How School Closures Affected the Teaching and Learning of English During The COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The forced closure of South African schools left learners with many challenges, especially in language learning. This study aims to explore the perceptions of teachers teaching the same subject to the same grade during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose is to analyse learning losses and changes in the scholastic achievement of primary school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative research design was chosen for this study because of its exploratory nature. Semi-structured open-ended interviews rendered data on the teachers' perceptions of academic losses as a result of the "COVID-19" pandemic. Homogenous purposeful sampling and semi-structured open-ended interviews were used to gather data, which were coded using the induction method to reveal codes, categories and subcategories within participant voices. This study reports on the challenges faced by teachers and learners, which include a lack of parental support, inadequate technological knowledge, and neglect of schoolwork. The findings and their relevance to teaching post-COVID-19 to mitigate academic losses are discussed. The conclusion is that different forms of support are needed to mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners' scholastic performance.

Key words: COVID-19, Academic Skills, Learning Losses, Teaching And Learning of English, School Closures

INTRODUCTION

For this research, technology will be defined as the most frequently utilised digital technologies employed in schools. This includes computers, software, computer peripherals and projectors, and the internet. These devices are used to promote teaching and learning, especially when online learning occurs (Warner et al., 2018). Technology was used to support learning losses suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such learning losses were noticeable not only in South Africa but also worldwide (Engzell et al., 2021). Eighteen months after the first COVID-19 case had been announced; schools in nearly half the world were either completely or partially closed (UNESCO, 2021). South African learners also had to contend with the challenges of schooling at home, relying on technology and online learning. As a result, many schools did not function optimally (Spaull & Van Der Berg, 2020). Besides the challenges faced with the use of technology for teaching and learning, teaching time was lost because of school closures, a phased-in grade approach to reopening schools, social distancing, and rotational timetables (Ardington et al., 2021). In addition, a significant number of learners never returned to school after the initial school closure in March 2020. It is estimated that around 29% of learners have dropped out

and are still not attending school (Ardington et al., 2021). This led to academic losses, especially in communication skills. Gustafsson and Nuga (2020) argue that because of the extended loss of contact learning, learning losses surpass the number of lost school days and are mainly experienced in the academic literacy levels of learners, where learners are now finding it challenging to read and understand even simple sentences. Oral communication levels declined and writing skills were often neglected in favour of attempting to teach reading and speaking skills. This is because these skills are more complex to teach using online techniques.

Many researchers and educational organisations have investigated the learning losses, specifically in language teaching, caused by forced school closures and the use of technology because of COVID-19, which resulted in losses that were as much as 35% lower than pre-Covid times (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Kaffenberger (2021) maintains that for every three months that learners were not at school, scholastic losses equate to as much as a year of no schooling. Azevedo (2020) believes that reading and comprehension dropped by at least 10 percent. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and lower-income groups, as well as school girls who entered into early marriage or got

pregnant during school closures, were most susceptible, especially considering that technology was not easily accessible to them.

According to Avanesian et al. (2021) and Hossain (2021), the ability of learners to continue learning at home, parents' ability to support their learning, and digital connectivity determined whether or not learners sustained a loss of learning with the resulting deterioration in learning their literacy and communication skills. Many South African learners were unable to keep up with their studies because poor connectivity made online learning difficult and, in some cases, impossible (Gustafsson & Nuga, 2020).

The statement of the problem for this study is school closures, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, led to academic losses and cognitive declines for learners and there became an urgent need to use technology to keep up with the schoolwork.

Based on the statement of the problem and gap in the above paragraphs, the following main research question and sub-questions can be investigated to attain the expected results of the study:

To what extent did COVID-19 school closures influence the academic achievement of a selection of primary school learners and what can be done about it?

Sub-questions that stem from the main research question are:

1. What challenges were experienced in keeping up the learning momentum of learners in South African primary schools?
2. How did teachers experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What can be done to offset learners' academic losses?

The purpose of this study is to investigate the school closure experiences of teachers and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The spreading of COVID-19, led to the suddenly forced closures of schools and the reliance on technology to ensure that teaching and learning continued uninterrupted. First, the literature on this topic was reviewed and, second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers. The authors then collected, analysed, and correlated the data and, finally, reached a conclusion regarding the impact of school closures on the teaching and learning of English during the COVID-19 pandemic. The next section deals with theoretical perspectives on school losses, and the sections that follow deal with methodology, data analysis, findings, and then the conclusion.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL LOSSES

Transformative perspectives were used to help understand the challenges posed by the pandemic's effect on learners' ability to learn. Such perspectives are best suited to sudden interruptions in times of chaos.

