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Addressing the challenge of over-crowdedness in English First Additional Language (EFAL) classrooms

ABSTRACT

This paper lends itself to extenuating the impact of over-crowdedness in the intermediate phase EFAL classrooms. An in-depth investigation into the causes of poor performance in the intermediate phase EFAL classrooms revealed over-crowdedness as one of the main possible causes. The pedagogical impediments that result from this phenomenon affect the intermediate phase EFL teachers more due to the curriculum requirements of this subject. The study was conducted in the Motheo Education District, in the Free State Province. The data was collected qualitatively, through the use of a group interview, semi-structured interviews and observations. The interviews focused on both well-performing and poor performing schools, while the observations focused on the

well-performing schools. The data, which was analysed thematically, revealed the following practices that can benefit EFAL teachers working in overcrowded intermediate phase classrooms: effective planning and preparation, the integration of skills, constructive teaching, explicit instruction, a selective approach, note-taking and the process approach. The study was premised on the theory of hope, as the insights from well-performing schools expound the importance of not losing hope and remaining motivated to mitigate contextual factors.

Keywords: EFAL, overcrowded, intermediate, insights, good performing, standards

1. Introduction

In his book, *Pedagogy of hope*, Freire (1997) emphasizes that regardless of the many social issues we face as a society, educationists should not lose hope. Educationists should make it their duty always to look for positive alternatives. Freire defended this notion to his colleagues, who were cynical of his continued endeavours to find solutions to educational problems in his country during that particular period. This assertion is raised in the introduction, because this paper focuses on over-crowdedness, a complex phenomenon, which teachers in certain parts of South Africa (SA) have to contend with. In addressing this issue, this paper begins by providing the background to challenges relating to intermediate phase EFAL classrooms in SA, which include the realities about over-crowdedness. This is followed by the literature review which focuses on the need for the language teachers to be life-long learners, the concept over-crowdedness, and the causes of over-crowdedness in Africa and SA. This literature section encapsulates pertinent theoretical issues. The main part of the paper presents the challenges as explicated by the data, together with pertinent suggestions on how the challenges can be mitigated.

2. Background

The Department of Education (DoE) in South Africa regards FAL as a critical subject. In part, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) of the department highlight this about EFAL in the intermediate phase:

“... greater emphasis is therefore placed on using the First Additional Language for the purposes of thinking and reasoning. This enables learners to develop their cognitive academic skills, which they need to study subjects like Science in English. They also engage more with literary texts and begin to develop aesthetic and imaginative ability in their Additional Language” (DoBE, 2011).

This quotation signifies the importance of EFAL regarding meaningful learning in the intermediate phase. It highlights the reality that EFAL can impact on how learners perform in content subjects. Unfortunately, at the moment, research points to the fact that the majority of the learners who take EFAL as a subject actually struggle (Van den Berg, 2011; Zimmerman & Smit; 2014). This sad state of affairs was confirmed by reports on the Annual National Assessment (ANA) stretching from 2009 to 2014.

School climate is one of the possible causes of the scenario explicated above (Cao, 2014; Christopher, 2010; Creemers, Antoniou & Demetriou, 2010; Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena, 2017; Gillen, Wright & Spink, 2011; Kyriakides, Wali, Abulfathi & Mustapha, 2019). According to Peng (2019), school climate can even affect attempts at multi-modality. One critical problem related to school climate in SA is over-crowdedness. The literature reveals that this is still a huge problem in SA (Howie et al., 2017, Jika, 2016; Mafisa, 2013; Matsepe, Maluleke & Cross, 2019; Matshipi, Mulaudzi & Mashau, 2017;

Mdletshe, 2013; Velaphi, 2013, West & Meyer 2020). Information from these sources highlights that a significant number of schools in SA are overcrowded, and that most of them are found in rural areas and townships. In most cases, these are the schools where the learners take English as both a subject and a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). In some instances the teachers have to contend with close to a hundred learners in a classroom. This has negative implications for any classroom.

