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Editorial note:

Faculty of Humanities Teaching and Learning Colloquium 2025 (T&L Colloquium 25) hosted by the Faculty of Humanities, North-West University, South Africa took place in Rustenburg, South Africa, from September 9-11, 2025, with a rich and stimulating programme filled with inspiring keynotes, contributed papers, workshops and panels. This bi-annual colloquium brings together educators, researchers, students, policymakers, and community practitioners. The main theme of T&L Colloquium 25 was “Reimagining the Future of Humanities Knowledge and Pedagogy: Decoloniality, Technology and the Social Justice Imperative.” This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Society And Education (JCSE)* contains Thirteen (13) selected papers presented at T&L Colloquium 2025. Selected contributions come from within and outside of South Africa and address a wide range of issues in humanities, decoloniality, technology and the social justice.

The introductory contribution by Tshifhiwa Ignatia Mashau provides an overview of research findings and trends related to the colloquium’s focus on the role of digital humanities and technology in supporting decolonial scholarship. The author’s article which titled “Decolonising digital health promotion in African higher education institutions: A justice-oriented literature review” develops a Digital Health Justice Framework to guide equitable and culturally responsive digital health promotion in African HEIs. A research article by Eyitayo Francis Adanlawo and Mpho Chaka follows with a discussion of emerging career pathways that foreground wellbeing and sustainable development, positioning humanities graduates as key contributors to sustainable and ethical futures. The authors identify novel professional opportunities in sectors including community engagement, policy development, and social innovation. They advocate for an expanded employability paradigm that integrates humanistic knowledge with sustainable development goals, underscoring the vital role of humanities disciplines in shaping resilient, inclusive societies.

The article by Nurain Aboo Mohammed evaluating the use of QR codes as a form of assessment in teaching and learning. The author confirms the potential of QR codes as both a useful and effective medium for assessment in educational settings. Samuel Chukwudi Agunyai and Victor Ojakorotu article “Analyzing the effect of the disconnection between the curriculum and Africa’s indigenous Knowledge on effective learning” argues that Africans’ realities still encompass indigenous knowledge on various levels that can be incorporated into the continent’s school curricula.

Other articles include: Examining the Impact of Digitalization and Inequality Post Covid -19 In Africa by Phuti Ignatius Moloto and Rosinah Pillay; The Omitted Conversation: Incorporating Teacher Union Scholarship for A Transformative Educational Agenda Within the Educational Landscape. Thembinkosi Zwane Trevor, David Matsepe, Examining factors behind an achieving institution: A scenario of secondary schools in Limpopo Province by Ngwako Solomon Modiba; Assessing the role of the COVID-19 catch-up recovery programme on learner performance in EFAL by Vele RJ, Tshikota and TM Badugela; Entrepreneurial Education and Sustainable Entrepreneurship Advancing Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa Through

Small Businesses by Lazarus, M. and Beharry-Ramraj, A; Mitigating Grammatical Ambiguity In English Prepositional Phrases At Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa by Farisani Thomas Nephawe; Exploring the Usage of Metadiscourse in Research Proposals Written by Honours Students by Mzamani Steven Khosa and Ernest Kwesi Klu; and Population Ethics and its implication for Developing Countries by Onwe Peter S. and Kelechi Johnmary Ani. Policy Windows and Missed Opportunities: An Institutional Analysis of How Teacher Unions Influence (or fail to influence) National Educational Policy Formulation by Zwane Thembinkosi Trevor, Matsepe David.

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ASSESSING THE ROLE OF THE COVID-19 CATCH-UP RECOVERY PROGRAMME ON LEARNER PERFORMANCE IN EFAL