Transformative Changes in Learning in Turbulent Times

The theory of transformative learning was adopted in this study. This theory postulates that such transformative learning occurs when teachers and learners are in turbulent circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Transformative learning is the expansion of consciousness through self-adaptation to a changing situation. COVID-19 resulted in paradigm shifts and transformations in education. Mezirow (1997) believes that any disorienting dilemma causes alterations that lead to cognitive differences and dramatic changes in the educational sphere. Furthermore, he asserts that when learners encounter learning, they create meaning that transforms their attitudes, behaviours and understanding. This theory posits that challenging tasks during paradigm shifts not only encourages learners to think critically and rationally, but also helps teachers gauge the success of their recent teaching and learning (Hashemi et al., 2021). To enhance their learners' learning during academic disruptions such as school closures, teachers use different techniques to adjust the learning process, adapt to changing norms, and bring about new developments and transformations in the learning process (Noori, 2021).

COVID-19 caused serious educational problems on a global scale, in addition to medical problems. Efforts to contain COVID-19 infection prompted the sudden, unplanned closure of schools worldwide. Countless learners across the world, including those in disadvantaged areas, had been locked out of school (Kaffenberger, 2021; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Onyema, 2020).

According to UNESCO (2020), some of the detrimental results of school closures during COVID-19 include:

1. Academic losses due to interrupted learning: Schools are the primary source of learning and when they are closed, the academic skills of learners deteriorate.
2. Unequal access to digital learning portals: A lack of access to technology or reliable internet connectivity for continued learning during school closures affects learners' ability to learn at home.
3. Social isolation: Educational institutions are centres of social activity, and school closures prevent learners from developing their social skills.

Academic Losses because of Interrupted English Language Learning

Despite the best efforts of the South African government, schools and parents, all learners, and poor learners, in particular, suffered learning losses, specifically in English language learning (Reddy, Soudien & Winnaar, 2020). Prolonged school closures led to lower scholastic performance examination results and pass rates (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). The harm was glaringly obvious to the authors during their interviews with the grade-3 English teachers.

Learning losses exacerbate existing inequalities because disadvantaged learners are affected the most (Allington et al., 2010; Cooper et al., 1996). Since South Africa's democratisation in 1994, all learning progress has been eradicated (Dorne et al., 2020; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Learners now require even more assistance to make up lost academic time. This is imperative, particularly in South Africa with its diverse learner population (Soudien et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic also allowed learners to learn in different ways, gain autonomy in learning, develop new skills, and spend more time learning with their families (Engzell et al., 2021). Parents have acquired knowledge through their increased involvement in the education of their children, their schoolwork and their learning experience (Denzell et al., 2021). Similarly, teachers have gained new skills and greater insight into the home environment of their learners because of collaborative online learning (Reimers, 2021). Thus, there was a rapid transformation that had to occur during such an unexpected pandemic to ensure that teaching and learning continued uninterrupted.

Availability of Technological Devices and Internet Connectivity

Teaching had to continue online and when online learning was impossible, learners stopped learning. Because of their sudden and unexpected closure, South African schools had to transform the way teaching and learning occurred, relying on technology to teach and complete the curriculum in time for the year-end assessments (Onyema, 2020). Home schooling proved frustrating for many teachers, learners, and parents. Parents and caregivers were faced with daunting educational tasks. Most parents and caregivers were not trained to teach children (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020).

In addition, many learners did not have computers and internet connections to learn online (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). This was especially true in developing countries where electronic devices and technology are not readily available (Gupta & Kaur, 2020). According to the General Household Survey of 2018 (StatsSA, 2019), only 22% of households have a computer and only 10% of respondents have an internet connection at home. The fact that multiple children in the same household had to share one mobile phone, the high cost of data, and the slow internet were aggravating circumstances. The free educational sites that were made available were not sufficient (Duncan-Williams, 2020).

Parents' roles changed and they now had to become teachers. A transformative approach to learning had to be adopted because parents had to learn to use online devices since their children's assignments had to be completed online. To find out what their children were supposed to study and which worksheets they had to print and complete, parents had to become conversant with e-mail, Skype and WhatsApp. Time constraints, financial costs, and ignorance of technology added to the concerns of most parents (Puspita, 2021).

Social Skills Delays Experienced by Learners

COVID-19 certainly hampered learners' social interaction and language development. Charney et al. (2021) point out that social interaction is crucial for language development. Due to social distancing and bans on large gatherings, face-to-face interaction with peers became impossible. Social interaction with peers is an essential part of the development of conversational skills such as taking turns and understanding indirect meanings. Masks also concealed facial expressions and obscured social cues. Owing to online schooling, learners had fewer opportunities to practise their conversational and social skills (Charney et al., 2021; Viola & Nunes, 2022).

