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# Exploring the impact of the COVID-19 safety measures on learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) has disrupted the process of teaching and learning in unprecedented ways. There has been a shift in the way lesson presentation takes place in many classrooms. In particular, the COVID-19 safety measures (social distancing and wearing of masks) threaten learner-centred teaching in rural English First Additional Language (FAL) classrooms. As a result, there is a need to explore the impact of the COVID-19 safety measures on learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms. To achieve this aim, the study raises these questions: how do COVID-19 safety measures disrupt learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms? How do rural English FAL teachers implement learner-centred teaching while adhering to the COVID-19 safety measures? The study adopts a qualitative research design and uses Document Analysis and Online interviews to generate data from eleven participants.

Following thematic analysis, data revealed that the COVID-19 safety measures negatively impact learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms. The challenges include ineffective monitoring and scaffolding, difficulty engaging in concrete and cooperative learning, limited opportunities for creativity, and distorted communication.

In response, the paper recommends various strategies to lessen the impact of the COVID-19 safety measures on learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms. These include: strengthening the home-school connection, creating a supportive classroom environment, incorporating fun activities in collaborative learning activities, and providing activities that encourage independent learning.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic, English language teaching, impact, rural schools, safety measures.

## 1. Introduction and background

The emergence and continuous spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 affected many sectors of society. In many cases, educational institutions were compelled to close operations (Fatima, 2020:20), while others sought innovative ways of overcoming the disruptions caused by this pandemic. The effects of these closures included loss of teaching time and insufficient curriculum coverage (Mohale et al., 2020:16603). As a result, the quality of teaching was generally compromised (Monareng et al., 2020:16754). Although several school closures took place in South Africa, the need for the resumption and continuity of teaching and learning remained high for the country's government amid the pandemic.

A curriculum recovery plan became one of the innovative ways of mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on the teaching and learning in South Africa. This new recovery plan was premised on the following:

- The reorganization and trimming of the curriculum.
- The amendment of the existing annual teaching plan
- The retention of fundamental skills and critical concepts (Mohale et al. 2020:16603).

Similar to other international countries, the South African government adopted the remote or online mode of teaching and learning to avoid a complete disruption to the learning programme (Mahlaba, 2020:122). However, the majority of teachers and learners in rural schools continue to forfeit this benefit even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dube (2020:138) points to a failure by this mode of learning to accommodate teachers and learners from these schools. In some cases, rural teachers' hostility towards online learning exacerbates the situation. In their view, Monaheng et al (2020:16758) state that teachers' lack of necessary skills to use technology adds to their fears and reluctance. In other cases, many rural schools do not have access to the internet while others lack the infrastructure necessary for the incorporation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the classroom. In addition, many rural schools are located in isolated and inaccessible areas where it is difficult to maintain a consistent and reliable internet connectivity (Owen et al., 2020:574; Kamble et al., 2021:201).

As a result of these challenges, it is difficult for many rural schools to switch to remote learning. English FAL teachers in these schools have no choice but to continue with face-to-face lesson presentation amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of this, they are expected to adhere to the COVID-19 safety measures prescribed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and adopted by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). These include:

- Ensuring continuity of safe, adequate and appropriate educational and social learning and development of children
- Minimizing the risk of SARS-CoV-2 [COVID-19] transmission within school and school-associated settings among children, teachers and other school staff
- Guarding against the potential for schools to act as amplifiers for transmission of SARS-COV-2 [COVID-19] within communities
- Ensuring school-related Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM) are integrated into and support the wider measures implemented at the community level (WHO, 2020:1).

In line with the WHO, the DBE published guidelines for schools on maintaining hygiene during COVID-19 (Department of Basic Education, 2020) to curb the spread of this virus in schools. In South Africa, it is mandatory for all people to wear surgical or cloth face-masks all the time in social gatherings and educational institutions. Large crowds have the ability to accelerate the transmission of COVID-19 (WHO, 2020:1). Consequently, maintaining a 1.5 meter distance between pupils and teachers in the classroom remains compulsory. Lastly, decontamination of classrooms and sanitization of hands remain a critical part of containing the spread of virus in schools.