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of the COVID-19 Curriculum Recovery Plan (CRP) on the academic performance of English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The CRP was introduced to mitigate the severe learning disruptions caused by school closures during the pandemic. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological design informed by social constructivism, the study explored the lived experiences of educators and learners across four secondary schools in the Nzhelele Central Circuit. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with three categories of participants, providing first-hand insights into the implementation process of the CRP. Findings reveal that while the CRP generated some positive outcomes, such as enhanced learner engagement, targeted curricular adjustments, professional development for teachers, and improved Grade 12 achievement, it was undermined by systemic challenges. Chief among these were limited digital access, inadequate teacher capacity for online pedagogy, and fragile institutional support mechanisms. These barriers disproportionately disadvantaged rural schools, intensifying pre-existing educational inequalities. Despite these constraints, the CRP demonstrated that strategic curricular adaptations combined with professional capacity-building can help learners recover lost academic ground in under-resourced contexts. The study underscores the need for education systems to design responsive programmes safeguarding equity during crises. It recommends urgent investment in digital infrastructure for rural schools, sustained professional development for educators, and curriculum adjustments sensitive to linguistic diversity in EFAL classrooms. Building inclusive institutional frameworks that integrate resilience planning is essential for mitigating learning loss during future emergencies and ensuring that all learners enjoy equitable opportunities to succeed.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Curriculum Recovery Plan, EFAL, Academic Outcomes, Educational Interventions, Learner Performance*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented global education crisis, disrupting learning for over 1.6 billion students at its peak (Gross et al., 2022). School closures and the abrupt shift to remote learning hit the hardest vulnerable learners, amplifying pre-existing inequalities. In low-resource settings, online learning models exposed long-standing disparities in access to technology, electricity, and digital skills (Angrist et al., 2021). Children from low-income households, rural areas, and marginalised groups were significantly less likely to participate in remote lessons due to a lack of devices and connectivity. These inequities meant that while some students managed to continue their education virtually, many others were left behind, deepening the **learning divide** created by the pandemic.

South Africa's highly unequal schooling system exemplified these challenges (Lynch, 2023). Urban and affluent schools pivoted more smoothly to online platforms, but rural and under-resourced schools struggled to maintain learning continuity. For example, in provinces like Limpopo, only about **1.7% of rural households** have reliable internet access. Such a digital divide made it nearly impossible for many rural English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners to engage in online classes or digital resources (Minea-Pic, 2023). The loss of face-to-face teaching, infrastructure gaps and limited teacher preparedness for online pedagogy put rural EFAL students at grave risk of falling behind their urban counterparts. This context underscored the need for targeted interventions to prevent irreversible learning loss in disadvantaged communities.

In response, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) implemented a

COVID-19 **Curriculum Recovery Plan (CRP)** as a nationwide "catch-up" programme. The CRP aimed to restore learning continuity and mitigate learning losses through several key strategies (Adanlawo & Chaka, 2022; Dery et al., 2025). **Curriculum trimming** was introduced to condense the syllabus by prioritising core knowledge and skills while omitting less critical content. EFAL meant an intensive focus on foundational skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening over enrichment topics (Tranjan et al., 2022). Additionally, **pedagogical adaptations** were encouraged: teachers shifted from high-stakes exams to continuous assessment and flexible, supportive tasks that could be done at home. The plan also promoted **digital integration**, leveraging online platforms, radio lessons, and mobile messaging to reach learners through any available means. Finally, the CRP provided professional development for teachers, with workshops on digital literacy and remote teaching to equip educators for new challenges (Wills & van der Berg, 2024). These measures reflected an urgent attempt to balance feasibility with equity – simplifying curriculum demands, innovating teaching methods, and mobilising technology – so that even in constrained settings, some learning could continue.

While the CRP's design was comprehensive, its **implementation on the ground was uneven** (Chanduvi et al., 2022). Schools with better resources implemented the recovery strategies more fully, often showing creativity in scheduling make-up classes or using online tools. In contrast, many rural schools in Limpopo and other provinces could only partially roll out the CRP due to infrastructural deficits and weak support systems. For instance, some learners had to

rely on radio broadcasts or WhatsApp text assignments as their primary learning mode, which are far less interactive than live teaching. High data costs, unstable connectivity, and a lack of devices meant that digital platforms, where available, reached only a fraction of students (Masuku, 2023; van Vugt, 2021). Moreover, reduced curriculum content while easing immediate pressures sometimes did not align well with learners' actual gaps, leaving students underprepared in subsequent grades (Xaba et al., 2025; Mokoena, 2024). The **uneven rollout** of continuous assessments and tutoring programs further compounded disparities: without consistent access to teachers or mentors, many EFAL learners received minimal feedback or practice. The CRP's impact largely depended on context. It provided a lifeline in some schools, but in places like Vhembe District, its promise was curtailed by persistent inequality in **infrastructure and support**.

