (Koc 2017, Efendi and Deyani 2022, Bautista & Maruland 2018). A study by Abualzain (2017) also revealed that FVR plays a significant role in improving the learners' writing skills. With these successes in mind, the following section demonstrates the unified, upward, spiral influence of the Input Hypothesis and Free Voluntary Reading in improving the reading skills of second language learners.

2.6. THE SPIRAL INFLUENCE OF THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS AND FREE VOLUNTARY READING IN IMPROVING READING SKILLS OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The relevance of the Input Hypothesis to this study was addressed in the preceding sections, as was the relevance of FVR. This section seeks to clarify and argue that the combination of the Input Hypothesis and Free Voluntary Reading is critical to the inculcation of a reading culture, which in turn leads to an improvement in reading skills, hence the title: The Spiral Influence of the Input Hypothesis and Free Voluntary Reading in Improving Reading Skills of Second Language Learners.

The study implemented the FVR approach to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The FVR approach is grounded in providing comprehensible and compelling input through reading. The idea of comprehensible and compelling input is the central tenet of the Input Hypothesis. Therefore, in this study, the provision of captivating and comprehensible input through FVR provided an opportunity for learners to increase their vocabulary and grammar, which directly affected their ability to read with comprehension. This supports Krashen's idea that we become better readers by reading. Therefore, the more

vocabulary we acquire, the more we can read more challenging texts with comprehension. Reading with comprehension is a fundamental reading skill that acts as a springboard for the application of other reading skills. In this regard, the picture below seeks to demonstrate the spiral influence of reading and how, with increased reading habits, we gradually progress to higher levels of language proficiency and reading benefits, which in turn enable us to read with comprehension more challenging texts.

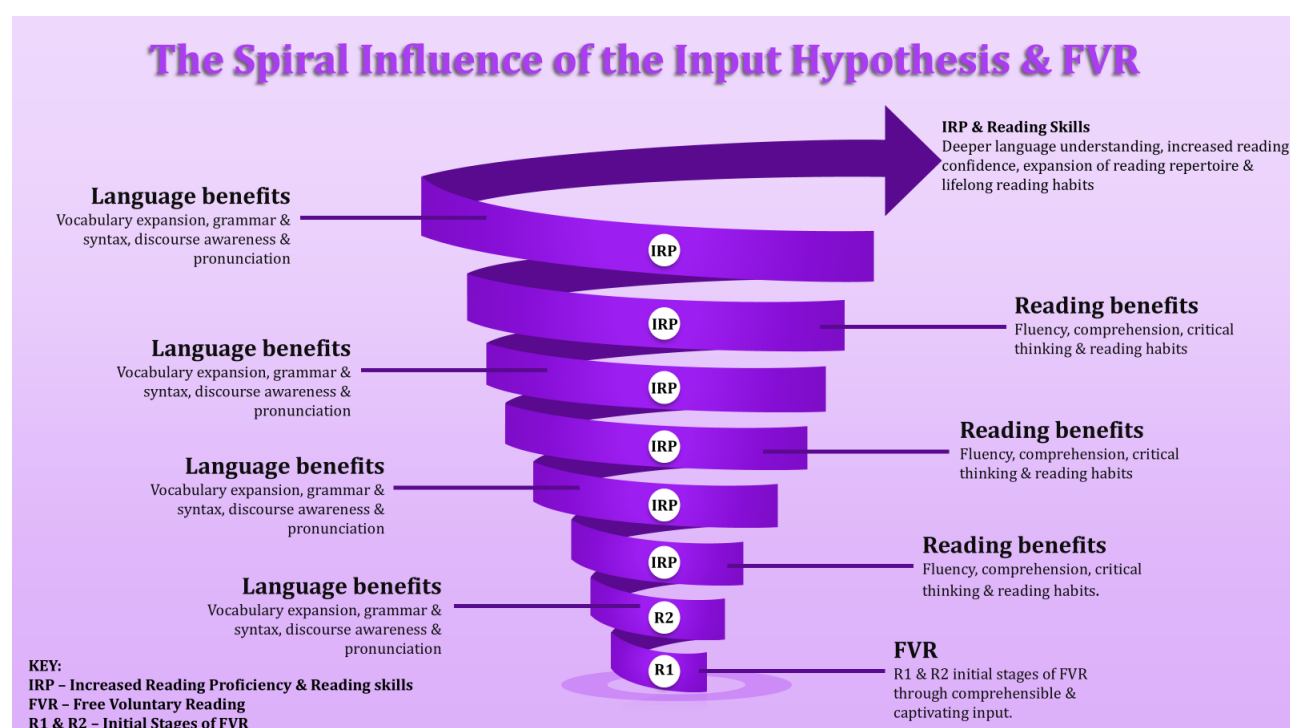


Fig. 1. The Spiral Influence of the Input Hypothesis and FVR

Learners gain language and reading benefits through increased exposure to comprehensible and captivating input. These combined benefits contribute to the improvement of reading proficiency and reading skills.

The spiral influence of the Input Hypothesis and FVR shown above demonstrates that we gain both the reading and language benefits through increased exposure to compelling and comprehensible input. First, the language benefits we gain from FVR are vocabulary expansion, grammar and syntax, and discourse awareness, which refers to the comprehension of text organisation and cohesion. Secondly, the benefits of reading could be fluency, comprehension, critical thinking, and reading habits. The combination of these benefits, in turn, helps readers develop a deeper understanding

of language and reading confidence. It also helps them expand their reading repertoire, instilling lifelong reading habits. This all boils down to the fact that reading makes us better readers. Thus, the explanation reveals a dynamic and interconnected process reflecting how crucial reading is in second or additional language learning and improving the learners' reading skills. The gradual expansion of the spirals symbolises the growth in language and reading benefits through increased exposure to comprehensible and captivating input. Through continued reading, readers eventually develop deeper language understanding, increased reading confidence, expanded reading repertoire and lifelong reading habits.

The explanation above reveals that the combination of FVR and the Input Hypothesis is critical to this study. In this way, exposing learners to FVR under the lens of the Input Hypothesis presented a golden opportunity to inculcate a reading culture in learners. With an instilled reading culture, learners are better positioned to improve their reading skills, thereby mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Therefore, FVR was implemented successfully with positive results, as demonstrated in the following chapters of this study.

2.7. LITERATURE ALIGNED TO THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY.

This section provides a review of literature aligned with the research objectives to establish the need for implementing Free Voluntary Reading to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

The COVID-19 pandemic, sudden, unexpected, and therefore not planned for, required swift measures to curb its devastating impact. Not only did it lead to the total lockdown of the economies in many countries, but it also led to the closure of traditional school services (United Nations 2020). The extraordinary nature of COVID-19 and the advent of school closures it imposed resulted in huge disruptions to the learners' education and learning (Sansone et al. 2021). In an effort to mitigate the consequences of school closures and to ensure that learning continued, national education stakeholders initiated remote learning policies that used broadcast media, online platforms and paper-based delivery (Avanasian, Mizunoya & Amaro 2021).

In a broader context, remote or distance learning can be described as a concept that involves online education, distance and e-learning, flexible learning, massive online courses and external education. Although teachers and learners do not meet in the usual instructional space, such as classrooms, one of the fundamental characteristics of distance learning is that technologies enhance contact and collaboration for all parties regardless of the distance between them (Sing & Thurman 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, this distance-based approach to education blends electronic and internet-based technology in learning. It uses a variety of applications and platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Zoom meetings, Google, Google Classroom and many others. An internet-connected computer is the main device required to enhance remote learning (Efriana, 2021). COVID-19-based remote learning could also be termed as emergency remote learning since it was characteristically an unplanned temporary transition in education delivery. The temporary attribute of this kind of learning emanates from the fact that when the crisis ends, a transition is made back to face-to-face or blended learning. Therefore, it is a temporary solution that ensures access to learning (Erarslan, 2021). The sudden and unplanned nature of COVID-19-induced remote learning means that it was not without consequences, particularly for learners in disadvantaged areas (Maree, 2022).

The transition to remote learning sidelined learners from rural areas. According to Stringer and Keys (2021), learners from schools serving low-income families and those attending schools in rural areas were more severely affected by the school closures. Alimi, Ayob, Abdullah, Sultan & Karuppanan (2021), further assert that there are learners who enjoyed the privilege of access to reliable internet and all the tools pertinent to online remote learning. However, the same could not be said for underprivileged learners who could not afford luxurious facilities like the internet connection and applicable technological equipment. South Africa was no different from these challenges. Studies show that schools in rural areas were affected by poor or lack of internet connectivity, thereby restricting learners from tools needed for online learning during school closures (Dube, 2020 & Omodan, 2020). These and many other challenges resulted in learning loss across the curriculum. Learners from rural English FAL classrooms were also negatively impacted by the school closures, thereby also incurring the COVID-19-induced learning loss. This study focused on how Free

Voluntary Reading could be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.7.1 FACTORS THAT LED TO THE LEARNING LOSS IN ENGLISH

The impact of COVID-19-induced school closures is also evident in English language learning, particularly in contexts where it was learned as an additional, second or foreign language. This section discusses explicitly how COVID-19-induced school closures affected English language learning, mainly those in rural areas, resulting in learning loss. Although the other language skills were also affected by COVID-19, this study primarily focused on mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.7.1.2. English language teachers' preparedness and their ICT skills

The shift to remote learning required teachers to be equipped with ICT skills to enhance effective teaching and learning. Although various platforms were used for effective teaching and learning of the English Language beyond the conventional classroom, the lack of teachers', learners' and parents' preparedness impeded successful learning, thus reducing the quality of learning (Nugroho & Atmojo, 2020). Further evidence reveals that the transition to remote learning happened suddenly, leaving teachers with inadequate time to prepare for remote learning. Although the use of technology was inevitable, some teachers were not equipped because of a lack of ICT skills (Efriana, 2021). The lack of preparedness and inadequate ICT skills implied that teaching and learning would be severely affected since the success of English language teaching and learning relied on the ability to utilize technology to the fullest (Kadir & Yunos, 2021).

2.7.1.3. Learners' lack of or access to ICT resources and the internet

The learners' lack of or limited access to ICT resources required for remote learning and the internet also affected English language learning in rural schools. A study in Turkey on the impact of COVID-19 on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes through the lenses of secondary learners reported that the lack of ICT resources was a real problem. Some learners had no laptops or tablets but only one phone owned by parents. Those learners could not learn when their parents were not around. Some learners failed to attend lessons because of poor internet connection or lack thereof

(Tumen-Akyildiz, Celik and Ahmed, 2021). Another Study that explored the challenge of EFL learning in rural areas during the pandemic revealed that EFL learning was affected by the learners' limited access to digital devices and the internet (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020; Paisal & Dwi, 2022). Yet another study revealed that some learners had to wait for their parents to come home from work so that they could borrow their parents' devices to do their schoolwork. Even though some learners had adequate access to electronic devices and the internet, they were not enthusiastic to engage in online learning. They displayed little concern for English as a Foreign Language literacy and task submissions. Consequently, assignments that could be completed in one week were usually completed after two weeks (Efriana 2021).

2.7.1.4. The Lack of support for learners

Lack of support for learners, both from parents and teachers, also negatively affected English Language learning, particularly in rural areas. According to Sugarman and Lazarin (2020), it is crucial to highlight that most English language learners come from homes where English is not the main language spoken. Therefore, schools may be the only perfect places for learners to gain exposure to listening, speaking, writing and reading in English, particularly the academic language which is essential for success in classwork. Therefore, Sugarman and Lazarin found that parents' capacity to provide support was limited during remote learning. Learner participants in a study based in the United Kingdom on English Additional Language reflected that they did not enjoy being taught from home because they often needed assistance to understand their work during school closures. The lack of support was also exacerbated by the parents' limited proficiency in English Language skills to support learning at home (Demie, Hau, Bellsham & Gay, 2021). Some learners even reported that they did not understand their teachers when they listened to them in front of the camera (Tumen, Celik & Ahmed, 2021). Therefore, learning from home placed learners in a position that demanded them to learn the language on their own. As a result, they struggled to understand and to overcome this challenge on their own (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

2.7.1.5. Learners' lack of engagement and motivation

Traditional classroom teaching and learning places the teachers in a position where they can assume direct control and ensure that learners are engaged and motivated throughout the learning process. Kaur and Aziz (2020) assert that teachers use a

variety of strategies that capture the interest of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners to engage them in exciting and fun activities that could motivate them to speak in class. Engaging learners actively in online remote learning becomes challenging for teachers since not all learners get accustomed to online learning, and it is even more difficult to get feedback from passive learners. Oza (2022) and Al-Zaabi (2021) also add that it is challenging to keep learners motivated in an English Language online class. What makes this even more challenging is the teachers' limited control and classroom management compared to face-to-face learning. Efriana (2021) discovered that some learners would join online classes and fill attendance registers but would not remain active throughout the whole class. Some would not participate from beginning to end. Even in situations where access to the internet and the quality of remote learning were improved, interminable absenteeism and insufficient engagement were more prevalent in learners from high-poverty English learners (Patrick et al. 2021).

2.7.1.6. Minimised opportunities to develop language through collaboration

The four language skills, listening, reading, speaking and writing, have to be integrated into language teaching. While it may not be simple to incorporate all these skills communicatively in a conventional English Language classroom, remote learning becomes even more inconvenient (Tumen et al., 2021). What may have made the teaching and learning of the English Language challenging could be linked to the idea that improved language proficiency rides on the successful promotion of information sharing through group learning and teaching engagements. Such a kind of learning helps learners to become vocal about their opinions as they work in groups. This gives learners the opportunity to learn the language. They learn new words as they interact with peers in shared activities (Rifiyanti, 2020). Therefore, it becomes evident that peer grouping is an invaluable weapon for realistic language development since it fosters interaction and improves conversational skills. As they engage in group activities, they learn new words from the other speakers (Hopman, Tick, Ende, Verhulst, Maras & Lier, 2020).

If collaborative environments are essential for language development, it is evident that language learning was dealt a blow because it requires interaction and a lot of practice to make sure that learners are engaged during the learning process. Learning from

home, away from their peers was, therefore, a challenge for collaborative English Language learning (Wirawati, Laili & Nashir, 2022; Makena & Mpiti, 2020). In other contexts, COVID-19-induced school closures robbed learners of immersion contexts required to develop English Language proficiency in daily, face-to-face interaction with peers and teachers (Kim, 2020). Sugarman and Lazarin (2020) further argue that the minimized opportunities to develop language skills were exacerbated by inadequate resources for remote learning and learning not tailored to assist English learners. If opportunities for learning language were minimized, it is clear that these led to learning losses in English language learning. Therefore, the aim of this study was to mitigate the learning loss in reading, particularly in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms, through the implementation of the Free Voluntary Reading approach.

2.7.2. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON READING

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented learning losses that varied according to country and context. As will be evidenced in this section, the disproportionate ripple effects of COVID-19 are still being experienced a few years after the pandemic. A growing concern that has been underscored by policymakers, educators, and researchers is that even short-term learning losses could accumulate with time, resulting in significantly prolonged learning losses over time (Bailey, Duncan, Murnane & Au Yeung 2021; Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek & Liu 2020). Despite all the gloom heralded by COVID-19, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that there were traces of silver lining, however minimal, that contributed positively, to a certain extent, to some of the learners' reading skills. This section presents findings on the impact of the pandemic on reading in English language classrooms.

2.7.2.1. Devastating impact of COVID-19 on reading

It is imperative to begin with a study that reports global learning loss. Jakubowsky, Gajderowicz and Patrinos (2023) used comparable reading scores to conduct a study on global learning loss of student performance. The study consolidated data from the PIRLS results with information from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to align the findings with the number of weeks the schools were fully or partially closed. The reason behind this approach was that UNESCO had been tracking and keeping records of school closures and methods for

delivery around the world. The analysis shows an average international reading decline of about 33% of the standard deviation, almost equivalent to more than a year of schooling. More significant declines were recorded for schools that closed for more extended periods and for lower-achieving students.

Research reveals that although COVID-19 is behind us, we are still grappling with its after-effects. This view is confirmed by the editorial in Education Journal (2022) about the after-effects of the pandemic on British learners. The report reveals that secondary schools in Britain are experiencing the devastating effects of COVID-19 on primary school learners who fell behind a few years back. Now, at the secondary level, these learners are battling to acclimatise. The most worrying issue about this ordeal is that secondary schools are not well equipped to deal with the problem. This issue presents various repercussions as some learners do not understand books suitably prescribed for their grades. Teachers face the monumental task of learning primary school teachers' skills because learners cannot cope with secondary education. It is revealed that these learners cannot read properly. The report further states that the 2021 government statistics revealed that for over 200,000 students, one in five eleven-year-olds would transition to secondary schools without being able to read to the expected standards. By 2022, this figure was predicted to be higher. Although the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) research tests results reveal that British learners perform above the average level for OECD, these results have always veiled a less than average performance from disadvantaged areas. These are the learners whom COVID-19 has hit the hardest. Poor reading performance is evident mostly for learners like these. This report reveals far more damaging effects of COVID-19, which require relentless efforts to implement strategies that curtail learning loss in reading.

Furthermore, another report in the United Kingdom (UK) on the impact of the school closures on pupils with English as an Additional Language revealed that English as an Additional Language learners were negatively impacted. English Language skills of reading, writing, and speaking were affected, with the writing skills being the most affected. The study argues that there was a discernible trend of English Language loss, which teachers detected in both primary and secondary phases. This was even worse for learners in the lower grades (Demie et al., 2021). A study by Scott (2021)

also found a significant loss in learners who took English as an Additional Language in the UK. The leading cause for this loss was attributed to the parent's inability to support learners due to language barriers. The findings also reveal that the younger the learners, the greater the regression in reading and writing when compared to the performance before COVID-19.

Studies based in the United States of America also revealed that COVID-19 negatively impacted the learners' reading skills. Interestingly, these studies revealed a disproportionate impact in terms of socio-economic status. (Pier, Hough, Christian, Bookman, Wilkenfeld and Miller (2021) confirm that learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and English language learners displayed significantly heightened learning loss compared to previous years. In their study, Relyea, Rich, Kim and Gilbert (2022) sought to investigate if learners made any progress in 2020-2021 compared to 2018-2019. The findings revealed that students displayed lower average reading gains for the period of nine months in the 2020-2021 school year with a learning loss amounting to 0.54, 0.27, and 0.28 standard deviation for Grades 3, 4, and 5, respectively. Furthermore, the results painted a gloomy picture for English learners from high-poverty settings, as significantly reduced reading gains were recorded. These findings were also echoed by the findings of Gray, Powell-Smith and Good (2023) in the United States. The study focused on Grades 1 to 6, comparing the scores from the 2020 to 2021 school year to the 2019 to 2020 school year. The findings reveal that there were significant declines in reading skills in the fall of 2020–2021 when compared to previous years; the 2019-2020 school year.

Furthermore, another study in the US tracked more than one million learners and found negative impacts on reading. The impact was more pronounced in students attending schools serving low-income families and students in rural areas, thereby revealing the disproportionate impact of COVID-19. The learners' performance at the end of 2020-2021 was 8 points behind the anticipated pre-COVID-19 performance, equaling a loss of 4 percentile rank points (The Renaissance Learning, 2021). Domingue, Hough, Lang and Yeatman (2021) measured Grades 1 to 3 reading development and discovered that learners were approximately 30% below the expected reading proficiency. The study also found that the impact on disadvantaged learners was even greater. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2021)

also published a report that revealed a significant decline in the average standards in reading in spring 2021. When compared to the pre-pandemic rates, the decline ranged from 7.4% in Grade 8 to 25.5%.

Elsewhere, a Finland-based study reported on math and reading skills among Finnish primary school learners prior and post COVID-19 school closures. While there were no differences in math, the findings revealed a decline in reading skills in the COVID-19 sample compared with pre-pandemic data. The results also demonstrated the prevalence of a slow development in reading fluency and comprehension in the COVID-19 cohort, thereby justifying that reading skills, specifically, were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lerkkanen, Pakannen, Salminen & Torppa, 2023). In Italy, a small negative impact in reading was reported (Carlana, La Ferrara & Lopez, 2023), while in Mexico, the learning loss was estimated in a range from 0.34 to 0.45 standard deviation in reading (Hevia, Vergara-Lope, Velasquez & Calderon, 2022). Another Turkey-based study reported that English was one of the subjects that incurred significant learning loss. A study by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) reported that English Language learners' scores in reading and writing reflected a decline in comparison to the time before the pandemic. This could be attributable to the fact that learners were denied the opportunity to engage in collaborative language learning activities. In Uganda, learning loss revealed that the percentage of learners regarded as proficient in English and literacy in 2021 declined by 5% and 13%, respectively, compared to 2018 (National Assessment of Progress in Education, 2022).

The discussion of the learning losses above is crucial as it helps to contextualise the South African situation on a global scale. In South Africa, a study by Makena and Mpiti (2020) aimed to determine the effects of social distancing on English First Additional Language development. The findings showed that there was a decline in the learners' language proficiency owing to the teaching methods that were used. The lack of collaborative gatherings, school closures and social distancing had a negative impact on both language learning and other subjects. A study based on the evidence of learning loss from the Western Cape systemic tests revealed that learning losses for language were far more severe in lexical comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing for Grades 3 and 6. Although the results for Grade 9 were not as severe, it should be noted that it may have been due to the fact that writing tests were not

included for Grade 9 in the systemic tests. However, the results generally reveal that the majority of learners across the levels have not yet acquired the basics of reading and writing (Van der Berg, Hoadley, Galant, Van Wyk & Bohmer, 2022). Wills and Van der Berg (2024) also analysed learning losses and how the school patterns changed in the South African education landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021. The review revealed that learning losses for South Africa were estimated at 38% to 118% of a year's worth of learning, further widening the learning inequalities in South Africa. These findings also revealed that not only were significant learning losses reported, but they also displayed great disparities. The comparison of the reported learning losses in South Africa becomes even more significant when expressed in contrast to 2021 PIRLS points across all 32 countries that participated in 2016 and 2021. South Africa's PIRLS scores for 2016 were 320 points, but a 31.4-point decline brought the 2021 results down to 288 points (Mullis, von Davier, Foy, Fishbein, Reynolds & Wry, 2023).

As shown above, it is essential to highlight that studies that reported on COVID-19-induced learning loss in English Language learning are based in primary and secondary schools. These studies reveal the negative effects of school closures and remote learning on English language development. Studies based in higher institutions of learning contrastingly reported that online remote learning was effective and that there were gains which were observed in English language learning (Xiuwen & Razali, 2021; Farahian, Parhiamnia & Maleki, 2022; Har, 2022; Latif, 2021; Fernandez-Malpartida, 2021; Zano & Charamba, 2021; Muftah, 2022; Alimi et al. 2021).

If not adequately addressed, learning losses incurred during COVID-19 school closures and rotational attendance might negatively impact students' progression to higher institutions of learning, their future productivity and national productivity (Molato-Gayares, Park, Raitzer, Suryadarma, Thomas & Van der Berg, 2021). Although the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be behind, the effects might last longer than expected since learning losses will likely increase for learners who fall behind as they progress through the grade levels (Van der Berg et al., 2022). An example attesting to this idea can be drawn from the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. The disaster led to three months of school closures, but the children who were affected continued to fall behind in subsequent years when compared to those who were not affected.

Even four years after the earthquake, they were 1.5 years behind groups that were not affected by the earthquake (Andrabi, Daniels & Das, 2021). This example reflects that mitigation strategies must be intensified, mainly when there is a paucity of studies focusing on the school-based and classroom-based strategies that English FAL teachers can employ to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Engaging in this study was essential for learners in rural areas because they did not have equal opportunities for remote learning in comparison with their counterparts in urban areas. To support this statement, Statistics South Africa (2022) revealed that in South Africa, only 6 per cent of South African Youth from ages 5-24 nationally participated in remote learning. There was also unequal access to remote learning, where 36 per cent of Indian/Asian and White youth in the same age group had increased access to remote learning in comparison to merely 9 per cent of Black South African youth.

Apart from the revised Annual Teaching Plans, which the Department of Basic Education implemented to mitigate the COVID-19-induced school closures, this study focused on what teachers could do in their subject areas to complement the ATPs and thereby mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The study argues that FVR is a powerful tool for mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.7.2.2. Silver lining for habitual readers during the COVID-19 era

The preceding section focused on the devastating impact of COVID-19 in terms of the learning loss in reading. Earlier, introductory sections pointed to the fact that the severity of the learning loss in reading varied according to factors such as socio-economic status and geographical location. For example, learners from rural areas. This section shows how some learners may have benefited from staying at home due to COVID-19-induced school closures.

While staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a learning loss in reading, there are other underlying factors that are more pertinent in the discussion of learning loss in reading. These factors are the availability of books or print-rich homes and the learner's reading habits. According to Atteberry and McEachin (2021) and Allington & McGill-Franzen (2017), the extent of reading loss and gains incurred during the

COVID-19 pandemic drew parallels with summer reading loss, which received extensive attention in the northern hemisphere, where it was discovered that learners who did not live in print-rich homes and were not habitual readers incurred more significant reading losses. Their reading proficiencies were more likely to be affected due to a lack of reading practice. Therefore, the same could be said about learners who did not live in print-rich homes during the pandemic and the other cohort of learners who had developed reading habits before the pandemic. A UK-based study conducted in the first half of 2020 reported that learners aged 9-18 enjoyed the benefits of free time during the lockdown, which they used to read more books. The report reveals that they read more during this time and that they enjoyed reading both print and digital reading materials. What is significant in this study is that the learners who enjoyed reading during the lockdown were those who read before the lockdown (Clark & Picton, 2020).

Furthermore, studies by Sun, Loh, O'Brien and Silver (2021) and Sun, Loh and Nie (2021) also corroborated the findings of Clark and Picton. Their studies revealed that reading was in the top three of the most preferred leisure activities during the pandemic, with learners reporting that they enjoyed reading more than usual. Learners with more print materials at home during the pandemic preferred print to digital books. The results further reveal that learners who enjoyed reading before the school closures demonstrated increased reading habits during the pandemic. Therefore, it is crucial to develop reading habits while learners are at school so that these could result in independent reading when at home (Sun, Loh & Nie, 2021; Jato, 2021).

2.7.2.2.1. Preferred reading materials during the lockdown

One of the factors that may have contributed to the learning loss in reading could be that literature-oriented activities, such as visiting libraries, were not available during the pandemic (Sun, Loh, O'Brien, & Silver, 2021). The restricted availability of books meant that learners read the books available at home. Some ended up re-reading some of the books. Those whose homes did not have any books pointed to this as the reason why they did not read during the school closures (Sun, Loh & Nie, 2021). On the contrary, it could be argued that those who had digital devices could read from such. However, research reveals that this was not the case.

Reading can be done through print or digital copies. Therefore, it is generally perceived that due to the ubiquity of digital devices, with perceived immersive tendencies for learners who are digital natives, there is more preference for digital reading. Although there are mixed findings, research demonstrates that there is still a preference for print (Loh & Sun, 2019). While they are open to using the idea of digital reading, secondary school learners in one study indicated that they still preferred reading hard copies to digital copies. In some cases, technological gadgets were used sparingly when reading for pleasure (McVicker, 2019; Sun et al., 2021). While this may be intriguing, another study found that the reading preferences of learners who engaged in pleasure reading during the pandemic were influenced by the availability. They preferred print reading since they could not afford access to digital books (Abimbola, Shabi, Aramide, 2021). Interestingly, respondents in another study indicated that they preferred hard copies for pleasure reading since they were convenient. They also acknowledged the value derived from the pleasurable feeling of the paper sheets and their ability to stimulate their imaginations (Melo & Sanches, 2022). In their study, Sun, Loh and Nie (2021) reported that one of the reasons they preferred print books was because they found digital devices distracting since they became tempted to do other activities like playing games. Another preference for print could be based on the fact that learners may feel that reading from digital gadgets puts a strain on their eyes (Kuzmicova, Schilhab & Burke 2020). Based on this information, it is clear that both print and digital copies still play a significant role in the learners' reading habits.

2.7.3. STRATEGIES TEACHERS USE TO MITIGATE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

The literature review discussed in the preceding section focused on different ways in which the COVID-19-induced school closures impacted English Language learning. Emphasis on this section also revealed that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural backgrounds and low socio-economic status were the ones who were severely impacted. For example, Valle (2021) reported that the average learning loss in California hides the reality that some students were more adversely affected than others and that without intensive mitigation strategies, these students may never catch up. Therefore, support and mitigation strategies must be directed to those who suffered the most and those who desperately need it. A report on learning loss in

California for Grades 4 to 10 found that low-income students and English Language learners were among those who experienced the most significant loss and that those groups were falling behind even after the return to school (Pier, Hough, Christian, Bookman, Wilkenfield & Miller, 2021).

Despite efforts for learning to continue and recover after the pandemic, school closures paint a gloomy picture of lost opportunities for learning, particularly for early grades and among learners who were already struggling. Therefore, mitigation must involve intense recovery plans to address the learning loss and the adverse social-emotional outcomes of isolation and closures (Page, Leonard-Kane, Kashefpakdel, Riggall & Guerriero, 2021). On this note, it is imperative to review recovery, remediation or mitigation strategies employed nationally and in the classrooms to curb the devastating effects of COVID-19-induced learning loss. More specifically, this section will also delve into the classroom-based practices and strategies English Language teachers currently employ to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The goal is to identify the best practices for rural English FAL learners and demonstrate the need for the current study, which proposes FVR implementation as a cost-effective intervention that can be used to help learners in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.7.3.1. Conducting assessments to determine how the pandemic affected learners

Before any interventions, research reveals that the first step is to assess the extent to which learners were affected by the school closures. Understanding information about learners and their learning journey is a fruitful exercise that helps one to get a deeper understanding of learners and their progress (Aldosemani & Khateeb, 2022). This process could potentially reveal gaps in knowledge that contribute to learning loss, thus revealing areas that need immediate attention. Therefore, Molato-Gayares et al., (2021) argue that any recovery plans should first start by assessing students to inform teachers, schools, and education departments of how severe the learning loss may have been. Determination of the severity of this learning loss will assist teachers in planning and designing lessons that address the learners' immediate needs. Thus, teaching and learning could be modelled along the learners' current level of performance. Grounding mitigation strategies in prior assessments would help to

measure losses and then employ assessments to measure the efficacy of the interventions (Patrinos, 2022). The process is crucial as it can help teachers tailor their instruction to address the learners' individual needs (Saliccioli, 2021). In their study based in India, Pattnaik and Nath (2023), reported that schools that administered tests for math and language at the beginning of the year reported gains in learning. The gains were attributed to the diagnostic tests, which helped teachers identify the learners' needs and then modelled their instruction to meet those needs, often through individualized instruction. UNESCO (2021) also reports that countries like Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Honduras, the Cayman Islands, Kenya and Benin assessed students' learning to reveal areas that needed remedial learning. Such comprehensive assessments helped these countries to tailor education to the learners' specific needs.

Instruction that is informed by the learners' needs can be called adaptive or targeted instruction because it is adapted to cater to the learners' individual needs (UNESCO 2021). Targeted instruction aims at providing instruction in line with the learners' learning level rather than by age or grade. This form of instruction significantly improves learning, particularly foundational literacy and numeracy. It can be implemented through tutors, teaching assistants or even education technology (Angrist et al., 2021). Since there is no one general inclusive approach to learning, targeted instruction is essential for it anchors on adapting the learning experience to ensure that instruction corresponds to the learners' specific needs, learning goals and interests (Thompson, 2023). A study by Angrist et al., (2021) reported that Botswana implemented targeted instruction in the north-east region of the country when the schools reopened. They also revised the roles and responsibilities of the staff members to formalize implementation. The Ministry of Education also provided training, with the expectation that there should be weekly progress reports. At the core of the implementation were the regional directors' direct and frequent visits to the schools to monitor progress. The early data from the intervention revealed that the learning levels in the north-eastern part of the country were improving faster than in other regions where the intervention had not been implemented.

Successful implementation of targeted instruction relies on formative assessments. These are the assessments that continually measure students' learning (Saliccioli,

2022). According to Molato-Gayares et al. (2021), teachers must conduct periodic formative assessments of individual learners to determine their learning levels and continually model teaching and learning strategies to their needs. This practice could also help teachers to offer appropriate support to learners who are falling behind. A California-based study followed the efforts of thirty-seven school districts in mitigating students' learning loss in low-income students, English Language learners and learners with disabilities. Based on the data from assessment and screening tools to determine gaps and then provide support, these districts employed various strategies to address the learners' needs. Some of the practices included targeted instruction in smaller classes and small in-person groups for tutoring and instruction. In some cases, high school interns were employed and trained on how to teach reading. These interns worked as instructional aides assigned to work with small groups of two or four learners. They also provided a Summer Reading Academy that involved enrichment programmes designed to engage learners fully in learning. These strategies were successful because they were evidence-based interventions that worked to identify gaps and then provide targeted instruction to students who required additional assistance beyond large classroom teaching and learning. These strategies were employed in a repetitive cycle until learners had reached their goals (Valle, 2021).

2.7.3.2. High-dosage tutoring

High-dosage or intensive tutoring involves the use of tutors with deep subject knowledge to help learners recover and accelerate learning (Patrinos, 2022). It comprises intensive one-to-one learning, or small groups, on a constant daily basis during the school day or after school (Fryer & Howard-Noveck, 2020). Aimed at disadvantaged learners, the argument for high-dosage tutoring is that it could boost students learning by extra five months over one or two terms of schooling (Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020; Sonneman & Goss, 2020). Hanover Research (2020) found that a high-dosage tutoring programme is among the most cost-effective strategies for enhancing academic performance and learning recovery. The report emphasizes that one-on-one tutoring several times a week for learners who encounter challenges in reading and math comparatively yields the highest educational improvement. However, the one-on-one nature of the programme implies that it could be relatively costly, but there are also publicly-funded tutoring programmes (Kirkenboen et al. 2021). The success of high-dosage tutoring relies on the size of the group and how

frequently tutoring sessions are offered (Pan & Sass, 2020). Consequently, Patrinos (2022) adds that it can be implemented in groups of six or fewer, with tutoring taking place at least four or more days per week. For this programme to succeed, teachers also have to be highly trained.

Further research reveals that high-dosage tutoring is effective. Italy implemented state-funded high-dosage tutoring during the school closures with impressive results. The programme was mainly targeted at disadvantaged learners using volunteer university students as tutors (Carlana & La Ferrara, 2021). Spain also implemented the same strategy as Italy with impressive outcomes, but it used regular school teachers instead of volunteer university students (Gortazar, Hapkau & Radan, 2022). The Netherlands implemented several online-based high-dosage tutoring programmes with positive outcomes (Patrinos, 2022). Countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Netherlands have invested in large-scale tutoring programmes to respond to the debilitating effects of the pandemic on education, and they have made significant progress. Australia employed certified teachers, while the US and the UK used paraprofessionals (Gallagher-Mackay, Mundy, De Britto & Asim, 2022). De Bruijn and Meeter (2023) conducted a study which tested the efficacy of high-dosage tutoring after the Dutch ministry subsidized schools to implement catch-up programmes to mitigate learning losses. The learners who participated in the programme had significantly lower grades than non-participants. The findings revealed that the learners who participated in high-dosage tutoring made significant progress, with scores higher than those in non-tutored subjects. As an alternative, Botswana employed over-the-phone tutoring using text messages and direct phone calls with promising results (Angrist, Bergman, Brewster & Matsheng, 2020; Hassan, Islam, Siddique & Choon, 2021). This further demonstrates that high-dosage tutoring is one of the most effective strategies for mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss.

2.7.3.3. Extension of learning hours or school day

Extending the school day has been found to be one of the most helpful interventions in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss. Pan and Sass (2020) assert that extending a school day by an hour for the whole year of schooling or implementing summer programmes could be a viable option for mitigating learning loss. Defeyter et

al. (2021) also emphasize that extending school days could improve learning outcomes. The extended hours could be added either before or after school. The extension of a school day could include supplementary classes, a reduction of school breaks between terms and longer school weeks (Molato-Gayares et al., 2021). The findings in Valle's report (2021) also reveal that extending learning, such as after-school classes and summer programmes, is effective in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss. UNESCO (2021) reports that countries like Hungary, the Netherlands and the United Arab Emirates implemented before or after-school programmes which effectively increased learning hours. A government-led remedial programme in India used community volunteers to offer 60 to 90 minutes of complementary lessons every day after the normal school day. The intervention helped learners to catch up by 28% in language and 20.7% in mathematics (Singh, Romero & Muralidharan, 2022). In South Africa, the extension of learning hours in the Western Cape evolved as a direct response to the report by Van De Berg (2021), which provided proof of substantial learning loss in the province. The report also offered recommendations for recovery. The Western Cape May 2023 #BackonTrackCampaign prioritized core subjects by reducing the number of instructional hours for Life Orientation in favour of Mathematics and language in the Foundation Phase. Thus, the total number of hours gained to mitigate learning loss in these areas adds up to three additional hours per week in the Foundation Phase in this province. However, there is no evidence yet, of whether this intervention has been taken up in other provinces (Hoadley, 2023). This reveals that a lot still needs to be done, specifically at the classroom level, hence the need for this study.

2.7.3.4. Remediation and Curriculum re-orientation

Remediation and curriculum re-orientation are other interventions which have been employed to remediate lost learning. This idea was based on the rationale that instead of covering everything that learners did not cover during the pandemic, the curriculum should be adjusted to address only the most essential skills and knowledge for a specific grade (UNESCO, 2021). Revising the curriculum would create more time for core and fundamental competencies, preferably in literacy and mathematics (Molayo-Gayares, 2021). Therefore, remediation and curriculum re-orientation aimed at the learners' learning levels could mitigate long-term learning loss (Kaffenberger, 2021; Ardington, Wills and Kotze, 2021). In this vein, Greece implemented a national

remedial teaching policy, which helped 70% of poorly performing students advance to a higher academic performance group within a short period. About one-third of these learners were able to sustain high-performance levels even after they had left the remedial teaching programme (Papadogiannis, Wallace, Pouloupoulos, Vissalakis, Lepouras & Platis, 2023). Turkey implemented, the I am in the Compensation Programme, which was successful since it supported learners academically and also socially. It instilled a positive attitude because learners generally looked excited as they participated in the programme. The programme was meant to give students equal opportunities and to reduce the differences between schools (Karbeyaz & Kurt, 2022). Even though the losses were substantial in Math and English in Nigeria, the implementation of supplemental lessons in 76 low-cost schools situated in low-income areas helped learners greatly recover after two months of participation in the programme. A follow-up on the same participants a year later, who were then in the next grade, revealed that they had recovered all the lost learning.