Although it is important to adhere to the COVID-19 safety protocols, their impact on learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms cannot be overlooked. This is particularly important in rural contexts where teachers "...are expected to be more creative and inventive" (Akhter, 2020:2) amid infrastructural defects and scarcely resourced schools. This paper argues that these COVID-19 safety protocols seem to impact negatively on learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms. In other words, if this problem persists, rural English FAL teachers may revert to using teacher-centred approaches in their classrooms. Therefore, this study explores the impact of COVID-19 safety measures on learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms. The following were the research questions for the article:

- How did COVID-19 safety measures disrupt learner-centred teaching in a rural English FAL classroom?
- How did English FAL teachers implement learner-centred teaching while adhering to COVID-19 safety measures in a rural English FAL classroom?

The paper begins by reviewing the literature related to English FAL teaching, learner-centred teaching, and learning styles in a classroom. I then focus on the theoretical framework and methodology employed. Finally, I discuss the findings and make recommendations.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Contextualising English FAL teaching in South Africa

Perhaps the first point to understanding the context within which English FAL is taught, requires an overview of South Africa's language policy. South Africa has eleven languages. Each of these languages is protected and afforded equal and official status by the country's constitution. In other words, all the policies pertaining to the teaching, governance and acquisition of any one of these languages must be within the ambit of the country's supreme law. The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) was introduced in 1997 in an attempt to reverse the dominance of foreign languages such as English and Afrikaans in the delivery and acquisition of education in the country, among other things. In order to achieve this balance, additive multilingualism was adopted as an approach to promoting and developing indigenous languages for social and educational purposes. As a result, schools were given the option of adopting a home language for learning purposes or one home language (mostly indigenous (African)) as well as another additional language (English). At the centre of the post-apartheid language policies is the need to maintain a balance between the use of English as a medium of instruction and the preservation as well as development of learners' home languages. This is important because the use of African languages for teaching and learning (LoLT) does not extend beyond Grade 3.

While advocating for the same, the recent Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (2012) aims to equip learners with skills necessary to become proficient in English FAL. Consequently, the English FAL syllabus focuses on the teaching of various language skills including listening, speaking, reading, grammar, and writing (Zano, 2020:2). In this case, CAPS recommends several language teaching approaches such as the text-based, communicative, integrated, and process oriented approaches (DBE, 2012). In brief, English FAL teachers are expected to use the text-based approach mainly for helping learners understand how different texts are produced, with the ultimate aim of producing their own texts in the real world. The communicative language approach aims to equip learners with the necessary tools to express themselves in English FAL in both academic and social environments. While the task-based approach demands learners to be exposed to real-life situations in which English FAL may be used, the process-based approach outlines different stages through which different language skills must be taught. CAPS recommends that language skills should be taught in an integrated manner in English FAL classrooms. Regardless of the language teaching approach English FAL teachers in rural settings decide to use, the need for learner-centred teaching remains paramount for enhancing learning.

## 2.2 Conceptualising learner-centred teaching

Despite having gained global attention from different education experts, a universally accepted definition of learner-centred teaching remains elusive. However, several attempts have been made to define this concept. For instance, terms such as ‘active learning’, ‘self-managed learning’, ‘constructivist learning’, and ‘learner-centred approach’ are used when defining learner-centred teaching (Schreurs & Dumbraveanu, 2014:37; Kiran, 2020:56). Accordingly, Du Plessis (2020:4) defines learner-centred teaching in terms of a set of characteristics. These range from learning through active participation, collaboration, explicit skill instruction, reflection to having direct control over the learning process.

Learner-centred teaching places learners at the centre while teachers play facilitative roles during the process of teaching and learning (Almekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2012:74; Payaprom & Payaprom, 2020:60). In this regard, learners learn through doing (constructing own knowledge) and collaborating with others in the classroom (Du Plessis, 2020:4). This requirement necessitates the use of a variety of methods when teaching English FAL in rural classrooms. In this regard, Fink (2003) identifies several methods of lesson delivery that characterise learner-centred teaching. When using observation as a method, learners actively participate through listening or watching activities in the classroom. Performance is described as a method of delivery that involves active completion of tasks by learners in the classroom. In the reflection method, teachers support learners to construct meaning and own language individually or in collaboration with others.