The literature review showed that COVID-19 led to considerable academic losses and that learners will need support to catch up on the work they have missed, correct their technological usage, and improve their social interaction. It is against this background that the chosen methodology will be discussed in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

The study is grounded in interpretivism and uses a qualitative approach to collect data. This approach yielded the most accurate results because of its exploratory nature. It allowed for the analysis of the teachers' views of their teaching practice after COVID-19 and the learning losses because of interrupted schooling.

Sample

Four teachers teaching English to learners in grade 3 participated in this study. Two of the teachers worked in urban schools. One in a private school and the other in a former Model-C school. The other two teachers taught in township schools. Their experience includes teaching English for over ten years. One was the head of the department and the other head of grade 3. The teachers were purposively chosen because they were actively involved in the teaching and learning programmes of their respective schools. This enabled the authors to obtain relevant information regarding their lived teaching experiences. The learners involved in this study were taught by these teachers and completed the same academic tasks.

Instruments

Data were collected by conducting individual, semi-structured interviews with 4 teachers. The teachers openly expressed their viewpoints on the pedagogical difficulties as a result of school closures and the challenges that learners and their parents had to contend with. The semi-structured interviews, as a data collection instrument, were designed to obtain subjective answers from the participant teachers regarding the subject of this study. Different types of questions were designed to elicit answers to the research questions. The interview questions were piloted by one of the teachers who commented on their clarity and appropriateness. The positive comments of this teacher were noted. The authors then distributed the questions to the other participants.

The questions focused on the views of the participant teachers regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the language skills of learners. They responded to these open-ended questions as they saw fit. The authors asked additional questions for clarification. Owing to their flexibility, the schedules are appropriate for this field of study in which adaptations may be needed (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). After the data had been collected, the authors did a descriptive data analysis. Themes and patterns emerged from the described and summarised data. This analysis helped to triangulate the data by

coding and comparing it and recognising the themes that materialised. Most of the relevant information emerged in this way.

The teachers had to answer the following questions:

1. In your opinion, how did COVID-19 impact the academic skills of primary school learners?
2. What were the academic challenges experienced by learners in South African primary schools because of extended school closures and rotational learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What challenges did you experience while continuing to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. How can learners in South African primary schools be supported so that there are no gaps in the development of their language skills?

Data Analysis

The data had to be analysed so that the authors could make sense of it and find answers to the research questions. The authorss, therefore, interpreted, consolidated, reduced and ascribed meaning to the data. The recorded interview responses were transcribed and reread a few times to understand the teachers' views. Then the data were categorised according to themes. Four main themes emerged: the influence of COVID-19 on the academic skills of primary school learners; learners' academic challenges; factors that hamper the continuation of teaching and learning; and support mechanisms that teachers and learners need post-COVID. This helped to answer the research question about the academic losses suffered by the grade-3 learners taught by the interviewed teachers owing to forced school closures during COVID-19.

Trustworthiness in Data Collection and Analysis

The credibility of this research was guaranteed by recruiting teachers who had been in education for several years. The authors of this article had a trusting and open relationship with the teachers who eagerly shared their experiences and assisted with the research. The teachers brought a wealth of experience and knowledge to the research. This enabled the authors to compare the findings over several years and agree on what had been gained from the literature study and the interview responses of the teachers. The teachers were also requested to read the transcripts of the interviews and ensure that the authors had captured their views correctly.

The trustworthiness of this study ensures that its findings are transferable. This means that the findings can be applied to individuals who have not been involved in the study but who recognise their own experiences in the research findings (Daniel, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic and school closures affected learners across the globe and South African learners in particular. Therefore, the findings apply to all learners and teachers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical Issues

The chair of the Department of Language Education, Arts and Culture obtained ethical clearance for the entire department from Unisa's CEDU Research Ethics. This clearance included all departmental research projects. This allowed staff to conduct research in schools and use their teachers and learners as participants. To protect the identity and privacy of the participating teachers, they were referred to as teachers A, B, C and D. The teachers were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from this research whenever they wished to.

RESULTS

The data was analysed after the interview transcripts had been reread several times. Irrelevant data was discarded. The remaining data were summarised to make it easier to code the data. After the content analysis, the following four main themes were identified.