Savage and Savage (2010) associate the following with overcrowded classrooms: tiredness, aggression and defiance, anxiety amongst certain learners, limited privacy, competition for attention, and negative effects on performance. Within the context of EFAL, these problems are compounded by the fact that, compared to other subjects, the intermediate phase curriculum places more responsibilities on the shoulders of the teachers. One just has to look at the intermediate phase teaching plan to see that EFAL teachers have too much to cope with (DoBE, 2011). It should be noted though that the DoBE is planning to reduce assessment requirements in the intermediate phase, but the contents of the teaching plan will not be reduced. Having to deal with all these, as well as to mitigate the problem of large numbers of learners, may be too huge a task for some intermediate phase EFAL teachers. Unfortunately, these teachers have to deal with this problem, as there is evidence that the DoBE will not be able to solve this quandary anytime soon (Marais, 2016).

The Minister of Basic Education, Ms Angie Motshekga has acceded to the sad reality that the Government has failed to meet its own targets in terms of school infrastructure projects (Govender, 2020). The report on the Accelerated School Infrastructure Development Initiative (ASIDI) presented to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2018) clearly indicates that there is a huge backlog because of issues such as incompetent contractors, lack of synergy between the DoBE and the Department of Public Works (DPW), migration patterns, unfavourable terrain, shortages in terms of human resources, and rationalization. In addition to this, it is now a given that the government is not in a position to employ the desired number of teachers. The statistics provided by the DoE over the years confirm this sad state (DoE, 2006; DoBE, 2014). What this means is that the EFAL teacher in the overcrowded intermediate phase classroom should find means and ways to mitigate the situation. Hence the 'pedagogy of hope' by Paul Freire is used to introduce this paper.

3. Literature review

EFAL teachers as life-long learners

In current times, information in all disciplines loses its validity quicker, due to the dynamic nature of teaching and learning (Kazu & Demiralp, 2016). Language and language teaching have also been affected by this phenomenon. Another dynamic is that language teaching is not straightforward (Okrent, 2017; Sapir, 1929; Woods, 1996).

These scholars highlight the scientific nature of language teaching. Walenski and Ullman (2005) argue that language teaching should integrate theoretical and methodological approaches across and within disciplines. In addition, Wright (2014), argues that the modern teacher carries too much weight. The review of the interim Annual Teaching Plans (ATP's) also gives an indication that the EFAL intermediate teacher still has significant responsibilities to deal with. All these mean that language teachers should not be complacent. They should think deeply about their craft, in order to take the necessary decisions, and to make appropriate adjustments. They need to read and research extensively, more so because the SA school curriculum still prescribes that teachers should be life-long learners. Language teachers need to appreciate that effective teaching and resourcefulness require a certain level of cognitive investment on their part. They are expected to constantly improve their knowledge, for the benefit of the learners (Al Asmari, 2016; Uzunboylu & Selcuk, 2016). This endeavour to improve oneself should also focus on how they can mitigate the challenges presented by overcrowdedness.

What is an overcrowded classroom?

Olaleye, Ajayi, Oyebola and Ajayi (2017) maintain that a classroom is overcrowded when the number of the pupils in that classroom put a strain on the available resources, the teachers, the infrastructure and the instructional material. Ayub, Saud and Akhtar (2018) equate an overcrowded classroom to a situation where the number of learners exceed the actual capacity of the structure. As Opotow (2006) observes, the problem begins when a school enrolls a larger number of students than it is designed to accommodate. The understanding is that a classroom is overcrowded if the numbers prevent teachers to perform their duties, as well as when these numbers prevent learners from achieving their academic goals. Onwu and Stoffels (2005:82) assert that most of the sub-Saharan countries limit their explanation of an overcrowded classroom to a situation where the specified teacher-learner ratio is exceeded. Unfortunately, as opined by Matsepe, Maluleke and Cross (2019), there are different views on the suitable teacher-learner ratio. These authors indicate that in some instances, a number of around 80 in a classroom is considered appropriate. In some Western countries, any number above 30 learners in a classroom may be deemed too high (West & Meier, 2020). Renowned scholars such as John Dewey actually emphasised that a classroom needs to have not more than 20 learners (Fatima, Mushatq & Fatima, 2019).