In the same vein, Weimer (2002) identifies five important changes for effective implementation of learner-centred teaching in the classroom. These include, the balance of power, a functional content, role of the teacher, responsibility for learning, and the evaluation purpose and processes. For effective implementation in the classroom, learner-centred teaching requires power-sharing between the teacher and the learner. Contrary to the traditional teacher-centred teaching where the teacher controls the entire learning process, a power-neutral classroom allows for learners’ deeper and meaningful engagement in learning. In such a learning environment, learners are eager to learn and discover knowledge on their own (Weimer, 2002:31). With regard to a functional content, a learner-centred teacher focuses mainly on finding ways through which learners can understand and use the content presented to them. This is in contrast to placing emphasis on content or curriculum coverage as is often the case in teacher-centred classrooms.

The facilitative role a learner-centred teacher assumes in the classroom is critical for the success of this approach. As Weimer (2002:14) argues, learner-centred teachers contribute immensely to the learning process. In this regard, their actions revolve around learners and guiding them towards different sources of information. Through these actions, they create space for collaboration and active learning. In other words, such teachers cease to become sole

sources of knowledge in the classroom (Alexander, 2013:205). Learners remain responsible for their learning when teachers assist them to become independent, self-reliant, and self-regulating individuals and groups in the classroom. This is important because this approach to teaching and learning places learners' creation and discovery of knowledge on the forefront. Lastly, the evaluation of learning forms an integral part of the effective implementation of learner-centred teaching. Here, Weimer (2002) argues that evaluation should be used to promote learning and to assess learners' performance as individuals or groups in the classroom.

When implemented effectively in the classroom, learner-centred teaching improves learners' ability to retain and process information (Payaprom & Payaprom, 2020:60). As Shah (2020:46) asserts, learners develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills in a learner-centred classroom. By adopting this approach, the quality of education improves as it allows learners to reflect continuously on their own learning (Mtitu, 2014:17; Du Plessis, 2020:4).

### 2.3 Different learning styles in learner-centred classrooms

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for teachers to find alternative ways of ensuring continuation of effective teaching and learning in the classroom (Syahria, 2020:30). This dynamic situation requires language teachers to change and adapt their pedagogical approaches consistently. These approaches must promote active-learner participation in the classroom (Iswati, 2020:37). In addition, Pasupathy and Sha (2021:630) argue that teachers must select various teaching methods to cater for learners' different learning styles. Gill (2005:1) puts it succinctly that "...differing learning styles in a classroom is inevitable...in the language classroom this is not different." In a similar vein, Al-mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2012:74) posit that learners' different learning styles feature prominently during teaching and learning (Al-mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2012:74) of languages such as English FAL.

According to Pasupathy and Sha (2021:630) learning styles refer to individual learners' preferences for learning. Similarly, Hartley (1998:149) argues that learning styles involve a student's approach to a learning task. Apart from these definitions, research provides factors that influence a student's learning style. These include the immediate environment (externally imposed environmental factors such, light, temperature etc.), emotionality (internally imposed factors such as motivation, persistence), sociological preference (externally imposed factors such as working alone, team, and or group work) and physiological factors (perceptual strength) (Felder and Brent, 2005, James et al., 2011, Lesmes-Anel et al., 2001, Lujan and DiCarlo, 2006, Vorhaus, 2010) (as cited in Alkhasawneh, 2013:1547).

In addition, there are numerous models of learning styles identified in the literature. However, Fleming's (1995) visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic (VAK) models feature predominantly in the learning preference research (Ghanney, Appiah & Esia-Donkoh, 2019:57). The prominence

of VAK is attributed to its ability to improve student learning (Marcy, 2001 as cited in Lambert, 2018). Learners with a visual learning preference learn better by means of what they see, including pictures, graphs and charts (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011:469; Syofyan & Siwi, 2018:642). In a learner-centred classroom, these learners work in pairs with others, present their graphs to their peers and interpret images (Syofyan & Siwi, 2018:642). While learners with an auditory learning style prefer listening activities, learning through activities that require reading or writing is another preferred learning style. For the auditory learners, a learner-centred classroom affords them the opportunity to listen to stories, rhymes and oral presentations from teachers and peers while taking notes. Lastly, bodily demonstrations, physical activities and physical contact (tactile) suit learners who prefer the kinaesthetic learning style (Syofyan & Siwi, 2018:642; Brown, 2020:130). A learner-centred setting creates a space for 'hands-on' activities such as role-play in the English FAL classroom.