EFAL as a subject occupies a central role in South African education, making the effectiveness of recovery efforts in this domain especially critical. English is the medium of instruction for most subjects in later grades, and proficiency in EFAL often determines learners' overall academic success and future opportunities (Lynch, 2023). Yet even before the pandemic, rural EFAL students faced formidable challenges: limited exposure to English outside school, a lack of reading materials at home, and sometimes teachers with varying levels of language proficiency (van Vugt, 2021). School closures magnified these vulnerabilities. Many EFAL learners missed daily language practice, corrective feedback, and the rich interaction needed to build fluency. Remote learning alternatives were

ill-suited to language acquisition – for example, listening and speaking skills require real-time interaction, which few rural learners could access during lockdowns (Shezi et al., 2025; Keane et al., 2023). Therefore, the CRP's focus on core EFAL skills was not just a remedial curricular tweak but a **necessary intervention to protect learners' language development**. However, concerns lingered that by trimming "non-essential" activities (such as debates, presentations, or creative projects), learners might lose out on broader language enrichment that fosters critical thinking and confidence in using English. This tension raised questions about whether the catch-up program truly enhanced EFAL competence or provided a stopgap solution.

In evaluating the CRP's effectiveness for EFAL, this study adopts a **social constructivist** perspective grounded in Vygotsky (1978) learning theory. Social constructivism posits that learning is fundamentally a mediated, collaborative process in which students learn through interaction with teachers, peers, and cultural tools (language, textbooks, technology). The pandemic disruption can be viewed through this lens as a breakdown of the typical social scaffolding that EFAL learners rely on. Without regular classroom dialogue, group work, and teacher guidance, learners were left to navigate English largely on their own, outside their *Zone of Proximal Development* (the range of tasks they can achieve with guidance). The CRP tried to recreate some of this scaffolding through alternative means (e.g. radio lessons acting as a *mediating tool* for instruction, or teachers giving feedback via phone). Yet, the **quality of mediation** suffered: a one-way radio broadcast cannot replicate a

teacher's real-time explanation or a classmate's prompting question. Similarly, continuous assessment was meant to guide learning at the right level, but in practice, many rural teachers lacked the training and time to tailor support to each student's needs. From a Vygotskian view, the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** for many EFAL learners in Vhembe may have shifted backwards during the pandemic without adequate scaffolding, and their independent level stagnated or dropped. Effective recovery would require catching up on content and rebuilding those interactive supports so learners can progress within their ZPD. The **cultural learning tools (digital platforms, books, even the English language as a medium)** also play a role. The CRP's digital integration provided new tools, but unequal access meant these tools often didn't reach the learners who needed them most, as evidenced by low connectivity in rural areas. Thus, the social constructivist lens highlights that the **success of any catch-up program hinges on social context**: supportive interactions and equitable access to learning tools. This theoretical framing helps interpret how and why the CRP's impact on EFAL performance might differ vastly between a well-resourced urban classroom and an under-resourced rural one.

Early indications suggest that the outcomes of the Curriculum Recovery Plan were mixed. Some schools reported that targeted interventions (like extra tutoring sessions or focused revision of core content) helped improve EFAL test scores and rebuild student confidence. In such cases, trimming the curriculum and concentrating on the basics prevented overwhelming both teachers and learners, allowing them to solidify foundational skills necessary for progression. Indeed,

recent assessments have documented **learning rebounds** in certain regions once regular schooling resumed, especially where recovery efforts were robust (large-scale) assessments in education.springeropen.com. However, in many rural schools, the hoped-for turnaround did not fully materialise. The **learning losses** in language persisted, as seen in broader studies that found significant declines in reading and language outcomes for South African learners' post-pandemic, as well as large-scale assessments in education. This divergence points to the CRP's limitation as a one-size-fits-all policy. No matter how well-intentioned, a short-term emergency plan struggled to remedy deep-rooted issues like resource inequality, large class sizes, and learners' socio-economic hardships.

Furthermore, by focusing on short-term curriculum coverage, the CRP arguably treated the symptoms of the crisis more than its causes. It offered a **stopgap solution** necessary for the moment, but not wholly sufficient to ensure long-term educational resilience in places like Vhembe. For EFAL learners, genuine recovery would require sustained support: ongoing reading programs, oral language practice, remedial instruction for those who fell behind, and continued teacher development. These were largely beyond the immediate scope of the CRP.