The re-packaging of the curriculum in South Africa by the Department of Basic Education evolved into updated Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs). These ATPs are meant to respond to the closures and the greatly compromised academic calendar. The ATPs serve as a guide to assist teachers to counter the reduced teaching time and reinforce foundational skills (Angrist et al. 2021). These ATPs have guidelines which emphasize several essential points involving assessment, differentiation and clear planning for learning recovery. However, the implementation-related setback is that the responsibility for school and classroom implementation has been devolved to teachers and the schools' senior managers with no additional time or resources for this work. As a result, school-based interventions for addressing learning loss, like the extension of the school day, are left to the teachers' discretion (Hoadley, 2023). Therefore, this point reveals the need for studies focused on the classroom interventions teachers can employ to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss, particularly for learners in rural areas who did not have equal opportunities to learn during remote learning owing to factors such as connectivity and lack of digital resources (Dube, 2020). In this regard, this study becomes essential in the context of promoting classroom-based approaches or strategies teachers can use to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Therefore, due to documented success in second or foreign language learning, Free

Voluntary Reading was proposed as an invaluable approach towards mitigating this loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

While the strategies explored thus far could also be beneficial in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in contexts where English is taught as a second language, they are not anchored in the Input Hypothesis. Additionally, due to a myriad of factors that are not the focal point of this study, some of them might not be applicable to the South African context. Therefore, these observations justify the need to implement a strategy that could be beneficial to mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The goal is to help learners acquire language to improve their language skills while simultaneously acquiring autonomy, an essential skill for lifelong learning.

2.7.3.5. Classroom strategies in English Language instruction and learning

This section provides evidence of the different strategies employed with positive outcomes, particularly in English language classrooms. It mostly focuses on cases where English Language is taken as an additional, second, or foreign language. A study on how teachers adapted to post-COVID-19 English Language teaching and learning in Indonesia revealed that the most important thing was that teachers were aware that language learning improves through communication. Consequently, they created interactive and communicative learning environments based on the learners' competence level in their English Language classes. They divided learners into pairs or small groups to perform tasks assigned to them. These activities incorporated interactive dialogue teaching and learning to enhance the communicative competencies of the learners (Fitrianingsih & Lestari, 2023). Using almost the same grouping strategy, teachers in a study by Dewi, Artini and Wahyuni (2022) used cooperative learning in their English classes with good results. The role of a teacher was to monitor the group work and determine progress while providing feedback and suggestions. Through this learner-centred atmosphere, the teachers continually encouraged learners to participate actively in group activities. Although it is not explicitly stated, the strategies used in the English language classrooms in these two studies align with the precepts of the Input Hypothesis. Creating collaborative classroom environments meant that learners were exposed to increased levels of input from their peers. Increased input presented opportunities for them to learn the English

language unconsciously from their peers, thereby improving their ability to express themselves. Implementing FVR in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms could also be helpful in developing a learner-centred atmosphere since improved reading habits can potentially develop learners who can study independently.

Some of the strategies teachers use reveal their commitment and innovation. Another study exploring the strategies and innovations teachers employed in teaching English in post-pandemic reports that English Language teachers, in addition to textbooks and worksheets, creatively developed worksheets designed to the character and the context of the environment around them. They also sourced information from books and the internet as they created opportunities for contextual learning of language. Some teachers asked learners to record videos while they practised conversations, read news or introduced themselves. These videos were then uploaded to YouTube or other social media platforms. Learners became enthusiastic when they considered that their work would be viewed by others. These strategies demonstrated significant gains (Wirawati, Laili & Nashir, 2022). Another study investigated the efficacy of the Personal Digital Inquiry Learning model in mitigating learning loss in English classes. Despite the challenges teachers encountered in implementing this model, they reported that there was evidence of gains as this model enhanced the learners' participation and higher-order thinking skills (Anggraeni, Firdaus, Arifin, Winarsih & Farikah, 2023).

Despite these documented successes in English language learning, there is a paucity of studies exploring how Free Voluntary Reading can be used as a mitigation strategy in English language classrooms. More specifically, there is a paucity of studies in South Africa exploring the strategies teachers use to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in either English Home language classrooms or English First Additional Language classrooms, particularly in rural areas. In a move to fill this void, this study demonstrates how FVR can be implemented to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural EFAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.7.4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON IMPLEMENTING FREE VOLUNTARY READING TO MITIGATE LEARNING LOSS IN READING

The preceding sections of this chapter discussed the principles and the benefits of FVR in English language classrooms, particularly where English is taken as a second or foreign language and, in the context of this study, an additional language. Evidence was also provided in the form of success stories reporting on the use of FVR in English language classrooms. This section reports on the literature relating to how FVR can be implemented in English classrooms. It is essential to note that the conditions suitable for implementation are context-bound. Therefore, this section will draw on how different studies successfully implemented FVR.

2.7.4.1. Highlights on Free Voluntary Reading and implementation

FVR, sometimes referred to as self-selected reading, has its roots in the Reading Hypothesis, which is one of the focal points of the Input Hypothesis for providing comprehensible input. The Reading Hypothesis asserts that reading for comprehension is the bedrock for reading ability, writing ability, vocabulary and spelling. The Reading Hypothesis also enables students to develop the ability to understand and use complex grammar rules without direct instruction (Krashen, 2018). In this study, sustained silent reading (SSR) was employed to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Where necessary, a slight variation of guided self-selected reading was used. Sustained silent reading refers to the in-school reading approach where a few minutes from the language class are devoted to reading. Students are free to select and read any material they want to read. No written or oral reports or any form of accountability is required (Krashen 2018). SSR differs from extensive reading because, in extensive reading, learners are expected to give a brief description of what they have read. For example, a report or a short description of what they have read (Krashen, 2003). On this note, Patrick (2019) argues that the over-abundance of testing grades and accountability takes away enjoyment from reading, thereby denying learners the opportunity to develop language through comprehensible input. Therefore, O'Brien (2020) believes that the significant decline in reading among learners can be attributed to the implementation of a curriculum that prescribes reading materials that learners often find uninteresting. Additionally, the requirements for learners to account through tasks and assessments that monitor progress deprive learners of the mere benefit of

deriving pleasure from what they are reading. FVR is the easiest way to provide compelling and comprehensible input. Therefore, the most important thing is to provide books and create time for learners to read (Ulrich & Tyndorf, 2018).

For learners who are still young and lacking the ability to find books that are not above their level, the solution is Guided Self-Selected Reading (GSSR). Here the role of a teacher is to help and guide learners to select appropriate books (Krashen & Mason, 2020). GSSR requires learners to provide some information that could help teachers recommend other books of interest. Such information includes the book title, book level, number of pages read, a book rating and a summary that the teacher may find helpful to make recommendations for further reading. The teacher can also get some of the information through engaging in conversations with the learners (Mason, 2019). One way of ensuring that GSSR is manageable and effective is to model learners towards narrow reading. This process involves reading materials from the same author and genre. In this way, the learner is likely to encounter familiar topics and words which might relieve them of the burden of trying to understand too many new vocabulary items (Mason & Smith, 2021).

Another critical factor in the implementation of FVR is the affective filter. Krashen (1982) emphasizes that keeping the affective filter at its lowest level is an integral part of language acquisition. If students do not understand what they are reading, they may become less motivated, stressed and anxious. This will prevent the language acquisition process from taking place (Mason & Smith 2021). Therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers to develop and maintain conducive reading environments. They should help learners develop and use reading skills like skimming and scanning. Ensuring that there are no disruptions during the reading sessions and reading along with them could motivate students to read even more (Hao, 2018).

With the above in consideration, Krashen (2016) reminds teachers that an interesting hypothesis about FVR is that it bridges the gap between everyday conversational language and the highly advanced levels commonly referred to as academic language. Krashen acknowledges that FVR alone will not elevate a reader to the highest level of literacy. However, it enhances the reader's competence levels to the point where more challenging texts begin to be comprehensible. FVR contributes by enhancing literacy

and knowledge. The implications of this statement could lead to the hypothesis that bringing the reader to the level where more challenging texts begin to be comprehensible paves the way for more advanced levels of language enrichment. The more one engages with these challenging texts, the more one attains advanced levels of literacy. According to McQuillan (2019), reading helps learners develop cognitively and linguistically. This makes FVR even more critical in second or foreign language learning. This is one of the many reasons why the study considers FVR to be one of the most effective approaches to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

2.7.4.2. The role of Libraries when implementing Free Voluntary Reading

Libraries play a crucial role in any reading-based intervention. The success of implementing FRV to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural depends on the functionality of libraries. Therefore, this section discusses the characteristics and the role of a functional library, the librarians, general design appeal, and the creation of homey and inviting reading spaces for learners.

A library is the foundation of any educational system. It is the role of the libraries to build a collection of relevant and relatable reading materials that will entice learners to read. Therefore, schools should ensure that their libraries are functional (Akinola, 2021; Nzara & Nampombe, 2024; Barber & Klauda, 2020). The presence of a library does not only serve to provide books. Alex-Nmecha & Horsfall (2019) agree that libraries go beyond the mere provision of books; they play a critical role in promoting literacy, for they can assist learners in developing skills they can use to survive and thrive in a global information society. Therefore, the lack of a well-resourced library and a librarian makes it challenging for learners to access and use the library resources. A library is crucial because it can ignite and develop reading habits among learners (Baba & Effendi, 2020).

Within the library, effective librarians are not only responsible for ensuring that libraries are functional, but they are also responsible for igniting the learners' desire to read. A librarian plays an important role in developing and shaping novice readers into habitual readers by recommending good reading materials. Thus, libraries and librarians are essential to promoting FVR and meeting the leisure needs of the reading public

(Biswas, 2023; Reed & Oslund, 2018). In this regard, the findings of a study by Merga (2021) reveal that a supportive library staff is essential to establishing inviting and supportive spaces. Such spaces create comfortable spaces for pleasure reading.

Apart from providing reading materials and the supportive role played by the librarians, libraries should also be appealing to learners by using appropriate furniture. According to Merga (2021), appropriate furniture helps readers feel comfortable. Thus, furniture like comfortable chairs promotes warm, welcoming reading spaces. Therefore, relaxed and comfortable seating creates ambient spaces that could ignite the passion for reading. Suganya & Kalaivani (2023) also reiterated that investments should be made towards creating comfortable reading environments with comfortable furniture and a quiet atmosphere. When these conditions are met, learners are more likely to be enthused by the idea of pleasure reading.

If research proves that learners are more likely to engage fully in learning if there are conducive academic spaces, the same can also be said for pleasure reading (Merga 2021). Reading spaces like libraries and classrooms should portray an atmosphere that motivates learners to read. Adetayo & Lawal (2024) point out that well-designed and organised library environments promote functionality, developing a feeling of order and comfort, factors that are essential for establishing desirable reading environments. A study by Adetayo, Adekunmisi, Otonekwu and Adesina (2023) reveals how influential adaptable and welcoming environments are on the learners' reading experiences. Thus, library spaces need to be inviting and conducive so that they can accommodate the learners' diverse needs, thereby increasing focus and engagement. Further findings by Merga (2021) reveal that a warm and home-like atmosphere where learners can sit and read quietly and focus on their reading is an essential component of a functional library. Decorations also play a crucial role in creating welcoming reading spaces, especially when learners are part of the decision-making process in determining the nature of those decorations. They cultivate a sense of ownership that deepens their roots in the culture of reading.

The discussion in this section reveals that libraries are not just spaces meant for providing books. They play a critical role in helping learners develop reading habits. Therefore, schools should ensure that libraries are functional so that interventions like

implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading will be successful.

2.7.4.3. The importance of a reading period in FVR

Research reveals that the first step towards developing the learners' reading habits is by ensuring that there is time set aside for reading. Despite the overwhelming documentation of the successes of FVR, attempts by schools to incorporate more technology into the curriculum have left insufficient or no time for in-school reading (Whitten, Labby & Sullivan, 2019). While technology cannot be divorced from education, Akinola (2021) argues that the best way to develop a reading culture is by creating a timeslot in the timetable reserved only for reading. Such a reading period would gradually help learners adopt a culture of reading, thereby improving a reading culture. Therefore, schools should consider reading as an integral part of the curriculum, which cannot be shelved away. In the same context, Gonser (2021) also reiterates that if teachers want to inculcate the reading culture in their classrooms, an ideal way of doing it is by prioritizing in-class reading. Despite the teachers' overwhelming pressure to meet the curriculum demands, creating in-class reading times or periods is a powerful weapon that may have a far more lasting impact on the learners' reading and writing skills (Ford, 2020).

Research also confirms that creating time for in-class reading greatly benefits learners. A Turkish study on implementing such reading times or periods found that they were instrumental in developing the learners' reading habits. Even the learners who did not have reading habits gradually developed a positive attitude towards reading (Arici, 2020). In a study based in a rural US district, participants reflected that they never made time to read for pleasure at home. Fascinated by the idea of choosing their preferred books, they indicated that creating time for them to read quietly in class motivated them to read. Although their study included some form of accountability not advocated in the current study, the researchers concluded that the learners' choice and in-class reading provided a fertile reading environment (Allred & Cena, 2020).

As discussed in the preceding sections, the proponents of FVR argue that the first step towards implementation is to provide books and create time for learners to read. This is why establishing reading periods could be one of the most efficient ways of

implementing FVR. Thus, the implementation would not be left to the discretion of individual teachers. When a reading period is included in the timetable, it ensures that the whole school embarks on a shared vision to promote reading and inculcate a reading culture amongst learners, a move that lays a solid foundation for improved performance in all subjects.

2.7.4.4. Free Voluntary Reading in Practice

This section reviews how FVR has been implemented in different English as a second/foreign language classroom studies. In a publication on the application of Sustained Silent Reading in various stages of English learning, Guo (2020) begins with the acknowledgement that since high school learners may have acquired some basic English knowledge after several years of schooling, they can understand English textbooks without much struggle. However, their limited time for reading books is robbing them of the opportunity to develop an interest in reading. They may have low self-efficacy due to the paucity of enough vocabulary. Test-oriented learning and low self-efficacy discourage them from English reading. Therefore, this study sought to create opportunities for rural English FAL Grade 10 learners to acquire and develop their language skills through FVR.

Implementing FVR at the high school level requires teachers to assist learners in selecting reading materials by employing the “Five-Finger Test” to ensure that the book they have chosen is appropriate. Dedicating 10 to 15 minutes to SSR in English class or setting up a morning reading session gradually eases learners into the reading habit. Teachers should continually observe the learners’ reading motivation so that they can help where necessary. Allowing learners to choose their own reading materials, followed by uninterrupted pleasure reading, motivates learners to develop reading habits. Arranging exciting activities after SSR where learners can share their reading experiences could also encourage learners to read more. These sentiments concur with the findings of Bautista and Marulanda (2018). The study explored the effect of FVR on students’ vocabulary usage and self-directedness in language learning. The needs analysis that preceded this study established that students were not motivated to read due to insufficient vocabulary and limited access to materials of interest in the target language. After the FVR intervention, the students' reading habits improved significantly, with positive results on language development.

Mokoena and Tsotetsi (2021) implemented FVR to enhance reading comprehension for English FAL learners in a rural high school. They share that the most fundamental aspect of implementation is to involve the participants in identifying the problem so that their voices can be heard. Thus, the participants are regarded as co-researchers. Identifying the problem is followed by a collective effort to find the solution. The study reveals that it is essential to identify conditions pertinent to the successful implementation of FVR. For FVR to work, the co-researchers found that a print-rich environment was essential. They also expressed the desire to have walls covered in posters that inspire them to read. They were allowed to bring their posters. Some of the posters were of celebrities reading. These posters were then posted on the walls of the classroom. Upon agreeing that the library had to be fully functional with a wide range of books to choose from, they established a library committee to ensure functionality. Drop-in boxes were created in the classroom so that some of the reading materials could be within reach. Kept in these boxes, were a variety of reading materials like newspapers, magazines, and books learners might consider interesting. The learner co-researchers also appealed that they would be even more motivated if teachers could drop everything and read along with them during the Sustained Silent Reading. Learners engaged in reading for an hour once a week, where teachers would also drop everything and read. Learners were also taught word-attacking and dictionary skills to find contextual meanings of words. The intervention significantly improved the learners' reading habits with envisaged language development.

In his journey of three and a half years using FVR and comprehensible input, Patrick (2019) applied the principle of input theory, which states that we acquire language when we are exposed to the messages we understand. He highlighted the importance of allowing learners to read books that were interesting to them. The findings in his study revealed that if this did not happen, learners who felt that they had chosen the wrong books developed resentment towards reading. He also discovered that regular testing and grading hampered the desire to read. Eventually, he developed the guidelines below for choosing appropriate books.

- Students can look at the cover of the book and tell if it looks interesting. Some books display the main character on the cover, while others use specific colours

and images to give clues to the storyline. This can help learners guess what is inside (Patrick, 2019).

- In his classes, learners found it helpful to feel how good books were to hold. For example, the thickness of the book may reflect the complexity of the language and the details of the story. Some learners want bigger books with bigger font sizes, which are easier to read (Patrick, 2019).
- What do learners already know about the author and the title? This might stimulate their interest since some books may treat topics learners already know. This could make the language in such stories more comprehensible.
- Pictures in the books also make the language more comprehensible (Patrick, 2019).

In his journey with FVR, Patrick proved that accountability in reading does not automatically lead to gains in language. He witnessed more success when learners read freely without the burden of accountability.

He also shares the insights below as a result of his encounter with FVR.

- Reading materials can be created online for those who have access (Patrick, 2019).
- When FVR is considered a cornerstone of the classroom by both teachers and learners, it gains more importance and becomes enjoyable (Patrick, 2019).
- Since learners easily copy the habits of their teachers, teachers who also read during the reading sessions inspire their learners to develop reading habits. Teachers can even share what they have been reading (Patrick, 2019).
- Setting apart time to read may be seen as enforcing reading. This contradicts the principle of FVR, but the bottom line is that learners will not read if teachers do not create opportunities for reading. When the researcher first implemented FVR, learners demonstrated reluctance, but they eventually developed interest and asked for more books to read (Patrick, 2019).
- It is vital to make learners aware that they need to read for enjoyment, not for the competition of how many books they read. If a competitive pattern arises, and is sustained, some learners may become less motivated to read. Some may even feel embarrassed about their reading ability (Patrick, 2019).

- It is important to maintain consistency and adhere to the established reading periods with the teacher as a role model (Patrick, 2019).

A study by Ahmed (2012) also implemented voluntary reading to improve students' language awareness. Ahmed had taught at different levels for many years and had used FVR in his classrooms with remarkable outcomes. His implementation involved keeping a ledger with a separate page for each student. Recorded in the three columned pages of the ledger were the students' names, the number of books they had read, their titles and how well they were progressing. He employed sustained silent reading with one class per week, which was mainly dedicated to FVR. Students would be asked to visit the library so that they could change the setting to a place with neatly arranged books. No form of accountability was required, no book reports, assignments, exams or grades. Ahmed reported that these reading sessions immensely helped students attain richer vocabularies and comprehend complex written and oral structures. As a result, they eventually transitioned into prolific writers and spellers.

Collins, Dargan and Walsh (2022), Mace and Lean (2021) and Dargan (2021) report on a pilot programme of reading for pleasure, "Just Read," at a whole K-12 primary and secondary school in Sydney, Australia. Learners read in 10 to 15-minute slots, amounting to 75 minutes per week for primary learners and 80 minutes per week in secondary school. During this time, formal instruction ceased, and everyone was expected to read a book of their choice. A literacy committee was set up to promote reading for enjoyment across the school. There were also posters around the school walls displaying teachers with books they were reading or what they had previously read. Consequently, conversations about these books ensued between teachers and learners. Thus, the staff played a massive role in modelling reading behaviour. The programme also started with an address that highlighted the benefits of reading and the role that teachers play in modelling reading behaviour.

The collection of reading materials began by asking learners to bring physical English language fiction books to school. These had to be the books learners could find interesting and worth reading instead of books they would bring just because they were compelled to bring them to complete some compulsory school-assigned reading.

The school also bought a wide range of books, including a unique collection for teachers. Teachers and the executive and administrative staff were also required to participate by reading books of their choice during the reading sessions. Book talks were also encouraged for 2 – 5 minutes after the reading sessions. Learners engaged in these book talks, and eventually, some recommended interesting books they had just finished reading to others. Learners themselves admitted that this aroused their interest in reading the recommended books.

The findings showed that implementing FVR significantly impacted both teachers and learners. Some teachers revealed that their learners' reading and comprehension skills had improved. Learners generally displayed improvement in reading ability, comprehension, writing, verbal and social skills and general knowledge. Some of the learners displayed improvement in imagination and creativity. The findings also revealed that as the learners' reading engagement increased, they borrowed more books from the library. They were also developing a love for fiction as they began engaging in discussions about what they had read. Even the learners who were resistant towards reading eventually developed a great interest in reading. Learners reported that they also began reading at home. The fact that time was created for them to read uninterrupted and that reading materials were readily available promoted their desire to read. This could potentially become a lifelong habit. Therefore, teachers agreed that the benefits of the reading programme transcended the mere development of reading skills. These findings have also been confirmed by a study by Khotimah (2020). The Sustained Silent Reading participants in this study reported that SSR helped to improve their reading skills and comprehension. It also improved their vocabulary significantly. A study by Cho and Krashen (2019) also found that pleasure reading positively impacts competence in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These findings prove that when people understand what they read, their linguistic competence increases, thereby enhancing their comprehension of what they read.

A study by Tsang and Fung (2023) compared the effectiveness of compulsory reading (Extensive Reading – ER) and voluntary reading. The difference between the two approaches is that ER requires accountability of some sort, while voluntary reading does not. The accountability may be in the form of book reports, summaries or journal entries. In their implementation, they discovered that stories were one type of material

learners liked to read. They learned that even learners from low proficiency levels favoured stories. They recommend that schools can assist learners by ensuring that there is a wide range of reading materials and, more importantly, by dedicating some time to pleasure reading. The findings of the study revealed that voluntary reading is a significant predictor of English performance. Learners who attained high grades were those who generally read more than the other participants. These learners preferred reading stories, which the researchers believe could be a contributing factor to their good grades.

The findings further revealed that this positive correlation does not exist when reading is forced, as in compulsory reading. Therefore, the researchers recommend that learners with low language proficiency should be encouraged to read voluntarily so that they improve and develop reading habits. Increased reading would create more access to input for language development. The researchers in this study are adamant that proficiency cannot be ascertained if reading is forced. The findings echo Krashen's (2020) claim that the best way to prepare English as a second language students for academic success is by providing them with compelling reading materials and by ensuring that these materials are easily accessible. According to Krashen, language drills and exercises, demanding and uninteresting, are not an ideal way of preparing students for academic success. McQuillan (2019) confirms this view by Krashen in his study by comparing the efficacy of direct instruction and FVR for developing academic vocabulary. He discovered that pleasure reading is within two to six times more beneficial than the explicit teaching of academic vocabulary. McQuillan concludes that students who read for pleasure are more likely to understand their textbooks with an increased ability to acquire more academic vocabulary from them.

A case study by Lee (2019) gives an account of a woman who, at one point, taught some basic English and other subjects for six years without ever speaking English informally. Then, a fully-fledged professor, she still found giving presentations a daunting task, which was frightening, frustrating, and exhausting. The stories she listened to and read were so compelling that she felt no need to look up the meaning of unfamiliar words. Thus, she acquired vocabulary through context. Her intense reading led her to discover her love for detective stories. This led to a narrowed reading which introduced her to the vocabulary of action, location, motion and motive – the

very language she lacked when giving speeches. After listening to these stories in English and reading compelling and comprehensible stories, there was a dramatic increase in her confidence, language proficiency and desire to read.

The studies above revealed different context-bound ways in which FVR can be implemented with positive results, particularly in English as a second or foreign language classrooms. In light of these strategic implementations, there is a paucity of studies dwelling on how FVR can be implemented in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. While some valuable insights can be taken from the studies reviewed above, it is imperative to note that context is a critical factor in implementation. The input of the participants, who were viewed as co-researchers in this study, was also invaluable. Therefore, this study sought to find context-appropriate strategies for implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. While the implementation assisted in fulfilling the objectives of this study, the goal was also to promote approaches that help learners become autonomous and not reliant only on classroom-based instruction and learning. Using approaches that develop reading habits helps learners become better readers and prolific writers, and as Krashen (1996) emphasizes, writing conventions are acquired through reading. Developing avid readers could also help education to become more resilient amid adversity since autonomy would have been instilled in learners.

2.7.5. CHALLENGES THAT MAY IMPEDE THE USE OF FVR IN MITIGATING THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING IN RURAL ENGLISH FAL CLASSROOMS

The driving factor behind this section was not to pre-empt that there would be challenges but considering such a possibility aligned with several studies that revealed that implementing the approach is not without challenges. Such challenges, however, are context-bound and are influenced by a myriad of factors, as will be demonstrated as the section unfolds. Therefore, reflecting on the challenges that could be encountered was considered part of planning, without which the study would be rendered futile. To support this view, Collins, Dargan and Walsh (2022) emphasize that researchers should always anticipate that there will be some form of resistance when a new initiative is implemented. Therefore, it was essential to think of the main

goal of the intervention all the time because it is easy to be discouraged when fully immersed in a project. The challenges found in literature revolve around the lack of support and limited exposure to relevant reading materials, lack of motivation amongst learners, learner disengagement, and finding books that are easy to read.

2.7.5.1. Lack of Support and Limited Exposure to Relevant Reading Materials

Successful project implementation depends on ample support from the stakeholders, access to, and availability of resources. Notwithstanding that there might be other challenges, these are the fundamental requirements for fruitful implementation. Webber, Wilkinson, Duncan & McGeown (2023) point out that sometimes reading interventions fail because the authorities control reading spaces like libraries and the resources inside these places, thereby curtailing teachers' and learners' implementation preferences. Without enough support, teachers sometimes find it challenging to develop ideas that could sustain these programmes. Thus, limited support hampers successful implementation. Findings in a rurality based study on FVR by Mokoena (2022) reveal that the lack of support and limited exposure to reading materials is a serious challenge in implementing FVR. The learner participants in the study expressed that they did not receive any motivation to read and that there was no support from home to engage in voluntary reading to boost their reading skills. Apart from the support from home, the limited availability of appropriate reading materials was another factor that contributed to poor or lack of reading. Sometimes, access and availability issues are exacerbated by the fact that learners do not have up-to-date books at home and in the school libraries. Some books offered in the school libraries may not appeal to the learners' lives and interests. Since such books do not meet the learners' needs, they are likelier to lose interest in reading. However, one point that is also worth noting concerning the issues of access is that the mere availability of reading materials will not automatically lead to the learners' increased motivation (Webber et al., 2023).

2.7.5.2. Finding Books that are Easy to Read

The reading process starts by first finding something to read. Good reading experiences are characterized by reading enriching and enjoyable books. However, finding such books could be a problem, especially for people who already have reading challenges (Berget and Bugge, 2022). Cho and Krashen (2019) contend that while it

is crucial for learners to read within their levels of competence, it is a challenge to find books that are easy to read. This pushes learners to shift prematurely to books that are too challenging for their levels. Such books lead to a slow and painful reading. Some books, though relatively easy, may contain very challenging vocabulary items. Therefore, it takes time for learners to find books they like and enjoy. Sometimes, this book-finding process can take up to two days (Patrick 2019).

2.7.5.3. Lack of Engagement and Motivation

Keeping learners motivated and engaged during FVR is another challenge that threatens successful implementation. Both motivation and engagement are crucial for implementing FVR. In a study based on a whole-school FVR implementation, Collins, Dargan and Walsh (2022) found that learners sometimes became disengaged during the sustained silent reading time. They would waste time chatting with their classmates, operating their mobile phones or even asking for bathroom breaks. Others would pretend to be reading. Such disengaged students usually disturbed others, putting at risk the success of the project. In their study, Katsuta and Sawada (2021) found that some learners became disengaged during the reading period. When coming to the lack of motivation another study revealed that learners were not motivated to read because they did not have role models at school. This reflects that motivation and modelling are crucial for helping learners develop reading habits (Mokoena 2022). Reading motivation is a complicated notion that is normally categorized into intrinsic motivation (from within) and extrinsic motivation (from outside). The learners' intrinsic motivation is usually lauded as a driving factor behind the development of reading habits (Vogrinčič Čepič, Mascia & Aerila, 2024; Zucker, Oh, Conradi Smith & Baker-Fink, 2022).

2.7.5.4. Finding Time to Read

Finding time for in-school reading is a challenge for both teachers and learners. Creating time and encouraging learners to read are regarded as ingredients for boosting motivation to read for pleasure. However, it remains a challenge for learners to read voluntarily. Once students feel pressured to read, they lose motivation to read. Sometimes, they are expected to read even when they do not feel like reading, thereby taking away the pleasure of reading (Webber et al., 2023). Sometimes, learners are discouraged from reading owing to the enormous pressure of examinations and

assignments, which leaves them hardly enough time to engage in pleasure reading to develop reading habits (Guo, 2020). Despite the call for teachers to develop the learners' reading habits, finding time to nurture pleasure reading remains challenging (Cremin & Scholes, 2023). Most schools are unable to find time for, and support FVR due to the demanding and overwhelming nature of the curricula with its focused assessment regimes. Driven by the desire to improve performance, most school authorities endorse activities that could potentially yield short-term gains. Consequently, opportunities for implementing FVR become sidelined (Cremin, 2020).

The challenges discussed above reflect that implementing FVR can be a demanding but doable feat especially when the benefits outweigh, by far, the challenges. This study seeks to reap the benefits of FVR and give learners an opportunity that will be beneficial not only for mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading, but also for other academic purposes. The multifaceted benefits of reading permeate many aspects of the learners' lives, from improving their reading skills to enhancing vocabulary, spelling and writing. Therefore, learning loss in reading deserves to be given urgent attention.

2.7.6. THE BENEFITS OF FVR IN MITIGATING THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING

The argument for this study is that the Free Voluntary Reading Approach is an invaluable approach that can be used to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. The preceding sections of this chapter provided proof of the merits and the efficacy of this approach in English as a second, foreign or additional language. While the effectiveness of this approach in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss is yet to be discovered, research has demonstrated its effectiveness in improving the learners' language skills. Therefore, this section will provide further research-based evidence to confirm the efficacy of this approach, thereby showing that it can be used to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. For clarity, it is crucial to highlight that in some studies, FVR is referred to as Pleasure Reading or Self-Selected Reading.

A study by Moberg (2023) is one of those that stand out in the application of FVR in English as a second language classrooms. It is a study on the implementation of pleasure reading for developing English as a second language. The findings revealed that pleasure reading can improve the learners' comprehension and proficiency in English as a second language. The study also discovered that learners who engage in more pleasure reading during their free time demonstrated even more improvement in comprehension and proficiency in English. Another study that takes an interesting turn is that of Ponniah and Priya (2014). This correlative study focused on the impact of pleasure reading or aesthetic reading against efferent reading. Efferent reading is the kind of reading done to derive certain information or facts from the text. Since it is not meant for pleasure, efferent readers only read when required to do so. As a result, their reading is infrequent and not likely long. The findings demonstrated that learners who engaged in aesthetic reading performed much better than efferent readers. The researcher attributed this impressive performance to the comprehensible input to which they had been exposed through pleasure reading. The author asserts that the fact that reading is considered a pleasurable activity lowers the affective filter, thereby making the language process effective. The study concludes by highly recommending pleasure reading for second language learning. It is on the basis of evidence and recommendations like these that this study sought to explore the benefits of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

An Indonesian-based study by Ovilia and Asfina (2022) provides further insights into the power of pleasure reading. Deviating from the norm of demonstrating the benefits of extensive reading in English as a second language, this study aimed at revealing a narrative inquiry of proficient non-English learners. The participants were not part of any formal English language classroom instruction. Therefore, the findings reveal the mysterious process of how people unconsciously develop proficiency by engaging in pleasure reading. The study followed two non-English learners who had engaged in pleasure reading for at least seven years with no intention of learning English. They just regarded reading as a pleasurable activity. The findings demonstrated that the participants went through the language acquisition process in which nobody explained to them the subconscious process of how language could be acquired through reading. Through pleasure reading, these two participants simultaneously developed

proficiency in vocabulary, reading and listening skills, and grammar, even though they were not in any English class. Thus, the findings prove that pleasure reading effectively enhanced the participants' language proficiency. If pleasure reading could yield such positive results even for non-English learners, why would it not yield the same or even better results in mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?

In a study by Biswas (2023), the participants revealed that pleasure reading is instrumental in achieving academic success and acquiring new knowledge. They reported that pleasure reading was also responsible for widening their vocabulary base. These findings are also confirmed by Krashen (2022). He emphasizes that reading popular self-selected fiction is the most successful and pleasurable way of acquiring language and developing literacy. Apart from developing language competence, pleasure reading also boosts knowledge of various subjects. In simpler terms, it means that people who read more are well-informed, thus leading to the ability to develop a profound comprehension of other people's points of view. The most surprising point to note here is that amongst all the genres in literature, fiction has been found to be the most effective for vocabulary development. This is also confirmed by the next study.

In a study by Jerrim and Moss (2019), the analysis of data from 250,000 teenagers from 35 industrialised countries, provides proof that fiction is highly effective for language development. The findings further reveal that teenagers who read fiction regularly have notably stronger reading skills than those who do not. The analysis did not reveal the same positive results for the other genres of literature. Therefore, Jerrim and Moss concluded that motivating young people to read fiction could be specifically useful for their reading skills. They believe this intervention is even more beneficial for those learners residing in rural areas. The observation by these two researchers is one of the reasons why this study focused on rural areas, which are usually disadvantaged. Implementing FVR has the potential to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The evidence of the efficacy of FVR or pleasure reading in second language learning is irrefutable. For the body of evidence provided in this chapter, implementing FVR in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms was not only be beneficial for English classrooms but also for

all the other subjects. Implementing FVR sought to inculcate in learners the reading habits that would inform their attitude towards their studies so that they do not have to wait for teachers to gain knowledge. Reading is the path to knowledge. Developing reading habits could help them realise that they can widen their horizons through reading. This helps learners develop autonomy, a trait that could be essential for making education systems resilient in the face of adversities like COVID-19.

Furthermore, a study by McQuillan (2020) provides more evidence that self-selected fiction is highly effective for language development. His study particularly focuses on how effective fiction is for developing academic vocabulary. His analysis of the Harry Potter series reveals that the vocabulary gained from reading all of the Harry Potter series was found to be more effective than what can be achieved through direct instruction. This Harry Potter series contains 85 per cent of vocabulary words believed to be essential for the Academic Word List (AWL). This list contains words that frequently appear in scientific journals, textbooks and lectures. They are taken as some of the most essential words for the comprehension of texts in various fields of study. McQuillan's analysis further reveals that it would take a fourth grader or intermediate English as a second language student about a year to read the Harry Potter novels and acquire between 123 and 297 words on the AWL or about one-fifth to one-half of the whole list. Spending the same amount of time on explicit instruction, taking into consideration that students may already know some of the words on the list, would lead to a vocabulary gain of 75 words of the AWL, which is less than 15 per cent of the list. This analysis proves just how efficient FVR is, further justifying the need for this study – to explore how FVR can be implemented to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. McQuillan advises that the promotion of free extensive reading of fiction can help learners acquire both general and academic vocabulary. This idea emphasizes that providing optimal input through Free Voluntary Reading or pleasure reading is valuable for both language acquisition, improving reading skills, and possibly leading learners to the point where they hardly need teachers, and are able to continue improving on their own (Krashen, 1998). Therefore, providing a massive amount of comprehensible and compelling input through story listening and self-selected reading is the most viable option for language acquisition (Mason, 2020).

2.8. SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter explored the theoretical framework that serves as the foundation for this study, the Input Hypothesis. Free Voluntary Reading was also explored, revealing its significance in reading and evidence of its impact and successful implementation. The literature aligned with the research objectives was also explored. This review demonstrated the impact of COVID-19 on reading and revealed the need for the current study to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. The next chapter expounds on the research design and the research methodology that guided this study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter explored the theoretical framework that underpins the study. The chapter also delved into the literature on Free Voluntary Reading and the literature aligned with the research objectives. This chapter discusses the research approach, research design and the methodology that anchored this study. Paramount in this chapter is also the unpacking of how PALAR was applied to address the study's research questions. Since the study used PALAR, it is imperative to mention that the participants in this study are designated as co-researchers. The reason for regarding them as co-researchers is elaborated in the PALAR section of the study, 3.5.

3.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research question was paramount in this study:

- How can the Free Voluntary Reading approach be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?

To answer this main question, the ancillary questions below guided this study:

- How did COVID-19 impact reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?
- What strategies do teachers use to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?
- How can teachers implement the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in the EFAL Grade 10 classroom?
- What challenges may impede the use of the FVR approach in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?
- What are the benefits of implementing FVR to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?

3.3. RESEARCH PARADIGM

This study is anchored in the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism is a paradigm that promotes subjective perspective instead of objective perspective, as in positivism. It is a context-conscious paradigm that seeks in-depth subjective meanings that human beings attach to their worlds (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Thus, the fundamental principle of interpretivism is that truth and knowledge are subjective, and that people's experiences and understandings are intricately linked to their cultural and historical backgrounds. In this way, interpretive-anchored studies are laden with the researcher's values. Therefore, the researchers are unable to wrestle themselves away from their values and beliefs. As a result, these values and beliefs cannot be detached from how they generate, interpret, and analyse data. However, the researchers must strive to comprehend the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant, rather than their own viewpoints (Gemma, 2018).

3.3.1. Ontology in interpretivism

Interpretivism adopts a relativist ontology that regards reality as an embodiment of socially bound, multiple interpretations of subjective individual experiences (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). In other words, interpretivists believe that there are multiple realities due to people's varying degrees of perceptions about reality (Gemma, 2018). Interpretivism is also rooted in constructivist ontology. While acknowledging that facts exist, the underlying meaning is complex. Thus, reality is shaped by how individuals construct meaning through social interaction (Irshaidat, 2019). This makes interpretivism relevant in this study because I also believe that people do not experience and interpret reality in the same way and that context plays a crucial role in determining the meaning behind the individuals' experiences. The way both teachers and learners were affected by COVID-19 in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms and the learning loss incurred thereof, is uniquely different. For example, while teachers reported that the learners' language skills, reading included, were severely hampered by COVID-19, one learner believed that her vocabulary increased during COVID-19-induced school closures because she and her friend read and exchanged novels during this time, resulting in a significant increase in the total number of books they read. These varying degrees of reality rendered interpretivism invaluable to this study.