Different methods can be used to cater for the various learning styles of learners and support learner-centred teaching. According to Du Plessis (2020:4) and Shah (2020:46), effective learning of English FAL requires collaboration to solve language-related problems. Moreover, collaboration assists with establishing and maintaining rapport between learners and teachers (Boudjelal, 2019:67) in rural English FAL classrooms. Other methods include discussions, group work and cooperative learning (Grami, 2012:1; Li, 2021:2). These methods put emphasis on learning rather than on teaching (Shah, 2020:46). They also enhance learners' thinking, understanding and interpretation which are necessary for the construction of own knowledge (Fresk et al, 2020:15; Tunali, 2020:158). These methods require English FAL teachers to provide support, scaffolding and, in some cases, modelling (Kerfoot & Van Heerden, 2015:26) when facilitating the process of learning in their classrooms. Similarly, rural English FAL learners are expected to participate actively and co-construct knowledge when learning any of the language skills (Iswati, 2020:37).

For successful learner-centred teaching to occur, rural English FAL teachers need to become cognisant of learning preferences of learners in the classroom. Such recognition and identification of how learners process and interact with information is beneficial to both teachers and learners. Knowledge about learning styles facilitate the process of knowledge acquisition in the classroom (Pasupathy & Sha, 2021:630). It assists teachers to plan and deliver their lessons effectively while catering for learners' needs (Bhat, 2014:15). In addition, learning styles influence learner performance and language acquisition (Moenika & Zahed-Babelan, 2010:1170; Silitonga et al, 2020:54).

### 3. Theoretical framework: social constructivism

This study is anchored by Vygostky's *Social Constructivist Theory* (1978). Its development can be traced back to research traditions in disciplines such as education, sociology and cognitive psychology (Savin, 1986:11; Sandu & Unguru, 2017:52). This development resulted

from the need to include the social life aspect in the learning process (Bozkurt, 2017:211). In other words, while acknowledging the involvement of both the critical thinking process and social interaction (Bozkurt, 2017:212) in learning, Vygotsky's social constructivist approach adds the social and linguistic influences to knowledge acquisition (Bozkurt, 2017:212). In this regard, there are three key elements of SCT: cognitive activity, cultural knowledge, and assisted learning. With this in mind, language learning is regarded as a social practice. Interaction and collaboration between learners are critical for language teaching and learning.

More importantly, learners are in charge of knowledge construction while teachers play a facilitative role in the classroom (Alzahrami & Woollard, 2013:4; Ngubane et al., 2020:3). By scaffolding learning activities, teachers create a language classroom conducive to active participation, collaboration and problem-solving. As Alzahrami and Woollard (2013:4) observe, participation allows for deep learning and effective knowledge construction. Given this, rural English FAL teachers are obliged to create space for active learning in their classroom. As set out in the CAPS document, teaching English FAL requires various methods which place learners at the centre of the learning process. These include discussions, cooperative learning and group presentations which are espoused by constructivist teaching and learning.

## 4. Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted to generate data from Bachelor of Education Honours students from one rural university. While pursuing postgraduate studies, these students are also in-service teachers of English FAL in rural schools across South Africa. Owing to their undergraduate course work which prepared them for learner-centred teaching under 'normal' circumstances, it was necessary then to find out how their implementation of this approach was impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

### 4.1 Participants

There were eleven (11) participants in this study. All of them were registered for a postgraduate Language Education module and they were also in-service teachers of English FAL in various rural schools across South Africa. Apart from being students in this module, their suitability for this study stems from the fact that they were directly impacted upon by the COVID-19 safety measures as they were expected to teach learners amid the pandemic in poorly resourced rural schools.

## 4.2 Procedure

As part of their course work, students were given an assignment that took three weeks to complete. In this assignment, each student was instructed to continue implementing learner-centred teaching in their English FAL classrooms. In this regard, the emphasis was made that while doing this they should not break any of the COVID-19 Safety measures. Furthermore, they were instructed to keep notes and make reflections after each lesson. These reflections were mainly about the challenges that they were encountering while using various strategies of learner-centred teaching in their English FAL classrooms. In addition, worth noting were the strategies they used to circumvent the challenges posed by adherence to the COVID-19 safety measures.

