**Reading & Writing - Journal of the Literacy Association of South Africa**
ISSN: (Online) 2308-1422, (Print) 2079-8245



# Free voluntary reading approach for mitigating reading loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms

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**Dates:**
Received: 04 Dec. 2025
Accepted: 21 Mar. 2026
Published: 06 May 2026

**How to cite this article:**
Mojaki, M.G. & Ngubane, N.I., 2026, 'Free voluntary reading approach for mitigating reading loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms', *Reading & Writing* 17(1), a634. https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v17i1.634

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**Background:** Although the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has significantly subsided, its educational repercussions persist, particularly in rural South African contexts. The abrupt transition to remote learning in 2020 disproportionately affected learners, particularly in under-resourced areas, resulting in significant learning loss – especially in reading among English First Additional Language (FAL) learners.

**Objectives:** This qualitative study aimed to explore how the free voluntary reading (FVR) approach can be used to mitigate the COVID-19-induced reading loss among Grade 10 English FAL learners in a rural Free State school.

**Method:** Grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis Theory, the study adopted the Participatory Action Learning and Action Research methodology to engage two English FAL teachers and ten Grade 10 learners through purposive sampling. Data generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

**Results:** Findings reveal that the FVR approach significantly fostered improved reading confidence, motivation, comprehension, imagination, and vocabulary development.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that FVR is a viable pedagogical strategy for addressing reading deficits in rural English FAL classrooms. It recommends integrating a reading period into the school timetable and revitalising school libraries to ensure the successful implementation of reading interventions.

**Contribution:** Beyond its role in post-pandemic recovery, this study affirms FVR as a research-supported approach for promoting sustained literacy development in English FAL contexts, thereby contributing to evidence-based practices in language education.

**Keywords:** mitigate; COVID-19; reading loss; rural; English First Additional Language; free voluntary reading.

## Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic may appear to be behind us, but its lingering effects on education transcend the mere discourse of COVID-19-induced learning loss. The abrupt transition from traditional schooling to online remote learning (Kidman et al. 2022; Oyedotun 2020) revealed underlying systemic inequalities in developing countries such as South Africa (Sansone et al. 2021; Wills & Van der Berg 2024).

Globally, school closures during the pandemic led to significant learning losses. An average decline of 33% of a standard deviation in international reading scores, corresponding to more than a year of schooling, provides compelling evidence of the severity of the learning loss (Jakubowski, Gajderowicz & Patrinos 2023). Studies in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom reported losses equivalent to almost one-fifth of a school year, with the United Kingdom recording losses of up to 54% in writing skills and 41% in reading. Despite efforts to minimise disruptions, progress was uneven, exacerbating educational disparities between and within countries (Demie et al. 2022; Dorn et al. 2020; Engzell, Frey & Verhagen 2020; Scott 2021).

The learning loss was also pronounced in South Africa. According to the Department of Basic Education (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2023), 54% of contact time was lost in 2020, and 22% in 2021, for better-resourced schools. In contrast, historically disadvantaged schools experienced learning losses of up to 70%. The decline was particularly severe in language learning. The Western Cape Systemic Tests revealed a 70% loss in language competencies, corroborated by

Funda Wande's findings of heightened losses in lexical comprehension, reading, and writing in English (Ardington 2021; Van der Berg et al. 2022). Similar trends for early-grade reading were observed in Mpumalanga (62%) and North West (46%) (Ardington, Wills & Kotze 2021). The results suggest that the pandemic nearly reversed a decade's progress in reading outcomes, especially in rural contexts (Spaull 2023).

However, research suggests that learning losses, particularly in reading, can be mitigated through low-cost, high-impact strategies such as free voluntary reading (FVR), which enhances vocabulary, grammar, and overall reading ability (Chew & Krashen 2017). This study adopted the Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) method, a form of FVR, where students read self-selected texts silently for pleasure without assessment pressures (Krashen 2018). Emerging evidence suggests that SSR is more efficacious in improving reading comprehension than direct grammar-based instruction (McQuillan 2019), while also supporting gains in listening, speaking, and writing skills (Cho & Krashen 2019; Efendi & Deyani 2022; Lee 2019; Renandya et al. 2019).

Although Mokoena (2022), and Mokoena and Tsotetsi (2021), underscored the potential of FVR in rural South African English FAL contexts, there is a dearth of studies examining its application in addressing the COVID-19-induced reading loss. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by examining how FVR can be utilised to mitigate COVID-19-induced reading loss among rural English FAL Grade 10 learners. The guiding research question is: How can FVR be used to mitigate the COVID-19-induced reading loss in rural English FAL classrooms?

# Literature review

## Defining reading and reading loss

Before reviewing the relevant literature, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of reading and reading loss, as they are used in this study.

Reading is defined as a complex cognitive process through which readers decode meaning from written symbols, culminating in comprehension. As a receptive language skill, reading supports language acquisition and enables readers to engage critically with written texts (Arcos 2018; Darmawan 2016).