3.3.2. Epistemology in interpretivism

Interpretivism adopts a subjectivist epistemology. According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), while the researchers rely on their own thinking and cognitive processes to interpret data, they do this from the co-researchers' frame of reference, not their own. That is, the way they make meaning is informed by their interaction with the co-researchers. Knowing reality as it is, is impossible because our observations and interpretations are guided by our worldviews, concepts and backgrounds (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Therefore, in this sense, reality is directly linked to individuals' subjective experience of their world (Khatri, 2023). Filtering through the study, interpretivism helped me consider the value of different ways the co-researchers experienced the implementation of the FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Consequently, it helped me acknowledge and appreciate the multiple truths the co-researchers presented, thus confirming my belief that there is no wrong answer in research. The unique way the co-researchers reacted to, interpreted, and made meaning as they engaged with others in their social world was what mattered in this study. Therefore, interpretivism provided a lens that helped in appreciating the value of human experiences.

3.3.3. Axiology

Interpretivism is guided by balanced axiology. Since social inquiry is value-bound and value-laden, the researcher is influenced by his own values. The values determine the researchers' preferred paradigm and data generation preferences, as well as the way they interpret and present the findings. Therefore, an ethically oriented researcher should admit and confess their values and biases, which could potentially interfere with neutrality (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012). Consequently, balanced axiology assumes that although findings will always reveal the researcher's values, the researcher ought to strive to deliver a comprehensive and impartial account of the research findings (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). While I acknowledge the uniqueness of other peoples' perspectives, it is also important to state my values as a researcher. I believe that reading is a powerful tool in second or additional language learning and that each learner stands an equal chance to achieve the desired levels in language learning and reading as long as they are constantly exposed to input (English), either orally or in reading. My experiences reinforce this belief as an English language teacher, that in order to promote a reading culture, merely encouraging learners to read widely may

not be the solution. The best way to inculcate a reading culture is by creating time for them to read. These are my personally held views that might unintentionally interfere with how I make meaning of the participants' experiences. Nevertheless, I did my utmost best to strive to understand and interpret the co-researchers' experiences from their frame of reference, not mine as a researcher.

3.3.4. Methodology in interpretivism

Methodological assumptions in interpretivism are birthed from the viewpoint that the researcher cannot be detached from the matter under study and that research should be set in the natural setting of the phenomenon (Pham, 2018; Irshaidat, 2019). Therefore, qualitative researchers should be deeply immersed in the data generation process and be alert and responsive to the co-researchers' thoughts and feelings to gain more profound insight into their experiences. This is because interpretivist research aims to understand the individual and the interpretations they attach to their subjective experiences (Pulla & Carter, 2018). Researchers gain access to these experiences by developing close ties with the co-researchers so that they can explore the co-researchers' multiple realities/perspectives, thereby constructing new knowledge (Khatri, 2023). The most convenient way of capturing these meanings and interpretations is through language or dialogue (Ugwu, Ekere & Onoh, 2021). As a result, interpretivism employs qualitative data generation procedures such as interviews, observations, field notes, personal notes, documents and others over extended periods. Data analysis is conducted through inductive processes that discover patterns in the data that enable researchers to understand a phenomenon. In this way, a theory can be developed from the findings (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). The study also employed data generation methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations to gain a deeper understanding of the co-researchers' experiences and viewpoints. The study was set in the natural environment of the co-researchers, with the researcher immensely involved throughout the research. The methodological implications of interpretivism closely align with the PALAR methodology, hence its significance to the study, as will be presented in the following section.

3.3.5. The relevance of interpretivism to this study

Interpretivism is relevant in this study because it resonates with the study's research design, research approach, and methodological preferences. This study was a case study-based research that advocated for a research set in the natural world of the co-researchers and for the researcher to establish rapport with the co-researchers. The research spanned fifteen weeks, and in these fifteen weeks, we worked closely with the co-researchers as equal partners in research. Thus, the prolonged engagement in the research site and working closely with the co-researchers created a safe space for honest and open communication where they could share their ideas without fear of judgement. This fostered trust and built rapport while simultaneously granting me a golden opportunity to make observations through close contact with them. The aim was not to impose my ideas but to involve them equally in the knowledge creation meant for their benefit. By involving them from the beginning to the end, I believed that the intervention stood a chance of sustainability because they would cherish and feel that, as change agents, they were the custodians of this transformative venture. Therefore, what mattered the most was to research with and for them. Thus, their varying inputs, views, and interpretations contributed immensely to shedding light on the most effective way Free Voluntary Reading was implemented to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in their rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

3.4. RESEARCH APPROACH

This research utilized a qualitative research approach. Several definitions are ascribed to qualitative research. According to Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016), qualitative research generally embodies research that produces descriptive data based on the co-researchers' written or spoken words and observable behaviour. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) define the qualitative approach as an interpretive, naturalistic approach to studying a phenomenon. Creswell and Creswell (2018) regard qualitative research as an approach that is used to study and understand the meaning individuals ascribe to their social or human problems. Thus, by focusing on the meaning individuals or groups attach to their problems, qualitative inquiry starts with assumptions and how interpretive or theoretical frameworks guide the research study. Qualitative approaches to inquiry are then employed to generate data in the co-researchers' natural environment using inductively and deductively based approaches to analyse

data and to generate themes. Consequently, the end product encapsulates the co-researchers' voices and the researcher's reflexivity, together with detailed descriptions and the interpretation of the problem (Creswell, 2013).

What is evident from the above-mentioned descriptions is that the co-researchers' points of view within their natural settings are key to qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) agree that the most important thing about qualitative research is that it involves the understanding of the phenomenon from the co-researchers' point of view, not the researcher's. In this way, the researcher aims to comprehend how people make sense of their experiences, how they shape their understanding of the world and the significance they ascribe to those experiences. In the context of this study, working closely with the co-researchers through the lens of Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) helped me make observations that were crucial to understanding the meaning they attached to their world. For example, the participatory nature of PALAR helped me understand what they meant when they said that their curriculum was so packed that they hardly had enough time to implement strategies not mentioned in the CAPS document. This reflects how invaluable the qualitative approach to inquiry could be in gaining insightful information about the problem being studied. Conducting a study in the natural world or setting of the phenomenon is another crucial component of qualitative research. Yin (2016) concedes that the core aim of qualitative research is to explore how people cope in their natural environments. These real-world settings enable the researcher to explore their contextual richness to understand the daily lives of people and the meanings they attach to their different circumstances.

3.4.1. Epistemological assumptions in qualitative research

The epistemological assumption in qualitative research is that the researcher must work very closely with the co-researchers so that he can become acquainted with their subjective experiences Creswell and Poth (2018). Taylor, et al. (2016) and Shkedi (2019) also add that qualitative research adopts a holistic study of people within their natural settings. Getting close to the co-researchers allows the researchers to know them personally so that they can feel and experience what they feel in their daily lives. It also gives the researchers access to firsthand knowledge of the co-researchers' social lives, and this helps them to make observations as these people go about their

lives. The current study was also conducted in the co-researchers' natural environment. Since we all worked as co-researchers and as equal partners according to the prescripts of PALAR, I established rapport and forged a close working relationship with them. Consequently, I could make observations that would have been impossible had I not worked closely with the co-researchers.

3.4.2. Ontology in qualitative research

According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), qualitative research acknowledges that situations, interactions and negotiations give birth to meaning. These meanings that the co-researchers attach to situations are culture and context-bound. Therefore, instead of believing that there is one single truth to interpret a problem, there are multiple, socially constructed realities that lead to numerous interpretations. This shows that qualitative research represents social reality (Leavy, 2014). The current study also considered that each co-researcher brought his/her unique experiences, which gave access to a more meaningful interpretation and understanding of how Free Voluntary Reading could be implemented to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in their rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. These multiple views enhanced a deeper understanding of how they were affected by COVID-19 in English FAL, the strategies used to mitigate learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms and how FVR could be implemented to mitigate this COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.

3.4.3. Axiology in qualitative research

Axiological assumptions in qualitative research acknowledge that qualitative research is value-laden. Thus, it cannot be separated from the researcher's values that he brings into the study. Therefore, researchers have to report their values and biases openly while acknowledging that the information generated from the field is also not value-free. In this way, the interpretation of data is laden with the values of both the researcher and the participants (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, I had to reflect critically on the values I bring into the study. As someone who majored in and taught English, I firmly believe that reading is a powerful yet underrated tool for helping learners develop their language skills. This idea is borne out of years of experience and experimentation with reading as a high school teacher. I believe that we become better readers by reading.

3.4.4. Methodology in qualitative research

The methodology in qualitative research requires researchers to be immersed in the context of the phenomenon so that, through observations and long-term immersive experiences, they can provide thick, culturally and context-bound descriptions of the phenomenon. These descriptions should also include multiple interpretations of the co-researchers' situations (Cohen et al., 2018). For this purpose, data generation is enhanced by multiple data generation procedures. For example, interviews, observations and document reviews can be used to generate rich data (Yin, 2016). The principles of PALAR guided the implementation of FVR in this study. One of the requirements of PALAR is to participate actively in implementing the project. As a result, I spent a long time in the co-researchers' natural environment, interacting with them as an equal partner while making observations that formed part of data generation methods. Multiple data generation procedures were also employed in this study to generate rich data. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and several implementation-oriented and reflective meetings we had with the co-researchers.

3.5. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was grounded in a case study research design. There are several case study definitions, but a few were selected for this study. Yin (2015) presents a dual definition of a case study. The initial definition addresses the extent of a case study, while the second addresses the features of a case study. The scope-inclined definition considers a case study as a comprehensive examination of a case (a contemporary phenomenon) in its natural environment, mainly when it is so context-bound that it cannot be studied outside its real-world context. Regarding the second definition, a case study, dealing with more variables than data points, is an empirical enquiry that utilises various data generation procedures that enable data to merge in a triangular pattern. Data units can also be generated and analysed through preconceived theoretical propositions.

Although Coombs (2022) does not explicitly dichotomise the definition of a case study like Yin, his definition also echoes Yin's. Coombs asserts that a case study is a methodical research designed to acquire a deeper comprehension of a complex

phenomenon in a clearly defined system. Acquiring a profound comprehension of a real-life phenomenon requires a rigorous investigation of an individual, group or event being studied. This rigorous investigation utilizes several data sources like interviews, observations, or documents. Case study research aims to acquire insightful comprehension of the case subject and create new theories or perceptions.

These two definitions reveal that context is crucial to case study research. In this regard, Sibbald, Paciocco, Fournie, Van Asseeldonk and Scurr (2021) stress that case studies can be instrumental when researchers seek to understand how certain interventions have been implemented in different contexts and how contexts influence the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, based on the documented success of FVR elsewhere, as reported in Chapter 2, the current study sought to determine the efficacy of FVR in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. Coombs (2022) adds that cases are usually constrained by both temporal and spatial factors and are demarcated by the research questions. Therefore, a study that is not context-bound has no place in case study research (Priya, 2021).

The two definitions above clearly align with the objectives of the current study. The main aim of this study was to find out, through PALAR, how FVR can be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Engaging as equal partners with the co-researchers through the PALAR principles fostered close relations that provided access to detailed observation data, which, when converged with semi-structured interview data and focus group discussions, provided a more nuanced comprehension of the effectiveness of FVR, the context-bound challenges and circumvention attempts thereof.

According to Coombs (2022), there are three types of case studies: single case study, multiple case study, and intrinsic case study. A single case study is appropriate when the researcher intends to focus on a single complex issue involving an individual or a group. Multiple case studies employ multiple cases aimed at comparing and establishing similar patterns. Intrinsic case studies, common in social sciences and humanities, are used to establish an insightful understanding of specific situations when studying unique or rare cases. The researcher should clearly describe the uniqueness of the phenomenon to differentiate it from others (Crowe, Creswell,

Robertson, Huby, Avery and Sheikh, 2011). This study adopted a single case study since it gave me ample time to make and record observations. This is impossible with multiple case studies because the more case studies the researcher has, the minimal the chance of collecting insightful observations (Gustaffson, 2017).

Within single, multiple and intrinsic case studies are exploratory, explanatory and descriptive case studies. Yin (2018:40) outlines these different kinds of case study research. Exploratory case studies are mainly guided by what questions, and they are more applicable when the aim is to generate pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further research or to explore. Explanatory Case Studies are usually guided by the how and why questions, and they are relevant when the goal is to track processes over time instead of focusing on mere frequencies or incidence. The third type is the descriptive case study. Guided by derivatives of “what,” “who,” or where questions such as “how many,” “how much,” or “to what extent”. These questions are preferable “when the research goal is to describe the incidence or prevalence of a phenomenon or when it is to track certain outcomes.” The “how” question mainly guided this study. The study sought to explain how FVR could be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Consequently, an explanatory case study was the most relevant for this study.

3.5.1. Methodological considerations in case study research

Methodical implications of case study research emphasize that researchers who engage in case studies must follow systematic procedures to maintain rigour and avoid being sloppy (Yin, 2015). Since case studies seek to study the phenomenon in its natural environment, researchers must ensure that they withdraw their preconceptions and not enforce them on the co-researchers or use them to manipulate data during analysis. If not, the whole study would be untrustworthy (Priya, 2021). In this study, I had to understand that as much as I have my values about the phenomenon, what was important was a prolonged engagement with the co-researchers so that I could understand and make interpretations from their frame of reference, not from my point of view as a researcher. Through the methodological guidance of PALAR, which aligns with case study research, I visited the co-researchers every week not only as an observer but also as an active participant who modelled reading along with the teachers. Crowe et al. (2011) also reiterate that for transparency, researchers should

explicitly describe their values and level of involvement and detail all the steps undertaken in selection. In this regard, this study has provided all the details and the steps involved in the whole process.

Data generation in case studies requires a well-executed plan comprised of a thorough investigation, usually with empirical data generated through an extended period from a comprehensively defined case to present an analysis of the contextual processes associated with the phenomenon (Rashid, Rashid, Warraich, Sabir and Waseem, 2019). The extended involvement also helps researchers to familiarise themselves with the study's natural setting and work collectively with the co-researchers (Crowe et al., 2011; Schoch, 2020). The data in this study were generated over a period of fifteen weeks, and this presented an opportunity for a thorough investigation and a deeper, dexterous understanding of the implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. A comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in case study research is also enhanced by multiple sources of evidence (Crowe et al. 2011). Using various data sources provides the researcher with ample data that enables him to seek patterns within these sources. As a result, an in-depth description of the case can be developed to enhance an extensive understanding and interpretation of the entire phenomenon (Sibbald, Paciocco, Fournie, Van Asseeldonk, and Scurr, 2021). The study also employed multiple data generation techniques through semi-structured interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with learners and observations. Data were also generated in the meetings held with all the co-researchers as we planned, implemented, reviewed and re-implemented FVR through PALAR.

A rigorous report structure, together with detailed story-like descriptions, are essential in case study reporting. These descriptions include “case descriptions, co-researchers’ descriptions, details of field protocols, empirical material interpretation and analysis, and conclusion” (Rashid et al., 2019: 6). Detailed descriptions are a central principle of a case study methodology often overlooked and understated in literature. Providing a detailed description of the case and the phenomenon helps readers thoroughly understand the setting and context to determine how applicable the findings could be in another setting (Sibbald et al., 2021). Since case studies require prolonged study of the phenomenon to enhance these detailed descriptions, researchers must exercise

patience and diligence. Consequently, through multiple data generation techniques, descriptive case studies study the phenomenon in the natural setting over extended periods so that any noticeable change demonstrated by the phenomenon can be highlighted through detailed descriptions (Priya, 2021; Schoch, 2020). Thus, the richly descriptive nature of case study research is enhanced by the fact that it is based on deep and different sources of information (Hancock, Algozzine & Lim, 2021).

3.5.2. The relevance of case study design to this study

Since the current study sought to explore how FVR could be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural EFAL Grade 10 classrooms, an explanatory case study design was utilised. This design was more appropriate since it allowed me to trace the intervention process over time rather than simple frequencies or incidences (Yin, 2015). The case study design was applicable because the goal was not to help with the intervention at the beginning of the project and leave, only to come back to hold workshops, meetings or generate data. Since implementing FVR was a collective effort, I was also part of the team. Therefore, being with the co-researchers for a prolonged period helped me trace the impact of the intervention and allowed me to work closely with them, thereby enabling me to be more acquainted with the case and the co-re-researchers to ensure a smooth process and to build harmonious relationships with the participants (Rashid et al., 2019). These relationships asserted my presence as an ordinary group member who was actively involved in the intervention. I also ensured that I stripped myself of any implications of power so that we could all work together as equal co-researchers. Relationships, building trust and collaboration are some of the fundamental precepts of PALAR, and this asserted the significance of case study research design in this study. Just as case studies emphasize the importance of context, PALAR advocates a context-based, democratic, and life-transforming intervention (Green and Kearney, 2011).

Case study research promotes multiple data generation techniques. This feature aligned with the study since multiple data generation sources were employed. The study used observations, semi-structured teacher interviews, and focus group discussions. Since PALAR guided the study, several meetings were held with all the co-researchers. These meetings provided a platform for engaging in discussions that provided insightful data pertinent to the objectives of the study. As stated earlier, my

prolonged stay with the co-researchers enabled them to express themselves freely since I had established a rapport with them. Therefore, a case study was the most relevant design in this study.

3.6. PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH

Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) is the methodology that drives this study. PALAR is a holistic integration of Action Learning and Action Research (ALAR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a research paradigm whose primary concern is to include participants (co-researchers) as equal partners with the researcher in almost all the stages and processes of research (Kearney, Zuber-Skerrit & Wood, 2013). PALAR is considered a philosophy, a methodological approach, a learning theory, and a process that promotes community involvement. The principal methodologies that propel PALAR encompass case study methodology, grounded theory, phenomenology, and phenomenography (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). The active involvement of the participants as co-researchers and equal partners in this study made PALAR the most suitable methodology for anchoring the study.

3.6.1. PALAR and its theoretical framework

According to Zuber-Skerrit (2015), PALAR is a comprehensive, collective concept that embodies principles and values, including participation, collaboration, communication of practice, networking and synergy. It also has interconnections with ALAR, an all-inclusive concept of action learning and action research. Although these two concepts (Action Learning and Action Research) initially operated as separate entities, they were combined at an international conference termed First World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM) at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia in 1990. A year later, the ALARPM association was established and is currently known as ALAR. The fourth ALAR World Congress, held in Cartagena, Colombia, in 1997, comprised delegates from the Participatory Action Research (PAR) network, who mainly focused on community development, mobilisation and engagement. The amalgamation of ALAR and PAR concepts gave birth to PALAR, so that it could encompass additional concepts such as lifelong learning.

The three key principles guide PALAR. Zuber-Skerrit (2018) outlines these key principles as the three Rs: Relationships, Reflection and Recognition. Regarding Relationships and relationship building, PALAR anchors on establishing relationships based on team building, cooperation and trust, which are integral to the progressive success and sustainability of a programme. The Reflection in the three Rs builds on critical, self-critical and meta-reflection. Reflection is a crucial component in the design, implementation, learning and evaluation phases of a PALAR programme. Co-researchers gain and create knowledge through active participation and critical reflection on the whole process and the role they play in it. These reflections help them identify requirements for further action. As they reflect on their own reflective processes, they gain further knowledge of the epistemology, ontology, and axiology of PALAR. The last R, Recognition, emphasizes that recognizing the co-researchers' efforts is rewarding and affirms personal and collective achievements. PALAR programmes culminate into the publication of reports or articles as a way of celebrating or recognizing the research efforts and the commitment of the co-researchers. However, Recognition and celebration are not regarded as the final stages since they have to inspire further new cycles of PALAR.

PALAR also operates from the precepts of emancipatory and transformative paradigms to ensure that the co-researchers collaboratively create knowledge that helps them to be in control of activities aimed at improving and shaping their own lives as they see fit (Wood, 2020). In this way, PALAR can empower and capacitate the co-researchers, who, after acquiring skills and knowledge, could pass their newly acquired skills to others. This methodology aims to create space for socially marginalized groups, those who are excluded and therefore voiceless and disempowered (Green & Kearney, 2011). Through the cyclical reflection on action or practice, the individual co-researchers acquire skills such as problem-solving, effective communication, lifelong learning, self-assurance and transformative change across personal, professional and community or organizational dimensions (Kearney et al., 2013). Thus, Wood (2020) defines PALAR as a transformative, collaborative and democratic approach to education research. This view is rooted in its ability to change peoples' lives through ways of thinking that are always open to change. These different ways of thinking were considered in this study to ensure that they aligned with the collaborative nature of the project that operates within the boundaries of democracy,

where all co-researchers, including the researcher, have equal voices in identifying and designing a course of action meant to benefit everyone. Right from the beginning, the co-researchers were informed that no one is superior and that we are all operating equally as co-researchers. Additionally, engaging co-researchers in addressing the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading helped them develop a sense of ownership of the problem as custodians of the intervention that transformed their lives.

The proponents of this methodology argue that the people-centred nature of PALAR enhances sustainability. Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) highlight that PALAR is a people-centred methodology based on the belief that the beneficial transformation brought by a PALAR-based project is likely to be sustained because the co-researchers regard themselves as active agents dedicated to enhancing both their quality of life and that of their community. Thus, they are interested in preserving the results of their labour, justified as the custodians of change. The primary focus of this study was to leave the co-researchers with a transformational experience that would inspire them to continue with the project even after the completion of the study. The aim was to help learners become responsible and autonomous. These attributes are essential since they shift the responsibility from the teachers as the primary sources of knowledge to students as the creators. Indeed, at the conclusion of the project, the co-researchers emphasized that they would like the project to continue. As I compile this report, the FVR intervention is still in progress at the school, where I still pay visits once a week even though I have generated all the data I needed for the study. Thus, the intervention served the purpose of longevity inspired by the co-researchers' desire to improve their learning experiences continually through FVR.

3.6.2. Epistemology of PALAR

Contrary to the well-established assumption that specialist scholars, scientists or theorists create knowledge that is implemented by practitioners, Zuber-Skerritt (2015) expounds that the fundamental epistemological premise in PALAR is that practitioners are capable of creating knowledge as well. PALAR acknowledges that even though there is a single world, individuals perceive and articulate their experiences differently. Therefore, practitioners carry out the process of developing knowledge through a critical reflection of the experiences derived from the concrete experience. These reflections help to formulate abstract generalisations. Testing these newly created

assumptions in new situations leads to the emergence of new concrete experiences. The process does not stop here; it continues with the subsequent phase of experiential learning and the generation of knowledge. The participation of co-researchers from different backgrounds enabled multiple views that were instrumental in the planning, implementation and reflections of this study.

3.6.3. Ontology of PALAR

Instead of regarding academic scientific knowledge as the exclusive form of valid and valuable information, PALAR is interested in how people relate to their social environment and thus holds local knowledge in high regard (Wood, 2019). The genuinely participatory approach to knowledge creation is driven by the three fundamental principles mentioned earlier: relationships, reflections, and recognition (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Therefore, PALAR represents a radical shift from the notion that for research to be valid, it has to be objective, value-free and controlled. PALAR acknowledges that the co-researchers' knowledge is just as valuable as the contribution made by the researchers (Wood, 2019). While the focus is not to eliminate or undermine the traditional forms of creating knowledge, PALAR highlights that researchers should create knowledge that recognizes what people have to offer (Wood, 2014). This study also regarded the knowledge of the co-researchers as invaluable. This idea was developed out of the need to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. I believe that any successful implementation would have to start by acknowledging the input of the people involved in the study. Knowing best how they were affected by COVID-19, whatever solutions were provided had to ride on the holistic involvement of the co-researchers from the beginning to the end. In this regard, their suggestions for implementing FVR ensured success and sustainability. Some of them revealed that they were already on the quest to do something about their proficiency in English. Allowing their meaningful participation gave insights into how best FVR could be implemented.

3.6.4. Axiology of PALAR

PALAR promotes the principles of community involvement aimed at fostering social change. This guiding principle necessitates that scholars conduct research in collaboration with people rather than merely study them. The people with whom the

researcher is conducting research are considered equal partners, not informers or subjects (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). In an attempt to address these power relations, the methodical process of PALAR is particularly befitting since it accentuates action learning with a participatory action process and creates opportunities for dialogue amongst the co-researchers, thereby negating power relations. Trust relationships are forged by engaging in critical reflection on continuing interactions and acknowledging various levels and forms of learning and development (Wood, 2019). Rooted in relationship building, the most fundamental values underpinning a fruitful action-learning project are trust, respect, openness and collaboration (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). Since the axiological implications for collaboration consider co-researchers as equal partners in research, it motivates and dignifies people who, in most cases, are classified as worthless or lazy. The initiative of actively involving the people usually labelled as the problem in the research that improves their quality of life gives co-researchers the feeling of being life-worthy. They begin to consider themselves as leaders and innovators (Wood, 2014).

This study emphasized, right from the beginning, that no one was superior to the other. This view was initially emphasized in my first meeting with the two teachers who participated in the study. The fact that we met several times before I could meet learners was helpful since it presented opportunities to emphasize to the teachers that they had to consider learners as co-researchers, equal to them, as long as they participated in the project. I also impressed upon them that even I, as a researcher, would operate as an equal. When we eventually met as co-researchers, students and teachers, I emphasized the significance of building trusting relationships where we treat one another as equals who share a common goal of mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. At first, as one would expect, the learner co-researchers were a bit reluctant to participate in the discussions, but as time went on, they realized that their teachers were not treating them as students. The respectful demeanour the teachers demonstrated towards the learners made them comfortable, and what ensued after that was meaningful and fruitful deliberations that were essential for grounding the study.

3.6.5. The role of the researcher and his relationship with the participants

According to Wood (2019), the researcher in a PALAR-oriented project is tasked with establishing democratic environments conducive to learning, adopting pedagogical approaches that solicit action learning, and remaining receptive to diverse perspectives. Adhering to these principles would motivate people to participate in their own learning. The researcher must also ensure that issues of language and self-confidence do not thwart the development of trusting, inclusive relationships. In this way, safe, democratic and inclusive spaces help co-researchers learn various skills crucial to improving problems being addressed and for personal development. To achieve this democratic space where everyone could participate freely without any apprehensive tendencies, I had to introspect thoroughly and realise that I might be held in a certain high regard just by coming into the school as a researcher. This would jeopardise any meaningful participation from the co-researchers. Realising the potential of the power of command helped to strip me of any traces of power. I had to emphasize, time and again, that even though I was a researcher, I was acting as an equal participant in the study. As a result, we ensured that we did not use language in a way that could intimidate or discourage participation. This eventually created a safe, inclusive and democratic space for all co-researchers.

The relationship between the researchers and the co-researchers starts by acknowledging that the researcher must become an integral member of the people the research is aimed at. From within the group, the researcher's role is to facilitate the entire research process. The researcher must not, in any way, dictate any part of the research process. Thus, the researcher assumes equal status with the participants, who, in this regard, are considered co-researchers. All the processes are conducted equally with all the group members (Kearney, Wood, and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Schiller, Jaffray, Ridley, and Du Plessis, 2021). Contrary to the typical researchers' obsession with publishing within the realm of academic seclusion, where research comprises data collection and publication with scant concern for the participants, PALAR challenges this conventional perception of research by promoting action, reflection and lifelong learning through the co-researchers' meaningful contribution and equal participation (Shiller, et al. 2021). Researchers must also be open to critique, coaching, and critical self-reflection (Schoonen, Wood & Kruger, 2021).

In this study, it was essential for me to refrain from dictating what should happen. I achieved this by acting as a facilitator during our workshops. Acting as a facilitator was helpful because it ensured that our meetings were not like simple group interviews. Facilitation in this study enhanced discussions that were even more meaningful and revealing than the one-on-one semi-structured interviews I had with the two teachers for pre-intervention and post-intervention data generation. I was an integral team member, ensuring that I participated devotedly in all the activities the team undertook. What followed was a trusting relationship with the co-researchers. The co-researchers suggested that we should open a WhatsApp group where we would share project-related matters. This move accelerated the strengthening of relationships and trust among the co-researchers.

3.6.6. Methodology in PALAR (stages of PALAR)

PALAR is more than an explanatory theory since it outlines methodical processes necessary for the successful implementation of PALAR-based projects. Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt (2011) emphasise that PALAR is a qualitative research methodology that distances itself from the established Western-oriented research paradigms that simply negate the voices and protocols of the community on which the research is based. Therefore, PALAR promotes co-researchers' commitment through the following essential elements: the startup workshop, the establishment of action learning initiatives and the recognition of accomplishments and significant milestones (Zuber-Skerritt 2011). These key features enhance relationships, reflection, and recognition, culminating in valuable lessons for the co-researchers and the results they can sustain as custodians of change. A generic model is shown in Figure 2 for implementing PALAR-oriented projects. The stages are explained below, in alignment with how they were modified to suit the context of the study (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

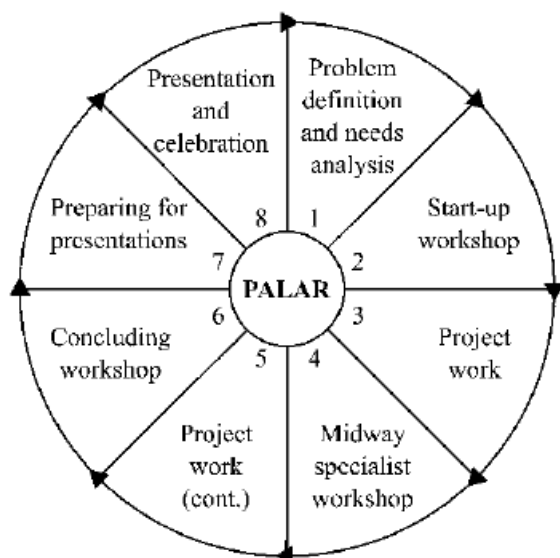


Fig. 2. A generic PALAR model

Shown in Zuber-Skerritt (2011), with the eight essential components of PALAR projects

The stages are outlined below:

Although there was no formal meeting for problem definition and needs analysis with the co-researchers, the several meetings I had with the teachers in preparation for the initial meeting with all the teachers and the learners opened a platform for discussions about the impact of COVID-19 on learning. This discussion was enhanced by the fact that, after meeting the school's authorities, the following line of contact was the two Grade 10 English FAL teachers. Upon meeting the teachers, I was bound to provide a detailed explanation of the title and the purpose of the study. What followed was a question-oriented discussion where teachers sought to understand the study. Answering their questions led to comments and discussions about COVID-19 and how it disrupted learning and led to learning loss in reading. Therefore, it was identified in these discussions that there was a need to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Apart from these discussions, the implementation of FVR was preceded by pre-intervention semi-structured interview sessions with the two teachers, where I sought to establish the extent of the impact of COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms and the strategies the teachers used to mitigate that loss. In those interviews, it was also established that learning loss in reading was incurred and that there was a need to mitigate this loss.

As part of the preparations, I needed to engage with the learners and clarify the objectives of the study to solicit their voluntary participation. Clarifications on the title and the aim of the study also set the tone for meeting learners in the start-up workshop. One meeting was cancelled due to time constraints, even though the learners had also assembled for the meeting. A brief discussion also ensued before they were dismissed. These several encounters created opportunities for meaningful interactions that helped to establish rapport with the co-researchers.

A start-up workshop – this workshop assists participants in acquiring, creating and sharing essential knowledge and skills required by PALAR for the project's design, management and evaluation. Relationships and team-building are forged in this stage of the project. Needs analysis, action learning, critical reflection, vision building and introduction to PALAR are some of the issues addressed in the start-up workshop.

In this study, several failed meetings were scheduled with the teachers. It is important to note that this was because of unforeseen circumstances since the teachers supported the study. These several failed attempts led to informal discussions with the teachers, which allowed us to discuss the purpose of the study. The team comprised two Grade 10 English FAL teachers and ten Grade 10 English FAL learners. In the start-up workshop, the purpose of the study was explained to the co-researchers, and the concept of Free Voluntary Reading was also presented to them. Following the admission that COVID-19 negatively affected their reading skills, the co-researchers acknowledged that there was a need to mitigate the COVID-19-induced reading loss. Thus, they approved the necessity of implementing FVR. The challenge that the co-researchers revealed was that they did not have a functional library. In their own words, the library was just a building that did not serve its purpose. There were no books that they could read for enjoyment. Whatever books were found were a few encyclopedias and other outdated subject-related books that were no longer enticing. It was agreed in the start-up workshop that all co-researchers would bring any books they had to school so that we could get the project underway. It should be noted that under the principles of FVR, books should be provided for learners. Since the initiative to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in English FAL classrooms came from outside the school with no funding, there was no choice but to use whatever means

we available to sustain the co-researchers' vision of accumulating enough books for FVR.

Another invaluable suggestion was that we could harness the benefits presented by technology because, as learners, they spend most of their free time on their cell phones. They suggested that a WhatsApp group should be opened where the co-researchers would share the project-related matters. This WhatsApp group would also help to share and address challenges head-on and almost immediately without waiting for the scheduled meetings. The co-researchers also mentioned that various websites provide free, engaging, and downloadable books that they could share. Links to such websites would be shared with the group. Some co-researchers also revealed that they had downloaded Apps from which they could read the books they liked. One co-researcher volunteered to collect phone numbers and create a WhatsApp group. A challenge established in this meeting was that the school policy prohibited learners from bringing their cell phones to school. On this point, the teacher co-researchers mentioned that on the day the co-researchers want to read from their cellphones, the phones could be kept in the school office until the time when they would need them. Therefore, the usage of cell phones was an exciting alternative. Since the Department of Education does not allow research-related matters to be conducted during school time, the co-researchers agreed to meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays every week for 20 to 30 minutes at 14h45 to engage in FVR. The place for FVR sessions was in the library.

Independent project work – this stage involves the actual implementation of the project, with regular monthly meetings held to monitor progress and learn where additional support is required. This stage also facilitates the generation of data, its analysis, the provision of feedback to the research team and the collaborative interpretation of the findings.

As planned in the start-up workshop, the group met for the first time the following Tuesday to implement the FVR. The library, as they had mentioned, did not have books. It was used as a storage and distribution centre for the students' stationery. We collected the books the co-researchers had brought. Those books did not serve the intended purpose because they were the prescribed novels learners used in their

classrooms. What we needed were books they could read for pleasure, not books that were linked with what they did in class. I had also brought several books which, I thought, could be interesting. Those were the books which got the project off the ground. All co-researchers chose their books. This process took some time. The co-researchers discussed some techniques that could be applied when selecting books during that time. Some of these hints were to consider the title and the cover page, read the back of the book, and look at the font.

After the learners had selected their books, they settled down to read even though we realised that there was a need to rearrange the furniture to create a more appealing and comfortable space for reading. This, the learner-co-researchers assured, that they would attend to it. It took a few minutes to settle down and read without whispers and distractions. When the first session ended, four other learners who were not part of the project approached me as I left the library building, asking questions about the project. They expressed their desire to improve their reading skills, vocabulary and general performance in English. As a result, they requested to be part of the project. I considered this as a reflection that the project was creating a positive image and already attracting participation from other learners. Those learners were allowed to join the team, but only at a later point when we had enough books. The participation of these learners was only restricted to borrowing the books and reading along with the co-researchers. In this way, they did not join the PALAR project workshops, the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

When we met again for the next session in the library, everything was neatly arranged, and a section with chairs and desks was set aside for reading. Since it was emphasized that the goal was to read for pleasure, they were allowed to sit in a position that made them feel comfortable. Some read with their feet on the desks, creating a relaxed atmosphere different from a typical classroom setup. At that time, everyone was reading, including myself and the teachers. I also observed that they seemed to be more absorbed in what they were reading, for when I announced that the time for the session was up, the group was reluctant to stop reading. I advised that reading should not stop at school since they took the books home. As time went on, the co-researchers suggested that we should meet at 14h30. This meant increased time for reading. Since the communication lines were open between me and the

teachers, they would sometimes inform me when there were functions at school that would allow us to start earlier than 14h30. In such instances, we would start at 13h00. The co-researchers agreed that no one should leave at least before 40 minutes had elapsed. Surprisingly, they would stay and read for more than an hour on such days. My observation was that they were enjoying what they were doing.

Another important fact was that the two participating teachers were the only ones teaching all four Grade 10 classes. The other teacher also taught English FAL in the four Grade 12 classes. Consequently, she could not always attend the reading sessions because she held extra classes after school for the Grade 12 learners. Since the FVR sessions were held after school, sometimes the other teacher would have commitments that required her to leave immediately after school. As a result, I offered support by always being part of the FVR sessions. Attending all the sessions increased rapport between me and the co-researchers, thereby creating a comfortable space for proper implementation. Working closely with them also created a conducive environment for making observations. Some of the announcements were made in the WhatsApp group. It is worth noting that although the learners had agreed to share links to the websites for reading novels, this did not happen. This move was supposed to be a complementary strategy that we would use due to the shortage of books. However, as the implementation continued the shortage of books was no longer a challenge.

Motivated by the learners' desire to read and the lack of books, I visited a local library to ask for book donations. The library donated more than 50 novels. On top of this, the library staff advised me to approach the library directorate at the Department of Sports, Arts, Culture and Recreation in Bethlehem. My request for books was given immediate approval. The directorate staff were so impressed that they invited me to be part of the English Reading Festival, which was going to hold competitions at the municipal, district, and provincial levels. I did not attend these competitions as a mere observer. I took part as a motivational speaker and an adjudicator. From the library directorate, 321 novels were donated with a promise of more books. Added to the books which were donated by the local library, those books were more than enough for our FVR reading programme. At the school, news spread that more books had been donated. Hence, more learners came to the library to borrow books. The FVR session focusing

only on 10 learners had garnered the attention of more learners. Most of the learners who came to borrow books were from Grades 10, 11, and 12. The rate at which they borrowed books, returned them and borrowed more reflected that they were reading. Some would join the group and sit down to read.

Mid-way workshop – at this stage of the project the team should have developed a clearer picture of what is mostly needed to finish the project. Researchers can invite specialists' input, communicate issues and concerns, raise questions and brainstorm possible solutions if necessary. Any burning issues and remarkable developments are given attention. Reflections focus on what has been experienced and achieved. All these are required to map the way forward for the project.