## 4.3 Data collection and analysis

The study employed document analysis and online interviews to generate data from the eleven participants. At the end of three weeks, the participants submitted their written reflections via Blackboard. In all cases, the reflections were more than five pages long. This gave students an opportunity to elaborate on their answers and to provide a variety of responses (Tsoetsi et al., 2020:159). Document analysis is effective against what Bowen (2009:31) describes as “investigators’ influence on research.” In addition, this method becomes suitable in situations where data collection is not feasible (Bowen, 2009:31). On the other hand, Hodder (2000) warns about the risk of misinterpreting the contents and purpose of the documents under analysis. An online-interview was carried out to verify and validate the contents of the documents analysed in this study. The participants reflected (documents) on the first research question while online interviews also provided responses to the second research question.

For analysis, the documents were retrieved from Blackboard, read and analysed thematically to “...elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) relevant to the aim of this study. Similarly, data from the online interviews was transcribed and analysed thematically.

## 4.4 Ethical considerations

Students were informed that their assignment would form part of a research study. In the actual assignment document, they were given an option to attach their signatures as a consent for their assignments to be used for research purposes. It was mentioned, however, that participation was voluntary. It was also emphasised that participation or non-participation in this study would not affect students’ final grades in anyway.

## 5. Results and discussion

### 5.1 Negative impact

The findings reveal that COVID-19 safety measures impact negatively on the implementation of learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms. A thorough analysis revealed four main themes from the participants' documents:

- a) ineffective monitoring and scaffolding;
- b) difficulty engaging in concrete and cooperative learning;
- c) limited opportunities for creativity; and
- d) distorted communication.

#### **a) Ineffective monitoring and scaffolding**

Another concept similar to modeling is scaffolding. In fact, "...scaffolding is support in the form of modeling" (Buenger, 2013:19). Scaffolding involves providing a learner the necessary support in order for the learner to attain a particular skill (Buenger, 2013:18; Salem, 2016:98). In this case, Pishghadam and Ghardiri (2011:50) argue that learners should be given tasks whose level of skill and knowledge demand exceeds what the learners are able to do. This is referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Pishghadam & Ghardiri, 2011:51).

While fully aware of the critical role of supporting learners through the learning process, the English FAL teachers in many rural classrooms have not been able to do this. This is evident in the statements below:

**TEACHER 1:** *As a language teacher, I am used to using scaffolding as one of my teaching strategies.*

**TEACHER 4:** *Prior to COVID—19 I used to visit individual students and groups, spend some time with them to make sure they were on the right track and understand what was expected of them...I no longer have conversations with small groups, circling groups in the classroom to hear or listen to they were discussing.*

Teachers have the responsibility to provide support to their learners in the classroom. This support is provided with the ultimate aim of helping learners to attain independence and be able to construct their own knowledge. To facilitate this process, learners are expected to complete a series of tasks and milestones while the educator plays a facilitative role in the English FAL classroom. For effective learning, it is also important for English FAL educators to monitor learners' progress both in learning and completion of the assigned tasks. For example, when teaching learners essay writing, English FAL teachers are expected to scaffold

learners throughout the different phases of writing: pre, during and post writing. However, the COVID-19 safety measures seem to have impacted negatively on monitoring and scaffolding in the classroom. While learner-centred teaching views language learning as an interactive exercise, the need to adhere to these safety protocols threatens this critical aspect. As shown in the preceding statements, there is a sense of fear in the classroom. Consequently, learners are left on their own as educators are unable to provide the necessary one-on-one assistance (scaffolding) due to fear of contacting or spreading the virus by breaking the COVID-19 safety measures.