Reading loss refers to the decline of reading knowledge or skills resulting from prolonged interruptions in schooling. In this study, reading loss denotes disruptions in the development of reading skills associated with extended absence from formal schooling. Reading loss may contribute to learning loss. Learning loss may be understood as knowledge that is forgotten or the content that learners should have acquired under uninterrupted instructional conditions (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] 2021). It also reflects the gap between what learners currently know and what they could have achieved had learning not been disrupted (Angrist et al. 2021).

## The impact of COVID-19 on reading

The COVID-19 disruptions had devastating effects on the teaching and learning of English as a second or additional language, resulting in substantial learning losses across the language skills. Jakubowski, Gajderowicz and Patrinos's (2023) study reported an average international reading decline of approximately 33% of the standard deviation, equivalent to more than a year of schooling, with greater declines recorded for schools that closed for longer periods (Demie et al. 2022). In the United Kingdom (UK), Relyea et al.'s (2022) study revealed a discernible decline in reading skills among students who took English as an Additional Language. Reading gains for the 2020/2021 school year declined by 0.54, 0.27, and 0.28 standard deviations for Grades 3, 4, and 5. Data from over one million learners in the United States also revealed negative reading trajectories (Renaissance Learning 2021). Interestingly, these studies reported that reading loss was more severe among learners from rural and low-income backgrounds, highlighting the need for targeted interventions in these areas.

Situating South Africa's experience within this global context reveals similar dire commonalities. Makena and Mpiti (2022) found that the learners' English FAL proficiency declined significantly as collaborative and communicative learning opportunities diminished as a result of social distancing and school closures. Systemic tests in the Western Cape revealed severe learning losses for Grades 3 and 6, particularly in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing. The relatively stable performance for Grade 9 was attributed to the exclusion of writing assessments at that level (Van der Berg et al. 2022). Further analysis by Wills and Van der Berg (2024) estimated that South African learners lost between 38% and 118% of a year's learning between 2020 and 2021, intensifying existing educational inequalities. The extent of these losses becomes even more apparent when compared with international benchmarks. South Africa's Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) score declined from 320 in 2016 to 288 in 2021, representing a 31.4-point drop, which highlights the deepening educational challenges (Mullis et al. 2023).

The long-term implications of these learning losses are profound. Without effective mitigation, long-term educational consequences may persist, particularly for learners who have already fallen behind and continue to do so as they progress through the school system (Molato-Gayares et al. 2021; Van der Berg et al. 2022). The aftermath of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan provides a compelling illustration of the enduring impact of such disruptions. Students who missed 3 months of schooling remained approximately 1.5 years behind their unaffected peers 4 years later (Andrabi, Daniels & Das 2021). These findings highlight that learning loss is not self-correcting. It demands deliberate, sustained intervention.

Despite the clear need, limited research has explored practical, classroom-based strategies that English FAL teachers in rural areas can use to address COVID-19-induced reading losses. Given the unequal access to remote learning during the pandemic, this gap is particularly critical for rural learners. Statistics South Africa (2022) indicate that only 6% of South African youth aged 5–24 participated in remote learning during this period. Racial disparities were also evident: while 36% of Indian, Asian and White youth accessed remote learning, only 9% of Black South African youth had the same opportunity. These disparities underscore the urgency for targeted support in under-resourced rural schools.

Although the DBE revised annual teaching plans (ATPs) to recover lost teaching time, such interventions require classroom-based reinforcement. Therefore, this study argues that FVR is a powerful, contextually adaptable tool for mitigating COVID-19-induced reading loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Free voluntary reading goes beyond just complementing the ATPs to cultivating sustained literacy development.

## The role of free voluntary reading in language learning

Stephen Krashen first introduced FVR in *The Power of Reading* (1993), with a second edition published in 2004. Also referred to as pleasure reading, recreational reading, or self-selected reading, FVR involves reading voluntarily rather than under obligation. It is a voluntary activity undertaken for enjoyment, without external pressure or evaluation. In FVR, readers are not required to complete book reports, answer comprehension questions, or look up unfamiliar vocabulary. Instead, they are encouraged to stop reading material they do not enjoy and select something more appealing (Krashen 2004).

Free voluntary reading is grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which posits that language acquisition occurs not through direct instruction, memorisation, or grammar drills, but through exposure to comprehensible input. From this perspective, both first and second language acquisition, including vocabulary development, are primarily driven by listening to and reading engaging, comprehensible content (Krashen 2021; Krashen, Lee & Lao 2018). When reading materials are overly complex, learners are less likely to engage with or benefit from them. As such, FVR is considered a highly effective method for promoting language and literacy development, with documented benefits in vocabulary growth, reading comprehension, and writing proficiency. Central to this approach is the principle that students become better readers by reading extensively (Krashen 2006). Therefore, addressing challenges in second language learning requires providing learners with access to a wide variety of interesting, level-appropriate reading materials and ensuring dedicated time for reading (Krashen 2003).