In the context of SA, the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), indicates that the agreed upon teacher-learner ratio is 1:40 (Bantwini, 2010, West & Meier, 2020). The World Bank also recommends the 1:40 as the ideal ratio. It should be noted though that teacher-learner ratio refers to the average number of learners per educator at a specific level of education in a given school year (DoBE, 2014). It does not necessarily translate into class size, which refers to the actual number of learners in the individual classrooms. This means that the teacher-learner ratio and class size may differ in certain instances.

Causes of over-crowdedness

This section explicates what has resulted in over-crowdedness at schools in Africa and South Africa. A number of international initiatives are discussed as a result. Through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations committed itself to eradicating illiteracy in the world (Korsah, Mostov, Dias, Sweet, Belousov, Dias and Gong, 2010:1). Many African countries embraced this initiative, and implemented appropriate measures. Another significant initiative was the access for all programme, which was adopted at the World Conference on Education for all, for the period 1990-2015. The main objective of this programme was to promote literacy (Compion, Steyn, Wolhuter and Van der Walt, 2011). In Adeyemi (2012:15-16), the following declarations that forced signatories to improve access to education are highlighted: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1990 Jomtien Declaration and Framework for Action on Basic Education for all, the 1991 New Delhi Declaration on the R-9 countries (countries with the lowest level of literacy), and the 2000 Brazil Declaration. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was about the right of every individual to education.

The World Bank and the United Nations International Children and Education Fund (UNICEF) in 2005 began to advocate for Free Education, which resulted in schools in many countries abolishing school fees (Al-Samarrai & Zaman, 2007). The aim was to improve access to schooling in the countries with high illiteracy levels. This initiative led to increased enrolments in many African countries (Kemp, 2008; Morojele, 2012). The Universal Primary Education (UPE) is another programme which was introduced in Africa to boost literacy levels (Nishimura, Ogawa, Sifuna, Chimombo, Kunje, Ampiah, Byamugisha, Sawamura, & Yamada, 2009). This programme also contributed to the increase in learner numbers in a number of African countries. UNESCO (2008) points out that the expansion of primary education in Africa had increased enrolments by 36% between 1999 and 2005. Demebele and Lefoka (2007) postulates that UPE increased the number of learners in schools and this in turn raised demands in terms of teachers in the affected countries. South Africa was also affected by this phenomenon.

With the advent of a democratic dispensation in 1994, South Africa was re-accepted into the UN and one of the first major international agreements on education the country took part in was the Dakar Framework for Action of 2000 (DoE, 2003). This is where the country committed itself to combating poverty and uplifting South Africans through the provision of basic education, which led to the decision to legislate compulsory education for all children of school going age. This was after the South African constitution had declared education a fundamental human right for all the citizens (DoE, 2001). All these led to the country embarking on its own measures to eradicate or decrease illiteracy levels. School attendance was declared compulsory for all learners between the ages of 7 and 15 (South African Schools Act, 1996: chapter 2). The same act stipulates that the learner can only stay away from school, or be prevented from attending school if there is a just cause. These measures have arguably led to increased enrolments and inadvertently resulted in some schools being overcrowded.

Post-provisioning may also be a contributing factor to the problem of overcrowding in South African schools. In Seekoei (2015,) it is reported that according to the post-provisioning model used in South Africa, the number of teachers needed in each province is calculated according to the number of learners in a province. In 2003, the DoE published information on how teaching posts were allocated in South Africa, and this highlighted the complexity of the system. From 1998 to 2002, the post-provisioning model was affordability-driven, and considered inputs such as straight enrolment, the grade, LoLT and curriculum offerings in grades 10 to 12. This was replaced with a pro-poor weighting system in 2002, to counter-act the advantage that was enjoyed by historically advantaged schools. The Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, in her response to parliament (12 September 2012), explained that MEC's in the provinces had to create a pool of posts in accordance with the funds available for this new system. The latter statement is our concern, as it suggests that if the budget is small, the formula used will be modified to ensure a reduced allocation of teachers, regardless of the number of learners in the school, or even across the province. This may actually be the case, because the criteria in the staff establishment documents in the schools has not been the same over the years.