Effective monitoring of learning in the English FAL classroom is also affected negatively. The following statements provide evidence:

**TEACHER 6:** *I would walk around the class to help learners reading out loudly with pronunciations and fluency and correct those who are wrong, but now I can't.*

**TEACHER 8:** *When I assign writing work to learners, I keep a distance from them while they are writing...makes it difficult for me to correct their errors such as spelling and language...I cannot keep on walking among them and see whether they are on right track or not...*

**TEACHER 11:** *When learners read as a class...it becomes challenging to identify those who do not read...I cannot get closer to them to be sure everyone reads since I have to keep distance...*

**TEACHER 5:** *As the teacher I also have to go to at least each learner and check if they are able to write the activity. The COVID-19 has limited that.*

From the above extracts, it is quite clear that these English FAL teachers know the importance of monitoring learners' progress in a learner-centred teaching situation. In other words, their role is not only limited to assigning tasks to learners, but also to provide learners with continuous and effective feedback about their learning. They further recognise that learning a language such as English FAL is a trial and error process which requires immediate and effective monitoring. As shown in the comments, however, the need to adhere to social distancing has proven problematic in rural English FAL classrooms. In this regard, English FAL teachers only assume that their learners are learning. Making such assumptions is dangerous especially in a country such as South Africa which is characterised by poor reading proficiency among its learners.

### ***b) Difficulty engaging in concrete and cooperative learning***

Learner-centred teaching places learners at the core of the learning process. In other words, language learning is regarded as a social practice. Consequently, interaction is paramount to English FAL teachers. There are different approaches to language teaching that the CAPS document espouses. Provision of cooperative learning activities is central to all these

approaches. The findings reveal that English FAL teachers were using these activities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent safety measures. These statements capture their responses:

**TEACHER 1:** *Students often formed groups or worked together in pairs and discussed ideas on a given topic... Collaborative reading...enhances their understanding of the subject.*

**TEACHER 8:** *Before COVID-19 I used group discussions, role playing, buzz sessions and brainstorming as my strategies when it comes to teaching*

Furthermore, English FAL teachers were aware of the benefits of incorporating these activities in their teaching. For instance, others argue that:

**TEACHER 10:** *And discussion becomes easy when learners work in groups as some learners cannot work independently*

**TEACHER 6:** *Sometimes learners work or learn better in small groups and engaging amongst themselves or rather hearing from someone different from their teacher.*

Similarly, these teachers pointed to the challenges brought by the COVID-19 safety measures in their rural English FAL classrooms:

**TEACHER 2:** *At this time of the epidemic students cannot use this strategy because we need to comply with safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, one of which is to keep public distance. This is an obstacle to the learning ...especially those who are shy or afraid to ask questions in front of the whole class or share their ideas during discussions. ...Now they have to get used to working on their own or with the whole class.*

**TEACHER 9:** *I could no longer have them do group work or do anything that will increase their creative and communicative skills.*

**TEACHER 10:** *Due to social distancing regulation, I cannot assign work to learners and let them work in pairs so they can help one another.*

**TEACHER 11:** *Learners cannot no longer be grouped and that makes discussions to be very difficult in the classroom.*

Apart from cooperative learning activities, learner-centred teaching recognises that learners have different learning styles. In other words, rural English FAL classrooms must accommodate learners' different learning styles. However, this has not been the case in rural classrooms due to COVID-19 pandemic and the need to adhere to the safety protocols. Below are responses from rural English FAL teachers:

**TEACHER 2:** *In my English class there are different posters of alphabets, English words, punctuation and simple sentences to use while teaching in the classroom. However, due to*

*COVID-19 ...I was no longer able to demonstrate to learners with the teaching resources I use in class in order to accommodate learners with different learning style in order to accommodate learners with different learning styles.*

**TEACHER 4:** *It is almost impossible to accommodate all learners. Even if I try to meet their needs, the time is very limited. There will not be enough time for all the students to write and present [in] class and that will make it difficult for me as a teacher to see if students really understand what is expected of them.*

The preceding statements demonstrate a retrogressive shift from a learner-centred and collaborative teaching approaches that cater for different learning styles of learners. The trimmed curricular, inadequate time for teaching as well as the need to adhere to the COVID-19 safety measures have propelled this change. While the teachers acknowledge the benefits of cooperative learning, the safety measures such as social distancing inhibit this critical aspect of learning a language.