Within this framework, the present study exposed learners to rich and engaging texts to foster consistent reading habits, characterised by regular independent reading, purposeful engagement with texts, and reading for meaning and enjoyment. These habits are expected to enhance their reading abilities and, in turn, support their development as confident speakers and proficient writers.

Sustained Silent Reading is one method that operationalises FVR, by allocating 10 min –15 min of uninterrupted, independent reading each day. In this study, a wide range of reading materials was provided to enable learners to select reading materials they could read independently. During this time, learners are free to choose and read any material they find interesting, without the pressure of assessments, book reports, or mandatory completion. Teachers are also encouraged to read alongside their learners to model positive reading behaviours, thereby portraying reading as a valued and meaningful activity rather than merely an instructional requirement (Krashen 2006). Unlike Extensive Reading, which typically requires summaries or reports, SSR promotes reading enjoyment and autonomy without follow-up tasks (Krashen 2003).

Within the context of this study, the primary aim of SSR was to foster a genuine interest in reading, particularly among reluctant readers, and to encourage them to read more frequently, even beyond the classroom setting (Krashen 1997). By increasing learners' motivation to read, SSR creates the foundational conditions necessary for language acquisition to occur.

## Free voluntary reading in research

Although the value and effectiveness of FVR have occasionally been questioned, empirical evidence affirms the effectiveness of FVR in second language acquisition, particularly when engaging with fiction and longer connected texts, which have been found to be more beneficial than other reading forms (Jerrim & Moss 2019; Torppa et al. 2020). For example, McQuillan's (2019) comparison of the efficiency of direct instruction and free reading revealed that FVR was six times more effective than direct instruction in teaching academic vocabulary. However, the absence of information regarding participants' reading proficiency limits the generalisability of these findings, as it remains unclear whether the reported effects apply equally to proficient and struggling readers. More broadly, FVR has been associated with gains in grammatical development, reading comprehension, and writing proficiency, suggesting its potential contribution to overall language development (Abualzain 2017; Bautista & Maruland 2018; Efendi & Deyani 2022).

These findings reinforce the argument that FVR is an invaluable, evidence-based pedagogical tool that can be employed to mitigate the COVID-19-induced reading loss in rural English FAL classrooms. Beyond reading loss mitigation, FVR holds potential to instil a reading culture that fosters

autonomy and lifelong learning, skills essential across all subjects. Thus, FVR is more than just a compensatory intervention; it can be a foundation for rebuilding and strengthening post-pandemic literacy foundations.

### Theoretical perspective: The Input Hypothesis

This study is grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which posits that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current proficiency level (*i*+1). Progress in language acquisition involves improving from the current level (*i*) to the next, slightly more advanced stage (+1) (Krashen 1982). Although it is often criticised for limited empirical precision, it remains influential in explaining how sustained exposure to comprehensible input supports language development. Krashen (1985) contends that optimal input must be comprehensible, slightly challenging, and so interesting that learners become absorbed in the act of reading rather than the mechanics of decoding a second language. In this regard, comprehension is not only enhanced by the learner's linguistic knowledge but also by extra-linguistic knowledge, such as general world knowledge and context cues.

Krashen's argument that reading is a key medium for enhancing vocabulary acquisition, spelling accuracy, reading fluency, syntactic development, and writing proficiency aligns with the pedagogical aims of this study (Krashen & Bland 2014). In this vein, it is reasonable to assume that Grade 10 English FAL learners already possess some foundational linguistic competence and background knowledge necessary for engaging with slightly challenging texts.

Therefore, the Input Hypothesis provides a theoretical framework for understanding how exposure to engaging, slightly challenging texts can facilitate vocabulary growth and language acquisition. As learners process increasingly complex input, their reading proficiency is expected to improve, thereby mitigating COVID-19-induced reading loss. Moreover, by developing sustained reading habits, learners engage in a continuous, unconscious process of language acquisition that occurs naturally without explicit instruction.

## Research methods and design

### Research design

The study adopted a qualitative approach, guided by the constructivist paradigm and framed within the Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design. The constructivist paradigm enabled both the researchers and co-researchers to engage in a collaborative journey of empowerment through knowledge construction, aimed at understanding and improving the learning experiences of the learners involved in the study (Kamal 2019). Positioning the study within a qualitative framework supported a participatory and context-sensitive inquiry conducted in the participants' natural environment (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018).

Participatory Action Learning and Action Research was employed as the research design to involve participants actively in identifying challenges and co-developing practical solutions. In keeping with the principles of PALAR, participants were treated as equal partners in the research process and therefore referred to as co-researchers (Kearney, Zuber-Skerrit & Wood 2013). The implementation of PALAR in this study followed a modified version of its traditional stages, aligned with the specific context and research goals, and was conducted over a 4-month period.