Infrastructural factors may have also contributed to the problem of over-crowdedness in South African schools. This is another aspect that the teachers affected have no power over. Evidence is there that there is a shortage of infrastructure and teachers in South Africa. The website of the DoBE refers to the Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI). According to the projections of the project, the DoBE had a plan to build about 339 schools between 2011 and 2015. Based on the statistics on the website, by the end of 2013, only 78 schools had been completed country wide. Motshekga (2014) points out that the ASIDI programme together with the Provincial Infrastructure Programmes, form the backbone of the Strategic Integrated Project (SIP) and the National School Built Programme. There are concerns, however, that the ASIDI progress is very slow, with many missed targets (Malingo, 2015). The DoBE (2013) indicates that the government has taken the decision to address the school infrastructure backlog in South Africa, and this has to happen by 2020. This will be seven years from the date of publication of the new regulations on public school infrastructure. Amongst others, the department had to build schools, or even increase the number classrooms in other schools. If this does not happen as planned, there is bound to be congestion in classrooms, because the population of the country is growing.

The availability of teachers has also been cited as a concern. A school with a shortage of teachers may not have any other option, but to congest the learners. The statistics released by the DoE over the years highlighted this concern. One report by the DoE highlights that around 2006, South Africa had a shortage of about 15 000 teachers (DoE, 2006). The same report attributes the decline in the numbers of people who choose teaching as a profession to the following factors: poor image of the profession, uncertainty about placement after completion, a competitive employment market, working conditions and changes in bursary conditions. The same document indicates that South Africa has more teacher shortages in subjects such as mathematics, natural

science, technology and languages. It further points out that more shortages are in the foundation and intermediate phases. After 1994, teacher training colleges were closed down or turned into Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges in South Africa (DoE, 2003). This has been identified as another factor that has led to a low production of teachers.

Our view, though, is that the issue of the availability of teachers should not be limited to teacher production. There are other factors such as the recruitment strategy, socio-economics and geographical area that should be considered. Getting teachers to apply and take posts up in certain areas, especially rural areas, may be a challenge. This is due to push factors such as poor service delivery, limited or non-availability of recreational amenities and lack of schooling opportunities for the children, amongst others. The situation about overcrowding as painted in the introductory section of this paper pertains mostly to rural areas and the townships. Schools in certain parts of the country are not overcrowded. Even in the same area or town, the situation in the schools differs in terms of learner numbers. Some of the schools do not have a problem because they can afford to employ and pay additional teachers. The DoE should have a strategy that will ensure that all areas in the country, especially rural areas, are adequately resourced in terms of personnel.

4. Theoretical issues

This paper is premised on the theory of hope, a theory that originates from the field of positive psychology (Kibby, 2015). According to Huen, Ip, Ho and Yip (2015), some scholars conceptualize hope as *“a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful goal-directed determination and planning of ways to meet the goals”*. Hope theory is grounded in the salutogenic paradigm, which focuses more on the coping mechanisms of individuals (Idan & Margalit, 2013). These authors further point out that the theory is about having a positive outlook, despite one’s current situation. According to Trzebiski and Zieba (2004), basic hope is about embracing order, meaning and positivity.

What stands out from the above explanations is that giving up should not be an option under any circumstance. It is about remaining hopeful in a hopeless situation. This message is relevant for EFAL teachers in South Africa, because they are faced with a complex, and possibly discouraging situation. Most learners in the intermediate phase struggle with EFAL, and that in itself is a challenge. This is a dilemma in most countries of the African continent, because most of the learners are either learning a foreign language, or using it as LoLT (Chatry-Komarek, 2003). This dilemma is compounded by the issue of a loaded teaching plan, and a learning environment that is not conducive. This is further compounded by the reality of large numbers of learners in the classroom. This is a situation that can easily demotivate any teacher, hence the choice of ‘hope’ as a theory. Idan and Margalit (2013) argue that learners with high hope are able to identify their challenges and work through them successfully. If hope can help learners

to be resilient and succeed against all odds, then teachers can also benefit from having a positive outlook about their situation. Of course motivation and hopefulness may not bring out the best out of all the teachers, but the reality is that there are those teachers who excel even in adverse situations, while others struggle under the same conditions. As will be evident later, the findings of this article attest to the fact that some of the intermediate phase EFAL teachers working in overcrowded classrooms succeed because they are resilient.