### **c) Limited opportunities for creativity**

In addition to accommodating learners' learning styles, learner-centred teaching requires English FAL teachers to create opportunities for creativity in their classrooms. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these teachers were creating a learning environment in which creativity would flourish. As attested in the statements below, this has since been hindered by the COVID-19 safety measures:

**TEACHER 3:** *I used to do regular spelling tests and different fun games and activities that encouraged learners to write, games such as "write the word" game... we has a corner and letter writing where [we] wrote letters to our friends or family members to improve punctuation, spelling and other writing skills...but with COVID-19 none of that could be done...*

From the above excerpt, it is clear that these rural English FAL teachers acknowledge the role and benefits of creativity in learning an additional language. Under the COVID-19 conditions, language teaching seems to have been reduced to a rigid process where the teacher becomes the sole authority who imparts knowledge to learners. As a result of these unfavourable conditions for creativity, learners may have adopted a passive role in the rural English FAL classrooms.

### **d) Distorted communication**

Added to the language skills discussed above, CAPS places emphasis on the teaching of listening and speaking skills in English FAL classrooms. Language is meant to be spoken and listened to. As per the prescripts of CAPS, English FAL learners are expected to listen for

information. With the skill of speaking, clear articulation and pronunciation of words is important when learning or teaching an additional language. This makes the need for communicating in the English FAL significant. The wearing of face masks by both English FAL teachers and learners has negatively impacted the teaching of these two skills. In most cases, as shown below, the flow of communication is distorted. In some instances, teachers and learners struggled hearing each other. As a result, it became difficult for learners to adhere to instructions or for teachers to provide feedback to learners promptly. In other cases, face masks impeded clear articulation of words and expression of ideas in the rural English FAL classrooms. The statements below reflect these views:

**TEACHER 6:** *However, now it is hard for the teachers to sound out words and letters with the masks on. It is difficult and learners often cannot hear what the teacher is saying.*

**TEACHER 4:** *Wearing of masks all the time seems to be the problem in most of my classes. The speech is hindered by the masks, spoken words are not heard clearly during the conversation.*

**TEACHER 9:** *Learners wear masks in a classroom...when they read aloud in the classroom, the pronunciation of words becomes unclear...thus it becomes difficult for me to help where there are mispronounced words.*

**TEACHER 8:** *Wearing masks all day as the teacher is a challenge because learners sometimes can hardly hear you. When you reading for them and you are wearing a mask sometimes the way you pronounce words they cannot hear properly and they cannot see the mouths movement because we always have to wear masks.*

Apart from struggling with issues relating to hearing, the wearing of face masks makes comprehension of speech more difficult. For effective learning to occur, non-verbal cues (facial expression) are important. Given the mispronunciation of words muffled by face-masks, invisible facial expressions exacerbate this situation. This is particularly important for learners who prefer learning through listening and ‘reading’ body language to understand information in the classroom.

## 5.2 Remedial strategies

When analysed, data from the online interviews revealed the following strategies to lessen the impact of the COVID-19 safety measures on learner-centred teaching:

- a) strengthening the school- home connection;
- b) creating a supportive classroom environment;
- c) incorporating fun in collaborative learning activities; and
- d) providing activities that encourage independent learning.

### **a) Strengthening the school-home connection**

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the shifting of roles between school and home. In this case, homes have become spaces of learning necessary for instruction to continue beyond the classroom. This synergy requires learners to take responsibility for their learning. Similarly, teachers have capitalised on this collaboration to lessen the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner-centred teaching. The following statements attest:

**TEACHER 1:** *Currently, I try to collaborate with families by talking to parents about different activities that learners need to do and how they must try helping them at home.*

**TEACHER 5:** *I start the lessons in the classroom and when I fail to finish, I give it to learners to finish reading, or do introductory and preparations at home. Then, when they come to classroom, we re—do the reading and touch ups where learners didn't understand when they were studying at home.*

**TEACHER 9:** *For activities that require learners to read, the teacher asked learners to bring their readings from the newspapers or magazines as there is a lack of reading materials...*

As evident in the above extracts, learner-centred teaching may be extended beyond the classroom. This is particularly important in the context where COVID-19 safety measures fall short in ensuring a successful implementation of this strategy. The parents play the facilitative role and support learners to learn independently.