### Project implementation overview

Several preparatory meetings with the two participating teachers, held prior to the initial session with all co-researchers (teachers, learners, and researchers), highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on reading. Pre-intervention semi-structured interviews with participating teachers confirmed a substantial decline in reading proficiency among Grade 10 English FAL learners, thereby justifying the rationale for the targeted intervention. The decline is reported in the findings section of the study.

#### Start-up workshop

The first collaborative workshop began with a shared recognition of the problem: COVID-19-related disruptions had hampered learners' reading development. The co-researchers considered FVR, operationalised through SSR, as a feasible intervention. Sustained Silent Reading sessions were scheduled for 20 min – 30 min on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons in the school library. Following targeted mobilisation efforts, about 391 books, mostly fiction, were donated by both local and regional library services, thereby ensuring access to a diverse and appealing range of reading materials. Guidelines for implementation were agreed upon during this session, laying the foundation for the intervention.

#### Independent project work

The intervention phase followed, with learners engaging in SSR as per the agreed-upon plan. Teachers and researchers also modelled reading during these sessions to legitimise reading as a valued activity. Demonstrating authentic reader behaviours was considered essential to fostering a classroom culture that supports sustained engagement. Their participation also mitigated the perception of SSR as an imposed task, framing it as a shared literary practice in which teachers, researchers and learners engaged as co-readers. This phase generated rich observational data, building on insights from the initial meetings.

#### Midway workshop

Although this phase is referred to as the *Midway Workshop*, a term that reflects the possibility of inviting a specialist to address critical implementation issues, it primarily served as a collective reflective space grounded in the first cycle of action and learning. In this session, the co-researchers

(teachers, learners, and researchers) assessed the project's progress, identified its strengths and challenges, and proposed improvements for the subsequent implementation cycle. This dialogic and participatory reflection generated rich data that informed ongoing action, strengthened shared ownership of the process, and contributed to the iterative refinement of the project.

#### Reimplementation phase

This phase was characterised by an increased commitment to SSR, with adjustments made in response to earlier reflections. More observational data were collected as the project matured.

#### Concluding reflective session and celebrations

The final phase involved a reflective session where co-researchers shared their experiences and insights gained throughout the project. To generate additional evaluative data, the project concluded with focus group discussions with learners and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Conducted separately, these data-generation processes allowed both groups to provide independent reflections on the implementation and perceived outcomes of the intervention. The focus group discussions enabled learners to collectively reflect on their reading experiences and the changes they perceived in their reading habits and abilities, while the semi-structured interviews provided teachers with an opportunity to share their observations regarding learners' reading behaviours and classroom engagement.

In line with PALAR, the project concluded with a brief celebratory meal to acknowledge the commitment and contributions of all co-researchers.

## Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select two Grade 10 English FAL teachers and ten Grade 10 English FAL learners from four Grade 10 classrooms in one rural high school. The two teachers were female, aged 35–46 years, with more than three years of teaching experience, and the ten learners were aged 16–17 years; all of whom are referred to using pseudonyms in the form of personal names. These participants provided rich data because they were directly involved in the FVR sessions implemented in their school. Since participation in this study was voluntary, the researchers selected the first 10 learners who showed interest in the study. As revealed by the findings, almost half of these learners were struggling readers. Although this small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, the primary aim was to elicit the co-researchers' lived experiences and generate rich, contextually grounded insights into their engagement with FVR.

## Data generation

Data were generated through the triangulation of semi-structured interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with learners, and observations. Additional data were collected during the various stages of the PALAR process, including the start-up, midway, and concluding workshops.

*Semi-structured interviews* captured the lived experiences of co-researchers, enabling the interpretation of the phenomena under study (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015). Their flexible format allowed for the emergence of rich, unexpected insights. These semi-structured interviews with the teachers were conducted before and after the intervention.

*Focus group discussions* provided extensive data due to their interactive nature (Hennink 2014). The dialogic format encouraged debate and discussion among participants, yielding insights not easily accessible through individual interviews. The focus group discussions with learners were conducted after the implementation was completed.

*Observations* served to complement interview and focus group data. The participatory nature of PALAR allowed researchers to be immersed in the implementation of FVR, enabling them to collect first-hand, context-rich data (Wellington 2015). These observations were made throughout the project, for example during the SSR sessions, workshops, and focus group discussions.

The triangulation of these data generation tools strengthened the credibility of the study by enabling cross-validation of the findings.

## Data analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phases of reflexive thematic analysis. Familiarisation began during data generation, with repeated readings and manual transcription enabling early engagement. Coding involved identifying data segments aligned with the study objectives and assigning concise, analytic labels that were refined recursively. To streamline organisation, the coded data were saved as a web document, allowing automatic numbering and linking of codes to corresponding quotes. Initial themes were developed by clustering related codes, which were organised in tables to support clarity. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and clearly named to ensure coherence and relevance to the research questions. Finally, the findings were written up through a cohesive narrative, supported by participants' verbatim responses, interpretive commentary, and observational data, to enhance depth and credibility.