Teachers' Opinions of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Academic Skills of Primary School Learners

Teacher A believed that teaching writing skills were one of the biggest challenges:

> *"The biggest academic challenge in our school was writing skills. This important skill could not be taught online and, as a result, was put on the back end, while Maths and English language skills were the main focus."*

Teacher B indicated that many learners lost focus even though learning continued online, which helped tremendously:

> "*These learners relate technology to fun and playing games, not to learning.*"

Learners' reading skills were also affected. Teacher D complained that learners did not have adequate reading materials at home and, consequently, there was a deterioration in reading skills. She stated that:

> *"Learners did not read as regularly as they used to when they had to attend school."*

It is clear from the above statements that the teachers agreed that COVID-19 had been detrimental to the academic skills of their learners. There simply was not enough time to teach all the language skills. As a result, learners are now unable to express themselves correctly. They also find it difficult to construct simple sentences. All their language skills, especially their reading skills, have declined.

Teachers' Opinions of the Academic Challenges Experienced by Learners in South African Primary Schools as a Result of COVID-19

Teacher A was of the view that:

> *"Never before had I experienced such challenges in continuing the teaching momentum. Teaching reading and writing was an absolute nightmare."*

Teacher C and Teacher D stated that:

> *"Some learners did not understand the rotational timetable, so they stayed at home even when it was their turn to come to school. Sometimes the rotational timetable did not match the brothers and sisters who were attending secondary schools."*

Teacher D concurred and stated that:

> *"Not all learners were attending during the rotational time. After attending, given work to do at home they came back with no work done. It was also time-consuming because you teach the same content twice to the same grade."*

Consequently, it was clear that COVID-19 exacerbated academic challenges in English teaching. All the teachers complained that almost half the learners in their classes had to stay at home and, as a result, failed to do the allocated schoolwork.

It is evident from the above that the rotational timetable, once introduced, was confusing because learners did not know when they were supposed to be at school.

Teachers' Challenges in Continuing Teaching during COVID-19

The academic skills of learners deteriorated because of a lack of resources and rotational classes. The absence of face-to-face contact made well-planned teaching impossible. This theme was implicit in the teachers' comments.

Teacher D remarked that:

> *"The momentum for continuity of teaching and learning was not there."*

Teacher B agreed and mentioned that:

> *"Some parents just did not have the know-how of ways to support their children. Others just were too busy with their work commitments to devote time to helping their children."*

Teacher A observed that:

> *"Their interest and motivation have dropped since the support I expected from home/parents were not visible."*

According to the four teachers, the learners' interest in their schoolwork and their learning motivation declined during the pandemic. Because learners did not attend school regularly and missed the school routine and face-to-face learning, continuity was lost. Due to poor parental support and involvement, a decline in learning motivation was noticeable. Teacher A and Teacher B believed that parents could not support their children because either they were working, or they did not have the expertise to help them.

In addition, online learning and its technological challenges were discussed. Teacher A and Teacher B complained about the following technological challenges:

> *"Bad signal, running out of data, load shedding caused connectivity issues with learners being unable to join online classes or access work e-mailed."*

Teacher C remarked that many learners lacked the technological devices and data for online learning and were unable to do the work their teachers sent them.

Teacher B stated that teaching online required a mindset and approach unlike the ones for face-to-face teaching:

> *"Mask wearing was a definite distraction and often both myself and my learners missed out on important non-verbal language."*

The wearing of masks concealed the facial expressions of teachers and learners. It also became bothersome to wear masks the whole school day.

Teachers' Views about the Support Learners will need Post-COVID-19

Teacher B contended that:

> *"We must not lower our expectations, but rather change them. For example, if a learner has missed out on writing skills and they don't have the "neatest" handwriting, we need to allow that learner to present his/her work in a better-suited way for him/her. We, as teachers need to teach these children the strategies to embrace their new skills and different ways of thinking."*

It is evident that teachers are faced with a different type of learner, a learner whose skills and way of thinking differ from those of the learners they had taught before the pandemic.

In the opinion of Teacher D:

> *"Teaching and giving support to learners is draining for class teachers and, as a result, no proper support is given to learners as expected. Remedial classes have become more important."*

Remedial classes should be compulsory in primary schools. Remedial teachers must focus on learners' language development, not on allocated subjects or periods.

Teacher B commented that:

> *"Before COVID-19, I knew how to use computers for the basics, but suddenly both I and my learners had to quickly adapt and learn new and different programmes for teaching and learning, for example, how to connect to programmes such as Zoom."*

The need for support to update and learn the latest technology skills proved essential as various technology devices had to be used. It became clear to the researchers that because technology has become an integral part of teaching and learning, all stakeholders need support to update their technological skills.

Teacher B noted that she needed emotional support. Learners who were unable to develop important social skills and experienced psychological problems because of the pandemic also needed such support.