The COVID-19 catch-up program in South Africa played a crucial role in averting complete educational collapse, but its role in **improving EFAL learner performance** remains subject to context and implementation. This introduction has outlined how COVID-19 exacerbated educational inequalities and why EFAL was particularly vulnerable as a

cornerstone subject. It also described the CRP's key strategies and theoretical underpinnings, highlighting their promise and pitfalls. The present study will build on this foundation by empirically assessing EFAL performance outcomes in the Vhembe District, a rural context where the challenges of pandemic recovery are acute. Using a social constructivist lens, the study will examine not just **what** the recovery program achieved, but **how** and **why** its impact was moderated by social interaction, resource availability, and local capacity. This focus on a specific subject (EFAL) and context (under-resourced rural schools) addresses a notable gap in the literature. While much has been written globally about COVID-19's impact on education, there is limited research delving into subject-specific recovery in disadvantaged settings. Understanding the CRP's effect on EFAL in Vhembe will yield insights into the effectiveness of catch-up strategies and inform more equitable approaches to educational recovery for the future. Ultimately, ensuring that **no learner is left behind**, especially in critical subjects like EFAL, is essential for safeguarding students' academic trajectories and life chances in the wake of a crisis.

Research Problem

Despite the global and national efforts to sustain education during the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning were severely disrupted, particularly in South Africa's under-resourced schools. Learners in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province faced profound challenges in transitioning to online learning, as limited access to digital devices, unstable connectivity, and low teacher preparedness compounded existing educational inequalities. These disruptions were especially detrimental to English

First Additional Language (EFAL) learners, whose acquisition of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills depends on consistent teacher support, peer interaction, and access to cultural tools. The Department of Basic Education introduced the Curriculum Recovery Plan (CRP) to mitigate learning losses, yet its effectiveness in rural contexts remains contested. This study, therefore, investigates the impact of the CRP on EFAL learner performance in the Vhembe District, examining how far it addressed learning gaps, the challenges encountered, and what lessons can be drawn for future interventions.

Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design rooted in the phenomenological tradition, enabling an exploration of the lived experiences of learners, educators, and departmental heads concerning the COVID-19 Curriculum Recovery Plan (CRP). A qualitative approach is particularly practical in educational research where context, perceptions, and subjective realities are central to understanding (Takona, 2024). One of qualitative research's advantages is its capacity to offer a comprehensive, contextualised, and rich understanding of complicated problems using a flexible and adaptive methodology. By revealing beliefs, views, and feelings, it enables the investigation of the "human side" of an issue and frequently results in the development of novel theories and hypotheses. The experiences and opinions of the major educational stakeholders on the implementation of the COVID-19 Curriculum Recovery Plan (CRP) and its impact on the academic performance of English First Additional Language (EFAL) students are reflected in this qualitative study. Drawing from multiple methods, including document analysis,

observations, and empirical studies, the research builds a layered and triangulated account of how the CRP shaped English First Additional Language (EFAL) learning in the Vhembe District.

Data collection

The data was gathered by using a more detailed document in the form of policy documents, curriculum recovery frameworks, departmental circulars and school level implementation reports. These papers were reviewed in order to see the way in which the Curriculum Recovery Programme was created and realised to address the learning losses due to disruptions during COVID-19. The study was done with the aim of discovering guidelines of trimming curriculum, suggested pedagogical changes, and suggested professional growth programs to teachers.

Observations

Observations were conducted within classrooms and school contexts to capture the practical enactment of the CRP. Unlike interviews or documents, observations allow researchers to record behaviour and interaction in natural settings, reducing reliance on self-reporting (Carter et al., 2023). For this study, the researcher observed EFAL lessons to examine how educators implemented curriculum trimming, adapted teaching methods, and engaged learners in recovery activities. Classroom interactions were beneficial for assessing the extent of mediated learning, whether teachers scaffolded tasks, encouraged peer collaboration, and integrated cultural tools such as textbooks or digital resources. Observations also highlighted environmental and infrastructural conditions, such as class size, availability of devices, or reliance on radio-based lessons, which shaped the

learning context. By situating the CRP's strategies within observable practice, this method strengthened the credibility of findings and provided evidence of how recovery measures functioned in resource-constrained schools.