The data analysis and the write-up of the final report adhered to the established criteria for trustworthiness. The researchers enhanced confirmability through sustained self-reflection throughout the study, ensuring that the results were grounded in the data rather than the researchers' biases. Therefore, member-checking was conducted by sharing emerging themes with co-researchers for validation and

feedback, thereby ensuring the credibility of the findings. Additionally, prolonged engagement with the participants, in line with the principles of PALAR, enhanced the credibility of the findings. Although the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, the detailed information provided in this study enables readers to assess the transferability of the findings to similar contexts.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee (University of the Free State) on 24 October 2023 (ethical clearance number: UFS-HSD2023/1391). Additional permission was obtained from the Free State Department of Education and the principal of the participating school. Issues related to anonymity, voluntary participation, withdrawal without consequences, written consent and assent forms were strictly adhered to.

## Results

The systematic, reflexive thematic analysis of the data discussed above yielded the following themes, which reveal that FVR was successfully implemented to mitigate COVID-19-induced reading loss in rural English FAL classrooms: decline in reading skills, increased motivation to read for pleasure, increased reading habits, increased confidence in reading, improved reading skills, and enhanced imaginative abilities.

### Impact of COVID-19 disruptions on learners' reading development

Although no baseline assessments were conducted because of the qualitative design of the study, evidence drawn from the co-researchers' lived experiences indicated that the learners' reading skills were adversely affected thy the COVID-19-induced school closures and rotational timetables. The excerpts below illustrate the teachers' and learners' perspectives regarding the perceived decline in reading proficiency during this period:

> 'So, it was a big challenge. You could find someone in Grades 8 to 9 and in Grades 10 or 11 not able to read. … They don't know how to read. … So, obviously, if they were able to come to school, we would be able to identify such challenges. That is whereby we will identify that a certain learner needs more work regarding reading.' (Mrs Lethole, teacher, 36)

> 'Some of them … I had one learner who literally cried because she couldn't read or because she was too shy to stand up and read. … So, it was worse during that time. They couldn't read, and when they responded, you would see that they did not understand, especially on open-ended questions where they had to apply what they read in the reading comprehension and then link it to their general knowledge.' (Mrs Ngobese, teacher, 39)

Corroborating their teachers, the learners' responses below also revealed awareness of the negative impact on their reading skills:

> 'But during COVID we were home. …. We didn't bother reading. I was reading, sometimes because my mother forced me. I was not used to reading. I could not read like I can read now.' (Thabile, learner, 16)

> 'Sir, it affected us very badly because we were going to school almost like once or twice a week. And, sir, at home, we were not able to read.' (Dintle, learner, 16)

The data suggest not only evidence of reading loss but also a limited reading culture among learners. A stronger home-based reading culture could have mitigated some of the negative effects of schooling disruptions, particularly where learners had access to appropriate reading materials. This insight underscored the need for targeted reading interventions and further strengthened the rationale for the present study.

### Increased motivation to read for pleasure

The aim of the FVR approach is for learners to derive pleasure in what they are reading. Although it may take time for learners to find books that are genuinely interesting, the ultimate goal is for reading to become an intrinsically pleasurable experience. The following are excerpts from the learners' focus group discussions:

> 'So, one of my one of my goals that I actually wrote down, was to use the books, like use the novels that we got as a type of reward after studying for a certain amount of time. Right? I would say, 'I'm going to study for like an hour.' Then I'll read a chapter as a reward for studying for that time. Then I found myself reading three chapters instead of reading just one, and I was enjoying reading. … So, from my part, it was really pleasing, and I really enjoyed it.' (Thato, learner, 16)

> 'Sir, the first time I came here, I just did it because I wanted to avoid taking part in Sesotho extra class. But after some time, after I started reading War Horse, I started liking coming in because it was quiet and I had time to read it, and I got attached to some of the books I was reading.' (John, learner, 17)

> 'There has been a lot of improvement, sir. The reason why I say so is because reading has become a little fun. … I didn't enjoy reading. So now that I'm reading because I want to read, I enjoy it.' (Ayanda, learner, 16)

The responses above illustrate the learners' increasing pleasure in reading. When learners derive greater pleasure from reading, they become motivated to read frequently, a pattern that is further explored in the next theme on reading habits. The observational data also revealed that learners were genuinely immersed in the reading process. The strong rapport established through close collaboration with the co-researchers facilitated open communication and strengthened the custodianship of the programme. Although SSR sessions were scheduled at 14:30, the co-researchers often alerted the researchers if there were events at school that would allow the reading sessions to begin earlier. On such occasions, sessions commenced at 13:00, an hour and 45 min before the end of the school day, demonstrating the learners' sustained interest and enjoyment of the programme. Although close collaboration with the co-researchers could potentially elicit

socially desirable responses, their voluntary requests for additional reading when the opportunities arose suggest genuine interest and an emerging pleasure in reading.