The midway workshop was held on July 16, 2024. The goal was to reflect on the FVR programme and discuss what the co-researchers had learned, the challenges and what could be done to circumvent these challenges. The co-researchers spoke avidly about the reading sessions. Most of them acknowledged that they felt like quitting initially, but they kept coming. They admitted that they were now fond readers who could not wait for a time to read. It was also acknowledged that not everything went according to plan. The challenges that were identified were that sometimes, they were not punctual. They also raised concerns that the WhatsApp group was not as effective as it had been intended. Some of the co-researchers revealed that they could not access their cell phones since their parents had confiscated them. Surprisingly, most co-researchers shared that since we had books, they preferred the hard copies to reading from their cellphones. They mentioned that there were so many distractions when using their cell phones. Therefore, hard copies were the better option than soft copies. One of the disadvantages of reading from the cellphones was that using cell phones during school hours was prohibited. I learnt in this meeting, of their increased desire to read. Some mentioned that they read their books whenever the teacher was not around. They also read on their way home and in the taxis.

It was agreed that we should be punctual and that the WhatsApp group should be used effectively. The co-researchers also suggested that we should have sessions where we share what we had read. Not only would these sessions motivate others to read more, but they would also provide a platform for making recommendations. They

were already making book recommendations at this point, but they mentioned that it would be more exciting if they could all sit together and share. That would also increase the bond and promote unity.

Project work continued – the continuation of the project solicits the active participation of the researchers as they work towards the conclusion of the project. They can interpret the findings within the framework of the literature review model and build a theory as in grounded theory. They can also clarify complex knowledge and reflect on personal and organizational learning.

The project work continued after the midway workshop. The WhatsApp group was then effective. Website links where novels could be read and downloaded as PDF files were also shared. However, I learnt through the informal discussions before and after the reading sessions that they were fascinated by the idea of reading hard copies. They were also more punctual. While some would miss the reading sessions due to other school commitments, it was evident that they had developed reading habits. This observation will be expounded in the following chapter.

Concluding workshop, presentation and celebrations – In this workshop, findings are shared and discussed as a draft, allowing participants to reflect on their learning. They also decide whether the project can be continued. Apart from these, preparations for oral and written presentation of the results are also considered. Committing time to publicize the findings opens opportunities for scrutiny so that action learning becomes research. Plans are also made for the final celebrations with drinks, dinner, dance or songs to recognize the co-researchers' hard work, contributions and achievements. More importantly, these celebrations become evidence of learning, transformation and change. However, the celebrations do not mark the end since PALAR is a cyclical methodology. The co-researchers may carry on with the project towards the betterment of their lives.

The concluding workshop was held on August 22, 2024, after the focus group discussion. First, the co-researchers indicated that they wanted the FVR programme to continue. They even asked me not to leave the programme. I told them I was impressed by their commitment and the programme's impact at the school. I had

planned to show them how they could harvest from the books they were reading to improve their creative writing skills. Due to time constraints and the school's busy schedule, we could not find a separate day to delve into this venture. Continuing with the FVR programme without the pressure of a research study would create time for improving their creative writing skills. Therefore, I assured them that I would continue to work with them. We agreed that I would only come once a week on Thursdays at 14:30. We also decided to have a celebratory meal scheduled for Thursday, 29 August 2024. The members also agreed that they needed to spread the word about the programme so that more learners could join or borrow books to start reading. They were excited when I reported that the library directorate was willing to donate more books. Two representatives were chosen to meet the school principal and raise concerns for the school to support them so that the library could function efficiently. I also met the school principal, gave him the report about the programme and inquired if I could continue supporting the learners. The principal approved the request and indicated that I was welcome to stay and work with the learners as long as I wanted to. Impressed by the impact of the programme, he assured me that he would also do his best to support the programme together with his staff. At the time of writing this report, the Free Voluntary Reading programme was still continuing in the school, even though the data required for the study had already been generated.

The final celebrations were held on Thursday, 29 August 2024. The co-researchers shared a celebratory meal, which was accompanied by song, dance and informal reflections on the project. Due to circumstances beyond our control, the celebration was only restricted to the group participating in the study. Thus, there was no opportunity to share what the group had been up to with the whole student body. However, the co-researchers agreed that the FVR project had already made an impact since more learners were being drawn to the project. It was resolved that each co-researcher should invite other learners to inculcate the reading culture in the school.

3.7. SAMPLING

Sampling is a systematic procedure researchers use to pick a comparatively small group of representatives from a defined population which will act as subjects for observation or experimentation in alignment with the research goals and objectives (Sharma, 2017). The fundamental goal of sampling is to choose co-researchers who

will enable the researcher to achieve the desired results of the study (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2016). The selection of co-researchers relies on the type of design used for the study.

Different sampling techniques apply in quantitative and qualitative research designs. In quantitative research, participants are usually selected through random sampling to enhance the generalizability of the findings to context outside the study (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Qualitative research uses non-probability sampling, which does not involve randomization where an individual within the population has no equal opportunity to be chosen. Thus, sampling in qualitative research means that not all individuals within the population have an equal opportunity to be chosen. The discretion on who is selected lies with the researcher (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2016). Sampling in Qualitative research designs also follows a well-defined approach that selects participants with the characteristics and information that align with the research objectives (Collingridge and Gantt, 2019). This study employed purposive sampling. Under purposive sampling, homogeneous sampling was used to select co-researchers.

In purposive sampling, the researcher intentionally chooses certain people because they have certain characteristics that make them ideal candidates for data generation. Such people should be well-informed about the phenomenon under study. No theories are required to justify this type of sampling. The main goal is to select people the researcher believes have the in-depth information required to fulfil the study's objectives (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016; Robinson, 2014; Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). The reason for purposive sampling is that it enables the researchers to match the sample to the research aim and objectives. This enhances the rigour and trustworthiness of the data and the findings (Campbell et al., 2020).

Purposive sampling is the type of sampling that is regarded as selective and biased in quantitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). However, the fear of bias in purposive sampling is not a concern because the co-researchers are selected, mainly because they hold information or experience that the researcher believes is pertinent to the phenomenon being studied (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016).

Voluntary participation resulting from interest and motivation in the topic also justifies the inclusion of participants in purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020).

There are different ways of purposive sampling. For this study, homogeneous sampling was used. Homogeneous sampling focuses on participants who share the same characteristics or traits. In this type of sampling, similarities may be determined regarding age, culture, jobs, or life experiences (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). They can be selected because they are members of a particular group that possesses specific characteristics (Robinson, 2014). In this study, the initial plan was to choose three Grade 10 English FAL teachers and nine Grade 10 English FAL learners from three Grade 10 classrooms. However, only two teachers were available for selection since they were the only ones teaching the four Grade 10 classes. Instead of nine learners from two Grade 10 classrooms, the teachers suggested that we should take ten Grade 10 English FAL learners from the four Grade 10 classrooms they taught. The justification for including the participants lay in the rationale that the study sought to implement FVR to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural Grade 10 English FAL classrooms. Firstly, teachers, as the curriculum implementers, had first-hand information on how English language skills were impacted by COVID-19 and how this led to the learning loss. These people had practical, in-depth information about the learning losses incurred due to COVID-19. Some of the objectives of the study sought to establish how COVID-19 impacted language skills, and the strategies teachers used and are still using to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. This reflected that the teachers held the information that was pertinent to the study's objectives. Therefore, the selection of teachers was predicated on their possession of the requisite knowledge and experience to address the research questions adequately (Grossoehme, 2014).

Since the study aimed to implement a strategy which involved the participation of learners, it would be disingenuous to exclude learners from the study. Thus, ten Grade 10 English FAL learners were chosen to participate in the study because they were directly affected by COVID-19. These ten Grade 10 English FAL learners volunteered to participate in the study after it was explained to them. These learners were the ones who incurred learning losses. Apart from the learning losses, the study utilized PALAR, which required the active participation of the co-researchers in the FVR project. In this

case, 10 English FAL Grade 10 learners, male or female, were eligible for participation in the study. In this case, the primary goal was not to generalize but to have access to in-depth information that aligned with the objectives of the study (Omona, 2013).

3.8. DATA GENERATION

The data generation tools employed in this study were semi-structured interviews for teachers, focus group discussions for learners and observations of the co-researchers' actions and behaviour during the implementation of FVR. Observations were also made on the environment. For example, the condition of the library and the availability of books. Each of these tools is briefly explored below with the justification of their application in this study. Data were also generated from the PALAR workshops held with the co-researchers.

3.8.1. Semi-structured interviews

This study used semi-structured interviews before the concluding workshop of the project to generate data from two Grade 10 English FAL teachers. Semi-structured interviews aim to derive the descriptive nature of the co-researchers' lived experiences to interpret the phenomena being described (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015). Thus, good interviews have to provide descriptive experiences of how the interviewees experience their world (Leavy 2014). Therefore, practical interview questions must encourage the co-researchers to provide descriptive data (Brinkman, 2018). For this to happen, the questions must not be interrogative but generative and open-ended for the in-depth development of the participants' thoughts and ideas. This allows them to talk about the subject matter from their perspectives, thus revealing their experiences in their own words (Karatsareas, 2022; Bearman, 2019). In this way, semi-structured interviews become one of the most effective tools for seeking a deeper understanding of the human experience (Bearman, 2019). This study used open-ended questions to enable co-researchers to describe their lived experiences. This led to rich data that helped me to make interpretations. This data was audio-recorded and transcribed before being thematically analysed.

Literature reveals that semi-structured interviews blend structured and unstructured questions and ad hoc follow-up questions (Ahlin, 2019). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasise that, although they still contain some elements of structured interviews,

semi-structured interviews are blended with a few less structured questions. The structured sections focus primarily on the specific information required by the researcher. Although a list of questions guides the semi-structured interviews, there is no fixed wording or order that should be followed. This feature provides researchers with the flexibility and autonomy needed to adapt to the circumstances they encounter, including relevant concepts that may emerge during the interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). These features give semi-structured interviews an upper hand over other types and make them the most preferred interview option for data generation (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, and Syam, 2022). While some of the questions in this study focused directly on the study's objectives, the goal was to encourage the co-researchers to go beyond just the scope of the study. This would pave the way to rich, unexpected data that could add new and meaningful insights to the study.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews can explore the knowledge-producing potential of dialogues by giving the researchers room to follow up on what is being discussed from different angles as the researcher deems necessary. Thus, they go beyond the pre-determined nature of structured interviews to allow for more insight into the subject of discussion (Leavy, 2014). This means that researchers have more freedom to direct the conversation on matters they regard more pertinent to the research study (Brinkman, 2018). This requires researchers to be vigilant so that they can detect when the interviewee is straying from the context of the interview. Using discursive strategies, they can coax the interviewees back to the desired direction (Karatsareas, 2022). Since the study did not adhere to a rigid interview protocol, I could follow up when the co-researchers revealed information I had not envisaged. At the same time, using discursive strategies allowed me to use probes when the co-researchers veered far off the scope of the study.

Most researchers consider interviews as social situations. Taking knowledge and evidence as contextual, situational and interactional implies that researchers should ensure that context is embedded in the interviews. This view suggests that there should be more context-based questions which solicit contextual knowledge than abstract questions (Ruslin et al, 2022). The guiding questions used in this study mainly were context-based to allow the co-researchers to dwell on their lived experiences.

Thus, the co-researchers could produce knowledge that was more contextual than abstract.

Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate data generation tool for this study. They allowed the two Grade 10 English FAL teachers to reveal how COVID-19 impacted them in their English FAL Grade 10 classrooms, leading to learning loss in reading. Semi-structured interviews also provided access to strategies used to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading, challenges encountered in implementing FVR and its benefits. The ideas suggested in this regard were invaluable. They gave the project more meaning, particularly when the co-researchers were part of the decision-making process in a project meant to improve their livelihood.

3.8.2. Focus group discussions

In addition to semi-structured interviews, the study used focus group discussions to generate data from ten Grade 10 English FAL learners from four Grade 10 classrooms. These focus group discussions were held before the concluding workshop. Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, and Mukherjee (2018) explain that a focus group discussion is a qualitative approach mainly employed to develop a thorough understanding of social issues. It is based on a group selection of a sizeable number of individuals instead of a sample that statistically represents a broader population. Merriam & Tisdell (2016:11) also add that “A focus group is an interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic.” However, what has to be emphasized from these two definitions, particularly Merriam and Tisdell’s definition, is that a focus group differs from a group interview. Perhaps the more inclusive definition is by Taylor and Blake (2015). They define focus groups as group discussions where individuals from a targeted population engage in a discussion and share their views on a particular topic under the guidance of a researcher who acts as a facilitator, not the interviewer. What makes focus groups unique is that they can generate vast amounts of data because of their interactive nature (Hennick 2014).

Although there are no rigid rules on the number of participants, six to ten members are generally thought to suffice for focus groups (Merriam & Tesdell, 2016). Differing slightly from this number, Moser and Korstjens (2017) believe that focus groups may comprise six to twelve participants. Careful time management is essential to determine

how much time needs to be spent on each question. Time should also be reserved for the introductory and concluding phases (Moser & Korstjens 2017). This study's focus group discussion comprised ten Grade 10 English FAL learners.

The primary goal of a focus group is to stimulate co-researchers to talk to one another. The expectation is that co-researchers will discuss, build upon or challenge one another's views (Dzino-Silajdzic, 2018). It is this interactive feature that makes focus groups unique. Rosenthal (2016) asserts that data generation in focus groups lies in their interactive nature to formulate answers to the research questions. Since interaction relies on openness and fluidity, focus group questions must be carefully crafted. To enhance this interaction, focus group discussions use semi-structured guiding questions meant to stimulate active participation and in-depth discussion. This semi-structured approach to guiding the discussion is intended to probe specific, predetermined topics while giving leeway and encouraging participants to discuss and share their opinions (Dzino-Silajdzic, 2018). As the discussion is underway, probes and prompts are used to clarify the co-researchers' responses (Taylor & Blake, 2015). This interaction generates the required information faster than when interviewing people individually. Focus groups can yield a wide range of data and the chance to seek clarification if there are issues that need to be clarified (Queiros, Faria & Almeida, 2017). However, the depth of information that focus groups can generate depends on how much the co-researchers' responses encourage one another to discuss and share their opinions and experiences. Since the main feature is interaction, the participants respond to the facilitator and to one another (Moser & Korstjens, 2017).

Since interaction is key to data generation, I had to ensure that I used well-crafted questions that would initiate a discussion between members. Those questions were open-ended so that they could give them flexibility and freedom to express any additional ideas that the questions might have missed. Probe and prompts were used where necessary for clarity and emphasis. As they confirmed their responses, they stimulated reactions from the other co-researchers. As a result, a lively interactive atmosphere was established, leading to insightful information.

The role of the researcher in focus groups is to facilitate the discussion. In this regard, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) highlight that the researcher operates as a

facilitator or moderator, not as an interviewer. The role of the moderator is to guide and facilitate the discussion, ensuring that the interaction between members aligns with the topic of discussion. Taylor & Blake (2015) also reiterate that the facilitator must ensure that he builds good relations with the group members and facilitates the discussion. To achieve this, he should have exemplary interviewing skills. He should be a good listener who encourages discussion and ensures that the discussion stays in line with the topic being discussed. He should also have impeccable time management and conflict resolution skills. The researcher must also prepare well, anticipate how he will react, and address difficulties that may arise during the discussion. Such challenges may affect power dynamics where dominant co-researchers monopolise the discussion. There may also be minimal or no interaction between co-researchers while some co-researchers may feel uncomfortable sharing their opinions in a group. In addition, there are those who do not display their normal behaviour under observation (Moser & Korstjens, 2017).

In this study, I also ensured that my role was only to guide the discussion. This helped me to avoid treating the discussion as a group interview. Facilitation enhanced discussion, where group members reacted not only to the questions I posed but also to the opinions of other group members. This created an interactive atmosphere that delved into issues I had not even envisaged as I prepared the questions that would guide the discussion. I also had to ensure that I managed the time well to avoid prolonging the discussion longer than was necessary. The co-researchers were also encouraged to feel free to participate. Since the group had been working together for a while, achieving this was not difficult.

While the contrived nature of focus group discussions might deem them disadvantageous, the fact that they were focused on a particular topic led to more insightful data that could otherwise not be obtained in straightforward one-on-one interviews. Focus group discussions are time-saving and can generate a lot of data in a short time. They also enhance synergy, fostering harmony and stimulating discussion and cooperation. Additionally, they are more beneficial when triangulated with other forms of data generation tools. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). In this study, focus group discussions were triangulated with semi-structured interviews and

observations. More data were also generated during the PALAR workshops and meetings.

By using the focus group discussions, I also had to adhere to the three rules and the three stages of implementation, as highlighted by Taylor and Blake (2015).

Rapport building – in this stage, I had to establish good relations with the co-researchers by explaining the purpose of the study, outlining ground rules and answering any questions that may arise. I did not have to introduce myself due to my prolonged engagement with the co-researchers. Working together as we implemented the FVR developed a strong connection. This means I was no longer viewed as an outsider but as an active group member.

The Question stage – in this stage, I used my pre-prepared open questions to initiate and maintain the discussion. I played the role of a facilitator, listening attentively to ensure that the discussion was on track and redirecting it if it went astray.

Closure – the discussion was closed by engaging with the co-researchers to ensure that nothing was left out.

These three rules govern focus group discussion; people take turns as they speak, one at a time, no belittling remarks are aimed at other co-researchers' responses, and what is discussed should not be shared with people outside the team (Taylor & Blake, 2015).

After explaining the purpose of the discussion, I had to lay the ground rules before we could continue. This was essential to enhancing meaningful participation. These rules addressed issues of power dynamics. Power dynamics were introduced from the first meeting with the co-researchers when the PALAR principles were expounded on them. The principles of PALAR emphasise that all co-researchers are equal and that their participation and contribution are equally important. Even the researcher has to operate as an equal partner. The fact that they had been operating under the principles of mutual respect and trust promoted a healthy atmosphere for discussions. Laying the rules also helped to allay the fears some of the co-researchers might have had. I

explained that we had to take turns and that all their inputs were equally important. I also impressed upon them that no answer is wrong in research. This I did to ensure that no one withheld their opinions because they believed they were not good enough. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were also addressed to make them aware that what we discussed in the group should stay in the group. They were also told that their real names would not be used and that no information that could be linked to them would be shared with anyone. At this stage, I needed to highlight that the data would be solely utilized for research purposes and pseudonyms were then used in this regard. In this study, the focus group discussion was a crucial tool that provided data on the impact of FVR in mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms, the challenges encountered in implementation, and how these challenges could be circumvented.

The discussion above reveals that focus group discussions with the ten Grade 10 English FAL learners were an invaluable data generation tool in this study. Through interactive discussions, much information emerged from the discussion that could not have been revealed.

3.8.3. Observations

Observations were also used to complement the data generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The observations were made during the FVR sessions which were held in the library for only the ten learners who participated in the study. Additionally, the observations focused on the school atmosphere with a particular inclination towards issues related to the study. According to Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger (2020), observations become essential when the need arises to gain in-depth information on a certain setting and the participants' actual behaviour. The significance of observations as data generation tools is that they allow the researchers to gather in-depth information from an ongoing social event instead of second-hand information (Wellington 2015). For this to happen, researchers should immerse themselves in the research setting so that they can make observations from the inside (Moser & Korstjens 2018). Operating from the inside harps on the basic requirement that the researcher must adapt to the context and interaction. He must also ensure minimal influence on the environment and the events being observed (Ciesielska, Bostrom & Ohlander, 2018).

In this study, I also immersed myself in the research setting to gather in-depth information from the inside. As indicated earlier in the PALAR section of the chapter, I acted as a full member of the group, participating and contributing equally to the implementation of FVR. This led to a prolonged stay in the research setting, allowing me to make close observations that would not have been possible if I had visited the school infrequently. The group met on Tuesdays and Thursdays for sustained silent reading after school, and I was at the school almost every week. I did this to motivate the learners and to assure them that I was one of them. I actively participated in the reading programme and the group activities while at the same time having access to authentic data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Since observations allowed me to participate in the lives of the co-researchers, it was the best way of getting close enough to see and feel many aspects of social life. Thus, I became a basic instrument through which the research was conducted. Observations allowed me to experience first-hand information on how the co-researchers perceived, felt and acted. This helped me better understand their perceptions, feelings, and behaviour (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2022). My observations involved taking field notes on the conduct and activities of the participants at the research site (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I also added my reflections on what I had observed. Thereafter, I reworked the field notes almost immediately to add all descriptive details (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The role of the researcher in conducting observations is undeniably significant. As a result, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018:552), explain that the role of a researcher in observations can take one of the following categories.

Complete participant – refers to the member of the group whose identity is hidden from the other group members. The identity is hidden so that his/her presence would not intimidate or influence the group members to behave differently.

The participant-as-observer – the identity of this type of observer is known by the group. As a result, his/her presence could result in intimidation. While this participant

may have insider information, he/she may not be completely objective, thus rendering their observations unreliable.

The observer-as-participant – this person is not a group member, but he/she may participate sparingly or fully in the group activities. The roles of such observers are clear and undisguised. It is also so unobtrusive that the group members may forget that they are being observed. Access to information may be a bit restricted.

The complete observer only observes without participating in the group activities. Since he/she is detached from the group, his presence may not be noticed by the members.

My role in this study as I conducted observations, was the observer-as-participant. This was because the co-researchers fully knew my identity since I had operated as a co-researcher with them from the beginning of the study. Since I played a participatory role in the study, I almost operated as a group member and not an outsider. The rapport-building and the establishment of trusting relationships forged in the frequent meetings and the implementation process meant that the co-researchers took me as one of them. In this way, I did not have to be unobtrusive. I could make observations sometimes without their being aware that they were being observed.

It is important to have a focused observation because one cannot record almost every observable behaviour. In this regard, descriptive observation deals with almost every behaviour in the observed setting. Focused observation means that researchers follow certain behaviours over time. Selective observation focuses on certain issues only (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Descriptive observations are unstructured and follow no predetermined agenda. Focused observations are semi-structured, and they have an agenda of what the researcher is looking for but will gather data in a less predetermined and systematic way. Selective observation follows a rigid, predetermined protocol that focuses only on what the researcher intends to observe (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

I adopted a focused observation in the study to focus mainly on issues relevant to the study. However, the observations were made less systematically to make room for any

unexpected observable behaviour that could prove vital to the study objectives. I mainly observed the issues related to how the implementation process unfolded, the initial behaviour and attitude of the participants to the project and how this would change over time. I also noted the physical attributes, such as the availability of the school infrastructure, and how they may impact the reading habits of the learners. Owing to the immersive nature of PALAR, I attended all the FVR sessions for support. What prompted me to do this was the fact that sometimes the two teachers offered extra classes after school. Sometimes, one of them would have commitments that prevented them from joining the sessions. While the teachers did their utmost best to be part of the FVR sessions, I also ensured that I was always available so that the sessions could proceed without any hindrance. Therefore, this provided a chance to make as many observations as were necessary.

3.9. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2022) six-phase guide to reflexive thematic analysis. First developed in 2006, thematic analysis evolved over the years (Braun & Clarke 2006, to 2022). Thematic analysis is a method applied in qualitative research to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning from a qualitative dataset. It is a comprehensive and methodical procedure for generating codes from qualitative data. Codes are units of analysis that eventually serve as building blocks for themes. Themes make the analysis accessible to the readers (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Acknowledging that the initial model was poorly demarcated, the authors later highlighted the significance of the researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity. They acknowledged that the researcher should not only be aware of his philosophical orientation and theoretical assumptions, but he should also be transparent about these issues as he applies reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This outlook gave birth to Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Therefore, Reflexive thematic analysis is a term that refers to a comprehensible, vigorous method for analysing, developing and understanding patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset. Positioning the researcher at the centre of the approach, reflexivity in thematic analysis acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity as an inseparable aspect of knowledge creation. Reflexivity reflects on the researcher's presence in the research process as someone

who is constantly questioning and critical of “what they do, who they do it with and the context(s) in which they do it” (Joy, Braun & Clarke, 2023: 4 of 13).

The idea behind reflexivity is that the reflexive thematic analysis cannot be done mechanically or robotically without the researchers’ thoughtful, inquisitive process, characterized by who we are as researchers. Thus, reflexivity is what the researcher brings into the research (Joy, Braun & Clarke, 2023). The researcher’s subjectivity is considered an essential part of the process of analysis, and the themes do not emerge from the dataset. They result from the analytic, interpretive process that involves coding and working with the data (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke and Braun, 2017).

This study analysed data in alignment with the following six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, according to Braun & Clarke (2022). The process was not linear but a back-and-forth attempt to ensure that the guidelines yielded the desired outcome. Before the analysis, it is crucial to note that the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and the meeting we held with the co-researchers were audio-recorded. After the recording, the data were transcribed and labelled accordingly. For example, transcript 1, interview with the teacher, Mrs Lethole. The labelled transcripts were then collated into a one word document, after which the data analysis was carried out as outlined in the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis below.

1. Familiarising yourself with the dataset – this phase requires the researcher to establish familiarity with the data by reading it several times. Familiarity could start as early as in the data generation stage. Since I was directly involved in data generation, this gave me an initial opportunity to acquaint myself with the data. I intentionally transcribed the data manually so that I could become even more familiar with it. Before coding, I read and re-read the dataset to ascertain familiarity.
2. Coding – This phase involves the interpretive and analytic development of the codes. I read the data slowly and carefully, noting anything that related to the study objectives. To these relevant snippets of information, I attached short, analytically meaningful descriptions. This was a recursive process since I would go back at times to review and confirm my codes. After the coding process, I

saved my document as a web document. Saving the document as a web page helped in two ways. First, this process simplified my work by automatically numbering the codes and the corresponding information in the text with matching numbers throughout the text. Then, all the codes were arranged in order at the end of the document. Clicking on the assigned number of the code would take me back to the page on which the corresponding numbered quote was located.

3. Generating initial themes – This phase involves clustering related codes. These clusters must revolve around the same idea, even though the meanings might be multifaceted. At this phase, I opened a Word document with a table. Going through the numbered codes grouped at the end of the web document, I carefully selected codes which, though multifaceted, revolved around the same idea. I copied and pasted these codes in the columns in the table I had created.
4. Developing and reviewing themes – This phase is all about validating the meaning the themes portray and how viable this process is. At this phase, I had to study the themes carefully while reflecting on what I considered important and the extent to which the themes answered the research questions. This stage also involved naming the clustered codes into themes and sub-themes
5. Refining, defining and naming themes – This is the refining phase in which the researcher reflects on the whole process and what story the themes tell. This was a reflective and critical phase in which I had to study the themes closely to ensure that they told a story that answered the research questions. The naming of themes had to be clarified and rewritten to ensure that the naming captured the essence of the story the theme told.
6. Writing Up – This is the final stage that translates into the presentation of the findings. Thus, in this stage, I had to present a detailed, coherent and persuasive story that revealed how the dataset related to the research questions. The writing phase centred on the themes as portrayed in the verbatim words of the participants in the next chapter. These quotes were followed by an interpretive, analytical story that also revolved around its links to

the context of the study. Observations were also infused to corroborate the findings, as evidenced by the co-researchers' responses.

3.10. TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness is to qualitative research what rigour is to quantitative research. Trustworthiness in qualitative research reflects the researcher's transparency in demonstrating explicitly how the research processes were followed. These processes should reflect how the researcher conducted the study, the procedural guidelines he followed, and how data were generated and analysed (Hammarbeg et al., 2015). The criteria for judging the trustworthiness of a qualitative study usually use the terms credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Elo, Kaarianen, Kantse, Polkki, Utriainen & Kyngas, 2014)

3.10.1. Credibility

The first criterion for assessing trustworthiness is credibility. According to Nassaji (2020), credibility in qualitative research focuses on the truthfulness of the research findings. The readers should be able to determine the degree to which the research findings, analysis, interpretations and conclusions can be regarded as believable. The researcher achieves credibility by accurately and adequately representing his understanding of the participants, context and the research processes. He should also demonstrate that his interpretations are inclusive. Credibility is usually determined by triangulation - using multiple sources to generate data through prolonged engagement in the research environment and member-checking. Member-checking involves going back to the participants so that they can confirm that the analysis and interpretation of the findings are accurately presented (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The study also used multiple data generation sources. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with the two Grade 10 English FAL teachers, focus group discussions with the ten learners, and observations made throughout the study. Some of the data were generated through the workshops and meetings held to plan, reflect and reimplement FVR to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in four rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

3.10.2. Transferability

Transferability refers to the potential for the research findings to be applied to different contexts outside the research context (Hammarberg et al., 2015). The researcher achieves transferability through detailed descriptions of context and the research processes thereby enabling readers to assess whether the results could apply to different settings. Thus, researchers should create a vivid representation that will illuminate and connect with the readers (Amankwaa, 2016). In this study, transferability was determined by offering comprehensive and detailed descriptions of the research context, the co-researchers involved, and the methods utilized for data generation and analysis so that the readers can judge if the results could be applied to other contexts. This process involved using a relevant theory that provided a lens through which the study was conducted. The findings were also cross-referenced with the reviewed literature to compare and contrast so that further readers can link the whole process to the context of the study (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

3.10.3. Dependability

Dependability is the criterion employed to determine the reliability of the study. It refers to the degree to which the same data would yield similar patterns in a different context (Hammarberg, et al. 2015). Analogous to reliability in quantitative research, dependability pertains to the consistency of the data throughout the duration of the study and the circumstances under which it was conducted (Polit & Beck, 2014). The researcher could use the audit trail to record all the notes on how the research was conducted. These notes should reveal all the research processes, from data generation to all the steps involved in the analysis, interpretation and reporting (Carcary, 2020). I also kept track of all the processes involved in the study, the initial plans, and how these changed due to contextual factors. For example, the initial plan in the study was to include three Grade 10 English FAL teachers and nine learners, but I ended up with two teachers and 10 learners since there were only two teachers teaching English FAL in Grade 10.

3.10.4. Confirmability

Confirmability can be achieved by keeping notes on all the research processes, decisions and their analysis throughout the development of the study. The criterion for this can be established through peer debriefing, where the researcher shares these

notes with notable researchers in his field. Such discussions eliminate biases from only one person's perspective in research. Member-checking can also be applied to discuss and confirm the findings (Connelly, 2016). The preliminary findings of the study were presented at the University's annual post-graduate conference, where inputs from other students and lecturers provided invaluable feedback that ensured that the findings were presented in a befitting manner.

3.11. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are a critical component of research, and this study stringently adhered to the necessary ethical considerations. First, an ethical clearance was applied for, from the University of the Free State ethics committee and the Free State Department of Education. Even after receiving approval, I sought permission from the school principal to conduct the study. Proceedings for the study at the school only began after the principal had approved my request.

The next step involved explaining my study to the prospective participants. Apart from explaining the study's objectives, I also clarified that participation was entirely voluntary and that for confidentiality and anonymity, their identity would be concealed through pseudonyms. The participants were also told that they were free to stop participating whenever they wanted to. Thereafter, I sought consent from the teachers and the parents. Study information leaflets and consent forms were given to teachers, parents and learners. However, learners were encouraged not to sign the assent forms and to wait for their parents' consent. Only after receiving consent from the parents did the learners sign their consent forms. At this stage, the learners were also informed that they possessed the right to decline participation, regardless of whether their parents had previously provided consent.

The study was anchored in building trust and establishing relationships through the implementation of PALAR. Therefore, issues of power balance and respect for one another were established from the beginning and maintained throughout the study period. The participants were regarded as co-researchers, and no one assumed superiority over the other.

3.12. SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The chapter outlined the research paradigm, approach, design and methodology that governed the study. The chapter demonstrated how the study operated through the qualitative lens, the interpretivist paradigm, the case study design and the PALAR methodology. Sampling procedures followed in the study were also discussed. The chapter also expounded on how the study generated and analysed data. Additionally, the discussion encompassed matters related to trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The data generated and analysed through the methods explored in this chapter is presented as the findings in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter shed light on the research design and methodology utilised in the study. The chapter also detailed how PALAR was implemented to guide the study. The current chapter presents data generated from two Grade 10 English FAL teachers and ten learners from four Grade 10 English FAL classrooms from one rural secondary school in Thabo Mofutsanyana district. The findings presented in this chapter were derived from the data generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and PALAR-oriented workshops. The data from the semi-structured interviews with the teachers and the focus group discussions was generated before the concluding workshop. The observations were made during the FVR sessions held in the library for only the ten learners who participated in the study. The observations also focused on the school atmosphere with a particular inclination towards issues related to the study.

4.2. Research objectives of the study

This study sought to address the following research objectives:

- To examine how COVID-19 impacted reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To determine strategies teachers use to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To demonstrate the implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To identify challenges that may impede the implementation of the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To explore the benefits of FVR in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

4.3. THE SUMMARY OF DATA GENERATION METHODS AND CO-RESEARCHERS

The following table serves to provide a summary of the data collection methods and reiterate the sample of the population of this study:

Data generation methods	Sample size of the population	Pseudonyms
Semi-structured interviews	Two Grade 10 English FAL teachers	Mrs Lethole Mrs Ngobese
Focus group discussions	Ten Grade 10 English FAL learners	Ayanda, Dintle, Vinny, Thato, Katleho, Thabile, Teboho, John, Kananelo, Dineo
Observations	All FVR sessions	Mrs Lethole, Mrs Ngobese, Ayanda, Dintle, Vinny, Thato, Katleho, Thabile, Teboho, John, Kananelo, Dineo
PALAR meetings & workshops	Two Grade 10 English FAL teachers and ten Grade 10 English FAL learners	Mrs Lethole, Mrs Ngobese, Ayanda, Dintle, Vinny, Thato, Katleho, Thabile, Teboho, John, Kananelo, Dineo

The data from these data generation tools were audio-recorded and then transcribed. As explained in the previous chapter, the transcripts were collated into one document before the analysis process could begin. The analysis was guided by Braun & Clarke's (2022) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis. The data analysis was a reiterative process that gave birth to the themes discussed below. As the responses from the participants are quoted to expound the relevant themes and sub-themes, brief descriptions will also follow to indicate whether such verbatim quotes are from the semi-structured interviews with the teachers, focus group discussions with the learners or the PALAR-oriented meetings we had with all the co-researchers. The findings are also intertwined with the observational data I accumulated through close working relations with the co-researchers. In most cases, as it will be seen in the chapter, the observational data is infused to corroborate the findings from the co-researchers' interview data, focus group discussions, and the meetings we held.

4.4. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LEARNERS' READING SKILLS

This part of the study presents findings on the impact of COVID-19 on the learners' reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The impact of COVID-19 is referenced in terms of the total shutdowns where learners stayed at home. As revealed in the verbatim quotes of the co-researchers, teaching and learning did not take place at that time. The impact of COVID-19 was also considered in terms of the rotational timetables and attendance when the learners eventually returned to school. While the expectation could be that the effects were wholly severe, the findings reveal that there may have been learners who benefited partly from the COVID-19-induced school closures and the planned rotational attendance.

4.4.1. Severe impact of COVID-19 on the learners' reading skills

The findings from teachers and learners reveal that the COVID-19-induced school closures and the rotational timetables severely affected the learners' reading skills. Without regular face-to-face contact sessions and remote learning enhanced by the application of social media platforms like WhatsApp, the findings reveal that learning was dealt a severe blow. The teacher co-researchers had this to say about the impact of COVID-19 on the rural English FAL Grade 10 learners' reading skills.

These verbatim quotes are from the one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the teachers.

Mrs Lethole, a teacher, had this to say about the impact of the learners' reading skills:

It became a problem because while they were at home, you would be telling yourself that they were doing the work that they were supposed to be doing; maybe they were reading something. And they were not actually reading. It affected them very badly because when they had to read you, you would understand that this person does not even know basic things that they are actually supposed to know regarding language and so on. So, it was a big challenge. You could find someone in Grades 8 to 9 and in Grades 10 or 11 not able to read... They don't know how to read. You ask yourself, how did you get to this level? How did you get to this grade whereby you cannot even read, so you know, such things. So, obviously, if they were able to come to school, we

would be able to identify such challenges. That is whereby we will identify that a certain learner needs more work regarding reading.

Another teacher, Mrs Ngobese, also had this to say:

They were severely affected because if they could not read, it does not only affect English because, except for Sesotho, all the subjects are assessed in English. So, it was very difficult... When you do a general reading like reading a novel, you often ask some of the learners to read. Some of them... I had one learner who literally cried because she couldn't read or because she was too shy to stand up and read... So, it was worse during that time. They couldn't read, and when they responded, you would see that they did not understand, especially on open-ended questions where they had to apply what they read in the reading comprehension and then link it to their general knowledge.

The two quotes from the two Grade 10 English FAL teachers above reveal the severe impact COVID-19 had on the learners' reading skills. While it could be expected that information relating to the severity of the effect on the learners' reading skills would be provided primarily by teachers, some of the learner co-researchers were also aware of the debilitating impact of COVID-19 on their reading skills.

The following information from the learners was revealed in the start-up workshop with all the co-researchers.

Ayanda shared the following about the effect on her reading skills:

We read books that we had already read. We could no longer go to libraries because they were closed... to get books that we had never read before. We were reading books that we read. In that way, we couldn't improve our vocabulary because we were reading books that we had read on and on again.

Dintle also had this to say:

Sir, it affected us very badly because we were going to school almost like once or twice a week. And, sir, at home, we were not able to read. Sir, it affected us very badly because we were going to school almost like once or twice a week. And, sir, at home, we were not able to read.

Thabile also believed that her reading was dealt a severe blow, as seen in her response below:

We were suffering inside because when we are at home you don't have that motivation to read, you know, like, you know, tomorrow I'm not going to school, so I will see that another time. So, when you go to school, you have that I have homework and I have to read this. We are given topics to read about, but during COVID we were home.... We didn't bother reading. I was reading, sometimes because my mother forced me. I was not used to reading. I could not read like I can read now.

Another learner, John, echoed the sentiments of his fellow classmates:

To me, it seemed like a normal day. I just got extra time to sleep. I didn't read a lot.

The verbatim quotes of the co-researchers above reveal that their reading skills were severely affected. The learners' responses show that COVID-19 restricted their movements. As a result, they could not borrow books from the libraries so that they could read. It could also be inferred that while at home, learners did not have the motivation to study. As shown by John's response, he just took the time at home as an opportunity to sleep. Even in situations where learners had access to ICT devices, research shows that some of the learners did not have the motivation to participate in learning (Efriana, 2021). The teachers' responses allude to the fact that even before COVID-19, reading skills were not given enough attention. Therefore, the onset of COVID-19 exacerbated this problem, heightening the reading losses. Despite this negative impact, it appears that some learners were not so severely affected.

4.4.2. Disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on reading skills

From the quotes in the previous section, it appears that the impact on reading skills was exacerbated by the fact that some learners did not have reading habits. They read only when they were forced to read. Two of the learners believed that they might have somehow benefited from staying at home regarding reading.