Empirical Studies

The empirical component of the study drew directly on participants' experiences through semi-structured interviews with educators and departmental heads, as well as focus group discussions with learners. This empirical approach captured subjective perspectives on how the CRP influenced EFAL performance, both positively and negatively. Interviews with educators and departmental heads provided nuanced accounts of implementation challenges, ranging from insufficient professional development to infrastructural constraints. Focus group discussions with learners, on the other hand, offered a collective consciousness of how recovery strategies were experienced in practice. Learners articulated their barriers, such as limited access to digital platforms, reduced exposure to oral language practice, and reliance on self-directed study. These empirical accounts foregrounded the voices of those directly affected by the CRP, making the disparities between policy design and classroom realities visible.

Document Analysis

Document analysis provided a critical foundation for understanding the formal structures and intended aims of the CRP. Policy documents, curriculum recovery frameworks, departmental circulars, and school-level implementation reports were examined to establish how the programme was designed to mitigate learning losses. Such documents offered insights into curriculum trimming guidelines,

recommended pedagogical adaptations, and proposed professional development initiatives for teachers. Document analysis is particularly valuable in interpretivist research because it situates lived experiences against official discourses, highlighting potential disjunctures between policy intent and classroom realities (Mbanaso et al., 2023). In this study, departmental guidelines and school records were analysed to create a baseline for interpreting participants' narratives and experiences, allowing the researcher to assess whether stated objectives translated into practice in rural EFAL classrooms.

Integration of Methods

The research achieved methodological triangulation by combining document analysis, observations, and empirical studies, enhancing both validity and reliability. Document analysis clarified what the CRP intended to achieve; observations demonstrated how it was operationalised in practice; and empirical studies revealed how learners and educators subjectively experienced it. Together, these methods created a comprehensive picture of the CRP's impact on EFAL education in the Vhembe District, balancing official narratives with lived realities.

Literature Review

This review synthesises theoretical and empirical scholarship on the educational effects of COVID-19 with a focus on English First Additional Language (EFAL) in South Africa, and the Curriculum Recovery Plan (CRP) as a catch-up strategy. Vygotskian social constructivism provides the guiding lens, foregrounding how interaction, scaffolding, and access to cultural tools shape learning, especially during disruptions. The literature converges on three imperatives for

recovery in under-resourced systems such as the Vhembe District: targeted curricular restructuring, equitable access to technology, and sustained professional development for teachers.

Theoretical literature: a social constructivist lens on recovery

Vygotsky's social constructivism situates learning as a socially mediated process in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction with more knowledgeable others and cultural tools, including language and digital media (Bodrova & Leong, 2024; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this frame, the pandemic's interruption of classroom interaction is not merely a logistical problem but a breakdown of core learning mechanisms, dialogue, feedback, modelling, and joint attention. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) clarifies why recovery requires adaptive supports that meet learners where they are and then extend their competence via scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). In EFAL, alignment of task difficulty, frequent formative feedback, and guided oral practice are central ZPD-aligned moves; the CRP's emphasis on online tutoring, teacher guidance, and collaborative tools reflects these principles (Dorn et al., 2021; Jacobs, 2021).

In Vygotsky's account, language is both the object and medium of learning organising thought and mediating access to content (Angrist et al., 2021). This dual role is heightened in EFAL, where learners must simultaneously acquire linguistic forms and use English to learn across the curriculum. Hence, recovery efforts that foreground rich, interactive language use (e.g., guided discussion, structured oral tasks) are theoretically congruent with social constructivism. The CRP's use of interactive lessons and collaborative

activities sought to recreate these conditions in constrained settings (Kigozi, 2021), while flexible remote modalities (asynchronous modules, digital classrooms) attempted to restore mediated access to curriculum when face-to-face teaching was impossible (Gabaldon, 2023; Minea-Pic, 2023).

Crucially, mediated learning depends on the availability of tools—textbooks, devices, platforms—and on the human mediation of teachers and peers (Bodrova & Leong, 2024; Yang et al., 2025). Where digital divides persist, the very means of mediation are unequally distributed, limiting ZPD-aligned instruction. Evidence that additional tutoring and discussion-based scaffolding improved EFAL outcomes for some learners underscores the centrality of guided participation (Mncwango & Adanlawo, 2025; Minea-Pic, 2023). The social constructivist tradition provides a coherent rationale for the CRP's core strategies and a diagnostic lens for understanding uneven impact in resource-constrained contexts.