## Increased reading habits

As indicated in the previous theme, learners who derive pleasure from reading often become motivated to read more. Over time, this increased engagement inculcates a sustained reading culture, which is the central aim of FVR. This pattern is reflected in the following quotes from the focus group discussions:

> 'Comparing my reading before and now. Before, I just had to make my parents happy… So, I just read for the sake of making them happy. But now I'm getting interested in reading. I'm always reading.' (Katleho, learner, 16)

> 'Now, I see something. I am benefiting something from reading, and I feel like we should keep on going.' (Thabile, learner, 16)

> 'Now, I often read. Most of the time, whenever I get the time to read, I read. So, it benefited me.' (Vinny, learner, 16)

> 'Honestly speaking, these hard copies, every book that I read, I read during my spare time. Let me just make an example. Maybe if the teacher just got out of class, I'd read the book. When going home, I read the book. When going to school, I read the book in the taxi and so forth, and that's how I finished the books.' (Thato, learner, 16)

Corroborating the learners' responses, quoted below are the teachers' reflections from the semi-structured interviews:

> 'I thought I knew these learners, but surprisingly, they got so interested in it, and sometimes when I get to class, when there are no teachers, you find them reading their novels. So, I think it has created a love for reading. And then they also have this healthy competition of who will finish the book first. I think it's a good thing.' (Mrs Ngobese, teacher, 39)

> 'What I've realised again … the ones that we were working with, the first group that we were working with, what I realised about them, it might be during break time or any other daytime, tuition time or whatever that is happening in the school, you'll find them holding their books.' (Mrs Lethole, teacher, 36)

The learners' quotes above illustrate a transition from having limited reading habits to developing regular reading habits. They also reveal that learners themselves recognised a positive change in their reading behaviours. Interestingly, the teachers' observations corroborated this development, noting the emergence of an increasing reading culture among the learners. One researcher even observed a participating learner reading on the sidewalk after school, an informal, yet compelling, indication of her growing interest in reading. Such evidence suggests that the FVR implementation was making a positive impact, contributing to efforts to mitigate the COVID-19-induced reading loss.

## Increased confidence to read

Reading in the presence of peers can be a daunting task for learners with low confidence, particularly when they feel that their reading skills are not good enough for reading aloud in class. However, the data analysis revealed that participation in the FVR programme contributed to increased reading confidence among the learners. Evidence of this growing confidence is captured in their responses below from the focus group discussions:

> 'Right now, if our teacher asks someone to read, I just volunteer because I can interpret words very fast, sir.' (Teboho, learner, 16)

> 'Even when a teacher would tell me to read, I would just keep quiet and continue with whatever I was doing. But now a teacher will just say, 'Vinny, read' and I would read.' (Vinny, learner, 16)

> 'I could say I benefited something from the programme. It has improved my confidence a lot.' (Thabile, learner, 16)

Notably, the teachers' responses from one-on-one semi-structured interviews resonate with those of the learners:

> 'There has been an improvement because, at first, before the whole thing, the only thing that made them read in class, is you having to point them out to read, you know. But now I've seen they're showing interest. There's no need for me to pinpoint them.' (Mrs Lethole, teacher, 36)

> 'But now … they are confident. Now, they are able to read aloud in class. … So, I think it has made them to be confident to read, even to read aloud in front of other learners.' (Mrs Ngobese, teacher, 39)

The reflections above demonstrate that learners have developed greater confidence in their reading. Interestingly, the teachers' observations from semi-structured interviews corroborate the learners' accounts. As Mrs Ngobese's observation succinctly noted, 'I think it has made them to be confident to read, even to read aloud in front of other learners.'

## Improved reading skills

The primary objective of this study was to implement the FVR approach to mitigate COVID-19-induced reading loss in rural English FAL Grade 10 classrooms. Within this context, the data revealed patterns of enhanced reading competencies commonly associated with SSR. These competencies include reading fluency (appropriate pacing and pausing), reading comprehension, reading stamina, and confidence in oral reading. The learners' reflections below acknowledge these gains:

> 'My reading skills really improved because I can identify where to pause when reading, where to pause and continue reading.' (Ayanda, learner, 16)

> 'But now … I'm always reading. My reading with understanding has improved. I now understand what I'm reading.' (Katleho, learner, 16)

> 'Sir, I can add that a few weeks after joining the programme, right? I found out that … I was able to read, like, a very thick book within two weeks, right? So, for me, that was a massive improvement in my reading skills. I can understand the content deeper.' (Thato, learner, 16)

These learner accounts suggest growth across several dimensions of reading. Ayanda's reflection indicates developing fluency and prosodic awareness, particularly the

ability to regulate pauses and pacing during reading. Katleho's response highlights improved comprehension and sustained engagement with reading, while Thato's experience suggests the development of reading stamina and deeper meaning-making when engaging with longer texts. Although these insights reflect learners' self-reported experiences rather than measured performance outcomes, they provide valuable evidence of how learners perceived the influence of the FVR programme on their reading practices.