The responses from these two learners are also from the start-up workshop with all the co-researchers.

Thato gave this answer about the impact on her reading skills:

Regarding the reading issue, I can say that there were three points. During the COVID-19 lockdown, I don't know about others, but I used to exchange books with my friends. And then, during the lockdown, we exchanged books. She would give me her book, and I'd give her my book. And then we continued reading. And then after reading those books, we also read the other books back after exchanging again. So, I can say that it positively impacted me because I was able to be exposed to different books. And the vocabulary kind of increased.

Ayanda also stressed that since she was at home, she was able to make time to read. This is what she said:

I could say negatively or positively because I was able to read or make time to actually read a book. But on the negative side, we didn't. We couldn't get time to do our regular meet-ups. It disturbed us in that kind of way because we were used to meeting up every time, then like sharing what we have learned motivating each other and setting goals and all, concerning reading. I was actually able to make time that I didn't think I would actually make to read and improve my vocabulary.

While only two learners mentioned that they benefitted, I believe it is worth noting that not all learners' reading skills were affected in the same way. However, the responses from these two co-researchers may not necessarily mean that their reading skills were completely not affected. It could be that the impact on their part was not as severe as the other learners. Findings in the studies by Pier et al. (2021) and Reylea et al. (2022) also reported that the impact of COVID-19 on learners' reading skills was disproportionate depending on factors such as socio-economic background. A study by Jato (2021) also reported that some learners developed positive reading habits during this time when many were severely impacted. This deviation from the norm reveals that if learners have developed reading habits, they do not have the same difficulties to adjust in times of adversity.

4.5. LACK OF CLASSROOM-BASED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING

The first step towards providing a solution is identifying and acknowledging the existence of a particular problem. One would believe that acknowledging how severely the reading skills were impacted would take teachers on a journey to explore possible intervention strategies. This section focuses mainly on the responses given by the teachers on the strategies they used to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.

These data were derived from the semi-structured interviews with the teachers.

Mrs Lethole shared the following information concerning the intervention strategies:

The strategies that I'm currently using or trying to implement, even now and then, even though not consistently, uh.. encouraging them to read.... We had a parent intervention in which I encouraged parents that, at least, that 30 minutes before they go to sleep, encourage them to read something. Try to read something other than you spending more time on your cell phone and so on. You try to read something, and you will then get used to reading. I encourage them to use that 30 minutes before they go to bed or 30 minutes when they get home, even if they are tired because it can also take place even if you are tired or you're at home just relaxing.

Mrs Ngobese also had this to say about the intervention strategies:

OK. During that year, nothing was done. But we had to teach what was going to be assessed. Like, if you knew, they were going to write an essay, then you had to teach an essay so that they could be able to respond. But nothing much was done at that time. But the following year, they decided to add the work from previous grades. If you are teaching Grade 10 then there's a bit of work that had to be done from Grade 9 just to link the work to Grade 10. That was done. And then we had to attend extra classes so that we could cover the work. But in order to cover reading, per se, there was nothing done.... There was no particular strategy that we applied.

The responses above reveal that no particular strategies were used to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. Although Mrs Ngobese admits that they held extra classes, these were not meant to cover reading. Mrs Lethole's response shows that she encouraged learners to read, but there was no class or school-based strategy to ensure that learners were actually reading. She acknowledged that the learners confessed to not reading, and the parents also confirmed it. This is reflected in her words below:

So, some would be like, 'Ok, I will do it.' Some would be like, 'We watch television' and such things, you know. Because I give them the platform in the classroom to be open... So, they are open to even tell you that when I get home, this is what I do... Even on the part where I was addressing the issue with the parents, the parents were like 'I have never seen this person prepare for or read for something.'

Therefore, the responses above prove that no particular strategies were used to mitigate the learning loss in reading. The fact that there were no particular intervention strategies is a worrying factor since, without intensive mitigation strategies, there are some learners who may never catch up (Valle (2021). This prompted me to find out why no strategies had been employed. This information is revealed in the following sub-theme.

4.5.1. Lack of time to implement reading strategies

While intervention strategies would be instrumental in mitigating the COVID-19-induced reading loss, the teachers felt that there was no space and time to implement such strategies.

The responses below are still from the semi-structured interviews with the teachers

Mrs Lethole had this to say in this regard:

We don't have enough time. Remember, we have to follow the ATPs. So, in some things, we are deprived because we don't get enough time as much as you would like or you would need with those learners regarding reading. Only that little part where you try, maybe that 10 minutes, where you try to give them

something for 10 minutes before you start your lesson. And remember, when I start with whatever I am doing related to reading, I'm already behind with the ATPs, so it becomes a lot. If we were given more time to implement those things, I think it would be much better.

Mrs Ngobese's response also echoed her colleague's sentiments:

I think even the department realizes that there's a problem in reading. And they do try to come up with strategies. These strategies need extra time. They are not covered by the ATPs... Because the way the timetable in our school is structured, you are in class most of most of the time.... These strategies should be done in extra classes or early in the morning. That's why they do not succeed most of the time. For example, I teach all the learners in Grade 10. So, you literally have to be at school every morning at 7:00, which is not always possible. So, that's why they fail sometimes.

The responses above reveal that if intervention strategies for mitigating reading loss in reading are not embedded within the regular school timetable, they stand little chance of success. Creating extra time for intervention strategies might have been possible if the school day was extended like in the Western Cape so that the teachers would have more time with the learners (Molato-Gayares et al., 2021). In this case, teachers are not prepared to sacrifice their class time for intervention strategies because they have a demanding curriculum schedule to follow. During our FVR intervention, I also discovered that both teachers already had extra classes they gave after school. Those extra classes were offered to cover the curriculum schedule that the teachers said was demanding. That is why I ensured that I joined all the sessions to ensure that on days when the teachers were occupied, the reading sessions would not be affected. I also did this so that the teachers would not feel like the FVR intervention was a burden.

4.6. CONDITIONS SUITABLE IMPLEMENTING FVR TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED READING LOSS IN READING

Successful implementation in any setting requires careful planning and consideration of instrumental factors. In this study, the same thing also had to be done to ensure that

the FVR programme would be implemented successfully. The following conditions had to be established to ensure successful implementation.

4.6.1. Selecting the Time and Place for the FVR Sessions

Since the programme could not be implemented during class time, it was unanimously agreed that we would have two sessions after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 14:45. After a few sessions, the time for the meeting was rescheduled. The FVR sessions started at 14:30 and ended at 15:00. It is worth noting that the two teachers who participated in the study had a hectic schedule that demanded them to hold extra classes, particularly Mrs Ngobese, who also taught three Grade 12 classes. As a result, they could not always join the reading sessions, but they always ensured that learners honoured the time for the reading sessions. They also joined reading sessions whenever they could. As a result, I had to be there for all the FVR sessions. This was beneficial as it strengthened the relationship between me and the co-researchers. Mrs Lethole raised concerns that having sessions after school would create problems since most of the learners used hired transport, which would not accommodate flexibility in terms of time. This is reflected in her response below from the start-up workshop:

***Mrs Lethole:** On the 14:45 thing, the thing that I was telling you earlier on, which we discussed with the Head of the Department, was the issue of them concerning transport. So, I'm really not sure whether we should continue with the 14:45 idea or what.*

In response, to Mrs Lethole, the learners' verbatim quotes below show their willingness for the project to succeed:

These learners' responses are from our start-up workshop with all the co-researchers.

Dineo: We'll make arrangements with our transport.

Teboho: It's not a problem. We can make arrangements.

Vinny: We share the same transport with Grade elevens and Grade twelves, and they get out very late, sir.

Thabile: *So, it won't be a problem.*

While the time for the reading sessions was set at 14:30, it was agreed that whenever conditions at school allowed, we should be flexible enough to meet earlier than the agreed time. When such opportunities came, the teachers would call me, and we would usually start the reading sessions at 13:00. This happened regularly, providing more time for learners to read. The place for the co-researchers to meet was the library. Since, at that time, the library was not functional, we could have reading sessions without any disturbances. Since the library was not in good condition, the learner volunteered to sweep and tidy up the library so that it could be conducive for the reading sessions.

4.6.2. A Functional Library

The success of any reading project is founded on the functionality of a library. Apart from providing a space for reading, a fully functional library provides the resources required for any reading programme. Therefore, the participants' responses also reiterated that the library needed to be functional to enhance effective implementation. According to the co-researchers' responses, the following are necessary for a functional library:

- **The availability of books**
- **The need for a librarian**
- **The need for the appropriate furniture**

4.6.2.1. The availability of books

Books are the bedrock of a successful reading programme. Without resources such as books, it would be impossible to implement FVR in this study. It was unanimously agreed that we needed books to implement FVR. This condition is clearly articulated in the responses of the co-researchers below.

These responses are from the start-up workshop with all the co-researchers.

Mrs Lethole, a teacher, had this to say about the availability of books:

Looking at our library, we need books.

The learner co-researcher, Ayanda, also said:

I think we need access to books. More books should be added to the library.

Another learner co-researcher, Katleho, had this to say about books:

I think we should add more books into the library so that it can look like, really, it is a library indeed.

It is clear from the responses above that reading materials are the essentials needed to enhance a successful implementation. When there are enough books, learners have a wide range to choose from. Providing the necessary resources also boosts the learners' motivation. Krashen (2003), a proponent of the FVR underscores that the best way to motivate learners is to ensure that there are lot of books for the learners to read and to create space and time for reading. This supports VFR because it takes time for learners to find exciting reading materials. Therefore, providing a wide range of books would create ample opportunities for learners to find the books they love reading.

4.6.2.2. The need for a librarian

While books are essential to a library, a librarian is just as crucial. Thus, a library cannot function effectively without a librarian. The co-researchers reiterated that a librarian should always be in the library whenever they needed to access books.

The responses from the two teachers below are from the semi-structured interviews.

Mrs Ngobese had this to say regarding this issue:

I think it can be implemented successfully if we have a person responsible for the library, even if it's one of the English educators who is responsible for the library.

Echoing Mrs Ngobese's statement, Mrs Lethole also made the following contribution

Before COVID, there was a librarian... I think the library should come back, or another person should occupy that position because it was very helpful.

From the focus group discussion, a learner, Ayanda, also added:

Uh, apart from having a librarian, the library should not be closed.

It is an undeniable fact that a library cannot function without a librarian. A librarian would make sure that everything runs smoothly. This would be beneficial to any implementation of FVR because a librarian is more than just someone who ensures that the library runs smoothly. Librarians are co-teachers of literacy who can work closely with the teachers to support schools' literacy targets (Reed and Oslund, 2018). Therefore, the co-researchers raised valuable issues which needed to be addressed.

4.6.2.3. The need for furniture

Appropriate furniture was identified as one of the conditions that should be met to ensure successful implementation. The co-researchers pointed out that the availability of proper furniture would ensure that they sat comfortably as they read their books.

The responses from the two learners below are from the focus group discussion.

Vinny had this to say about furniture:

We need couches and stuff because one cannot read freely when they are sitting uncomfortably.

Another learner, John, had this to say:

If we could get, like, those three big triangular tables and a few chairs to seat people as a group.

From the semi-structured interviews, Mrs Lethole also had this to say on the matter:

Looking at our library, we need chairs. I think there should be furniture in the library. There should be resources in the library for it to function, obviously. We have to ask people who are managing the school that we need our furniture.

It is evident from the responses given above that a library without furniture is not a proper library. People do not just go to the libraries to borrow books. Sometimes, they go there because it is a quiet space where they can work undisturbed. For this to happen, there should be proper furniture. Learners would then sit comfortably as they read their books.

4.6.3. Creating a Space Conducive to Reading

One of the most important conditions that the co-researchers identified for the successful implementation of FVR is to create an environment that is conducive to reading. They emphasised that establishing such a space would motivate learners to read more. In their own words, a reading space should not look like a typical classroom.

These responses are from the learners' focus group discussions.

Ayanda also had this to share:

I think we should have a lively environment for us to be comfortable.

Dineo also had this to say on the matter:

We also need a friendly environment. Sir, it's not nice getting into a library that looks like a place that has been abandoned for years. I think, maybe, if we draw butterflies and just put them on the wall, like make it a friendly place, sir, a friendly environment, make it colourful, make it our second home.

Katleho also made the following contribution to the matter:

Maybe a few quotes from famous readers or authors.

Thabile also emphasised:

Decorating. Yeah, decorating the place.

And Vinny concluded:

We need to make it look like a library, unlike a classroom.

The above statements reflect that successful implementation does not only hinge on providing relevant resources. Creating a comfortable, inviting, reading-friendly environment is just as essential as providing books. As the learners put it, creating such a space makes it welcoming, almost like a second home. This point is highlighted by Rudkin and Wood (2019). They state that apart from the availability of exciting reading materials, one factor influencing learners to use libraries is the availability of friendly and comfortable spaces where they can relax and read.

4.6.4. Setting a Day and a Period for Reading

Another critical point the co-researchers raised is that implementing VFR would be impossible unless a period is set aside for reading. The concern here is that this reading period should be part of the school timetable and that it should not be implemented after school. This would make reading compulsory, thereby enhancing the success of FVR.

The responses below are from the semi-structured interviews with the two teachers.

Mrs Ngobese had this to say on the matter:

Then that particular period of going to the library. Alternatively, it can be done in class while they are seated; where a person is sitting during that particular period, they can just take out, whether it's a newspaper or a magazine, anything just to read.

Mrs Lethole also had this to say on the matter:

Maybe starting from there having a certain day set aside for reading, bit by bit. From that, I believe it should be a culture. There should be a specific period included in our timetables and in learners' timetables, whereby they then go to the library and read.

This issue was mainly raised by the teachers. As stated in the section on the challenges that could impede successful implementation, they mentioned that their timetable was so packed that they would need more time to implement such reading strategies. Apart from the packed timetable, they stressed that they were under tremendous pressure to cover the curriculum. Therefore, creating a slot for reading in the timetable would be an ingenious strategy to ensure successful implementation and potentially inculcate a reading culture amongst learners. Success stories of FVR depend on creating a special time dedicated only to reading. For example, in a study based in Australia, the reading period was included in the timetable, and during this time everyone had to drop everything and read. This included even the administrative staff. Everyone had to drop everything and read. The study reports that this initiative had a tremendously positive impact on teachers and learners (Collins, Dargan and Walsh (2022).

4.7. CHALLENGES THAT COULD HINDER SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF FVR

Identifying challenges is one of the most essential considerations in any implementation process. The idea is not borne out of a pessimistic outlook but rather out of the realisation that things do not always go as planned. Such challenges can be identified before the implementation and even during the process. This enables implementors to make contingency plans to circumvent such challenges. The co-researchers in this study also embarked on the identification of the problems at the beginning of the FVR programme and during the continuation of the FVR programme. The joint effort of the co-researchers enhanced shared ownership of the project, as well as the challenges, benefits, and learning moments. The challenges are discussed below.

4.7.1. Non-Functional Library

The first challenge identified by the co-researchers was that the library was not functional. It was evident that the library would have to be operational for the FVR project to take off. An operational library not only provides access to reading materials, but it also offers a space conducive to reading. Therefore, a non-functional library could potentially jeopardise the implementation of FVR.

These responses are from our start-up workshop with all the co-researchers.

Vinny has this to say about the condition of the school library:

There are books in the library. It's not a functional library.

Mrs Ngobese had this to say about the availability of books:

There are a few books and some encyclopaedias.

Katleho also had this to say on the matter:

We don't have a library. It's just a structure.

John added:

It's empty, yes!

From the focus group discussions, Dineo also shared the following information:

The security guard always keeps the place locked... Sir, even if you wanted to go, the people who keep the keys... For example, if you want to go right now, it's 2:24, if you go right now and you ask for whoever that's holding the keys to go and unlock the library, it would not be unlocked at around 2:45.

From the semi-structured interviews, Mrs Ngobese again shared the following:

Do you remember when we went there for the first time? So, it was basically neglected.

The responses given above by the co-researchers revealed that the library was not functional. A functional library would not always be locked. This shows that the library existed as a building, not in terms of the purpose it was supposed to serve. A functional library is essential in any schooling environment because it is an information and innovation hub for the school (Nzara & Saurombe, 2024). Indeed, when we met in the library for the first time, the library was not in a good state. What I observed confirmed what the co-researchers had said. The place did not look like a library. There were only a few, non-fiction books that seemed to have been haphazardly thrown at the shelves. The place was dusty and unkempt. There were papers on the floor that was also occupied by many desks, most of which were broken. There was only one chair. As Mrs Ngobese had stated, the place had been neglected. It looked more like a storeroom than a library. This was the biggest challenge that could have been detrimental to the implementation of FVR. As seen in the quotes above, it was indeed just a structure, not a library. The lack of books, furniture and the overall functionality of the library meant that implementing FVR threatened to be a monumental task.

4.7.2. Neglected Reading Period

Implementing an FVR project means that a specific time must be dedicated to reading. Just as books are essential for successful implementation, so is time. Learners have to be provided with the resources, and time has to be created for them to read.

These verbatim quotes are from the semi-structured interviews with the two teachers

Aware of the significance of the reading period, Mrs Ngobese had this to say:

When I got here a few years back, there was a period for reading. I don't know what happened to it. It just disappeared. So, during the reading period, learners would just go to the library, but they used to bring their own novels. And they would just sit and read, and then it just disappeared.

Mrs Lethole also echoed Mrs Ngobese's sentiments to reveal that the reading period had been neglected. This is her response when asked if they had a reading period in the timetable.

No, no! No one wants to be behind. 'I don't want to use my time for reading or rest.' Learners will not be assessed on that because that's what we are pushing.

Judging from the responses of the two teachers above, it is evident that implementing the FVR approach would be dealt a blow if there was no time allocated to reading in the timetable. Driven by the pressure to cover the curriculum, teachers felt that implementing reading would be a waste of time. Cremin & Scholes (2023) concur that finding time for learners to read in an overwhelmingly demanding curriculum remains a challenge for teachers. The responses somehow echo my observations. Our FVR session initially started at 14:45, and then the co-researchers moved it to 14:30. Most of the time, there were extra classes for Grade 12 and Grade 11, and sometimes even Grade 10. Thus, the teachers sometimes had to give classes after school. Consequently, they could not always join the FVR sessions. Sometimes, they would come in 15 or 10 minutes before the sessions ended. This observation supports their statement that they had so much curriculum to cover that they had to give extra classes. Creating time for reading then would not be possible, as their responses reveal. This was exacerbated by the fact that the reading period was neglected.

4.7.3. Insufficient Support from the School's Management

The success of any intervention programme relies, to a great extent, on the support of the school management. Such support could be in terms of ensuring that the required facilities are provided. For example, in the FVR we undertook with the co-researchers, while the management allowed us to implement the intervention, some of the most

essential things, like chairs, were not provided for and this made the implementation challenging.

These responses are from the semi-structured interviews with the teachers.

Mrs Ngobese said the following about the lack of support.

For learners to sit comfortably, I tried to address the issue with the principal. He sent me to the deputy principal. The deputy principal said they must go out with their chairs when they go to the library. But there are there are so many chairs in the hall. It's just that they are green, so they say these should strictly be in the hall. They do not go out of the hall. So, I think... they could take a few chairs to the library. It is not such a big challenge. It's just that someone does not want to take out those chairs in the library for those learners to sit. It's not that there are no chairs as such.

Mrs Lethole's response also echoed Mrs Ngobeses's answer.

Firstly, we're talking about the furniture. So obviously we cannot do anything about that. So, we have to ask people who are managing the school that we need furniture, so, that our library could be effective. We did approach our departmental head... we only asked for a certain number of chairs, like only just for that group so that they could be accommodated. They gave us reasons. So, we told them that it's only just for 10 people, that group that we are going to work with in the library. There's nothing actually that is going to happen, so yeah. We tried, we tried.

The responses given above reveal that inadequate support could potentially hamstring effective implementation. While the success of reading interventions depends on the commitment of the teachers, school authorities also play a major role by ensuring the availability of all the tools that teachers need. Therefore, leadership is vital in providing guidance and the necessary support (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). For reading to take place, learners should be provided with chairs. Therefore, not having chairs was one of the greatest challenges. Apart from the general cleanliness and neatness, which were far from appealing, one of the things I first observed when we walked into the

library was that there were no chairs. The place was strewn with stationery boxes, papers on the floor and desks, some of which required repairs. It was then clear that this would pose a challenge for the implementation.

4.7.4. Poor Communication and Commitment to the Stipulated Rules of Engagement

Communication is an essential component in any situation where people are working together. Apart from this, specific rules or guidelines must be followed to ensure a smooth operation. One of the conditions which were raised for effective implementation was that a WhatsApp group must be created to keep the communication channels between the co-researchers open. The aim was also to share websites for reading and downloading novels because we did not have books when we started. The co-researchers said the following during the reflections we had in the midway workshop.

The following responses are from our midway workshop with all the co-researchers.

John: The Group chat, sir. No one is using it to communicate about the books or anything else.

Dineo: Interaction with one another, Sir, I thought we were going to be one thing and give reviews about what we've read about so far but it didn't happen.

Thabile: To discuss what was going to happen with our meetings and everything, and, share but it did not happen.

Mrs Lethole: You came up with a new strategy or a new idea, and you said you are going to share the website, we are still waiting for that website.

While it was initially assumed that the co-researchers would share the websites and links in the WhatsApp group for reading and downloading novels, this did not really materialise. Perhaps the plan was thwarted by the fact that not long after we had started our FVR sessions, we received donations from the local library and the library directorate from the Department of Sports Arts, Culture, and Recreation. These books

were sufficient for the FVR sessions. We even accommodated other learners who showed interest in the programme. I also thought that the idea of reading from their cell phones would be fascinating to the learners, mainly because we believe that they are so obsessed with their cell phones that they would not have time to pick up a book and read. The co-researchers gave the following responses when asked if they preferred reading from their cell phones or the hard copies.

These responses are still from our midway workshop with all the co-researchers.

Thato: *Reading from the hard copy! Reading from the cell phone often makes my eyes itchy and so forth, and there are just a lot of distractions on my phone for me to read and actually dedicate my time and say that, OK, I'm reading from my phone right now.*

Katleho: *Sometimes the messages pop up and you have to reply to them and you forget what you were reading, what you were doing and you just end up leaving it.*

Dineo: *I'm also with her on that one, sir. I prefer reading hard copies than a PDF on a cell phone.*

Thabile: *when I'm holding my phone, I can read, but the phone also affects my eyes. So, when I'm tired, I can read a book.*

While one would have thought that the learners would prefer reading from their cell phones, the responses above suggest otherwise. It is commonly agreed that learners may not be reading because they are always glued to their cell phones, but these learners revealed a perspective that deviates from common thinking. Therefore, it is clear that choosing the appropriate version for reading depends on personal preferences and different factors (Ahmed, 2023). What they said above somehow aligns with my observation after the first FVR session. I had brought about ten new books with the recommendations of the local bookstore keeper. When I drove home, I spotted a learner walking on the pavement along the main road, reading as she walked. When I looked closely, I realised that she was one of the co-researchers. One would have thought that since it was after school and the reading session was over,

she would be on her cell phone, but there she was, walking with her head buried in the book.

4.7.5. Poor Time Management

Since the FVR approach could not be implemented during class time, it had to be done after school. Secondly, it had to be held in the library. This meant that being punctual was of essential importance for the implementation to be a success. The co-researchers also acknowledged the significance of time management and identified it as a challenge that needed immediate attention.

The reflections below are from our midway workshop with all the co-researchers.

Thato had the following to say in this matter:

I think something that would really hinder the progress is time management.

Dineo also added:

Time management, sir. Even if you wanted to go, the people who keep the keys... For example, if you want to go right now, it's 2:24, if you go right now and you ask for whoever that's holding the keys to go and unlock the library, it would not be unlocked around at 2:45.

Thabile also added:

Sir, ...sometimes, sir, we are being called from classes and sometimes we are writing like today. You see, I arrived late because I was writing. So, the time management, I think we should, I don't know.

The co-researchers' responses indicate that time management is essential for effective implementation. One of the main principles of the FVR approach is that whoever seeks to implement this strategy should first provide books for learners, and secondly, they must create time and space for them to read. Therefore, commitment to time is essential since the more time spent on intense FVR sessions, the more significant the gains in reading and other language skills (Ulrich & Tyndorf, 2018). Since this type of reading does not require long sessions, time must be managed efficiently. I also observed that sometimes the co-researchers arrived a bit late.

However, this was understandable because they had to come to the library immediately when the school bell rang to mark the end of the school day. Therefore, it would be almost impossible for them to make their way to the library on time due to the hustle and bustle that characterises the end of the school day.

4.8. IMPLEMENTING FREE VOLUNTARY READING TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING IN RURAL ENGLISH FAL GRADE 10 CLASSROOMS

This section presents data demonstrating that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. In other words, the aim is to provide evidence of successful implementation of FVR. This section is aligned with the fifth objective of the study.

4.8.1. Growing Interest from the Other Learners to Join FVR

The implementation of FVR in this study was initially meant for the ten learner co-researchers who participated in this study. Since the reading sessions could not be done during school hours, we had to hold the session in the library. This meant that the implementation might have been removed from the immediate view of the other learners. However, the evidence provided in this section is a manifestation of the interest the FVR programme garnered from the other learners in the school. This evidence is captured in the verbatim quotes of the co-researchers as indicated below:

The quotes from the two learners below are from our midway workshop with all the co-researchers.

Thato: We were also able to attract more people into the program. More people started being attracted to the idea of having a library at school because we never actually had one... They are outside waiting. They want to read.

Dineo: as time went by... meeting new people became interesting because a lot of people joined during the course of the program.

From the semi-structured interviews the two teachers' responses are given below.

Mrs Ngobese: sometimes, from the passages, you'll be approached by a few learners who would ask if it's possible to join. Even those who are not in grade

10. They will always ask if they can join. What is happening here, so I think these learners indirectly inspired other learners, even from Grade 11. And a very few from Grade 12.

Mrs Lethole: Even in other grades, they have that interest whereby they want to actually join and... because they see others doing so, they have that thing whereby they feel like they also want to join.... They even knew on Tuesdays and Thursdays, something that was actually happening. So, they would ask if they should come or not... Funny enough, some of those learners included the Grade 12s and the Grade 11s.

As revealed by the co-researchers' responses, implementing FVR attracted interest from the other learners. This is a sign that it was being recognised and that other learners wanted to participate. My observations also corroborate the views of the co-researchers. During the first FVR session, two Grade 10 girls and one boy from Grade 11 walked into the library and pleaded to join the session. Since there were a few books left, we were able to accommodate them. After the session, I was approached by four learners who sought to learn what was going on in the library. They asked if free books were being issued to learners. I had to explain the purpose of the study. The learners asked if they were allowed to join. At the time, we practically did not have enough books, so I had to dismiss them gently without discouraging them. I promised to invite them as soon as we had enough books. After almost every session, there would be new faces waiting outside the library building asking if they could join the programme. After receiving book donations, the co-researchers asked if they could invite the other learners who had persistently insisted on joining. Once they were given permission, they came in numbers to borrow books. In one instance, about thirty-eight books were borrowed from the library at a time, mainly by the Grade 10s, Grade 11s and some Grade 12s. Since they had not signed assent forms, these learners only joined the reading sessions, not the PALAR workshops, meetings, or focus group discussions. Some would borrow books, leave, and return when they needed more books.

Another observation that proves that there was growing interest from the other learners was made during the midway workshop. The workshop was held at 1:00 p.m.

because there was a sporting event at the school. The co-researchers agreed that it would be a perfect opportunity to meet without worrying about time and transport. Therefore, this meant that the midway workshop was held simultaneously with the sporting event. Surprisingly, when the meeting ended, other learners were waiting to join us outside. Unfortunately, they did not know that we had a meeting on that particular day. That is why Thato's response above reveals that "they are outside waiting to join." It was surprising that they were waiting to join the reading session while there was a sporting event they could attend for entertainment. This proved that the FVR programme had garnered interest from the other learners.

4.8.2. Increased motivation to read for pleasure

Another term for FVR is pleasure reading. The central tenet of the FVR is that learners should find comprehensible reading materials that ignite their interest in reading (Krashen, 2011). This does not refute the fact that learners might need time to find suitable reading materials. However, the ultimate goal is for learners to reach a point where they derive joy in reading. The co-researchers' responses echoed these sentiments as reflected in their verbatim quotes below:

These verbatim quotes are from the focus group discussions with the learners.

Thato: So, one of my one of my goals that I actually wrote down, was to use the books, like use the novels that we got as a type of reward after studying for a certain amount of time. Right? I would say, 'I'm going to study for like an hour.' Then I'll read a chapter as a reward for studying for that time. Then I found myself reading three chapters instead of reading just one, and I was enjoying reading... So, from my part, it was really pleasing, and I really enjoyed it.

Dineo: As time went by, everything became interesting. So, sir, right now, I am enjoying it.

John: Sir, the first time I came here, I just did it because I wanted to avoid taking part in Sesotho extra class. But after some time, after I started reading War Horse, I started liking coming in because it was quiet and I had time to read it, and I got attached to some of the books I was reading.

Thabile: I had a problem with reading. But after reading, ... the book that I was reading was very nice and I was able to enjoy it.

Dintle: Sir, I can say that I really started to enjoy reading a lot because at home, like I said, I can't get enough time to read. So here at school, at least, I can get some time to read in the quietest place. So, I could say I really enjoyed it. I really enjoy reading.

Ayanda: There has been a lot of improvement, sir. The reason why I say so is because reading has become a little fun... I didn't enjoy reading. So now that I'm reading because I want to read, I enjoy it.

Teboho: At first, I wanted to quit, and now I'm enjoying it.

The responses quoted above are a testament to the increased pleasure in reading. When the learners enjoy what they are reading, they want to read more, developing reading habits as it will be reflected in the next theme. The enjoyment derived from reading led to more reading (Wilhem, 2016). This proves that if time is created for them to read and they are provided with books, they will gradually enjoy reading. The observations I made also revealed that learners were enjoying reading. The rapport that was created by closely working with the co-researchers opened communication channels and custodianship of the programme. Even though we eventually settled on meeting at 14:30, the co-researchers would alert me if there was an event at school so that our reading sessions could start early. On such occasions, we usually met at 13h00, which was one hour and forty-five minutes before the end of the school day. The agreement was that, on such days, they could stay as long as they wanted. However, it was agreed that no one would leave before thirty to forty minutes. It was so moving to realise that they stayed way longer than was anticipated. Some would go out for a break after forty minutes and then come back. Sometimes, they would go on until 15h00. If they were not enjoying what they were doing, I do not believe they would stay that long, particularly when they were free to leave at any time after the first thirty or forty minutes. Therefore, it could be concluded that all this proves that they enjoyed what they were doing.

4.8.3. Increased Reading Habits

In the theme discussed previously, it was alluded that increased enjoyment in reading will likely motivate learners to read more. More reading leads to improved reading habits. In other words, it becomes easy for a reading culture to be inculcated if learners enjoy what they are reading (Krashen, 2004). Thus, pleasure becomes a breeding ground for developing a reading culture. The situation then lives up to the name of the programme – Free Voluntary reading. Learners read because they want to, not because someone forced them to read or because they are reading to fulfil a particular obligation – writing a book review, for example. The quotes below attest to the developing reading culture amongst the co-researchers.

These responses are from the focus group discussions with the learners.

Thato: Honestly speaking, these hard copies, every book that I read, I read during my spare time. Let me just make an example. Maybe if the teacher just got out of class, I'd read the book. When going home, I read the book when? When going to school I read the book in the taxi and so forth and that's how I finished the books.

Vinny: And this reading thing helped me because I don't like reading. Now, I often read. Most of the time, whenever I get the time to read, I read. So, it benefitted me.

Thabile: After the book I was reading, it was very interesting, and everything. And I was like, let me give it a chance. And I gave it a chance. Now, I see something. I am benefiting something from reading, and I feel like we should keep on going.

Katleho: Comparing my reading before and now. Before, I just had to make my parents happy... So, I just read for the sake of making them happy. But now I'm getting interested in reading. I'm always reading.

Corroborating the learners' responses, the teachers' responses below are from the semi-structured interviews with the teachers.

Mrs Ngobese: I thought I knew these learners, but surprisingly, they got so interested in it, and sometimes when I get to class, when there are no teachers, you find them reading their novels. So, I think it has created a love for reading. And then they also have this healthy competition of who will finish the book first. I think it's a good thing.

Mrs Lethole: What I've realized again... The ones that we were working with, the first group that we were working with, what I realized about them, it might be during break time or any other day time, tuition time or whatever that is happening in the school, you'll find them holding their books.

The learners' quotes above show a transition from a point of not having reading habits to increased reading habits. They reveal that they have seen a change in their reading habits. Interestingly, the observations from the teachers also confirm that there is a developing culture of reading among the learners. This attests to the fact that the implementation of the FVR approach was making an impact, a positive step towards mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.

4.8.4. Increased Confidence to Read

Reading in the presence of other learners may be a daunting task for learners whose confidence is low. These might be learners who feel like their reading skills are not good enough for them to read aloud in the presence of their classmates. The data analysis revealed that learners had become confident due to participating in the FVR intervention. The evidence of increased confidence to read is captured in their responses below:

The responses below are from the focus group discussions with the learners.

Teboho: At first, sir, there were words I was scared to pronounce in front of the class. Right now, if our teacher asks someone to read, I just volunteer because I can interpret words very fast, sir.

Vinny: *I was never interested in reading, but then after coming, and attending the sessions that we had, I started having an interest in reading. I was never a person that would read. Even when a teacher would tell me to read, I would just keep quiet and continue with whatever I was doing. But now a teacher will just say, 'Vinny read' and I would read.*

Thabile: *I could say I benefited something from the program. It has improved my confidence a lot. It added to the confidence that I already had.*

The teachers' responses below from the semi-structured interviews corroborated the learners' responses.

Mrs Ngobese: *OK, amongst the learners who are participating in this free voluntary reading, I have learners from grade 10A. Our learners are grouped... In grade 10A, it's a class of learners who are struggling. They are struggling with everything - with reading, with writing, with everything. But I was surprised to have a few learners who were interested in doing that. So, when it's time to read in class, you even struggle when you point to them, 'We are reading a story today. Who's going to read for us?' No one wants to read. But now...they are confident. Now, they are able to read aloud in class if they do not understand, they will ask instead of just skipping a word or keeping quiet. So, I think it has made them to be confident to read, even to read aloud in front of other learners.*

Mrs Lethole: *Funny enough, we are doing our reading for a task - reading aloud. So, you'll see that they are interested in taking part in that activity...I realized that something has changed, and others, when I look at them, the likes of Katleho and others, showed interest in actually wanting to do the activities... There has been an improvement because, at first, before the whole thing, the only thing that made them read in class, is you having to point them out to read, you know. But now I've seen they're showing interest. There's no need for me to pinpoint them*

The reflections given by the co-researchers above prove that the learners have experienced an increased confidence to read. The findings correlate with the findings

in a study by Lee (2019), where constant FVR increased the participant's confidence and desire to read. Interestingly, the learners' reflections are confirmed by the teachers' observations. Data from the semi-structured individual interviews with the teachers also gave more insight into how the learner's confidence had increased over time. As Mrs Ngobese's observation succinctly confirms; *'I think it has made them to be confident to read, even to read aloud in front of other learners.'*

4.8.5. Improved Reading Skills

The main aim of conducting this study was to use the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. While the results may not be immediate and robust, the patterns in data analysis reveal that there is a noticeable improvement in the learner co-researchers' reading skills. Any sign of improvement in the learners' reading skills points in the right direction. The improvement was acknowledged by both the teachers and the learners. The co-researchers' quotes presented below reveal this invaluable finding.

These responses are from the focus group discussions with the learners.

Thabile: *Sir, because I never read when I was at home. I was reading, sometimes because my mother forced me. I was not used to reading. I could not read like I can read now.*

Ayanda: *My reading skills really improved because I can identify where to pause when reading, where to pause and continue reading.*

Katleho: *Comparing my reading before and now, before, I just read for the sake of reading. But now... I'm always reading. My reading with understanding has improved. I now understand what I'm reading.*

Thato: *Sir I can add that a few weeks after joining the program, right? I found out that.... What was the name of the book? Yeah, Zyla and Kai? Yeah, I was able to read, like, a very thick book within two weeks, right? So, for me, that was a massive improvement in my reading skills. I can understand the content deeper.*

From the semi-structured interviews, the teachers' responses corroborate the learners' responses.

Mrs Lethole: There has been an improvement in their reading skills, now they understand what they are reading. They are more confident in reading.

Mrs Ngobese: I realize that with the learners who are doing this free voluntary reading, they would volunteer to read, and their reading skills have improved. The likes of Ayanda and Vinny in 10A. They are in my class, and so now they are better readers.

The responses above from the learners reveal that they see an improvement in their reading skills. More importantly, they are aware that their participation in the FVR programme has yielded positive results. For example, the proof they give that their reading skills have improved is that they are now able to read with understanding, while others are able to read voluminous books that they could not read before joining the programme. This is proof of the improvement of reading skills after prolonged participation in FVR (Olivia & Asfina, 2022). The responses from the teachers also confirm the learners' reflections. Teachers are aware of the increasing reading skills among the learners. Unlike before, learners are not afraid to read in front of other learners. Thus, the teachers' responses also reveal that the learners are now better readers. The evidence of improving reading skills means that the FVR has been implemented successfully to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

4.8.6. Enhanced Imaginative Abilities

One of the skills good writers master is the ability to evoke vivid, sensual images in the minds of the readers. Their playing around with words creates imagination in the minds of the readers, thereby enhancing a deeper understanding of the text. The learner co-researchers' verbatim quotes reveal that constant exposure to comprehensible and compelling books they had been reading has enhanced their ability to imagine things as they read. This is evidenced in the following verbatim quotes.

These quotes are from the focus group discussion with the learners.

Thato: And the second thing I noticed is that while reading, I can actually see or like imagine the characters and I can actually see them, like, 'OK. He is there. He is moving to that chair. That person is leaning like that.' I can understand the content deeper, I could say that.

Thabile: Before the program, I was just reading for the sake of reading. But now I benefited some things, you know, like imagining what's happening in the story when it's being said... Imagining helps me understand what's happening in what I'm reading.

Katleho: For me, at first, I couldn't read while visualizing what I'm reading. But after I started reading, and the story I was reading was actually interesting. I can now visualize what I'm reading.

Ayanda: It really helped me a lot... And the way I feel about stories that I read, sometimes I get imaginary.... I imagine things. Yeah, I feel the story, especially the one I was reading.