Empirical literature: mixed outcomes and persistent inequalities

Empirical studies document the pandemic's exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities and the uneven success of recovery initiatives. Disadvantaged learners experienced the sharpest disruptions at the system level due to limited connectivity, devices, and home support (Machimana & Genis, 2024; Wills & van der Berg, 2024). Teachers frequently struggled to redesign EFAL lessons for remote/hybrid modes without adequate training in digital pedagogy (Lynch (2023), prompting calls for targeted professional development to sustain learner engagement and assessment quality (Keane et al., 2023; Mokoena, 2024).

Learner-level evidence shows that self-directed learning was particularly fragile in rural EFAL contexts: reduced teacher contact and scarce feedback led to disengagement and weaker performance (Nohayi & Caga, 2021; Tranjan et al., 2022). Personalised supports one-to-one tutoring, peer study groups, and structured formative assessment, which are associated with improved attendance and EFAL outcomes, but their reach was often constrained by infrastructure gaps (Angrist et al., 2021; Keane et al., 2023; Mokoena, 2024).

Implementation studies of the CRP consistently report heterogeneity across schools. Urban schools were more likely to enact the full suite of CRP measures, while many rural schools implemented partial versions due to device shortages, patchy connectivity, and limited technical support (Dery et al., 2025; Minea-Pic, 2023; Venketsamy & Sibanda, 2021). Though curriculum trimming helped teachers concentrate on essential EFAL competencies and relieved time pressure, questions remain about reduced exposure to enrichment tasks that build higher-order language use (Tranjan et al., 2022; Wills & van der Berg, 2024). Studies describe positive but uneven effects, with technology access, teacher readiness, and school-level capacity mediating impact (Ahmad, 2024; Evwierhurhoma, 2024; Lynch, 2023; Nelson et al., 2021).

International and local perspectives on curriculum recovery

Globally, recovery initiatives ranged from intensive tutoring and extended school time in high-income systems to radio/SMS solutions in low-resource settings (Tranjan et al., 2022). South Africa's CRP combined

three pillars: curriculum reduction, distance education, and educator training Dery et al. (2025), but national progress masked strong within-country variance. Urban schools tended to sustain online provision; many rural schools struggled with minimal connectivity and limited devices, pressuring EFAL, where oral interaction and feedback are vital (Lynch, 2023; Wills & van der Berg, 2024). The Vhembe District exemplifies how local infrastructural and socio-economic constraints can attenuate national policy goals.

Challenges and imperatives for equity in EFAL

Across the literature, three cross-cutting constraints recur: (1) technology access—the primary driver of participation gaps in remote learning Chanduvi et al. (2022); (2) teacher preparedness—professional development existed but too often lacked depth, follow-up, or contextualisation for rural settings (Keane et al., 2023; Mokoena, 2024); and (3) learner motivation and support, self-regulated learning faltered without frequent feedback and structured interaction. Addressing these jointly, rather than piecemeal, is presented as the cornerstone of an equitable, durable recovery for EFAL.

Conceptual framework: learning recovery pathways

The study's conceptual framework maps independent variables: curriculum restructuring, teacher support, technology access, and learner support onto dependent outcomes: learner engagement, academic performance, and language proficiency (Gradillas & Thomas, 2025; Lynch et al., 2024).

One of the central pillars of the Curriculum Recovery Plan (CRP) is curriculum restructuring, which involves the strategic trimming of content to prioritise essential skills. In the context of English First Additional Language (EFAL), this meant focusing intensively on core competencies: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, while reducing less critical content. Such restructuring lightened the cognitive load on learners and created opportunities for depth rather than superficial breadth of coverage (Goo, 2024; Tatlock, 2024). This approach was critical given the loss of instructional time during school closures, allowing learners and educators to channel their limited resources towards the most impactful areas of language learning. While curriculum trimming raised concerns about narrowing educational exposure, its practical value in preserving key EFAL outcomes during crises cannot be underestimated.