Findings from the semi-structured interviews with teachers corroborate the learners' perspectives:

> 'There has been an improvement in their reading skills, now they understand what they are reading. They are more confident in reading.' (Mrs Lethole, teacher, 36)

> 'I realise that with the learners who are doing this free voluntary reading, they would volunteer to read, and their reading skills have improved. The likes of Ayanda and Vinny in 10A. They are in my class, and so now they are better readers.' (Mrs Ngobese, teacher, 39)

The teachers' observations reinforce the patterns reported by learners, particularly regarding enhanced comprehension, increased willingness to read aloud, and greater confidence when engaging with texts. Since the study adopted a qualitative design, no baseline or post-intervention quantitative assessments were conducted to measure changes in reading performance. However, the convergence of perspectives from two independently generated data sources strengthens the credibility of the findings through triangulation, as both learners and teachers describe similar improvements in reading behaviour and engagement. This points to the successful implementation of the FVR approach.

### Enhanced imaginative abilities

A hallmark of skilled writers is the ability to evoke vivid, sensory images in readers, a skill that relies on strong reading comprehension. The learners' verbatim quotes reveal that sustained exposure to comprehensible and compelling texts through the FVR programme has enhanced their capacity to visualise and imagine as they read:

> 'I benefited some things, you know, like imagining what's happening in the story… Imagining helps me understand what's happening in what I'm reading.' (Thabile, learner, 16)

> 'For me, at first, I couldn't read while visualising what I'm reading. But I can now visualise what I'm reading.' (Katleho, learner, 16)

> 'It really helped me a lot. … And the way I feel about stories that I read, sometimes I get imaginary. … I imagine things. Yeah, I feel the story, especially the one I was reading.' (Ayanda, learner, 16)

> 'And the second thing I noticed is that while reading, I can actually see or like imagine the characters, and I can actually see them, like, 'OK. He is there. He is moving to that chair. That person is leaning like that.' I can understand the content deeper, I could say that.' (Thato, learner, 16)

The learners' reflections above indicate their growing awareness of their improving reading skills. They recognise the significance of developing imaginative abilities, noting that visualising events and scenarios while reading deepens their engagement with the text, a foundational skill for effective reading.

## Discussion

Despite the absence of baseline assessments due to the study's qualitative design, evidence from the co-researchers' lived experiences suggests that opportunities for sustained engagement in reading activities and teacher-guided literacy development during this period were significantly reduced. These disruptions were perceived to have contributed to noticeable declines in learners' reading proficiency. Therefore, the findings underscored the need for targeted reading interventions to strengthen learners' engagement with reading and rebuild foundational literacy practices following the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis, FVR is anchored on the premise that language acquisition is enhanced by exposure to comprehensible and compelling input. The enjoyment derived from this exposure lowers the affective filter, increasing input uptake and promoting language development (Krashen 1985). In this study, the learners' reported enjoyment and greater motivation to read for pleasure provide initial evidence that these conditions were met. Corroborated by observational data, the learners' voluntary initiative to extend their reading time, despite competing school activities, further attests to the genuineness of their participation, thereby ruling out compliance or the need to portray socially desirable behaviour. Such behaviour resonates with Krashen and Mason's (2020) claim that compelling input can sustain engagement even when comprehension is partial. The freedom to select their own books and abandon those that did not capture their interests established conditions for optimal comprehensibility and engagement. These findings demonstrate that the FVR intervention was implemented successfully.

Pleasure-enhanced reading emerged as a driving force for potentially developing independent reading habits, a key factor in promoting autonomous language learning beyond the classroom. Although the sustainability of these reading habits beyond the intervention period could not be empirically determined, and would require longitudinal follow-up, both learners' and teachers' accounts consistently indicate increased frequency, engagement, and spontaneity in reading practices during the intervention period. These converging perspectives suggest that participation in the programme fostered a noticeable shift in learners' reading behaviour, characterised by a greater inclination to read voluntarily and more regularly. Observational data supported these claims; for example, learners were often seen reading during free moments, even on the sidewalk. In this way, the multiple data sources enhanced the credibility of the findings, with teachers' reflections confirming learners' accounts (Nassaji 2020). Patrick (2019) noted that while scheduling reading time might seem imposed and at odds

with the spirit of FVR, such structured opportunities are necessary for developing reading habits. Similarly, improvements reported in Bautista and Marulanda (2018) and Mokoena and Tsotetsi (2021) further support the argument that FVR is a catalyst for change in learners' reading behaviours.