### **b) Creating a supportive classroom environment**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic extends beyond the physical well-being of role players at schools. In other words, the pandemic presents challenges which affect the psychological and emotional well-being of rural English FAL teachers and students. As a result, creating a classroom environment conducive for learner-centred teaching is critical. The following statements are noteworthy:

**TEACHER 2:** *By creating an appropriate psychological and emotional environment in the classroom and a spirit of psychological support.*

**TEACHER 5:** *Even I as a teacher, I experience this challenge of ending up repeating words so that learners would hear me out even though I have mask covering my mouth. I repeat the information and help them orally to complete the task.*

From the extract, the argument is that despite adhering to the COVID-19 safety measures, psychological and emotional support remains critical for a successful implementation of learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms. In addition to creating a conducive

environment for learning, exercising patience by the teachers palliates fears and encourages active learner participation.

### **c) Incorporating fun in collaborative learning activities**

As argued elsewhere in this paper, learners bring different learning styles into the classroom. As a result, teachers are obliged to use various strategies to accommodate these learners. This is particularly important in the context of severely constrained physical contact and close interaction between teachers and learners in the classroom due to the COVID-19 safety measures. The following statements indicate how the participants responded to this challenge:

**TEACHER 2:** *Giving learners practical examples and allow them to come up with their examples makes the lesson fun and majority of learners part-take.*

**TEACHER 8:** *So instead of grouping them, I allow them to read in rows or in the plays I characterise them by their rows. The whole row will be one character and read the lines of that particular character.*

**TEACHER 6:** *Since stories have pictures that illustrate the content of the story, it becomes much easier for learners to understand what the story is about.*

**TEACHER 7:** *One of the activities that children still able to do is ‘who’s telling the truth?’ which children write three facts about themselves that nobody in the class knows on a piece of paper. These facts are attached with their names on top, then as a teacher I read the fact aloud to the classroom. Learners claim their facts and in the process, the class question them to determine who is telling the truth. After a round of questions, learners start guessing who was telling the truth.*

**TEACHER 10:** *I had to research on rhymes and poems that will keep them in their places and not move around.*

According to the above extracts, it is possible for rural English FAL teachers to implement learner-centred teaching while adhering to the COVID-19 safety measures. The key lies in the teachers’ ability to create a safe space for collaborative learning and activities. The use of pictures, role play, providing examples and allowing learners to ask each other questions are some of the techniques rural English FAL teachers employed to cater for learners’ different learning styles.

### **d) Providing activities that encourage independent learning**

The advent of the COVID-19 safety measures require both teachers and learners to maintain social distancing in the classroom. However, independent learning remains central to learner-centred teaching. As a result, it is important for teachers to use various activities to support

learners and ensure that they can learn independently. The following statements are worth noting:

**TEACHER 3:** *I use this approach in which learners answer five or more questions based on the text they read in the short narrative, which are then corrected in class to determine the right answer.*

**TEACHER 5:** *...by asking learners to fill-in the written sentences and text learners develop the writing skills. I present problems to learners that need them to fix without my aid.*

**TEACHER 11:** *I also allow my learners to read aloud using small books. They would read from the same page, one learner would be standing in front of the class reading aloud.*

**TEACHER 7:** *To make it a point they also feel they are in control, they suggest rules, they write on the checkboard and they take part in the remedial work.*

Despite this, the responsibility for learning should not be taken from the learner. In this regard, it is important to give learners activities that require them to work independently. As mentioned in the above extracts, in order for learner-centred learning to occur, the activities that are given to learners remain key. The teachers' role must always remain facilitative, rather than authoritative in the classroom.

## 6. Conclusion

Although the COVID-19 safety measures aim to preserve the lives of teachers and learners in schools, the implementation of learner-centred teaching through the use of the language teaching approaches discussed above becomes almost impossible. Despite appreciating the benefits of learner-centred teaching, the participants in this study resorted to the traditional teacher-centred approaches in their classrooms during the COVID 19 pandemic. This paper cautions against the increasing chances of rural English FAL teachers to abandon learner-centred teaching in favour of the traditional teacher-centred teaching. Undoubtedly, this shall reverse the gains that have been made from using learner-centred teaching in rural English FAL classrooms. Arguably, this may worsen the already volatile education system that is characterised by poor learner performance and low literacy levels and competencies.

## 7. Limitations of the study

This study has the following limitations. Only eleven English FAL language teachers participated in it. As a result, this low number of participants means that the findings of this study cannot be generalised to all teachers in rural contexts. For trustworthiness, the participants were also subjected to an online interview to corroborate the written reflections and verify the findings.

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