Teacher Support

Equally important to recovery was the provision of teacher support through professional development. The CRP emphasised practice-embedded training to strengthen educators' ability to navigate hybrid and remote teaching environments. Professional development initiatives focused on building digital pedagogy, enhancing assessment literacy, and equipping teachers with the tools needed to engage learners meaningfully outside traditional classrooms (Zhang & Zhang, 2024; Nkomo & Adanlawo, 2024). By empowering teachers with these skills, the programme recognised that they serve as the primary mediators of learning, particularly in EFAL, where scaffolding, corrective feedback, and interactive engagement are vital. Although uptake and application were uneven, teacher support remained a cornerstone for translating

curriculum restructuring into effective classroom practice.

Technology Access

Technology access formed another critical dimension of the CRP. Without equitable provision of digital devices and reliable internet connectivity, the broader goals of mediated and interactive learning could not be realised. Access to technology enables learners to engage with multiple cultural tools—online lessons, digital textbooks, and interactive exercises— that facilitate independent learning and support from a distance (Alieto et al., 2024; WHO, 2024). However, the South African context, particularly rural districts like Vhembe, exposed persistent inequalities. While some learners benefitted from advanced digital platforms, others had to rely on radio lessons or SMS-based instructions, which lacked the interactivity essential for EFAL proficiency. Thus, while the CRP highlighted the potential of technology in recovery, it also revealed the pressing need to bridge the digital divide to ensure that mediated learning opportunities are accessible to all.

Learner Support

Finally, learner support was central to the CRP's design, addressing the need for scaffolding to sustain progress within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Personalised tutoring, formative assessment, and structured peer activities were employed to assist learners (Chaiarwut et al., 2025; Wilson-Trollip, 2024). These support structures were particularly critical for EFAL learners, who required targeted feedback, oral practice, and continuous engagement to build confidence and proficiency. By encouraging peer-to-peer collaboration and formative feedback mechanisms, the CRP attempted to recreate social learning

contexts disrupted by school closures. While challenges in consistency and access limited the full effectiveness of these interventions, they nonetheless underscored the importance of learner-centred recovery strategies that move beyond technical fixes to focus on holistic cognitive and linguistic development.

These inputs are theorised to increase engagement (participation, persistence), strengthen academic performance (attainment, progression), and improve language proficiency (reading, writing, listening, speaking) in EFAL (Jaramillo-Mediavilla et al., 2024; Obionwu & Martens, 2024; Saputra et al., 2024). The framework aligns with social constructivism by emphasising mediation (human and tool-based), scaffolding, and context sensitivity; it also anticipates that gains will be contingent on local capacity and equity of access.

Theoretical and empirical strands converge on a clear insight: recovery for EFAL hinges on restoring the social and material conditions that make mediated learning possible. Where CRP implementation secured sustained teacher development, equitable tool access, and adaptive curriculum focus, EFAL outcomes improved. Where these conditions were partial or absent, as in many rural schools, the effects were muted. This evidence base justifies a context-sensitive evaluation of the CRP in the Vhembe District. It supports recommendations that couple curricular focus with durable investments in teacher learning and digital equity.

Findings and Discussions

Impact of Curriculum Restructuring

Restructuring the EFAL curriculum under the CRP enabled educators to concentrate

on core language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This reduction of non-essential content was particularly effective for Grade 12 learners, who were under pressure to prepare for final examinations. With less cognitive overload, learners could master fundamental skills more thoroughly, resulting in improved engagement and better examination outcomes. These findings resonate with Oubibi and Hryshayeva (2024), who confirmed that curriculum trimming enhances learner focus and performance, and with Dery et al. (2025), who argued that curriculum adaptation mitigates the adverse effects of educational disruptions. From a social constructivist perspective, this restructuring provided scaffolding that enabled learners to progress within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978)

Challenges in Technology Access

Despite the CRP's emphasis on digital tools, technology access remained a significant barrier in rural contexts such as the Vhembe District. Many learners lacked smartphones, laptops, or affordable data, which limited their participation in online lessons and digital platforms. As a result, the digital divide deepened existing educational inequalities. Although some schools attempted to distribute printed materials, these could not replicate the interactive and multimedia dimensions of digital learning. These findings are consistent with Angrist et al. (2021); (Chanduvi et al., 2022), who highlighted the role of technological inequities in shaping outcomes during the pandemic. (Minea-Pic, 2023) similarly observed that inadequate infrastructure in rural schools undermined the reach of digital interventions, leaving learners

disadvantaged despite the availability of resources elsewhere.