The learners' reflections above reveal their awareness of their improving reading skills. The learners seem to be fully aware of the significance of developing imaginative abilities. They state that imagining things as they read entrenches them into the deeper meaning of what they are reading. In as much as the writers aim to write so vividly that they evoke the readers' imaginative abilities, the first prerequisite is to understand what one is reading – a result of the comprehensible input they are exposed to through reading (Ponniah & Priya, 2014). The second prerequisite is that one has to enjoy what they are reading. Therefore, the combination of these two prerequisites fully immerses the readers in the reading experience, allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of what they are reading. This demonstrates that the FVR programme has played a significant role in the reading skills of the co-researchers.

4.8.7. Significance of Reading on the Other Language Skills

This section reports on the co-researchers' acknowledgement of the role reading plays beyond the purpose of improving reading skills.

4.8.7.1. Improvement in the Other Language Skills

Reading and listening are receptive language skills believed to be pertinent to developing productive language skills, such as writing and speaking (Allington & MacGill-Franzen, 2021). As speakers engage in a conversation, they invite input from the other speakers, thereby creating opportunities for acquiring language. In the same way, reading also provides input to enhance language acquisition. Therefore, this section presents data that show that the co-researchers are cognisant of the fact that they do not just read for the sake of improving reading skills. Reading is instrumental in the development of productive language skills. Presented below are the co-researchers' views on the contribution FVR made in developing other language skills.

From the semi-structured interviews, Mrs Lethole had the following to say.

Mrs Lethole: They are more confident in reading, and also using the language, using English. Learners like Thabile, when she talks, you would hear that something has actually changed in her, having to speak up in class. In their writing and presenting, I can see that there's a change. There's a change. So, I think if it's given more attention or the support that we need, it could really help.

From the focus group discussion, the learners had the following to say:

Dintle: Yes, sir. My English writing is now good. When I was writing essays, my spelling was really bad. So now I see improvement.

Dineo: It has. It has impacted me in a very great way because I was not really one to have long conversations because I doubted my English. But ever since I started reading, enjoying reading, enjoying saying some words, now I see myself as someone who wants to speak this language day in, day out.

Katleho: I can say this reading program helped... I was not good at reading and writing essays, but it really helped me.

While it is widely acknowledged that reading makes us better readers, it is equally important to note that reading is an essential skill that is crucial to the development of

other language skills. The co-researchers' responses point to an improvement in the learners writing and speaking skills. One area that is challenging for learners is essay writing. Therefore, it is impressive to find out that their essay-writing abilities are improving. Mabrooka and Riyath (2019) also confirm that good readers usually produce better pieces of writing. Good writing also entails that learners need to be able to spell words correctly. The learners also acknowledge that there is an improvement in spelling. The findings reveal how significant reading is for language development. The aim of the study was to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. However, it felt imperative to present the findings in this sub-section to show that reading can be a powerful tool in second language learning.

4.8.7.2. Improvement in Vocabulary

Reading exposes readers to a range of vocabulary items which are beneficial for further reading to enhance meaning (Kazemi, 2021). This means that the more we learn new words, the more we can read complex texts, which further gives us exposure to more vocabulary. This becomes a never-ending process, the end-product of which is learners who are not only good readers but also good writers, speakers and spellers. Therefore, the co-researchers revealed that participating in FVR helped them improve their vocabulary as shown in their responses below.

The learners' responses from the focus group discussion.

Thato: Then the second goal was expanding our vocabulary, right? I know that it can't actually be a direct goal. I can say that...I am on the way to attaining it.

Vinny: It has improved my vocabulary.

Katleho: I can say this reading program helped me improve me my vocabulary. I was not good at reading and writing essays, but it really helped me.

John: You get to increase your vocabulary, in order to help your writing skills.

Mrs Lethole's response from the semi-structured interviews.

Mrs Lethole: You start reading for pleasure and after reading for pleasure. Obviously, there're some words you don't understand, yes. You are building your vocabulary.

The responses above show that the co-researchers are aware of the invaluable impact reading has on developing a language. The learners are aware that there has been an improvement in their vocabulary. They are also aware that improving their vocabulary helps them become better writers. The ability to write creatively and expressively is determined by the words writers use. Aisyiyah and Hakim (2020) emphasise that reading exposes learners to a wider range of words which are critical for producing accurate texts. These words help them to paint pictures in words. For learners to acquire the same skills, they must be exposed to a lot of reading so that they can encounter the meanings of words in context. Equipped with all these new words, learners would then become better readers and writers. This shows that FVR is worth exploring, particularly in areas where English is taken as a second, foreign, or additional language.

4.6.4. SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter presented the major findings of the study in relation to the research objectives. The main objective was to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. The findings presented above prove that FVR was implemented successfully. More importantly, the major findings point to improved reading skills, imaginative abilities and developing reading habits. The findings also reveal that implementing FVR helped to attract interest from the other learners who came in numbers to borrow the books. The next chapter presents a detailed discussion and interpretation of the findings to show how the findings relate to the objectives, literature and the theory that anchored this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the findings and analysis on mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. This chapter attempts to discuss and interpret the findings presented in Chapter Four. The discussion focuses on five major themes and sub-themes generated through reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase guide to thematic analysis. These themes address the objectives of the study.

The study sought to address the question:

How can the Free Voluntary Reading approach be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?

To answer this question, the following objectives steered the study:

- To examine how COVID-19 impacted reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To determine strategies teachers use to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To explore the implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To identify challenges that may impede the implementation of the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To explore the benefits of FVR in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

5.2. DISCUSSION OF THE THEMES IN ALIGNMENT WITH THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This section presents the discussion and interpretation of the major themes and how they align with the objectives of the study.

5.2.1. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RURAL ENGLISH FAL LEARNERS' READING SKILLS

The discussion on this theme aligns with the first objectives of the study. The aim is to discuss how data prove that the learners' reading skills were impacted by COVID-19. Two sub-themes were generated under this theme. The first is the severe impact of COVID-19 on rural English FAL learners' reading skills, and the second is the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on rural English FAL learners' reading skills.

5.2.1.1. Severe Impact of Covid-19 on the Learners' Reading Skills

The impact of COVID-19 on education brought devastating effects that disrupted the learners' education, leading to learning loss for most learners (Sansone et al. 2021). Literature reveals that its rippling effects are still evident, hence the need for this study to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural Grade 10 English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

As seen in the previous chapter, the co-researchers revealed that COVID-19-induced school closures and rotational timetables severely impacted the learners' reading skills in rural English FAL classrooms. Their regression in reading skills was reflected in the fact that even reading in class was a problem for the learners. The fact that learners struggled to read in class, somehow alludes to the fact that there may have been a problem even before the onset of COVID-19. Therefore, when COVID struck, it exacerbated the problems that already existed. It is also important to note that the responses given by the teacher co-researchers regarding the learning loss in reading focus on the learners they had at that time. The current learners, part of whom are participating in the study, were possibly in Grade 6 when the hard lockdown was implemented in 2020. The lower levels are considered to be the ones who bore the greatest losses.

In as much as they may find it difficult to determine the extent of the impact on their reading skills, the learner co-researchers were also aware that COVID-19 negatively impacted their reading skills. Restricted movement denied learners access to the libraries where they could borrow books. Therefore, this alludes to the lack of sufficient reading materials for the learners. While the issue of reading materials is crucial, it is also worth noting that it may not have been the only factor. The findings further reveal that learners were not motivated to read when they were at home.

The severity of the impact of COVID-19 on the learners' reading skills expounded above aligns with findings from the literature, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds like rural areas. Trends in COVID-19-aligned empirical studies confirm that learners' reading skills were severely affected. Studies by Reylea et al. (2022), Gray et al. (2023), Lerkkanen et al. (2023), Carlana et al. (2023) and Hervia et al. (2022) reported that there was a significant decline in the learners' reading skills. What is more concerning is that discourses in the literature reveal that the devastating effects on the learners' reading skills were worse for the learners in the lower Grades in primary schools. For example, a study by Scott (2021) reported a significant loss in learners who took English as an Additional language. The findings by Scott reveal that the younger the learners, the greater the regression in reading. This report relates to this study because the learner co-researchers were still in primary schools when COVID-19 struck. Demie et al. (2021) also confirmed that the learning loss was worse for learners in the lower grades. South African-based studies also revealed similar trends. For example, a study from the Western Cape systemic tests revealed severe losses in lexical comprehension, reading comprehension and writing for Grades 3 to 6 (Van der Berg et al., 2022). Therefore, these studies corroborate the findings in this study, confirming the prevalence of learning loss in reading, particularly among learners in the lower grades. The learners may be in Grade 10 now, but they were still at primary level during the crux of the COVID-19 impact on education, with the possibility of heightened loss in reading.

If the literature underscores the possibility of rippling effects, particularly when no stringent measures were taken to mitigate whatever losses had been incurred, it is possible that these learners in the study may have suffered the most regarding learning loss. For example, a study in the UK, (Education Journal, 2022) confirmed

that learners who were in primary schools suffered the most. The after-effects of the learning losses were felt when these learners moved to secondary schools. The study reported that the reading skills were so severely impacted that the learners could not read the prescribed books. Therefore, secondary school teachers had to learn the skills of primary school teachers. The learners could not cope with secondary education because they could not read properly. The report also reveals that the situation was worse for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study was conducted in a rural setting, with the possibility that the impact of COVID-19 differed from that of learners who attended schools in more affluent parts of the country. If not adequately addressed, learning losses incurred during COVID-19 school closures and rotational attendance might negatively impact students' progression to higher institutions of learning, their future productivity, and national productivity (Van der Berg et al., 2022). Van der Berg also warned that while COVID-19 appears to be behind, the effects might last longer than expected since learning losses are likely to increase for learners who fall behind as they progress through the grade levels. A report on the rippling effects of an earthquake in Pakistan also revealed that four years after the earthquake, the learners who were affected by three months of school closures were still 1.5 years behind their peers who were not affected (Andrabi, Daniels and Das 2021).

Regarding motivation and collaboration during the COVID-19-induced school closures, Al-Zaabi (2021) and Oza (2022) also confirm that it was difficult to motivate learners as they learnt from home. Being robbed of places where they collaborated with their peers also demoralised them, leaving them with no desire to read. If communicating in English, these collaborative school environments also provide opportunities for learners to learn English. They learn new words as they engage in group activities, thereby improving their reading abilities (Tumen et al. 2021). Thus, the conversational nature of school environments sets the platform for providing comprehensible input. When learners engage in dialogue, they invite input from their peers. Being exposed to input, in turn, enhances acquisition. As their language proficiency increases, they are able to read more challenging texts with comprehension (Krashen 2003). Therefore, being at home made it hard for learners in this study to make considerable progress in their reading skills.

These findings solidified the need for the study, especially when it is evident that the losses may accrue over time if they are not adequately addressed. The following section will further assert the significance of the study after exploring if there were any classroom-based strategies to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural Grade 10 English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

5.2.2.2. Disproportionate Impact of Covid-19 on Reading Skills

Literature explored in the previous sub-theme revealed that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds suffered the most regarding reading loss. This demonstrates the disproportionate nature of the impact of COVID-19. Sometimes, the disparities in the impact on the learners' reading skills rely on the individual learner characteristics and learning habits. Certain habits help learners to flourish or make progress even in the absence of regular teaching and learning.

The findings in this study also revealed that while the reading skills may have been affected, for some of the learners it was not that severe. These co-researchers show that the COVID-19-induced school closures benefited them in terms of reading. Even though their movements were restricted, they resolved the matter by sharing their books with their friends because they could not borrow books from nearby libraries. Being at home created ample opportunities for them to do lots of reading. While other learners, as revealed above, indicated that they were not motivated to read, these learners found a silver lining amid adversity. By reading and exchanging books with their friends, they believe they made some progress in acquiring new vocabulary. It could be concluded that these co-researchers already possessed some reading habits. Even if those habits were not heightened before COVID-19, being at home helped them to hone them and reap something when the other learners could not bring themselves to do the same.

While the study aimed to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading by implementing the FVR approach, the purpose hinged on a two-pronged approach that also sought to inculcate a reading culture among the learners. Inculcating a reading culture aligns with the goals of the Input Hypothesis to gradually ease learners into reading until they develop reading habits. Increased reading habits relate to increased exposure to comprehensible input, a requirement for learners to acquire the language

that would help them become better readers (Krashen 2012). Using a PALAR methodology and guided by the precepts of the FVR approach, the goal was to equip the co-researchers with the skills that would benefit them well beyond the scope of the study. Developing a reading culture transcends the aim of mitigating learning loss in reading to help learners acquire skills that could help them become autonomous learners who do not rely only on the information they learn from their teachers. In this way, it helped learners become aware that learning was not confined to the classroom. Such a mentality helps learners to co-create knowledge with their teachers. That is why, even in this study, they were regarded as co-creators of knowledge with the researcher so that they could consider themselves as the custodians of the change that positively impacted their lives.

As shown above, the prevalence of a silver lining for learners who had reading habits is also acknowledged in that, they might not have been affected by COVID-19 in the same way as those who did not have a culture of reading. In other words, even if they suffered a learning loss in reading, it was not as severe as those lacking a reading culture. A study on learners aged between 9 and 18 years reported that learners who enjoyed reading during the pandemic were those who used to read before the lockdown (Clark & Picton, 2020). The findings of this study were also corroborated by two other studies which stated that reading was one of the top three preferred leisure activities, revealing that learners were reading more than usual. The findings further indicated that learners who enjoyed reading before the pandemic displayed increased reading habits (Sun et al. 2021 & Sun et al. 2021). Even if those learners also incurred some reading losses, they would not be as severe as those with no reading habits.

The significance of helping learners to develop a reading culture, as shown above, could go a long way in helping learners to become autonomous. If increased reading habits lead to increased reading proficiency, assisting learners to develop reading skills is beneficial for the whole curriculum. It also has the potential to instil lifelong learning habits in the learners. Therefore, while the aim of this study was to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms, the other equally important reason was to develop their reading habits. As will be revealed in the coming sections of this report, the study achieved this feat, for even at the time of compiling this report, the FVR approach was still in progress at

the school. The benefits of pleasure reading have been explored extensively in this study. Therefore, the co-researchers' prolonged engagement in the FVR intervention promises to yield results that will help learners way beyond the scope of this study. It is an initiative that will be applicable even when they further their studies.

5.2.2. THE LACK OF CLASSROOM-BASED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING

The prevalence of learning loss in reading is a worrying prospect that requires intervention strategies. The task of a government or the Department of Education is to provide guidelines on how and what can be done to recover the lost time and mitigate the learning losses. However, this does not prevent teachers from devising and implementing classroom-based interventions. More than anybody else, they are the ones who carry the burden of ensuring that the learners' daily educational needs are met. Therefore, before implementing FVR, it was essential to find out first if there were any intervention strategies that the teachers were using to mitigate learning loss in reading in their own rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

The teachers' responses, as presented in the previous chapter, revealed that there were no classroom-based strategies the teachers were using to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The initiative that Mrs Lethole took was to encourage learners to read. On top of that, she also solicited the help of the parents so that they could encourage their children to read. While it was a good thing to encourage learners to read, there was no assurance that they would read as requested. What proved that the learners were not reading was that they honestly opened up to her and told her that they did not read when they got home. It must be noted that the learners were not being spiteful. It was just a genuine communication between the learners and a teacher who had established a harmonious relationship with her learners. Admitting that they did not read was a sign that merely encouraging them to read might not yield desirable outcomes. The other teacher, Mrs Ngobese, openly admitted that apart from the Annual Teaching Plans which the Department of Basic Education revised, and the extra classes they offered to cover the lost work, there were no particular strategies they used or were currently using to mitigate the learning loss in reading in their rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The extra

classes they held were not aimed at mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in their rural English FAL classrooms.

Teachers' innovation in their classrooms is influenced by a myriad of factors, some of which might be personal or work-related. Hence, implementing intervention strategies to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading is the duty of the education departments, schools' authorities and the teachers. Therefore, it was imperative that I found out why no class-based interventions were being implemented. The teachers bemoaned the lack of time and demanding curriculum schedules as the factors that impeded the implementation of intervention strategies. As Mrs Lethole stated, they were under pressure to cover the work set out in the ATPs, so they did not have time. She acknowledged that if there was more time to implement these strategies she would gladly do so. In the same vein, Mrs Ngobese reiterated that it was impossible to implement mitigation measures during class time and ensure they were successful. Mrs Ngobese pointed out that these strategies needed extra time because they were not covered by the ATPs, nor was time created for them to implement them. By referring to the Educational Assistants, she acknowledged their significance and the support they offered for such reading-oriented strategies.

The need for implementing mitigation measures was crucial, particularly in rural areas, which were the hardest hit by the pandemic. This implies that support and mitigation strategies should be directed to those who suffered the most (Valle, 2021). One of the effective strategies used to mitigate learning losses was targeted instruction, where teachers provided teaching that was tailor-made for the needs of the learners, the nearest example being Botswana (Angrist et al., 2021). Other strategies were high-dosage tutoring offered by tutors with deep subject knowledge. Such interventions were implemented successfully in countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, the Netherlands and also Italy, where they used volunteer university students for tutoring (Patrinos, 2022; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2022; De Bruijn & Meeter, 2023). Botswana offered deep tutoring through intensified text messaging and direct phone calls with promising results (Hassan et al. 2021 and Angrist et al. 2020). However, none of the strategies were employed in South Africa.

The strategies adopted in South Africa were the remediation and curriculum re-orientation, which were based on a rational strategy based on the revision of the curriculum to cover the most essential skills and knowledge for a specific grade (UNESCO, 2021; Molato-Gayares, 2021). The curriculum re-orientation by the Department of Basic Education was introduced in the form of the Annual Teaching Plans with guidelines to assist teachers to counter the reduced teaching time and reinforce foundational skills (Angrist et al. 2021). However, the setback related to the ATPs was that the responsibility for school and classroom implementation was devolved to teachers and the schools' senior managers with no additional time or resources for this work. As a result, school-based interventions for addressing learning loss, like the extension of the school day, were left to the teachers' discretion (Hoadley, 2023).

The extension of a school day was implemented successfully in the Western Cape, a province that had provided substantial proof of learning loss. The Western Cape even reduced instructional time for subjects like Life Orientation in favour of Mathematics and Language in the Foundation Phase (Van Der Berg, 2021; Hoadley, 2023). The same cannot be said for the other provinces like the Free State. As shown above, the teachers insisted that they would implement such strategies if they had time. However, this still did not prevent English FAL teachers from being innovative and designing strategies that could work for tight schedules. That is why the study proposed FVR as a strategy that could be used to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. While it may require time and effort to take off, once the implementation is in motion, it is not that time-consuming. Again, once the learners begin to develop a reading culture, reading becomes a hobby that does not always require the teachers' presence. One thing I observed was that teachers needed support. The appreciation they demonstrated for the support offered through FVR implementation showed that intervention strategies would stand better chances of success if they had enough support. Therefore, the findings in this section of the study reveal that no particular strategies were implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Again, it is also evident that teachers need support to implement such strategies.

5.2.3. CONDITIONS SUITABLE FOR IMPLEMENTING FVR TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED READING LOSS IN READING

Implementing FVR successfully depended on the collective effort of the researchers to identify the conditions suitable for implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Additionally, co-researchers had to commit to ensuring that the conditions were met so that the implementation could be successful. Their commitment to the implementation was voluntary and was guided by their passion for the project to succeed since they were implementing it for their own good. Those principles were cultivated through the application of PALAR as a methodological guideline for the study. Through a joint effort, the co-researchers identified the following conditions for successful implementation:

- Selecting the time and place for the FVR sessions
- A functional library
- Creating a space conducive to reading
- Setting a day and a period for reading

5.2.3.1. Selecting the Time and Place for the FVR Sessions

As shown in the previous theme, there is not enough time to implement intervention strategies when they have not been allocated time in the timetable. Apart from that, even if there was a time slot for such interventions, the Department of Education in Thabo Mofutsanyana district does not allow any research study, as well as its intervention strategies, to be conducted during class time. It is categorically stated that research activities should not interfere with the learners' teaching and learning time. Therefore, our first step towards implementation was the selection of a place and time for the FVR intervention because it could not be conducted in the classrooms.

The co-researchers had to propose a time that would be convenient for everyone. Since we could not meet in the classrooms, we decided to meet in the library at 14:45. 14:45 marked the end of the school day, and the teacher co-researchers were worried that it coincided with the time when the learners had to go home. The greatest worry was that their transport would leave them behind. However, all the learner co-researchers assured the teachers that they would make transport arrangements.

Some even confessed that they did not go home as soon as the bell rang. They waited around for Grades 11 and 12, who usually had extra classes after school. That demonstrated the learners' enthusiasm for the project, even though it had to take place after school. Later on, after about two sessions, the time for the meeting was changed to 14:30. When the reading sessions started, everyone had to read their books silently. I joined all the sessions to maintain consistency, support and collaboration because sometimes the teachers had extra classes, meetings or commitments after school. Sometimes, they would be compelled to leave as soon as the school day ended. This benefited me as an outsider because it enabled me to build rapport with the co-researchers

With the time and place set, we had to take the first step towards the implementation. It is commonly believed that learners do not create time to read, even when they have to read for pleasure. The proponent of FVR, Krashen (2003), argues that apart from making the necessary resources available, we need to create time specifically for reading. Everything else should be put aside during this time, and the learners and the teachers should engage in sustained silent reading. There should be no distractions during this time; even the teacher has to put everything else aside and model reading. This would motivate the learners when they saw their teacher reading. Creating time and space to read maximises exposure to comprehensible input which is a key factor for acquisition, according to the Input Hypothesis (Krashen & Mason, 2020). As stated above, I modelled reading and the teachers did the same thing whenever they joined the reading sessions. Since learners easily copy the habits of their teachers, teachers who also read during the reading sessions inspire their learners to develop reading habits. Teachers can even share what they have been reading (Patrick, 2019). As will be shown later, these principles helped learners develop reading habits.

5.2.3.2. The Need for a Functional Library

If the foundation of FVR for language enrichment and building reading proficiency is based on reading, it is evident that books are needed, and the place where books are kept should be functional for ease of access. Therefore, the co-researchers rightfully indicated that the library should be functional for the implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Although the co-researchers rightfully stressed the significance of a functional library

as a requirement for implementing FVR, it does not imply that schools without libraries cannot implement interventions like FVR. For example, learners in a study by Mokoena and Tsotetsi (2021) solved this problem by creating drop-in boxes which were filled with reading materials. However, this view does not negate the significance of a functional library for implementing reading interventions and instilling a reading culture. In the context of this study, the functionality of the library was viewed from three fronts as stated below:

- The availability of books
- The need for a librarian
- The need for furniture

5.2.3.2.1. The availability of books

After agreeing on the place and time for the FVR sessions, the co-researchers considered books as the next most crucial aspect for successful implementation. The co-researchers' responses revealed that more books needed to be added to the ones in the library. One co-researcher indicated that more books should be added to the library so that it could look like a library. I believe this was raised out of concern that there were insufficient books in the library. The Input Theory argues that reading and listening are fundamental components of language programmes (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Therefore, the requirement for providing ample comprehensible input relies on the availability of a wide range of reading materials. This makes the availability of books a foundation for helping learners develop their language skills and reading habits.

5.2.3.2.2. The need for a librarian

By merely indicating that they needed a librarian, the co-researchers revealed that, indeed, the library was not functional. The co-researchers' responses reflected that they needed someone to be in charge of the library, even if that person was one of the English teachers. The librarian would keep the place open so that the learners could access the library to borrow books whenever they wanted to. This is a serious issue which is essential for successful implementation. A librarian ensures that everything is in order and that the library runs smoothly. Without a librarian, it might be difficult to

implement and inculcate a reading culture in learners. In other words, it would be a futile exercise to dream of implementing FVR if there is no librarian.

5.2.3.2.3. The need for furniture in the library

While books, as well as a librarian, are the most essential resources, the need for appropriate furniture is just as crucial. Being aware of this necessity, the co-researchers reiterated that they needed appropriate furniture in the library so that they could sit comfortably as they read their books. The fact that they expressed the need for furniture was not just a statement but a reflection of the fact that there might not be enough or no chairs in the library. Since the reading sessions were to be held in the library, we could not do any reading session without chairs. Therefore, chairs were also a priority.

A functional library with all the elements discussed above is a pillar of any successful reading intervention strategy. For FVR to be implemented, we needed a functional library with books and suitable furniture. Therefore, attempts to implement any reading intervention to promote and encourage literacy development should be reflected in our commitment to providing a collection of relevant and relatable reading materials that will entice learners to read. Therefore, schools should ensure that their libraries are functional (Akinola, 2021; Barber & Klauda, 2020).

While the co-researchers' responses underscore the functionality of the school library, they also reveal the essential role played by a librarian in a functional library. The role of a librarian is also widely acknowledged. Librarians are viewed as change agents who can develop and shape novice readers into habitual readers by recommending suitable reading materials. Thus, librarians are essential to promoting FVR and meeting the leisure needs of the reading public (Biswas, 2023). In support of the findings on the need for a librarian, the findings of a study by Merga (2021) reveal that a supportive library staff is essential to establishing inviting and supportive spaces. Such spaces create comfortable spaces for pleasure reading.

Furthermore, the co-researchers highlighted the need for suitable furniture. The views of Merga (2021) corroborate the findings by asserting that appropriate furniture helps readers feel comfortable. Thus, furniture like comfortable chairs promotes warm,

welcoming reading spaces. Therefore, relaxed and comfortable seating creates ambient spaces that could ignite the passion for reading. The co-researchers were justified by pointing out this issue as being critical for implementing FVR. As a result, investments should be made towards creating comfortable reading environments with comfortable furniture and a quiet atmosphere (Suganya & Kalaivani, 2023). When these conditions are met, learners are more likely to be enthused by the idea of pleasure reading. Therefore, without a functional library, librarians and appropriate furniture, reading interventions stand little chance of success.

5.2.3.3. Creating a Space Conducive to Reading

The previous sub-theme hinted at the significance of creating a comfortable reading environment with comfortable furniture. Apart from the furniture, the co-researchers were also aware that the general atmosphere of a library should make libraries conducive to FVR. They emphasized that such a space would motivate them to read for pleasure. According to them, reading spaces like libraries should be so lively and comfortable that they feel like a second home. This could be achieved by making decorations on the walls so that they could become colourful. They even recommended that the library could also have a few quotes from famous readers or authors on the walls. Since we were using the library for FVR sessions, they suggested that all these would make it look like a library, not a classroom.

The passion with which the co-researchers made the suggestions for improving the condition of the library reflected that they understood that reading was more than just holding a book and reading. A comfortable and inviting library was essential for motivating them to read. Literature also substantiates these views. Adetayo and Lawal (2024) point out that well-designed and organised library environments promote functionality, developing a feeling of order and comfort. These are factors that are essential for establishing desirable reading environments. A study by Adetayo, Adekunmisi, Otonekwu and Adesina (2023) reveals how influential, adaptable, and welcoming environments are on the learners' reading experiences. Thus, library spaces need to be inviting and conducive so that they can accommodate the learners' diverse needs, thereby increasing focus and engagement. Further findings by Merga (2021) reveal that a warm and home-like atmosphere where learners can sit and read quietly and focus on their reading is an essential component of a functional library.

Decorations also play a crucial role in creating welcoming reading spaces, especially when learners are involved in making those decorations. They develop a sense of ownership that deepens their roots in the culture of reading.

5.2.3.4. Setting a Day and a Period for Reading

Any reading intervention, regardless of discipline, requires time. Therefore, the implementation of FVR also requires time. Hence, the co-researchers' responses reveal that setting aside time for FVR, mainly when it is part of the timetable, is essential for successfully implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. I also observed that if I had not adopted a methodology that allowed me to be immersed in the co-researchers' environment, the FVR implementation would not be effective. Sometimes, the teachers understandably missed the FVR session due to the extra classes they offered after school or other personal commitments. Taking a participatory approach to the study ensured that during such times, the FVR sessions continued without any hindrance because I always joined those sessions to model reading. If the school had a reading period, there would not be any problem with implementing FVR. It would lessen the burden of creating time for FVR in a curriculum that teachers already complained was overwhelming.

FVR-conscious researchers also agree with the co-researchers' proposition that in-class reading time is essential for successfully implementing FVR. Akinola (2021) argues that the best way to develop a reading culture is by creating a timeslot in the timetable reserved only for reading. Such a reading period would gradually help learners adopt a culture of reading, thereby improving a reading culture. Despite the teachers' overwhelming pressure to meet the curriculum demands, creating in-class reading times or periods is a powerful weapon that may have a far more lasting impact on the learners' reading and writing skills (Gonser 2021).

Research also demonstrates that prioritising in-class reading yields positive results for learners. A Turkey-based study discovered that implementing such reading times or periods was instrumental in developing the learners' reading habits. Even the learners who did not have reading habits gradually developed a positive attitude towards reading (Arici, 2020). Findings in another study based in a rural US district also found

that apart from being fascinated by the idea of choosing their preferred books, learners indicated that creating time for them to read quietly in class motivated them to read. Although their study included some form of accountability not advocated in the current study, the researchers concluded that the learners' choice and in-class reading provided a fertile reading environment (Allred & Cena, 2020). These findings support the co-researchers' views that establishing a reading period would ensure that interventions like FVR could be implemented successfully.

In alignment with the third objective, this section presented the conditions that should be met for implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading rural English FAL classrooms. While we were able to meet some of the conditions, others could not be met due to time constraints and the fact that the power to put those into practice lay in the hands of the school administration. For example, the issue of the reading period was something that could not be decided upon and put into practice within a short time. The next theme addresses the challenges that could impede the successful implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

5.2.4. CHALLENGES THAT COULD HINDER SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF FVR

This section aligns with the fourth objective of the study. The purpose is to discuss and interpret the findings to show the challenges which the co-researchers believed could be detrimental to the successful implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Some of the challenges affected us directly. As a result, attempts will also be made to detail what measures we took to circumvent those challenges. The sub-themes established from the analysis of the researchers' responses regarding the challenges are:

- Non-functional library
- Neglected reading period
- Insufficient support from the school management
- Poor communication and commitment to the stipulated rules of engagement
- Poor time management

5.2.4.1. Non-Functional Library

The conditions suitable for implementing FVR discussed in the previous theme revealed that a library plays a central role in determining the success of any reading intervention. As shown above, apart from providing books, the librarians, furniture, design and decorations play a crucial role in creating homey and enticing reading environments. Therefore, a non-functional library is detrimental to the successful implementation of FVR. The co-researchers acknowledged that a nonfunctional library makes it almost impossible to implement FVR. When we started some of the co-researchers were under the impression that there were books in the library and that the main problem was that it was not functional. Some emphasized that it was empty, while others commented that it was just an empty structure with a few books and encyclopedias.

While these inputs may seem to differ, they point to the fact that the library was not functional. The fact that not all co-researchers were particular about the availability of books in the library somehow revealed that they rarely ever went to the library. One co-researcher's response confirmed that the library was always locked. This statement confirmed that the library was truly non-functional, perhaps explaining why they were not confident about the availability of books. Our first meeting confirmed that the library was not functional. It was just a building used as a distribution centre for the learners' stationery. It housed extra desks, empty boxes of stationery, and a few non-fiction books that were scattered on the shelves. As the co-researchers mentioned, it was just a building, not a library. Additionally, there were no books we could use for FVR. The argument for FVR is that learners must have a wide range of books from which they can choose what they want to read for pleasure. Therefore, a library that is not functional jeopardises successful implementation. Baba and Effendi (2020) also confirm that the lack of a well-resourced library and a librarian makes it challenging for learners to access and use the library resources. A library is crucial because it can ignite and develop reading habits among learners. My observational notes also revealed that there were practically no books in the library, which posed a challenge to how learners would access books. A study by Mokoena (2022), which was based in rural areas, also revealed that limited exposure to reading materials is a serious challenge in implementing FVR. Even in cases where libraries are functional, some books offered in the school libraries may not be appealing to the learners' lives and

interests. This problem worsens if the library is not functional since learners cannot be expected to read and develop reading proficiency and reading habits when not provided with books.

5.2.4.2. Neglected Reading Period

The co-researchers previously stated that a reading period is pertinent to the successful implementation of FVR. The lack thereof would be detrimental to effective implementation.

As presented in the previous chapter, one of the greatest challenges is the lack of a reading period. The co-researchers were aware that reading needed time and that reading interventions would be successful if they were incorporated into the normal school day. What is alarming in the context of this study is that there was a reading period before that was incorporated into the school timetable. The teacher co-researchers could not recall why it was abandoned, but they indicated that during that period, learners would take out the books they borrowed from the library and just read. Mrs Lethole's opinion on the whole matter reflects that even though she values reading as a language teacher, she would never spare time for reading when she has much content to cover in the curriculum. In other words, as long as the reading period is not part of the timetable, she would not sacrifice her time for reading sessions.

While the factors that influence schools to neglect or fail to incorporate a reading period into the timetable may vary depending on context and other factors, it is an issue that has also been noted in the literature. Whitten, Labby and Sullivan (2019) reported that despite the overwhelming documentation of the successes of FVR, attempts by schools to incorporate more technology into the curriculum have left insufficient or no time for in-school reading. Cremin and Scholes (2023) also admit that despite the calls for teachers to develop the learners' reading habits, finding time to nurture pleasure reading remains challenging (Cremin & Scholes, 2023). Another factor that echoes the sentiments of the teachers in this study is that most schools are unable to find time for and support FVR due to the demanding and overwhelming nature of the curricula, which is focused on assessment regimes. Driven by the desire to improve performance, most school authorities endorse activities that can potentially yield short-

term gains. Consequently, opportunities for implementing FVR become sidelined (Cremin, 2020).

The pressure of all these activities does not only affect teachers but it also affects the learners. Sometimes, learners are discouraged from reading owing to the enormous pressure of examinations and assignments, which leaves them barely enough time to engage in pleasure reading to develop reading habits (Guo, 2020). Nevertheless, neglecting the reading period is not a solution. With the well-documented successes of in-school reading, schools have to find innovative ways in which they can blend reading into the timetable. An Australian-based study reflects on how successfully the school created a reading period and ensured that the whole school, even administration officers, participated in the reading. The project yielded desirable results (Collins, Dargan & Walsh, 2022); Mace & Lean, 2021). Efforts like these are commendable. If some schools can inculcate a reading culture in learners, it is never too late to start. Therefore, the evidence from the literature justifies the co-researcher's views that neglecting a reading period hampers the successful implementation of FVR.

The information above reflects that the pressure brought by the curriculum demands affects teachers and learners. This implies that if time is not created for learners to read, then developing reading habits might be a monumental task. Initiatives like the FVR have limited chances of success if the reading period is not incorporated into the timetable.

5.2.4.3. Insufficient Support from the School's Management

The success of any school-based activities requires the endorsement and full support of the school management. Some of these activities may be initiated by the teachers or even from outside the school.

The most concerning issue that the co-researchers believed could hinder the successful implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms was the insufficient support from the school management. As presented in the previous chapter, the greatest challenge was that there were no chairs in the library. In the section on the conditions suitable for FVR implementation, one of the conditions the co-researchers raised was that the library

must be a welcoming space with enough comfortable furniture to create a homey feeling in the library. The co-researchers noted that not having chairs was the greatest hindrance to the implementation of FVR. While the school approved the implementation, basic resources like chairs needed for implementation were not provided. The co-researchers reported that they raised the issue with the school management but could not get the help they needed. Surprisingly, the very same management contemplated the idea of a reading period after discovering the impact the FVR intervention was making at the school. The response the teachers were given was that there were no chairs. However, the teachers did indicate that there were chairs in the hall that could be used for the FVR sessions. The only problem was that they were not supposed to be taken out of the hall. A closer look at the teachers' responses revealed dismay that a few chairs could not be sacrificed for the learners, as Mrs. Lethole stated, "We tried. We tried."

It is evident that support from the management is essential for the effective implementation of any school-based intervention that seeks to contribute to the teaching and learning experiences of both teachers and learners. In this regard, Mokoena (2022) found that the lack of support is a serious challenge in the implementation of FVR. Webber, Wilkinson, Duncan & McGeown (2023) also point out that sometimes reading interventions fail because reading spaces like libraries and the resources inside these places are controlled by the authorities. These are the things over which learners have little control, and in the context of this study, the provision of chairs was beyond the learners' control even though they showed commitment to the FVR intervention. A report on the reading for pleasure project by Collins, Dargan and Walsh (2022) demonstrated that despite the challenges that may be encountered, when reading initiatives receive the full support of the management, they are bound to succeed. Their positive findings of the whole school reading project are a lesson that, with support, FVR initiatives could be a great success. Wulyani, Widiati & El Khoiri (2022) also emphasise that reading programmes do not always receive enough support and that, without support, sometimes teachers find it challenging to develop ideas that can sustain these programmes.

The discussion above reveals that support from the authorities plays a significant role in ensuring the successful implementation of intervention strategies. While the support

in this study was provided through the permission to use the library building, more could have been done to provide the basic resources such as chairs. It is also befitting to acknowledge that by giving approval, the school showed support, especially when it was an initiative brought by an outsider and not a staff member. Such interventions also require time and elaborate planning, often involving financial commitments.

5.2.4.4. Poor Communication and Commitment to the Stipulated Rules of Engagement

Communication is the foundation of any project that involves collaboration between people. In this case, maintaining collaboration amongst the co-researchers was also of essence, and it emerged as one of the challenges.

As presented in the previous chapter, one of the conditions suitable for implementing FVR to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading was to create a WhatsApp group for all the co-researchers. The purpose of the group was to maintain communication among the members. Sometimes, announcements would be made for the upcoming FVR sessions. The other purpose of the group was to share websites where the co-researchers could read or download novels. The idea was born from realising that the school library did not have books. Apart from the suggestion to bring their own books, sharing these websites would ensure that the FVR programme succeeded. The idea of bringing their books was not successful. It turned out that the learners did not have books they could read for pleasure since they brought the prescribed novels they used in their classrooms. My bringing novels I had bought from the local bookshop helped to kick-start the project until we got book donations not long after we had started. This information is detailed in Chapter 3. The other idea was that the WhatsApp group could also be used to share the stories the co-researchers had read and give book reviews or recommendations. What I observed and allowed to continue was that the co-researchers had informal discussions about the books they were reading. They even made recommendations. Those recommendations usually happened at the end of the FVR sessions because that was when they would return the books they had borrowed and get new ones. I observed that those informal discussions were even more meaningful and engaging than if we had formally incorporated them into the reading sessions. Since they were doing it without being

aware, it became lively, engaging and meaningful, while also solidifying the rapport among them.