DISCUSSION

From the authors' analysis of the data, it was evident that the academic skills of the learners they taught were impacted by the adverse effect of COVID-19. It became difficult for teachers to continue teaching as they had done in the past. This was particularly noticeable in the language skills of learners who now found it difficult to speak, read and write properly. The fact that learners now had to continue their lessons at home meant that a transformative approach had to be brought in and adopted. Teachers had to suddenly adapt their teaching methods to teach online and ensure that their lessons were adapted for online learning.

The study by Ardington et al. (2021), across South African schools, concurred with the findings of this study, that there was a definite loss in the academic skills, especially the language skills, of learners. Although this study focused on teaching in South Africa, other researchers in other countries have found similar results. Engzell et al. (2021),

Table 1. Summary of the themes that emerged from the literature review and data analysis

Theme number	Main theme	Sub-themes/categories
1	The influence of COVID-19 on the academic skills of primary school learners.	Time constraints to teach all language skills. Development of certain language and Maths skills at the expense of writing skills. Lack of reading resources. Deterioration of reading. Technology is not equated with learning.
2	Learners' academic challenges.	Lack of parental support. Learners were alone at home. Allocated schoolwork not completed. Confusion about rotation timetables.
3	Factors that hamper the continuation of teaching and learning.	The decline in learners' interest and motivation. Lost learning continuity. Lack of routine. The parent's inability to help with academic activities led to low motivation. Technological challenges of online learning. Adaptation is necessary. Wearing masks.
4	Support mechanisms for teachers and learners post-COVID-19	Changes in the expectations of current learners. Remedial classes are essential. Training in the correct use of technology. Emotional and social skills support.

whose study focused on teaching in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic also reported that there was a significant decrease in learning and poor achievement results.

As a consequence of learners' diminished motivation, as well as the rotational timetable being misunderstood, once schools did start opening up, it became challenging for teachers to continue the teaching momentum. This finding is consistent with Ardington et al. (2021) who reported that the rotational timetable, once introduced, was a huge cause of confusion and led to a lot of missed teaching time. Teachers, no doubt, had to try and find novel and creative ways of ensuring that learning continued in such turbulent and unpredictable circumstances which were often very challenging. The fact that parental support was often lacking and technological challenges often occurred made it imperative that teachers transformed their teaching methods. The study of Hossain (2021) found similar results as according to him, the involvement of parents in the academics of their children made a huge difference in their success. The type of learners that teachers now had to teach was suddenly different. The learners' attitudes towards learning and the way they learned and socialised were all suddenly altered and there was no doubt that teaching and learning had changed from pre-COVID times.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the impact of school closures on the academic skills of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was specifically on the teaching and learning of literacy skills during this time. It was based on the perceptions of four teachers teaching English to grade 3 learners. The transformative learning approach was adopted in this research. This approach was chosen because teaching and learning not only depends on social connections between teachers and learners but also had to be adapted suddenly because of the pandemic.

According to the teachers who were interviewed, COVID-19 was detrimental to the scholastic performance of most learners, even when learning was successfully continued online. These losses were specifically experienced in the development of the learners' literacy skills who now found it challenging to verbalise their thoughts as well as read and write a simple sentence. It was thus found that teachers and learners needed support on how to improve the literacy levels of their learners. Support was also needed in technological and emotional self-care training to minimise the negative impact of the pandemic. Besides technological and emotional training, learners needed help with their social skills.

A summary of the themes that emerged from the literature review and data analysis is presented in Table 1.

Limitations of this Research

- The study involved only four teachers who teach the same subject to the same grade.
- The study involved only teachers working in South Africa. The impact of the pandemic on other countries would also be beneficial.
- The study involved only the teaching of English during the COVID-19 pandemic. An investigation into the teaching of other home languages as well as other subjects would be valuable.
- The full extent of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact may be known only in ten years when these grade-3 learners will have reached matric or will be studying at higher educational institutions.

Research Findings and Recommendations

This study was guided by the main research question: "How does COVID-19 impact the academic skills of primary school learners?" Based on the literature review and the data analysis, it was found that learners' academic skills deteriorated because of the pandemic. It was noticeable not only in the four main language skills but also in learners' emotional and social development. Often parental support was lacking because parents had to work or did not know how to support their children. The technological challenges were considerable because a new shift in teaching and learning was required. The rotational timetable caused significant confusion and many learners were unsure about when they were supposed to be at school. Remedial classes to catch up on academic backlogs are recommended.

Recommendations for Further Research

* Teachers in other grades and teaching other subjects should be asked for their opinions on the impact of school closures on the academic skills of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.
* An investigation into the technical training needs of teachers, learners and parents so that teaching and learning can continue undisturbed despite turbulent times.
* An investigation into the emotional support that teachers and learners need to minimise the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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