Support Structures for Educators

Professional development was another key component of the CRP, aimed at improving teachers' capacity for online and hybrid instruction. Many educators who participated in training programmes reported increased confidence using platforms such as Google Classroom and Zoom. Peer collaboration also emerged as a valuable informal support mechanism, enabling teachers to share resources and strategies. However, training opportunities were uneven, particularly in rural areas with limited infrastructure and access. As a result, not all educators were equally equipped to implement the CRP effectively. These findings align with Keane et al. (2023), who stressed the importance of ongoing teacher education in adapting to new instructional environments, and Lynch (2023), who emphasised that professional development must be comprehensive to sustain quality online teaching. From Vygotsky's (1978) perspective, peer collaboration exemplifies how social interactions foster skill development among educators themselves.

Linking Findings with Literature

The findings are consistent with international and South African literature on COVID-19 educational recovery. Studies confirm that curriculum restructuring improves focus on essential content (Dery et al., 2025; Tranjan et al., 2022), while the digital divide continues to be a decisive factor in educational inequality (Angrist et al., 2021; Chanduvi et al., 2022). Teacher professional development remains critical, though often insufficiently implemented (Keane et al., 2023; Lynch, 2023). These insights

highlight the importance of targeted interventions that combine curriculum adjustment, technological equity, and sustained teacher support to minimise the negative consequences of disruptions.

Recommendations

Equitable Access to Technology

Bridging the digital divide must remain a national priority. All schools, particularly rural districts, should have sufficient devices and reliable internet access. Policies could include bulk provision of laptops or tablets, partnerships with service providers to offer subsidised data bundles, and long-term investment in rural connectivity infrastructure (Eden et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2024). These measures would ensure that learners have equal opportunities to access online lessons, interactive content, and e-learning platforms.

Ongoing Professional Development for Educators

Continuous, context-sensitive training programmes should be embedded within teacher development frameworks. These programmes must address digital literacy and inclusive pedagogies that account for learners' diverse needs in hybrid and remote environments. Special attention should be given to educators in rural schools, who require tailored support to navigate infrastructural and contextual challenges (Saunders et al., 2024). Sustained mentorship and peer collaboration networks could complement formal training.

Curriculum Adaptations for Diverse Learner Needs

While curriculum trimming was effective during the crisis, longer-term adaptations should incorporate differentiated instruction to meet learners' varying levels

of EFAL proficiency. This includes designing remedial support for struggling learners, providing enrichment opportunities for advanced learners, and integrating culturally relevant content that reflects learners' linguistic backgrounds (Karataş et al., 2025). Such adjustments would enhance inclusivity and ensure that recovery measures benefit all learners equitably.

Sustainability and Long-Term Planning

Finally, schools must embed resilience into their systems through long-term planning. This involves sustained investment in digital infrastructure, teacher training, and adaptable curriculum resources that can function in both physical and virtual classrooms (Al-Qashouti, 2024). Preparedness for future crises requires institutionalising recovery strategies so that disruptions do not permanently derail learner performance, especially in critical subjects like EFAL.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the critical role of the COVID-19 Curriculum Recovery Plan (CRP) in mitigating learning losses in English First Additional Language (EFAL) education within the Vhembe District. The CRP's targeted interventions curriculum restructuring, supplementary tutoring, and teacher support proved valuable in enhancing learner engagement and improving academic outcomes. By streamlining the EFAL curriculum, educators could focus on essential skills of reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension, enabling learners, particularly those in Grade 12, to consolidate their language proficiency despite the unprecedented disruptions caused by the pandemic.

However, the findings also revealed persistent challenges limiting the plan's

effectiveness. Rural schools were disproportionately affected by inadequate access to technology, unaffordable data costs, and weak digital infrastructure. These barriers widened the educational divide and hindered the consistent implementation of online and hybrid learning approaches. Additionally, variations in teacher preparedness and digital literacy created disparities in the quality of EFAL instruction across different school contexts. The study concludes that while the CRP offered an important remedial response to the crisis, its long-term impact depends on

addressing these systemic inequities. Sustainable improvements in EFAL education require policy measures that prioritise equitable digital access, continuous professional development for educators, and curriculum adaptations responsive to learners' diverse needs in under-resourced regions. Building a resilient and inclusive education system will demand coordinated and forward-looking efforts to ensure that learners and educators are supported during future disruptions.

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