The co-researchers immediately addressed this issue to explain why they did not share the links as they had promised. Some of the co-researchers indicated that their phones had been confiscated by their parents. Others mentioned that they were so overwhelmed with work that they barely had time to share the links. As explained above, the idea of sharing books was raised because we did not have books for FVR. However, a few days after we had started, I asked for donations from the local library, and they donated approximately seventy novels. The books were enough to keep the FVR project going. Later on, I also approached the regional library directorate from the Department of Sports Arts, Culture and Recreation, and they donated three hundred and twenty-one (321) books with a promise for more. Then, there were more than enough books for the ten learner co-researchers who participated in the study.

Interestingly, the learner co-researchers indicated that they preferred hard copies to soft copies. They pointed out the fact that since cell phones were not allowed at school, books made it easy for them to read wherever and whenever they wanted to read. Others mentioned that they could read on their way home in the taxis, during break and when there was no teacher in the class. They also mentioned that they preferred hard copies to digital copies because there were so many distractions when they read from their phones. Others acknowledged that while they preferred hard and digital copies, reading their cell phones hurt their eyes. These reflections were surprising because one would expect that, as digital natives, learners would be drawn to the idea of reading soft copies.

Sharing information during FVR sessions is considered an important practice when implementing FVR. It serves to motivate and arouse the interest of learners as they share stories they have read and make recommendations. Findings in the study by Collins et al. (2022) and Mace and Lean (2021) revealed that the 5 minutes sharing sessions held at the beginning of each reading session contributed immensely to the success of the project. Learners engaged in these book talks, and eventually, some recommended interesting books they had just finished reading to others. The learners themselves admitted that this aroused their interest in reading the recommended

books. Time was something that was not on our side. Since the FVR sessions were held after school, we felt that it was wise for learners to settle down as quickly as they could so that they could read before they lost interest. For this reason, books were only returned and borrowed after the reading session. Since I had to be around to facilitate the FVR sessions, I observed that there was a lot of sharing and recommendations made during that time, and some ended up borrowing books that their friends had just returned.

In the era of digital technology, it is always wise to think of how technology can be used to solve problems we encounter in teaching and learning. Using technology as an alternative solution to the lack of reading materials was a genius move. Patrick (2019) also asserts this by emphasising that reading materials can be created and accessed online by those who have the means. Since the reason towards this unanimous decision was fueled by the unavailability of reading materials, the learners seemed to have settled on reading hard copies because the books were made available through donations not long after the FVR programme had begun. The learners started sharing websites after the midway reflections, but it became obvious that they preferred reading the hard copies, as shown above. While mixed findings on the preferences between digital and hard copies exist, it has been noted that sometimes learners prefer print to digital copies (Sun, Loh, Obrien & Silver 2021). The findings on these preferences also align with studies by Sun, Loh and Nie (2021), Loh and Sun (2019) and McVicker (2019). The learners in these studies demonstrated a preference for hard copies. Some found hard copies convenient, while others indicated that they found reading from their technological gadgets distracting. Participants in another study indicated that reading from digital gadgets strained their eyes (Kuzmicova, Schilhab & Burke 2020). The findings from these studies, along with the findings in this study, show that while learners are fascinated by technology, in some cases, they find the advantages of reading from their hard copies outweighing those of reading digital copies. Therefore, it is not surprising that learners in this study preferred hard copies to digital copies.

5.2.4.5. Poor Time Management

Time is central to every activity we undertake. Activities and interventions like FVR must be planned and executed timeously to ensure success. The co-researchers in this study also acknowledged the significance of time.

The co-researchers identified poor time management as one of the factors that hampered the successful implementation of FVR. Learners acknowledged that sometimes they arrived late for the sessions due to the commitments they had in the class before coming to the library. Another factor was that sometimes we had to wait outside because the library building was always locked. It was only unlocked for FVR sessions. Understandably, poor time management jeopardises everything, and it might eventually discourage some of the learners. My observation notes confirmed the issues raised by the co-researchers. Since the FVR session was held after school, it would be unrealistic to expect that learners would be in the library as soon as the bell rang. In most cases, they had to carry their chairs to the library and then take them back to their classes when the sessions were over. Therefore, the issue of time management was a complex one.

As stated above, views from the literature also confirm that time must be managed efficiently when implementing FVR. The findings in this study corroborate the observations of Patrick (2019). Patrick emphasised that it is important to maintain consistency and adhere to the established reading periods with the teacher as a role model. This may be challenging when teachers have to grapple with the immense curriculum demands, creating time for reading and ensuring consistency at the same time (Ford, 2020). Nevertheless, once time has been devoted to FVR, it is best to ensure all parties involved respect the time allocated for FVR because punctuality and commitment determine the success of the project.

5.2.4.6. STRATEGIES USED TO CIRCUMVENT THE CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED IN 5.2.4

Identifying challenges in implementing FVR was vital since it provided the opportunity to find the best practical ways to circumvent such challenges. Before delving into the discussion, it is worth noting that some of the challenges discussed above could not be solved during implementation since they required time and engagement with all the

stakeholders, like the school's management. This would take time, and that could extend the timeline boundaries for this study. Below are the strategies used to circumvent the above-mentioned challenges.

5.2.4.6.1. Strategies Used to Address the Issue of a Non-Functional Library

As indicated above, the library at the school was not functional. The first step we made was to ask the teacher co-researchers to ask for permission to use the library building. Hence, the library was always open on Tuesdays and Thursdays when we had the FVR sessions. Since there was no librarian, the co-researchers took the responsibility of tidying up the library to make it conducive to learning. The cleaning started by sweeping the library and arranging the desks neatly. The few non-fiction books we found in the library were also neatly arranged on the shelves. Since there was no librarian, the library was only open on the days we had FVR sessions.

Regarding the lack of books, I asked the local library for book donations. The local library donated almost seventy (70) novels. The local library staff also advised me to approach the regional library directorate at the Department of Sports, Arts, Culture and Recreation. From the library directorate, three hundred and twenty-one books were donated. These books were more than enough for the ten learner co-researchers who participated in the study. We even invited other learners who had been showing interest in borrowing books to read. These learners came in numbers to borrow the books. The only hiccup was that the library was locked on the three other days when we did not have the FVR sessions.

5.2.4.6.2. Steps Taken to Address the Issue of the Neglected Reading Period

The issue of the neglected period was something which we could not address for the benefit of the current study. First, the Free State Department prohibits the conduct of research-related activities during school time. This means all these activities would be done after school to ensure that they did not interfere with regular school activities. Including the reading period in the timetable would also require careful planning and engagement between the management and the teachers. The only solution we had was to hold the FVR sessions after school. In the first week, the reading session started at 14:45 and ended at 15:05. In the subsequent weeks, the reading sessions started at 14:30 and ended at 15:00. On days when there were activities like sports at

the school, the co-researchers agreed that we would begin to at 13:00 so that they could have more time to read. The co-researchers would sit well beyond thirty minutes or even an hour on such occasions. It was agreed that staying for a long time was completely voluntary and that they could leave after the first thirty minutes. Surprisingly, this did not happen as they stayed for more extended periods reading.

5.2.4.6.3. Measures Taken to Address the Issue of Insufficient Support from the School's Management.

Our greatest challenge was that there were no chairs in the library for conducting our reading sessions. Therefore, we had to approach the school management for support. The teacher co-researchers approached the school management to ask for chairs. However, this did not produce the desired results. The only option was to ask the learner co-researchers to bring chairs from their classrooms. When the session ended, they had to return the chairs to their classes. While this was a bit strenuous, there was nothing we could do. The learners' commitment and enthusiasm for the project ensured that the FVR sessions were held successfully. While the school offered support by allowing us to use the library building, this support was insufficient because, without chairs, it was challenging for learners to carry the chairs every time we had to meet.

5.2.4.6.4. Measures Taken to Address Poor Communication and Commitment to the Stipulated Rules of Engagement

Being aware of the significance of communication and commitment to the stipulated rules of engagement, the co-researchers agreed that the WhatsApp group would be used more efficiently and that the websites would be shared as per agreement. After this resolution, the co-researchers shared information in the WhatsApp group so that even those who preferred to read digital copies would read them if they wanted to. Since we could source books for the project, there was not much enthusiasm about reading digital books since most of the co-researchers indicated that they preferred reading hard copies.

5.2.4.6.5. Measures Taken to Address the Issue of Time Management

The co-researchers stressed the need to be punctual so that our FVR sessions could run smoothly. The first step was for the people with the keys to the library to be

approached in advance so that we would not waste time waiting outside for the library to be opened. This intervention worked because the library was opened on time. The other issue was that sometimes the co-researchers arrived late to the reading sessions. While the problem was beyond their control in some cases, the co-researchers agreed that they would arrive in time for our FVR sessions. The co-researchers did their best to arrive in time for the FVR sessions.

Addressing these challenges ensured the successful implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Failure to address the challenge would jeopardise the aim of the study.

5.2.5. EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD: IMPLEMENTING FREE VOLUNTARY READING TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING IN RURAL ENGLISH FAL CLASSROOMS

This section provides a discussion of the findings that align with the fifth objective of the study. The aim is to demonstrate that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. Therefore, this section seeks to provide evidence of this effect.

5.2.5.1. Growing Interest from the Other Learners

FVR implementation in this study focused on the ten learners who were selected from the four Grade 10 classrooms. As part of mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in English FAL classrooms, successful implementation sought to help the learners who participated in the study develop an interest in reading. While this was achieved, the most commendable aspect is that learners from outside the programme showed interest in the FVR sessions.

As revealed in the previous chapter, both the teachers and the learners were aware of the positive impact of what they were doing at the school. This was evidenced by the number of people who sought to join the programme. The co-researchers also believed that the other students were fascinated by the idea of having a library at school. This reveals that the learners had been deprived of the opportunity to use the services provided by the library. The fact that the FVR programme garnered support from the other learners may have given the learners the feeling of being pioneers of

change for if they were not proud of the FVR programme, it would be challenging to inspire other learners. The teachers also alluded to this notion by stating that the learner co-researchers had indirectly inspired other learners, even from grades higher than Grade 10. The teachers' responses reveal that they had not anticipated the kind of impact the programme would have on the other learners. Both of them found it strange that some of the learners who showed interest included Grade 11s and 12s. During the midway workshop, some Grade 11 learners were waiting outside to join us and the learner co-researchers were aware of this, hence the statement, 'They are outside waiting'.

My observations also confirm the views of the co-researchers. Almost every day after the sessions, I was approached by learners who wanted to know if they could join. Since we did not have enough books at the beginning, we could not allow them, but as soon as the books arrived, they were invited by the learner co-researchers, and they came in numbers. Another interesting issue is that the deputy principal was also contemplating the idea of bringing back the reading period after seeing the impact the FVR programme had made. Concerned with the poor English language proficiency of her Grade 8 learners, even the Head of the Department of Languages approached me to find out how we could help. The outcome of the discussion was that a specialized programme for those learners would begin the following year (2025).

The interest the FVR programme attracted from the other learners was a sign that it was implemented successfully since it went beyond the scope of the study. In his observations, Patrick (2019) confirmed Krashen's view (2004), that since learners easily copy the habits of their teachers, teachers who also read during the reading sessions inspire their learners to develop reading habits. While this is true, the learners in this study also inspired other learners to read. The rate at which the other learners borrowed, returned books and borrowed again was somehow a reflection of the fact that those books were being read. The findings confirm that libraries play a critical role. A library is the backbone of any educational system. Therefore, schools should ensure that their libraries are functional by building a collection of relevant and relatable reading materials that will entice learners to read (Akinola, 2021; Barber & Klauda, 2020). These books do not have to be the most recent; the most important thing is that they should be exciting and relatable. This will ensure that there is an ample supply of

compelling and comprehensible input from which the learners can choose what they want to read (Krashen 2003).

What is surprising about how the FVR programme generated so much interest at the school is that the books which had been donated were not the most recent. In fact, they were books that were meant to be discarded. When I was shown a building with shelves full of books to choose from, it felt like the greatest gold discovery. I believed that as long as the books were still in good condition, with all the pages, they would somehow ignite the learners' passion to read. Some learners were elated when they found the books from which the movies they had watched had been adapted. This raised their curiosity to read the books. I even encouraged them by emphasizing that sometimes movies leave out some parts of the books for dramatic purposes.

The discussion above demonstrates that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The most crucial point is that this did not only benefit the ten learners who participated in this study. With sustained progress, since the co-researchers fervently asked for the project to continue, it is envisaged that favourable results are in store for the school, mainly because the Library Directorate promised to donate more books.

5.2.5.2. Increased Motivation to Read for Pleasure

The other term for FVR is pleasure reading or reading for pleasure. This reveals that the term pleasure is central to FVR. The proponent of FVR argued that this type of reading should be done for enjoyment. Therefore, learners must be provided with books they find interesting. Books were provided for learners, and time was created for them to read (Krashen 2004). It should be noted that providing books and creating time will not instantly make learners derive pleasure from reading. It is a gradual process that needs time. Therefore, the learner co-researchers' acknowledgement that participating in the FVR sessions enacted their pleasure in reading demonstrates that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.

It is interesting that nearly all the learner co-researchers' responses reflect a transition from almost a disdain for reading to pleasure in reading. The initial perceptions and

expectations about the FVR approach are also loaded in their responses. This is important because it reveals that the co-researchers had been tracking their own progress. For example, Thato revealed that she had set a goal of rewarding herself by reading one chapter after doing her schoolwork. As time went by, she found herself reading more than she had anticipated – three chapters. John's admission that he only joined the FVR programme to avoid Sesotho extra classes reveals that he did not expect to benefit much from the FVR programme, but he found himself enjoying reading. Teboho wanted to quit, but then, with time, he began to enjoy reading. Ayanda did not enjoy reading, but after some time in the FVR programme, she began to enjoy reading. As reported in the previous chapter, on days when we started early and therefore, had more time to read, the learners stayed longer than anticipated. Sometimes, they would go outside for a break and then come back. If they did not like what they were doing, they would not stay for that long when it had been agreed that they were free to leave after 30 minutes. Staying for an hour or more was an indication that they loved what they were doing.

The above discussion reveals that the learners really enjoyed what they were doing. Deriving pleasure is one of the optimal conditions for developing language. This happens when the material they are doing is so compelling that they even forget that they are reading in a foreign or second language. The findings adhere to the first two characteristics of optimal input responsible for enacting pleasure reading as explained by Krashen and Mason (2020). Firstly, they argue that optimal input must be comprehensible. This does not necessarily mean that every word has to be understood. Input is comprehensible and useful for language acquisition when it contains some incomprehensible structures slightly above the acquirer's current level of competence. This was essential in this study because allowing learners to self-select the books they understood created room for comprehensible input. Secondly, optimal input must be fascinating. It should be so compelling that one forgets that they are listening to or reading in another language. If the input is comprehensible and compelling, acquirers may not even be aware of the incomprehensible bits in the input. In this way, Krashen & Masons' theoretical viewpoint aligns with the views of the participants thereby explaining how they enjoyed what they were reading. Since they were the ones who chose the books, they understood what they were reading. Secondly, having the freedom to change the book if they did not find it interesting

meant that they were at liberty to peruse through the available collection until they found interesting books. When those two conditions were met, they derived pleasure from what they were reading, thereby proving that FVR had been implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.

5.2.5.3. Increased Reading Habits

As shown in the preceding theme, the learner co-researchers reported that participating in FVR sessions helped them enjoy what they were reading. There is a strong connection here that builds on to the next phase, which is increased reading habits. In other words, it is likely that when people enjoy what they are reading, they read more. While the focus of the study was on the learners, including teachers, helped to confirm the findings from the learners' perspective, thereby confirming the credibility of the findings.

The learner co-researchers' views reveal awareness of their increasing reading habits. Like in the preceding sub-theme, the learner co-researchers gave a comparative narrative detailing the impact of the before and after intervention. The learner co-researchers revealed that they were not fond of reading at the beginning. Some stated that they did not like reading, while others admitted that they just read because they had no choice. After participating in the FVR programme, they admitted that something changed. They were able to read more than they did before, and they did it regularly. One indicated that she read whenever an opportunity presented itself, during the break, when there was no teacher in the class or on the way to and from school. Others also stated that they read most of the time.

Interestingly, the teacher co-researchers' responses from one-on-one semi-structured interviews corroborated the learners' responses. The teachers also acknowledged that there was an observable change in the reading habits of the learners. One teacher admitted that the learners shocked her. She had not anticipated that they would enjoy participating in the FVR sessions. Both teachers reported that sometimes, when they went to class and there was no teacher, they would find the learners who participated in the study reading their novels. Learners were also seen reading outside during breaks.

Once again, the credibility of these findings is confirmed by the fact that different data generation methods were used to generate data. The teachers' observations were given during the one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and the learner's responses were given in the focus group discussions for learners only. Juxtaposing data from two different data generation sources does confirm that there was a noticeable improvement in the learners' reading habits, thereby attesting to the fact that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Therefore, the findings prove that the crystallisation of different data generation tools renders the findings and analysis more credible (Nassaji, 2020).

The responses from the two parties reveal that there was evidence of increasing habits amongst the learners. Showing a direct link from the previous sub-theme, it could be argued that since they derived pleasure from what they were reading, they found themselves reading whenever they had an opportunity. They were reading stories they understood, which were also fascinating. Deriving pleasure from reading is one of the key characteristics of optimal input, according to Krashen and Mason (2019). They argue that the input must be so compelling that one forgets they are reading in a foreign or second language. The enjoyment lowers the affective filter, thereby optimizing the intake of input, which is crucial for language acquisition (Krashen 1985). Acquiring language makes reading more enjoyable since it prepares them for handling more challenging texts. Eventually, this process positively impacts their reading habits. This made them develop a love for reading, a sign that a reading culture was being inculcated. Wilhelm (2016) also agrees that reading, particularly for pleasure, helps to foster competent and life-long reading. Thus, the more one reads, the more one becomes a good reader with deeply rooted reading habits. In his journey on using FVR and comprehensible input, Patrick (2019) admitted that setting aside time to read may be seen as enforcing reading. While this contradicts the principle of FVR, the bottom line is that learners will not read if teachers do not create opportunities for reading. When Patrick first implemented FVR, learners demonstrated reluctance, but they eventually developed interest and asked for more books to read. The findings align with the findings in this study that providing books and creating time to read gradually eases learners into developing reading habits. The co-researchers admitted that participating in the study significantly improved their reading habits. Findings in studies

by Bautista and Marulanda (2018) and Mokoena and Tsotetsi (2021) also align with the findings in this study, because after the FVR intervention, the learners' reading habits improved significantly, with positive results on language development. These findings prove that increased exposure to comprehensible and compelling input through FVR-based intervention programmes is instrumental in improving the learners' reading habits.

With all the documented successes of FVR, the co-researchers increasing reading habits reflect that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

5.2.5.4. Increased Confidence to Read

The common saying that practice breeds excellence can be attributed to the findings in this sub-theme. As previously discussed, the learner co-researchers in this study admitted that FVR enacted pleasure reading and improved their reading habits. Therefore, it is not surprising that these two benefits are responsible for increasing the co-researchers' confidence in reading.

Another before and after revelation is evident in the learner co-researchers' responses regarding their confidence to read aloud in the presence of the other learners. They emphasised that, at first, they were afraid to read and pronounce words in front of their classmates. Their confidence was so low that they simply kept quiet when asked to read aloud in class. After the FVR programme, they admitted that there had been an added boost to their confidence in reading. They acknowledged that they were not afraid to read. Teboho even added that he volunteered to read in class because he could interpret words fast. The teachers' observational responses also corroborate the learners' responses. The teachers admitted that there was a noticeable difference in the learners who participated in the FVR programme. At first, those learners struggled to read in class. They read only if the teacher had pointed them out. After the FVR intervention, they read aloud in class without even being asked to.

Once more, the findings from the learners' focus group discussion and the teachers' one-on-one semi-structured interviews reveal a corroboration, thereby justifying that there was indeed a noticeable change in the learners' confidence levels. Thus, the

crystallisation of different data generation tools renders the findings credible. This improvement further underscores the significance of implementing FVR in rural English FAL classrooms. A case study by Lee (2019), which followed the journey of a participant who engaged in FVR also revealed that by reading compelling and comprehensible stories, there was a dramatic increase in the participant's confidence, language proficiency and desire to read. The findings of McQuillan (2019) also point to noticeable improvement and confidence after an FVR journey that involved reading stories rich in language. Therefore, these findings align with the findings in this study to show that increased exposure to compelling and comprehensible input is essential in English as a second or additional language classrooms. Further findings in Kazemi (2021) and Bernal further assert the significance of FVR. Apart from the participants' improved ability to analyse and understand texts, increased confidence levels for reading in English were also reported.

The findings in this sub-theme prove that sustained exposure to comprehensible input is an ideal way of helping learners develop confidence in reading aloud in their classrooms. The findings further highlight the significant impact the Input Hypothesis makes to second language learning. This is another proof that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms.

5.2.5.5. Improved Reading Skills

The core aim of this study was propelled by the need to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. As revealed in the preceding discussions, the learners' reading skills were negatively affected by the COVID-19-induced school closures, and a myriad of other contextual factors. Therefore, the implementation of the FVR approach without evidence of improvement in the learners' reading capabilities would render this study a futile exercise.

The co-researchers' responses regarding reading skills reveal that implementing FVR positively impacted them. In comparison with the pre-intervention phase, the learner co-researchers revealed that they could not read like they read after participating in the study. Ayanda's improving reading skills are demonstrated in the ability to detect where to pause and continue reading, while Katleho admitted that before the FVR

intervention, she just read for the sake of reading. An improvement in her reading skills is revealed in her ability to comprehend what she reads. Thato reported that she could read a thick book in two weeks, which, according to her, was a massive improvement that was rooted in the fact that she could understand what she read. Some reported that they could read with the necessary pauses as they paid attention to punctuation marks. Paying attention to punctuation marks is important because it enables the reader to derive the writer's intended message from the text. Therefore, it could be concluded that the learners are now better readers, as Vinny said. The teachers' views also gave a stamp of approval that there had been a development in the learners' reading skills. Through their observations, they reported that there was an improvement in the learners' reading skills because, after participation in the FVR programme, they understood what they read. Mrs Ngobese concluded that the learners who participated in the study were then better readers.

The findings in this section lean more towards an improved understanding of what the learners read. This means that they can read with comprehension, a crucial skill that embodies the ultimate goal of reading – understanding and interpreting the text. The findings justify that if compelling and comprehensible input is consistently made available to learners, it will ultimately improve their reading skills. In the same vein, Krashen and Bland (2014) argue that an exciting hypothesis is that comprehensible input paves the way to the highest levels of language competence and academic language. This can be achieved through reading and not through deliberate study of vocabulary, grammar and the text structure of academic texts. Krashen and Mason (2020) further explain that optimal input comprises rich language that aids in how the events unfold in a story or text being read. The language used in the story should help readers understand the incomprehensible bits, thereby enabling the reader to acquire these new aspects of language.

Now, how do these newly acquired bits of language contribute to reading and particularly to the findings in this study? The significance of the Input Hypothesis in this study is that acquiring new words and complex grammatical structures improves the learners' language proficiency, which in turn enables them to read with ease more challenging text, thereby becoming better readers (Krashen & Mason, 2020). This attests to the notion that the more we read, the more we equip ourselves with the tools

to understand more complex language structures. Thus, this becomes an upward spiral structure revealing that we cannot engage in a lot of reading while still staying at the same level of language proficiency and reading the same level of texts. As our language improves, we look for more challenging texts, proving that we are becoming better readers. This explains why the learner co-researchers in this study claim to have developed increased abilities to read with understanding. In a nutshell, once reading proficiencies have been developed, the increased extensive reading that might follow results in improved reading achievement. Thus, increased reading leads to reading proficiency (Allington and MacGill-Franzen, 2021).

Other research studies also corroborate the findings in this study that exposure to abundant, comprehensible, and compelling input through FVR is instrumental in improving the learners' reading skills. Studies by Kazemi (2021) and Bernal (2020) found that reading for pleasure improves comprehension skills. The findings in these studies revealed significant improvements in analyzing and understanding texts. In a survey by Jerrim and Moss (2019), data analysis from 250,000 teenagers from 35 industrialised countries revealed that teenagers who read fiction regularly had notably more vital reading skills than those who did not. Therefore, Jerrim and Moss concluded that motivating young people to read fiction could be specifically helpful for their reading skills. They believe this intervention could be even more beneficial for those who come from rural areas. Other studies were also conducted successfully through the application of Input Hypothesis and FVR with a reported increase in the learners' reading skills and comprehension (Khotimah, 2020; Huang, 2018; Keshmirshekan, 2019; Kasap & Peterson, 2018; Koc, 2017; Efendi & Deyani, 2022; Bautista & Maruland, 2018). Corroborating the findings in this study, these studies justify that the Input Hypothesis is instrumental in improving learners' reading comprehension skills. One of the things Krashen stresses the most is that we become better readers by reading. The findings in this study attest to this viewpoint. This happens when the language in the books the learners read contains rich language that helps learners understand incomprehensible bits, thereby enabling the reader to acquire these new aspects of language. Acquiring the new aspects improves the ability to read and understand (Krashen & Mason, 2020). Therefore, the learners' improved reading skills justify that the FVR was implemented successfully with desirable results. With the cyclical nature of the PALAR-driven FVR intervention and the fact that the co-

researchers are continuing with the implementation even after the data needed for the study was generated, it is envisaged that there are yet more benefits that the co-researchers are going to reap.

5.2.5.6. Enhanced Imaginative Abilities

Writers are artists who paint pictures in words. Seasoned writers achieve this through a careful selection of words, which, when creatively arranged, help to create mental images in the readers' minds, thereby aiding in understanding the writer's intended message.

The co-researchers admitted that before the FVR intervention, they only read for the sake of reading and that they could not visualize while reading. They noticed a change after the introduction of the FVR. They revealed that participating in the FVR session helped them develop imaginative abilities. They are aware that the advantage of acquiring these imaginative abilities is that it helps them to gain a deeper understanding of what they are reading, another crucial point that contributes to the development of reading skills. This makes what they are reading even more fascinating. A fascinating story ignites the passion to read, and as a result, the reader becomes so engrossed in what they read that they develop reading skills even without being aware that their reading skills are improving.

The findings on the ability to create mental images justify the central tenet of the Input Hypothesis that the input must be so compelling that the learners are unaware that they are reading in a foreign language. The learners will find this input compelling only when they understand what they are reading. Even if there are incomprehensible structures in the input, the ability to visualise enhances comprehension. This is because the excitement derived from reading enhances the imagination (Kucirkova & Cremin, 2020). Kind (2022) also argues that reading fiction can play a crucial role in improving our imaginative skills. Reading presents readers with the fictional lives of characters, and this becomes an essential prerequisite for imaginative exploration and experimentation, leading to a deeper understanding of the texts being read. As the co-researchers in the study explained, it is evident that imagination is another critical skill that aids in comprehending the text. The ability to develop imaginative abilities is

another proof that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

5.2.5.7. SIGNIFICANCE OF READING ON THE OTHER LANGUAGE SKILLS

The co-researchers were also aware that reading positively impacts the other language skills as well. The discussion of the findings below demonstrates that reading does improve the other language skills like speaking and writing.

5.2.5.7.1. Improvement in the other language skills

The Input Hypothesis posits that input can be provided through speaking and reading. While speaking on its own does not improve language development, it invites input from the other interlocutors, thereby creating a platform for developing language (Krashen & Terrel, 1983). Reading is seen as the most effective way of providing input.

The co-researchers were also aware that the benefits of reading go beyond reading itself. They admitted that the prolonged exposure to FVR had not only boosted their confidence but also their ability to speak English. They stated that they eventually enjoyed having long conversations in English with their friends. Apart from speaking, the findings also reveal that there has been an improvement in their writing skills. For example, Dintle admitted that her English writing was not good, particularly in spelling, but there had been an improvement in spelling ever since she joined the FVR programme. Mrs Lethole also corroborated the learners' views to confirm that there was indeed an improvement in their speaking and writing.

These findings underscore the significance of reading in English as a second, foreign, or additional language classroom, thereby justifying that if it becomes an integral part of the curriculum, there could be a significant improvement in such classrooms. In support of the findings, Krashen (2003) believes that our ability to read and write in an appropriate style, our ability to spell, our vocabulary knowledge, and our ability to use complex syntax are the direct result of reading. In favour of the role of input in second language acquisition, Lichtman and Van Patten (2021), argue that the fundamental role of input, the acquisition learning distinction, and ordered development have made a transition from being regarded as good ideas to irrefutable observations about second language acquisition. A study by Abualzain (2017) revealed that FVR

significantly improves learners' writing skills. Numerous studies that explored the impact of reading on the students' writing ability revealed that reading habits profoundly improved the students' academic writing skills (Atayeya, Setyo, Kassymora & Kosbay, 2019; Aida & Widiyati, 2020; Karasu & Tunaboyle, 2022; Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen, 2022; Linuwih & Winard, 2020; Wati, 2021; Nugrahani & Wati, 2022; Mahmoud, Quora & Hassan, 2020; Skenderi & Ejupi, 2017). In this regard, Mabrooka and Riyath (2019) highlight that good readers usually produce better pieces of writing. This statement proves why the co-researchers in this study reported an improvement in their writing skills, thereby justifying that reading is the most important tool in classrooms where English is not a mother tongue.

5.2.5.7.2. Improvement in vocabulary

One of the most significant benefits of reading is that it exposes readers to a wide range of words, which, when acquired, elevate readers to the next level of proficiency. This view is based on the notion that grammar and vocabulary are an outcome of receiving input (Krashen 2021). This implies that the ability to read texts with comprehension depends mainly on the readers' built-up vocabulary items, with the possibility of acquiring more vocabulary through reading. The co-researchers in this study were also aware of the significant contribution FVR made to their vocabulary.

The co-researchers admitted that there was a profound improvement in their vocabulary since joining the FVR programme. The responses reveal that some of the researchers had a goal when joining the programme. One co-researcher indicated that her second goal was to improve her vocabulary and that she was on her way to attaining it. Like in the previous discussions, some responses contrast the learner co-researchers' current level with the previous level, with one mentioning that the improvement in her vocabulary has improved her reading. The teacher co-researcher also acknowledged that by encountering new words as they read, learners build their vocabulary.

The co-researchers' views expounded above underscore the power of reading in helping learners acquire new vocabulary items. This aligns with the Input Hypothesis, in which FVR is grounded, that the acquisition of both the first and the second language, including vocabulary, is enhanced by mainly listening to and reading

captivating, comprehensible input (Krashen, Lee & Lao, 2018). Thus, this exposure is critical for language development since avid readers have a richer vocabulary and can use words more accurately in relation to context and register (Aisyiyah and Hakimi, 2020). Not only does reading enhance the acquisition of new vocabulary, but it also reinforces previously learnt vocabulary (Kazemi, 2021). Therefore, these views imply that learners with rich vocabulary demonstrate higher comprehension levels when reading, thereby justifying the significance of vocabulary in improving reading skills.

McQuillan (2019) conducted a study in support of this idea and found that FVR was six times more effective than explicit teaching of academic vocabulary. In another study, McQuillan (2020) focused on the efficacy of fiction in bolstering academic vocabulary. His analysis of the Harry Potter series revealed that the vocabulary gains from reading the Harry Potter series is more effective than what can be achieved through direct instruction. This Harry Potter series contains 85 per cent of vocabulary words believed to be essential for the Academic Word List (AWL). This list includes words that frequently appear in scientific journals, textbooks and lectures. They are taken as some of the most essential words for understanding texts across a wide range of disciplines. McQuillan's analysis further reveals that it would take a fourth grader or intermediate English as a second language student about one year to read Harry Potter novels and acquire between 123 and 297 words on the AWL or about one-fifth to one-half of the whole list. Spending the same amount of time on explicit instruction, considering that students may already know some of the words on the list, would lead to a vocabulary gain of 75 words of the AWL, which is less than 15 percent of the list. These findings reveal that engaging in FVR could be a solid way to gain vocabulary. Numerous other FVR-oriented studies have also been conducted with positive results in vocabulary acquisition (Biswas, 2023; Khotimah, 2020; Lee, 2019; Ovilia and Asfina, 2022). The findings in these studies prove that reading is instrumental in enhancing vocabulary acquisition, which in turn helps learners read more challenging texts with ease. The fact that the co-researchers in this study attest to the improvement in their vocabulary proves that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in their rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

5.3. SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The chapter presented the discussion and interpretation of the findings which were presented in the previous chapter. The primary goal of the chapter was to demonstrate how the discussion and the interpretation of the themes align with the objectives of the study. This alignment is critical since it justifies whether the studies' objectives have been achieved or not. First, the findings proved that the disruptions brought by COVID-19 severely impacted the learners' reading skills in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Secondly, the study demonstrated that teachers applied no particular in-class strategies to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. In awareness of the need to mitigate this learning loss in reading, the co-researchers identified the suitable conditions for implementing FVR to mitigate this learning loss in reading. Discussed in this chapter were also the challenges that could, and impeded the successful implementation of FVR. Steps that were taken to circumvent some of these challenges were also discussed. The word 'some' suggests that some of the challenges could not be circumvented during the study since they require time, planning and the involvement of relevant stakeholders. Therefore, the challenges that were addressed were those that could be collectively circumvented by the co-researchers who participated in the study. Lastly, the discussion provided proof that FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The next chapter provides the summary, recommendations and conclusion based on the findings of the study.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the discussion and interpretation of the findings. This chapter focuses on the summary of the key findings, contributions of the study, implications for practice, limitations, recommendations for future research and conclusions. To enable comprehensive alignment, the main research question and the objectives of the study are reiterated:

The following main question guided the study:

How can the Free Voluntary Reading approach be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms?

The following objectives guided this study to answer the main question:

- To examine how COVID-19 impacted reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To determine strategies teachers use to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To explore the implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To identify challenges that may impede the implementation of the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.
- To explore the benefits of FVR in mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

Qualitative methods were employed to achieve the objectives of the study. In particular, the PALAR methodology was followed to implement FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The study was conducted through the lens of the Input Hypothesis in conjunction with the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural

English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Data were generated through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with two Grade 10 English FAL teachers, focus group discussions with ten Grade 10 English FAL learners from four Grade 10 classes and observations. Data generated from these sources were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase guide to thematic analysis. Thus, the summary of the key findings presented in this chapter aligns with the objectives of the study.

6.2. SUMMARY OF THE KEY FINDINGS

The summary of the key findings is aligned with the major themes of the study. These are:

- The impact of COVID-19 on rural English FAL learners' reading skills.
- Lack of classroom-based intervention strategies to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading.
- Conditions suitable for implementing FVR to mitigate the COVID-19-induced reading loss in reading.
- Challenges that could hinder the successful implementation of FVR.
- Evidence from the field: Implementing free Voluntary Reading to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms.

6.2.1. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RURAL ENGLISH FAL LEARNERS' READING SKILLS

The findings on the impact of COVID-19 on the rural English FAL learners' reading skills confirmed that their reading skills were severely affected. This justified the fact that a learning loss in reading was incurred due to the school closures during the hard lockdown, remote learning, the phased-in approach and the rotational timetables which were used when learners returned to school. The impact on reading skills was reflected in the work submitted by the learners, which, according to the teachers, was a reflection that learners did not understand what they were reading. The learners were also not willing to participate in class-based reading activities.

While the findings reflected the severe impact of COVID-19 on the learners' reading skills, it was also discovered that for learners who had the habit of reading, the impact might have not been the same. The findings revealed that being at home provided

ample time for some learners to read. Thus, the learning loss in reading incurred by those learners might not be the same as those who did not have a reading culture. This explains the notion that if learners have developed reading habits, they can learn on their own.

6.2.2. THE LACK OF CLASSROOM-BASED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING

Closely linked to the findings in the first theme, the aim was to find out if there were any strategies that the English FAL teachers used to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Apart from the revised ATPs, the findings revealed that teachers employed no particular in-class strategies to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The teachers bemoaned the lack of time to implement such strategies during class time. They also revealed that the immense pressure to cover the demanding curriculum made it hard for them to implement such strategies.

6.2.3. CONDITIONS SUITABLE IMPLEMENTING FVR TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED READING LOSS IN READING

Having acknowledged the problem, the co-researchers identified the suitable conditions for successfully implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The findings show that the following conditions were identified: the need to select the time and place for holding the FVR sessions since these could not be conducted during class time. They also identified the need for a functional and fully resourced library. A conducive environment was also pointed out to be essential for motivating learners to read. Such an environment had to be 'homey', comfortable and welcoming. The co-researchers also suggested that FVR would be successfully implemented if a reading period was included in the timetable. However, including a reading period was not practical since it required time, planning and decision-making from the stakeholders.

6.2.4. CHALLENGES THAT COULD HINDER THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF FVR

The findings also revealed that certain challenges could hinder the successful implementation of FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The

first major challenge was that the library was not functional, with no librarian and appropriate resources like books and furniture. Another challenge was that the reading period had been neglected at the school. This means that there was once a reading period, but it was no longer observed. Another challenge was that the implementation might not be successful without sufficient support from the school management. While the school management gave approval for conducting the study, other conditions for successful implementation were not provided for. Another challenge was poor communication through the WhatsApp group, in which a decision was made that websites for finding reading materials would be shared. The last challenge was poor time management. While the co-researchers strived to be punctual, sometimes they arrived late for the FVR sessions due to circumstances beyond their control.

The co-researchers used the following strategies to circumvent the identified challenges. For the functionality of the library, it was agreed that the library would be open, and we would hold FVR sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The issue of books was solved by asking for book donations, and more than enough books were received for the FVR project. Attempts to seek support from the school management to provide support regarding chairs were unsuccessful. Therefore, learners had to bring their own chairs to the library. For poor communication, it was decided that the links to the websites for reading books would be shared, and the co-researchers also pledged that they would do their best to be punctual.

6.2.5. IMPLEMENTING FREE VOLUNTARY READING TO MITIGATE THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING IN RURAL ENGLISH FAL CLASSROOMS

The findings in this section addressed the core aim of the study – to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms through the FVR approach. Therefore, the findings show that the FVR approach was implemented successfully to fulfil the aim of the study. The evidence of successful implementation was determined because many learners showed their desire to join the project from the very first day. Those learners were eventually allowed to join the FVR programme. The findings also show that the learners derived pleasure from joining reading, which is one of the goals of FVR: helping learners read for pleasure so that they could develop reading habits.