Furthermore, learners reported increased confidence in reading aloud, frequently framing their progress as a clear transition from their previous reluctance. The teachers' observations also aligned with these claims. Triangulating the learners' accounts with the teachers' reflections validates the argument that the observed gains stemmed from enhanced reading proficiency developed through FVR. The≈participatory norms of PALAR appear to have contributed to this outcome by fostering a sense of co-ownership of the FVR intervention. This collaborative feature arguably contributed to the sustainability of the behavioural shifts, corroborating Wood and Zuber-Skerritt's (2013) argument that participatory action research fosters long-term engagement. Similarly, the current findings align with those of Lee (2019), McQuillan (2019), and Kazemi (2021), who also reported gains in learners' confidence, language proficiency, and motivation to read following FVR interventions.

The study's core aim of implementing FVR to mitigate COVID-19-induced reading loss in rural Grade 10 English FAL classrooms was largely achieved. Learners' perspectives reveal substantial improvements in fluency and comprehension, with several affirming their ability to handle and understand longer texts with ease. These self-reported gains are further reinforced by teachers' reflections, which corroborate the learners' claims. However, the extent of these improvements should be interpreted cautiously, as the findings were primarily not the result of standardised reading assessments, but self-reports and observational indicators. While self-reports and observational indicators permit insights into the learners' reading gains, they underscore the need for more robust measurement in future research. Nevertheless, the consistency of the findings across the different data generation sources employed in this study points to the effectiveness of the FVR intervention, aligning with previous research (Efendi & Deyani 2022; Kasap & Peterson 2018; Keshmirshekan 2019; Khotimah 2020). This alignment lends weight to the conclusion that sustained engagement with compelling and comprehensible input supported the learners' reading development. Therefore, the findings support Krashen and Mason's (2020) assertion that regular exposure to compelling and comprehensible input fosters reading development. Moreover, the findings highlight the potential of FVR to support learning beyond the classroom by cultivating lifelong reading habits. As Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021) argue, increased pleasure reading leads to improved reading proficiency, and once a threshold of proficiency is established, reading becomes self-sustaining. Therefore, this study provides credible evidence that FVR can serve as a low-cost, scalable strategy for mitigating reading loss in resource-constrained rural contexts.

Another notable outcome of the study is the development of the learners' imaginative abilities. Learners reported enhanced capacity to visualise scenes and events more vividly, an ability closely tied to comprehension. This reinforces the central tenet of Krashen's Input Hypothesis, that compelling and comprehensible input immerses learners in the reading experience to the point where they become less conscious of the linguistic demands. The relationship between imagination and comprehension has been widely recognised. Kucirkova and Cremin (2020) assert that imagination helps readers infer meaning when linguistic cues are incomplete, thereby deepening their understanding. In the same vein, Kind (2022) adds that reading fiction fosters imaginative exploration by immersing readers in fictional worlds, thereby enhancing interpretive skills. These arguments align with the learners' accounts since they recognised imagination as central to enhancing their comprehension. Thus, the emergence of imagination as a by-product of FVR adds further evidence of its success in mitigating COVID-19-induced reading loss among rural Grade 10 English FAL learners. It also highlights the broader cognitive and affective benefits of sustained, meaningful reading engagement.

Collectively, these findings present a persuasive case for FVR as a low-cost, high-impact and sustainable reading intervention for rural South African classrooms. The evidence provided by the current study indicates that when implemented in accordance with the principles of PALAR, FVR holds the potential to address reading loss while simultaneously fostering a reading culture that is a cornerstone of learner autonomy and lifelong learning.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to mitigate COVID-19-induced reading loss in rural English FAL classrooms by implementing FVR. The findings from the teachers' and learners' lived experiences suggest that this objective was successfully achieved, with learners demonstrating improved reading habits, comprehension, confidence, and imaginative engagement. Although the absence of baseline assessments and the qualitative design warrant cautious interpretation, the triangulation of learner and teacher perspectives provides credible qualitative evidence that sustained opportunities for voluntary reading may contribute to the recovery and strengthening of reading practices in post-pandemic rural FAL classrooms. More broadly, these findings position FVR not only as a remedial response to pandemic-related disruptions but as a sustainable and transformative literacy practice that cultivates autonomy, motivation, and enduring reading habits.

Based on these findings, we recommend that teachers and language practitioners integrate FVR into their pedagogical practice. Beyond providing access to books, it is crucial to create structured opportunities for reading within the school day. Such measures can address current learning gaps while also fostering a reading culture, particularly in under-resourced rural contexts.

The researchers acknowledge that the study's small sample size limits the generalisabilty of the findings. As a result, future research should prioritise larger-scale, longitudinal studies that include standardised reading assessments to provide rigorous measures of reading gains across learners of different abilities. Nonetheless, the current findings provide policymakers with insight that promoting school-based reading interventions is essential. This can be achieved by formally incorporating a reading period in the school timetable or by redesigning the curriculum to integrate reading activities into daily learning. These efforts should be supported by establishing new school libraries and refurbishing the existing ones. Establishing such conditions has the potential to enhance learners' reading gains and foster a robust reading culture.

# Acknowledgements


## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## CRediT authorship contribution

Mojaki G. Mojaki: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Nomalungelo I. Ngubane: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Mojaki G. Mojaki, upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

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