The findings also demonstrated that the co-researchers benefitted from the programme as they reported increased reading habits. They noted that they read more than they ever did before and that they enjoyed it. The proof of their improving reading habits was reflected by the fact that they read during their spare time in class, during break and even on their way home. The co-researchers also acknowledged that there was an improvement in their reading skills. They could then read with comprehension, and one of the things that aided their ability to read with understanding was that reading evoked imaginations in their minds. The findings also reveal that FVR helped learners acquire new vocabulary, and that new vocabulary further boosted their ability to read with comprehension. Lastly, the findings indicate that FVR also positively impacts other language skills, such as speaking and writing. The co-researchers admitted that there was an improvement in their writing and the confidence to engage in conversations in English.

The summary of these findings demonstrates that the objectives of the study were achieved. In other words, FVR was implemented successfully to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

6.3. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the findings presented and discussed in this study, the following recommendations are made for effectively implementing FVR in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The implications can be used in any English as a second, foreign or additional language classroom.

Implications for the Department of Basic Education

The Department is well aware of the significant impact extensive reading has on developing English Language skills. This awareness is reflected in the recommendations made in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. It is advised that learners be exposed to reading a lot to help them acquire language. Therefore, the department could enforce the inclusion of reading periods in the school timetable at least once or twice a week. Secondly, the department should support and

monitor school libraries to ensure that they are fully functional and adequately resourced to address the needs of the learners.

Implications for the schools' administrations

The success of reading programmes depends on the support provided by the schools' authorities. School authorities that value the importance of reading could start by ensuring that their libraries are functional. This is because most libraries, like the one in this study, are not functional. Even the once-functional and resourced libraries have been neglected. The first step towards reading should start by ensuring that learners have places where they can find materials to read. The schools' authorities should also encourage and support their teachers in implementing reading programmes by including reading periods in the timetable so that the responsibility to inculcate a school's reading culture is not delegated only to the language teachers. The improvement in the reading skills of learners is beneficial for improving performance and autonomy in all subjects. More support can also be created by holding workshops that remind teachers of the significance of a reading culture in education.

Implications for teachers

As implementors and agents of change, teachers should embrace approaches that liberate learners and help them develop skills that encourage autonomy. It has been established in this study that learners who read more excel not only in language subjects but also in other subjects. Learners who have developed good reading skills and a reading culture use this as a weapon to learn anywhere and at any time. For such learners, learning is not confined to the classroom. Thus, inculcating a reading culture indirectly influences learners to be autonomous, a trait that could have yielded dividends during COVID-19-induced school disruptions. Developing autonomy enhances the resilience of education systems during adversity. Teachers are also encouraged to read extensively so that they can motivate their learners to read.

On the basis of these implications, this study proposes a strategy for implementing the FVR approach in English language classrooms. The strategy is explained in detail in Chapter 7.

6.4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current qualitative study focused only on one school in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district. Only ten Grade 10 English FAL learners were purposively selected from the four Grade 10 classes in this school. Two teachers who taught these classes also participated voluntarily in this study. All in all, twelve co-researchers participated in this study. Therefore, the findings were based on a relatively small sample with limited opportunities for transferability to a larger population. Nevertheless, the study provided detailed descriptions of the research processes and the findings. The study also employed member-checking and crystallisation of different data generation tools. The audit trail was also kept throughout the study. These processes were used to render the study, to a certain extent, credible, transferrable, dependable, and confirmable.

6.5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Owing to the limitations discussed above, more extensive case studies may need to be conducted on the impact of FVR on a school-wide project or in several schools to determine the efficacy of the FVR approach. Since the intervention in this study lasted almost four months, future studies spanning the period of a year, or more are recommended to track the progress of the learners and the effectiveness of FVR in rural English First Additional classrooms. Teachers are agents of implementation. Therefore, future studies could also explore the role played by teachers in implementing FVR since the success or failure of any intervention relies, to a great extent, on the support and approval of teachers.

6.6. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this section is to explain and justify the contributions made by this study. The main aim of the study was to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms through the implementation of FVR. Therefore, this section will justify the contribution made by the study in alignment with its central aim. As this purpose unfolds, references will be made to the information from the current and previous chapters.

6.6.1. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE ON MITIGATING THE COVID-19-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS IN READING IN RURAL ENGLISH FAL CLASSROOMS

Cognisant of the severity of the learning loss in rural areas, specifically focusing on rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms, the study sought to implement FVR to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The idea behind implementing FVR was propelled by the documented success of FVR in Second, Additional or Foreign language learning, particularly in English language classrooms. If FVR was implemented with positive results, indeed, it could also be implemented to mitigate the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. Another idea behind this approach was that if it could be implemented successfully, it would inculcate a reading culture in learners. The success and sustainability of the intervention were also greatly boosted by using the PALAR methodology so that teachers and learners would participate as equal participants in the implementation. This approach would enhance a collective identification of the problem and ideas for the solution. This collective approach would also ensure that the co-researchers would see themselves as the custodians of the change that positively impacted their lives, thereby cherishing the idea of keeping the project running for improved benefits. The achievement of this feat would entail the sustainability of the FVR project with an outlook on helping learners become habitual learners. This trait could help learners develop into autonomous, self-driven individuals who do not always have to wait for the teacher to impart knowledge to them. It is this quality that could help education systems develop resilience in times of adversity like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings in the study demonstrate that FVR was implemented successfully with positive results to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Despite the challenges that usually affect such places, such as limited resources, the collective effort of the co-researchers ensured that FVR was implemented successfully. Not only did the FVR project positively impact the co-researchers who participated in the study, but it also had a positive influence on the other learners at the school. As demonstrated in Chapters Four and Five, more learners were enthusiastically drawn to the project. Another significant success was that the adoption of the PALAR methodology yielded the desired results because the

project did not come to an end at the conclusion of the study. After realising the need and the benefits of participating in the programme, the co-researchers fervently expressed the desire for the FVR project to continue. Even as this research study is being compiled, the FVR programme is still in operation, and I am still heavily involved at the request of the co-researchers. Thus, the envisaged impact and longevity of the implementation have been achieved, and with continuation, more positive results are expected. The pledge by the regional Library Directorate to donate more books to the school promises to yield even better results and contribute significantly towards the success of the project.

The information presented above reveals the significant contribution this study has made to the literature on mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. These areas are disadvantaged, but with programmes like FVR, there is a vision for emancipating learners so that they can be creators of their own knowledge. Thus, the skills learners have acquired and will continue to acquire will contribute significantly not only to improving their language and reading skills but also to other subjects as well. Developing autonomy through the inculcation of a reading culture is a benefit that transcends the borders of this study to contribute immensely to the learners' lifelong learning. This trait is crucial for personal and professional development.

6.6.2. CONTRIBUTION TO THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS AND FREE VOLUNTARY READING

The study also contributed significantly to the Input Hypothesis and FVR by demonstrating how critical their combined elements are to improving the learners' reading skills, thereby mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. The demonstration was explained through 'the Spiral influence of the Input Hypothesis and FVR on improving the learners' reading skills: the relevance of the Input Hypothesis and FVR to the study.' There was a need to demonstrate this interconnection through a spiral diagram reflecting that the Input Hypothesis and FVR offer two-pronged benefits, which are essential for improving the learners' ability to read more challenging texts. These benefits are the language benefits and reading benefits. The ability to read more challenging texts with

comprehension demonstrates significant growth, which, through continued effort, promises even better results – learners becoming better readers by reading.

While the relevance of FVR to this study was almost obvious, it was challenging to prove how the Input Hypothesis relates to the study. FVR is indeed based on the Input Hypothesis. Still, the concerted attempt to explain the spiral influence of the Input Hypothesis and FVR approach shows a dynamic, interconnected process of how we become better readers by reading. This attempt could help further studies by clarifying how the Input Hypothesis and FVR are relevant to research based on reading.

6.7. CONCLUSION

The study explored implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that if learners are not equipped with the appropriate tools, they are affected negatively in disastrous times like COVID-19. The learning losses that were incurred could not have been severe if most education systems were resilient. The other conclusion is that intervention strategies do not stand a chance to succeed without insufficient support from the school management. Apart from the schools' management, it is important to engage learners actively in any decisions that affect them so that they can embrace change and develop a sense of ownership of whatever strategy is being implemented in their classrooms. Therefore, PALAR is a powerful tool that should be used to promote the collective involvement of all the relevant stakeholders.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is that FVR is one of the most invaluable yet underutilized approaches to inculcating a reading culture and helping learners improve their overall language skills. A deeply rooted reading culture could help learners become autonomous, self-driven individuals. Consequently, the next chapter presents a proposed strategy for implementing FVR in English language classrooms.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROPOSED STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTING FREE VOLUNTARY READING

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Findings and recommendations from this study would be incomplete without proposing a strategy or a model for implementing the Free Voluntary Approach in reading classrooms. While the study sought to implement this strategy in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading, this strategy is open to more than just mitigating COVID-19 learning loss. It is a strategy that can be used to instil a reading culture. As revealed in this study, reading is a powerful tool for improving learners' language skills. However, it has also been found to equip learners with skills that are not only beneficial for language classrooms. Attributes such as critical thinking, problem-solving and lifelong learning are often associated with habitual readers. Such learners have also been found to develop autonomy, a skill that is essential for learning across the curriculum. On this account, I propose that the implementation of FVR should be the responsibility of the whole school, not just the language teachers. The strategy is drawn from the insights developed while conducting this study.

Free Voluntary Reading can be implemented through the following facets, which are anchored in collaboration for a shared vision of inculcating a reading culture. This strategy does not, in any way, endorse any form of assessment or any tools used to monitor the learners' progress. The goal is to let the learners enjoy reading without the pressure of accountability.

6.2. COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION AND THE SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

As revealed in the findings of this study, intervention strategies stand little chance of success if they are not incorporated into the school timetable. Therefore, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should collaborate with schools to draw guidelines on how a reading period can be incorporated into the schools' timetables. Including a reading period is not enough without the appropriate resources. Liaising

with the schools' management, the DBE should ensure that school libraries are fully functional by providing schools with books and relevant resources. As revealed in the findings, when the resources are provided to the learners and time is made for them to read, they eventually develop good reading habits. The department should also monitor the implementation and progress.

6.3. COLLABORATION BETWEEN TEACHERS, SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEARNERS

The implementation of FVR is more likely to succeed when it involves all the stakeholders from the conceptualisation stage and throughout the whole project. The collaboration that includes learners as invaluable team members gives learners a sense of ownership of the project. With this feeling of ownership, they are more likely to do their best to ensure that FVR implementation succeeds. Below is an outline of the role that the school management, teachers and learners should play.

6.3.1. School Management

The role of the school management is to offer guidance and support for the smooth running of the school. Therefore, school management must work towards promoting a shared vision for FVR programmes so that everyone at the school understands the value of reading. The first step is to educate both teachers and learners about the benefits of reading so that as they embark on the implementation, they will know what they will reap. At this point, the role of the school management is to ensure that policy guidelines for including a reading period are implemented. This implementation requires teachers and learners to be involved as well. The school management should provide support by ensuring that libraries are fully functional and well-resourced. They should also liaise with different stakeholders and apply for book donations and other resources pertinent to successful implementation. Additionally, the school management must promote a shared responsibility in implementing FVR so that the implementation is not only led and maintained by language teachers. Opting for the all-inclusive approach is driven by the fact that the benefits derived from reading programmes are also instrumental in the other subjects. Thus, promoting shared responsibility will promote a common vision for the school.

6.3.2. Teachers

Teachers are the agents of implementation. When the implementation agents are convinced about the benefits of implementation, they are likely to support it, especially when they have been included in the decision-making process. In this regard, the role of the teachers is to work with the school management to ensure that implementation serves the learners' best interests. In other words, the teachers should be mediums through which learners can air their concerns. Teachers should constantly remind learners of the benefits of reading and motivate them to read. Motivation should come in the form of modelling reading during the FVR programme because learners are likely to imitate good behaviour.

Moreover, teachers must ensure that learners are fully involved in all the activities related to the implementation. They can solicit their input on matters such as decorating the classrooms to create a conducive atmosphere for reading. As part of creating a conducive atmosphere, teachers should also create their own classroom libraries. For example, reading corners can be set-up, where learners can sit quietly and enjoy reading after completing their classwork.

Finding preferred reading materials may be challenging for some of the learners. In this case, teachers must equip learners with the skills they can use to select books for pleasure reading. Consequently, learners should not be forced to read or finish a book if they do not find it interesting. One way of helping them find compelling books is by creating time for learners to share their reading experiences. Such activities help learners to make recommendations, thereby helping others to find interesting books to explore. Online novels can also be used if there is a shortage of reading materials or for those who prefer to read online.

6.3.3. Learners

The learners' role is crucial to implementing the FVR approach. Learners should be motivated to express their preferences so that their participation in the FVR implementation could be meaningful. They could also be encouraged to select representatives who would act as mediators in cases where they encounter implementation-related issues. They should also be allowed to participate in book-sharing sessions so that they can motivate one another.

This implementation strategy is summarised in the model illustrated below.

PROPOSED STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTING FREE VOLUNTARY READING

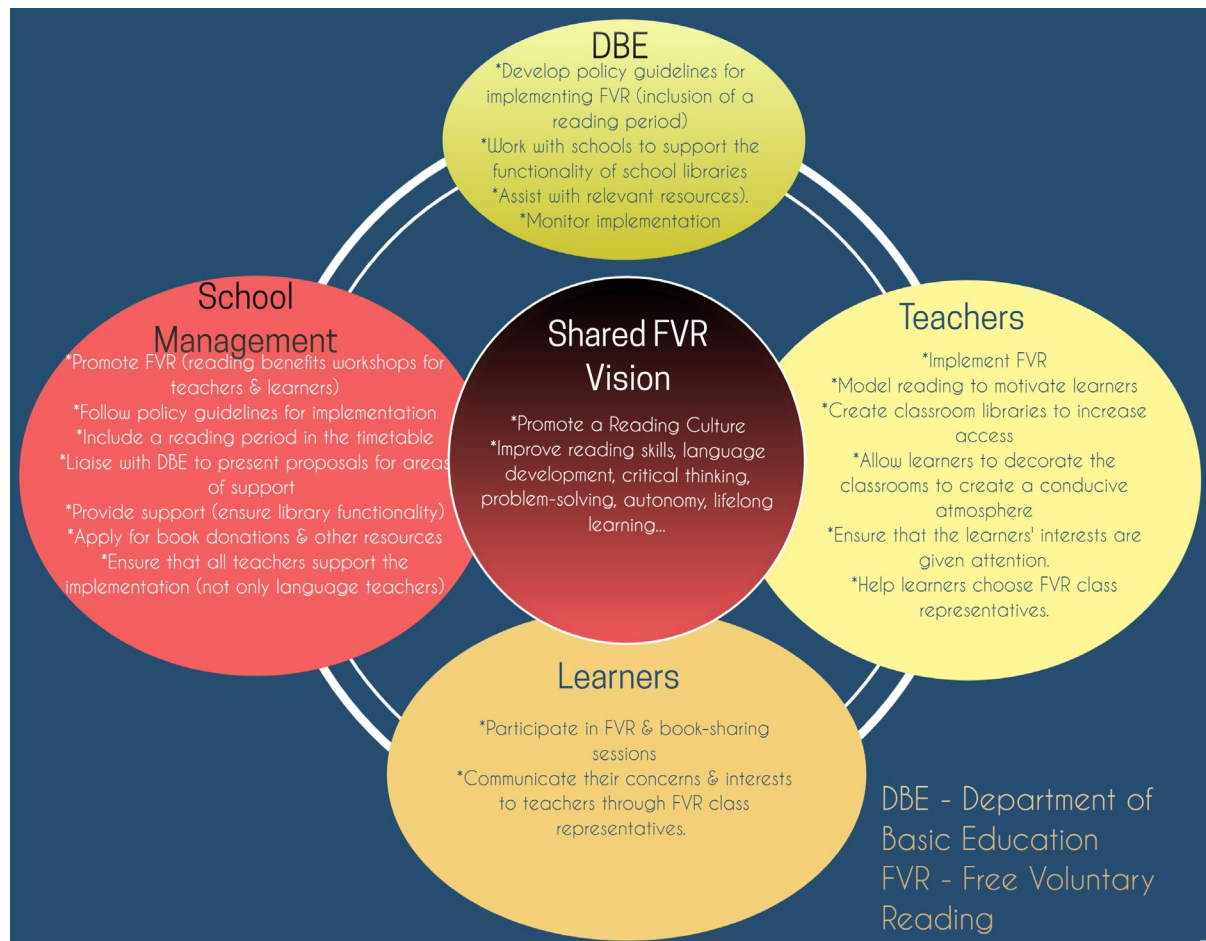


Fig. 3. Strategy for implementing FVR

The model reflects the implementation through the collaborative efforts of the Department of Basic Education, the school management, teachers and learners.

6.4. CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a proposed strategy for implementing FVR in English Language classrooms. The strategy outlines the roles that different stakeholders should play for successful implementation. The fulfilment of these roles requires collaborative and reflective processes aimed at accommodating inputs from teachers, learners and the school management.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PLAGIARISM REPORT

Mojaki MG PhD Dissertation - Final Draft.docx

ORIGINALITY REPORT

9%	6%	4%	4%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Submitted to University of the Free State Student Paper	3%
2	ejournal.uinsaid.ac.id Internet Source	1%
3	researchspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	<1%
4	vital.seals.ac.za:8080 Internet Source	<1%
5	uir.unisa.ac.za Internet Source	<1%
6	Fine, Laurie Ann. "A Mixed Methods Study Investigating the Relationship of COVID-19 to Reading Loss in Struggling Readers and Teacher Perceptions of Intervention Effectiveness", Evangel University, 2023 Publication	<1%
7	scholar.ufs.ac.za Internet Source	<1%
8	archive.org Internet Source	

APPENDIX B: LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that I edited **MOJAKI GILBERT MOJAKI'S** dissertation

entitled:

Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English
FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach

M.V. Nzama: M.A (General Linguistics (Unizulu)

D.Ed. Educational Psychology (Unizulu)

Editing for Professionals (Wits University)

Cell: 0834790937

Email: wosimv@yahoo.com



APPENDIX C: ETHICAL CLEARANCE (UFS)



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

24-Oct-2023

Dear Mr Mojaki Mojaki

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

**Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms:
A Free Voluntary Reading Approach**

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2023/1391

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

Dr Adri
du
Plessis

Digitally signed by Dr
Adri du Plessis
Date:
2023.10.25
17:26:52
+02'00'

205 Nelson Mandela
Drive
Park West
Bloemfontein 9301
South Africa

P.O. Box 330
Bloemfontein 9300
Tel: +27 (0)51 401
9337
duplessisA@ufs.ac.za
www.ufs.ac.za



APPENDIX D: RESEARCH PERMISSION LETTER (FREE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Enquiries: M.Z. Thango
Ref: Research Permission: M. G. Mojaki
Tel. 051 404 8808
Email: MZ.Thango@fseducation.gov.za



2956 Phoko Street
Phuthaditjhaba
9866

Dear Mr. M. G. Mojaki

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE FREE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: THABO MOFUTSANYANA DISTRICT

This letter serves to inform you that you have been granted permission to conduct research in the Free State Department of Education within the Thabo Mofutsanyana Education District. The details in relation to your research project with the University of the Free State are as follows:

Topic: Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach.

1. **List of schools involved:** [REDACTED]
2. **Target Population:** Three teachers teaching English FAL in grade 10 and nine learners doing English FAL in grade 10 at the selected school.
3. **Period of research:** From the signature of this letter until 30 September 2024. Please note that the department does not allow any research to be conducted during the fourth term (quarter) of the academic year. Should you fall behind your schedule by three months to complete your research project in the approved period, you will need to apply for an extension. The researcher is expected to request permission from the school principals to conduct research at schools.
4. The approval is subject to the following conditions:
 - 4.1 The collection of data should not interfere with the normal tuition time or teaching process.
 - 4.2 A bound copy of the research document should be submitted to the Free State Department of Education, Room 101, 1st Floor, Thuto House, St. Andrew Street, Bloemfontein or can be emailed to the above-mentioned email address.
 - 4.3 You will be expected, on completion of your research study to make a presentation to the relevant stakeholders in the Department.
 - 4.4 The ethics documents must be adhered to in the discourse of your study in our department.
5. Please note that costs relating to all the conditions mentioned above are your own responsibility.

Yours Sincerely,

Mr. MZAMO W. JACOBS
DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE, M&E AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

DATE: 08/03/2024

RESEARCH APPLICATION BY M. G. MOJAKI. PERMISSION LETTER 08 MARCH 2024. THABO MOFUTSANYANA DISTRICT
QASME, M&E and Strategic Planning Directorate Private Bag X20555, Bloemfontein, 9300 - Thuto House, Room 101, 1st Floor, St Andrew Street, Bloemfontein

www.fsdoe.fs.gov.za

APPENDIX E: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH_(PRINCIPAL)



REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Dear Principal, The Secondary School

I am doing research and would like to request permission to conduct our research at The Beacon Secondary School.

DATE

March 11 2024 – July 2024

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach Insert the title of the research project.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki 2018646956 0604148165

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of Education
Curriculum Studies

STUDY LEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Dr. Nomalungelo Ngubane
079 471 0483

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The main aim of this study is to demonstrate how Free Voluntary Reading can be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I, Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki, am a registered PhD student at the University of the Free State. I am doing this study in fulfillment of this qualification.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: UFS-HSD2023/1391

WHY IS YOUR INSTITUTION/ORGANISATION/COMPANY INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Your school was chosen because it is part of the study population (rural schools in Thabo Mofutsanyana district). The study requires the participation of three Grade 10 English FAL teachers and 9 Grade 10 English FAL learners. The objectives of the study cannot be achieved without the participation of the



mentioned participants since the aim is to use Free Voluntary Reading approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. Their participation is, therefore, invaluable.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The role of the participants in this study is to help implement a Free Voluntary Reading approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. The study will involve workshops to discuss the Free Voluntary Reading approach and how it can be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. The study will also need participation from 9 Grade 10 learners. These learners will participate in the workshops. They will also participate in Free Voluntary Reading for the whole term on days and times that will be chosen during the workshops. Teachers will also be requested to answer interview questions aligned with the aim and the objectives of the study. The interview sessions will be guided by semi-structured interviews, which will be audio-recorded. Semi-structured interview questions encourage the participants to speak freely and openly to give in-depth information. The interview session is expected to take 30 to 45 minutes. The anticipated time of participation in this study is March 11 2024 – July 2024. One session will also be needed for the learners' focus group discussion, lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Since the learners are underage, the involvement of teachers in this study will ensure that they are well protected from any possible violation of their rights. I promise to conduct myself in a manner that protects the learners' integrity. My study is also free of any form of manipulation.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Apart from assisting in fulfilling the objectives of this study, participants will benefit by becoming aware that Free Voluntary Reading is an invaluable approach that is not only beneficial for mitigating COVID-induced learning loss in reading, but it can also be used throughout to help learners improve their language skills. Research has proven that this approach is highly successful in second language learning. While the information the participants provide will be used to address the questions of this study, their participation in this study will be kept confidential. The study is for academic purposes only. Therefore, their participation will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity.

WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The anticipated inconvenience of participating in this study is that the participants will sacrifice their time to help implement Free Voluntary Reading and answer the interview questions. Apart from the time they will be asked to sacrifice, there are no other anticipated inconveniences or discomforts.

WILL THE INFORMATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Please note that the study will adhere to stringent measures to ensure that participation in this study is kept confidential. As a result, names will not be recorded to eliminate any possible link to the answers the participants will provide. A fictitious code or a pseudonym will be used in place of their names throughout the research study. This is how they will be referred to in cases where the study is published as a journal article or presented in conference proceedings. Data transcribers/external coders may have access to the information they have provided. However, they will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. Their answers may also be reviewed by people responsible for ensuring that research is done correctly, including the external coder and the Research Ethics Committee members. Otherwise, records that identify them will be available only to people working on the study unless the participants give permission for other people to see the records. Focus groups will also be used to collect data from

learners. A focus group is a small interview group of not more than twelve learners on a particular research interest. While the researcher will make every effort to ensure that learners will not be connected to the information they share during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat the information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I shall advise learners not to disclose sensitive personal information in the focus group. Learners can refuse to participate in this study even if their parents have agreed to their participation. Thus, they will not get into any trouble by withdrawing from this study.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

The researcher will store the information in a password-protected cloud storage. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics review and approval, if applicable. This information will eventually be permanently deleted from cloud storage. The nature of this study does not necessarily pose any risk. No volatile information is needed to fulfil the objectives of this study. If participants are subjected to abuse or ridicule for participating in this study, legal avenues will be explored to ensure their safety.

WILL THERE BE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will not be any monetary incentive for taking part in this study. Participation is voluntary. No financial costs will be incurred for taking part in this study.

HOW WILL THE INSTITUTION / ORGANISATION / COMPANY BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The findings are accessible anytime. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please get in touch with me at 0604148165, home: 0587130289, or email: MojakiMG@ufs.ac.za. Should the participants have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, they may contact Dr Nomalungelo Ngubane at 0794710483 or email ngubaneni@ufs.ac.za.

Yours sincerely

Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki

PLEASE FILL IN THIS SECTION AND RETURN THIS PAGE. THE LETTER ABOVE CAN BE KEPT FOR FUTURE REFERENCE

STUDY: *Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach.*

RESEARCHER: M. G. Mojaki

NAME OF THE SCHOOL

NAME AND SURNAME OF THE PRINCIPAL

CONTACT NUMBER

- I hereby offer informed consent, allowing teachers and learners from the above-mentioned school to participate in the above research study.
- I understand what the study entails and all the risks and benefits for the teacher and the learners who will be participating.
- Subject to the stipulations indicated in the letter above, I grant the researcher permission to use the data generated from the participation of the teacher and learners from the school.

Signature: -----

Date: -----

APPENDIX F: INFORMATION LEAFLET & TEACHER CONSENT FORM



RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM FOR THE TEACHER

DATE

04 March 2024

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki 2018646956 0604148165

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of Education
Curriculum Studies

STUDY LEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Dr. Nomalungelo Ngubane
079 471 0483

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The main aim of this study is to demonstrate how Free Voluntary Reading can be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I, Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki, a registered candidate of the University, is doing this research study for my Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum Studies.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: UFS-HSD2023/1391

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

You are invited to participate in this study because, as an English FAL teacher, you have invaluable information that is crucial for fulfilling the objectives of this study. I am looking for a committed English FAL teacher with at least of three years of teaching experience. As a result, I was referred to you by your school principal.



WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

Your role in this study is to help implement a Free Voluntary Reading approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. The study will involve workshops to discuss the Free Voluntary Reading approach and how it can be implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss. The study will also need participation from 9 Grade 10 learners. These learners will participate in the workshops. They will also participate in Free Voluntary Reading for the whole term on days and times that will be chosen during the workshops. You will also be requested to answer interview questions aligned with the aim and the objectives of the study. The interview sessions will be guided by semi-structured interviews, which will be audio-recorded. Semi-structured interview questions encourage the participants to speak freely and openly to give in-depth information. The interview session is expected to take 30 to 45 minutes. The anticipated time of participation in this study is March 11 2024 – July 2024. One session will also be needed for the learners' focus group discussion lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Since the learners are still underage, I shall ask the school principal to assign a teacher who will ensure that the children are well protected from any possible violation of their rights. I promise to conduct myself in a manner that protects the learners' integrity. My study is also free of any form of manipulation.

CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and there is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. Therefore, you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without providing a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Apart from assisting in fulfilling the objectives of this study, you will benefit by becoming aware that Free Voluntary Reading is an invaluable approach that is not only beneficial for mitigating COVID-induced learning loss, but it can also be used throughout to help learners improve their language skills. Through research, this approach has been proven to be highly successful in Second language learning. While the information you provide to will be used to address the questions of this study, your participation in this study will be kept confidential. Remember that the study is for academic purposes only. Your participation will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The anticipated inconvenience of participating in this study is that you will sacrifice your time to help implement Free Voluntary Reading and answer the interview questions. Apart from the time you will be asked to sacrifice, there are no other anticipated inconveniences or discomforts.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Please note that the study will adhere to stringent measures to ensure that your participation in this study is kept confidential. As a result, your names will not be recorded to eliminate any possible link to the answers you will provide. A fictitious code or a pseudonym will be used in place of your names throughout the research study. This is how you will be referred to in cases where the study is published as a journal article or presented in conference proceedings. Data transcribers/external coders may have access to the information you have provided. However, they will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. Your answers may also be reviewed by people responsible for ensuring that research is done correctly, including the transcriber, external coder, and the Research Ethics Committee members.

Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study unless you give permission for other people to see the records. Focus groups will also be used to collect data from learners. A focus group is a small interview group of not more than twelve learners on a particular research interest. While the researcher will make every effort to ensure that learners will not be connected to the information they share during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat the information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I shall advise learners not to disclose sensitive personal information in the focus group. Learners can refuse to take part in this study even if their parents have agreed to their participation. Thus, they will not get into any trouble by withdrawing from this study.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

The researcher will store the information in a password-protected cloud storage. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics review and approval, if applicable. This information will eventually be deleted permanently from the cloud storage. The nature of this study does not necessarily pose any risk. No volatile information is needed to fulfil the objectives of this study. In the case where participants are subjected to abuse or ridicule for taking part in this study, legal avenues will be explored to ensure the safety of the participants.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will not be any monetary incentive for taking part in this study. Participation is voluntary. No financial costs will be incurred for taking part in this study.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The findings are accessible anytime. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact me on 0604148165, home: 0587130289 email: MojakiMG@ufs.ac.za. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr. Nomalungelo Ngubane at 0794710483, email: ngubaneni@ufs.ac.za.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, the undersigned,

_____ (participant's full names to be included), (the "Participant")

confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study referred to as the

_____ (the "Study") in relation to

and which Study is being conducted by

(insert the name of the researcher), (the "Researcher").

I, the undersigned Participant, further confirm that–

1. the Researcher has explained the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of my participation in the Study;
2. I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the Study as explained in the attached information sheet;
3. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the Study;
4. I understand that my participation in the Study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable);
5. I voluntarily provide the UFS and the Researcher with my personal information and consent to the UFS and the Researcher collecting, disclosing and processing my personal information in order to conduct the Study and any related activities in relation thereto;
6. I hereby acknowledge and confirm that I understand the purpose for which the UFS and the Researcher may collect, store, use, delete, destroy, outsource, transfer or otherwise process, as the context and circumstances may require and as contemplated in terms of POPIA, my personal information as set out herein;
7. I am aware that the findings of the Study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings and that my personal information will be aggregated and deidentified at such stage;
8. I also give the UFS permission to share, without notification, the collected data with other researchers at the UFS or other Higher Education Institutions. This permission is dependent on the same principles of ethical research practices, anonymity/confidentiality, safekeeping of information, and other issues listed above applying.

I, the Participant, agree to the recording of the interview session.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX G: PARENT LETTER

P.O Box 5958
Phuthaditjhaba 9866
Cell: 060414816

04 March 2024

Dear parent/guardian

Request for your child to participate in a research study

I wish to ask for permission for your child, a Grade 10 learner, to participate in a research project to be conducted in their school from March 11 2024 – July 2024. I am a registered PhD candidate at the University of the Free State.

The title of my study is; *Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach.*

The aim is to use the Free Voluntary Reading approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. The objective is to provide time for learners to read regularly so that they can gradually improve their reading skills and even other language skills. Apart from this, your child will participate in a focus group discussion with questions revolving around the aim of the study. A focus group discussion is a small group interview with questions that guide the discussion. Your child's participation will be appreciated since the goal is to use an approach that benefits learners even after completing this study.

The information your child will provide will be kept confidential. The study will not use real names to protect your child's identity. However, this information may be viewed by the authorities to make sure the study is done correctly. Should you or your child feel uncomfortable, the child is free to withdraw from the study at any time.

A leaflet detailing all the relevant information and a consent form is provided with this letter.

I hope my request meets your kind approval.

Yours Faithfully
Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki

APPENDIX H: INFORMATION LEAFLET & PARENTAL CONSENT FORM



RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

DATE

04 March 2024

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach

RESEARCHERS NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki 2018646956 0604148165

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of Education
Curriculum Studies

STUDYLEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Dr. Nomalungelo Ngubane
079 471 0483

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH PROJECT ALL ABOUT?

This research uses the Free Voluntary Reading Approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. This approach has been found beneficial in second language acquisition. It promotes reading as an excellent source for improving the learners' language skills. Hence, it can benefit learners even after participation in this study.

WHY HAS YOUR CHILD BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Your child has been invited because they are Grade 10 learners in an English FAL classroom. The child's participation is vital because teaching and learning affect them directly. Since most learners incurred COVID-19-induced learning loss, the study seeks to use an approach that will not only help learners for the purpose of mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss but also for the future. Participating in this study will also help your child improve their language skills since the goal is that they should continue with the approach being implemented even after the completion of this study

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I, Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki, a registered PhD candidate at the University of the Free state, am conducting this study for my Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum Studies.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.



Approval number: UFS-HSD2023/1391

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOUR CHILD IN THIS STUDY?

Your child will be part of nine learners who will participate in Free Voluntary Reading with the aim of mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. The child will be directly involved in the decision-making, planning and implementation process so that they can understand the value of Free Voluntary Reading. Your child also will take part in a focus group discussion. A focus group discussion is a group interview of people less than twelve. Participation in the focus group discussion will be guided by the research questions revolving around implementing Free Voluntary Reading to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss.

CAN ANYTHING BAD HAPPEN TO YOUR CHILD?

The nature of the study does not require sensitive information that could put your child's life at risk. As explained above, the study is only concerned with using Free Voluntary Reading to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. This topic does not hint at any possible risk. The research will also be done at the school your child attends. However, as a parent, the child is free to tell you if they feel uncomfortable to continue participating. They can withdraw from the research anytime they want to.

CAN ANYTHING GOOD HAPPEN TO YOUR CHILD?

The good that could come out of this study is that your child will benefit from the approach that seeks to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms. Participation will help your child improve their language skills. This approach can be used even after the participation in this study. The study addresses current challenges while also helping learners for the future to develop their language skills.

WILL ANYONE KNOW YOUR CHILD IS PART OF THE STUDY?

The information your child will provide will be kept confidential. Real names will not be used to protect the identity of your child. However, this information may be viewed by the authorities, such as transcribers, to make sure the study is done correctly. The transcribers will have to fill in the confidentiality agreement. The information the learners provide will be locked away in a cabinet. The information stored on my computer will also be protected with a password. This information will be destroyed by burning the hard copy of the learners. The data stored in the computer will be deleted permanently.

WHO CAN YOU TALK TO ABOUT THE STUDY?

For further information about the study, you can call me on 0604148165, email; MojakiMG@ufs.ac.za. Should you not be pleased about the way the research is being done, please contact my Supervisor, <DR. Nomalungelo Ngubane> on 0794710483, email <ngubaneni@ufs.ac.za>.

WHAT IF YOU DO NOT WANT YOUR CHILD TO DO THIS?

Your child is not forced to take part in this study. They can refuse to participate even if you (parents) have agreed to their participation. If ever they feel uncomfortable participating in the study, they can withdraw from the study at any time without getting into trouble.

PLEASE RETURN

Name of child: _____

Name of Parent: _____

- Do you understand this research study and are you willing to let your child take part in it? Yes ☐ No ☐
- Has the researcher answered all your questions? Yes ☐ No ☐
- Do you understand that you can withdraw from the study at any time? Yes ☐ No ☐
- I give the researcher permission to make use of the data gathered from my child's participation Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature of Parent

Date

APPENDIX I: INFORMATION LEAFLET & LEARNER ASSENT FORM



Participant Information Leaflet And Assent Form



TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT: *Mitigating the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms: A Free Voluntary Reading Approach*

RESEARCHERS NAME(S): Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki

ADDRESS: 2956 Phooko Street, Phuthaditjhaba 9866

CONTACT NUMBER: 0604148165

What is RESEARCH?

Research is something we do to find new knowledge about how things (and people) work.

What is this research project all about?

It is about using the Free Voluntary Reading Approach to mitigate(reduce) the COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Free Voluntary Reading is an approach that promotes reading as a source to improve language skills – we read to become better readers, speakers, listeners and writers.

Why have I been invited to take part in this research project?

As a learner, you were affected by the school closures during COVID-19. Through this study, we seek to address COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. You are invited to participate in Free Voluntary Reading to improve your reading and other language skills, thereby mitigating COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. Therefore, you can continue with this approach even after participating in this study.

Who is doing the research?

I, Mojaki Gilbert Mojaki, am doing this research to complete my Doctor of Philosophy Degree at the University of the Free State.

What will happen to me in this study?

You will be participating in Free Voluntary Reading, where you are given time to read regularly so that you can gradually improve your English language skills. You will also be part of the workshops where we will discuss and plan how Free Voluntary Reading can be implemented. Lastly, you will participate in a focus group

discussion. A focus group discussion is a group interview of at most twelve people. You will be asked questions about using Free Voluntary Reading to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading in rural English FAL classrooms.

Can anything bad happen to me?

Nothing bad will happen to you for taking part in this study. The study does not use questions that may be sensitive to you. However, should you feel uncomfortable about anything in the study, you can inform your parents immediately.

Can anything good happen to me?

The good that can come out of participating in this study is that it will help improve your language skills to mitigate COVID-19-induced learning loss in reading. However, the benefits go beyond just mitigating the learning loss. The approach proposed in this study can help you even after the study has been completed. The goal is to encourage teachers to use this approach to help learners improve English language skills – reading, speaking, ability to spell words correctly and writing.

Will anyone know I am in the study?

Your identity will not be revealed anywhere in the study. Pseudonyms (false names) will be used throughout the study so that no one will link you to the information you have provided in the study. Although your participation will be confidential, the study will be given to the relevant authorities. Sometimes the study may be published or presented in conference proceedings. However, your participation will remain confidential.



Who can I talk to about the study? If you need more information, you can contact the researcher on 060414 8165, email <MojakiMG@ufs.ac.za> or consult the supervisor, Dr Nomalungelo Ngubane on 0794710483, email, <ngubaneni@ufs.ac.za>.

What if I do not want to do this?

Your participation in this study is out of free will. Should you feel that you need to withdraw from the study at any time, you are free to do so. You can choose not to participate even if your parents have given permission for you to participate in this study.

Do you understand this research study and are you willing to take part in it?

☐ YES☐ NO

Has the researcher answered all your questions?

☐ YES☐ NO

Do you understand that you can pull out of the study at any time?

☐ YES☐ NO

Signature of learner

Date