5. Methodological issues

The main question that guided this study was, *which insights can benefit the EFAL teachers who teach in overcrowded intermediate phase classrooms?* In order to respond to this question, the interpretive paradigm was deemed appropriate to inform the methodology. It enabled a close interaction with the participants, which resulted in a detailed understanding of how they perceive their situation, and what they believe should be done to improve it (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:21). Phenomenology was therefore used as a research design, because the objective was to set aside all judgements and collect data on how EFAL teachers in the intermediate phase make sense of their reality (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:26). In line with this design, qualitative approaches were employed, where the focus was more on words and categories (Johnson & Christensen, 2012:33-34).

Participation was sought by purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method, to select cases that are especially informative (Neuman, 2007:141). All the participants had been teaching EFAL for more than five years in township schools. All the schools are located in Bloemfontein, which is located in the Motheo education district, and are overcrowded. For the group interview, the focus was on those who worked in schools listed as under-performing. For individual interviews and observations, the focus was on teachers from schools listed as well-performing. The rationale was to identify, amongst others, the differences in practice.

The data collection commenced with a focus-group interview, with the intention of getting a variety of viewpoints on the topic in focus, namely over-crowdedness (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015:174). Eight teachers from under-performing schools were interviewed with a view to confirming and crystalizing the problem. The discussions were centred on the following questions: *how many learners do you have in your classroom/s? What is the impact of the large numbers? Which of the prescribed language skills has proved to be more difficult to assess and teach? Which strategies do you use to mitigate the mentioned challenges?*

The group interview provided direction in terms of what the focus of the individual interviews should be. In the second phase of data collection, eight teachers from well-performing schools individually shared their experiences in terms of how they managed to produce good results. These interviews allowed us to solicit information on facts, beliefs

and perspectives, feelings, motives, present and past behaviours, reasons for actions, and standards for behaviour (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:146). The individual interviewees were presented with the same questions as the group interview participants.

The responses from the interviews referred to above informed the last phase of data collection, which was participant observation. The observed participants were also from well-performing schools, and the main objective was to identify how they mitigated overcrowdedness in their spaces. The observations focused also on attitudes, behaviour, and relationships (Johnson & Christensen, 2012:206).

The data analysis was descriptive, where we searched for patterns, themes and holistic features (Johnson & Christensen, 2012:34). This was followed by a thorough interpretation of the findings, resulting in us generating conclusions and recommendations.

The following practices that support trustworthiness were observed: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Member checking was conducted by verifying certain aspects of the data with the participants concerned (Cope, 2014:89). The scholar mentioned in the previous sentence advocates for pro-longed engagement, which was, in the case of this article, achieved by conducting a group interview, semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Sufficient contextual information about the research sites and the phenomenon under investigation have been provided to enable the reader to make a determination of whether the findings can be considered transferable or not (Shenton, 2004:69). To achieve dependability, the supervisors to the study verified the decision trail at each stage of the study (Cope (2014:89). Confirmability, which is about an accurate reflection of the participant's views, was ensured by providing rich quotes from the participants to depict each emerging theme, especially from the group and the individual interviews (Cope, 2014:89). Triangulation was used to ensure confirmability as it would reduce research bias (Shenton, 2004:72). Methodological triangulation was used, and this resulted in a constant comparison of the three data sets.

6. Ethical considerations

All permissions were secured from the University of the Free State, the Free State Department of Education and the principals of the selected schools. The group participants signed both consent and confidentiality letters, in order to protect their identities and ensure the confidentiality of the discussions. All care was taken to protect the participants from any sort of harm. The individual participants also signed consent letters that guaranteed their anonymity, the confidentiality of their responses, as well protection from any sort of harm. The observed teachers signed consent letters that guaranteed their anonymity, confidentiality in relation to their practices, and protection from any form of harm.

7. Findings and discussions

Challenges experienced by the EFAL teachers

The group interview highlighted the reality that EFAL teachers at under-performing schools were distressed. They complained about issues such as lack of time to complete the syllabus, poor discipline, the inability to provide individual attention to learners and to assess them effectively. The following two quotations serve as evidence for these frustrations:

Group participant - Sometimes you are unable to control the learners, which leads to ill-discipline and activities that are incomplete. You cannot see that this learner has not done his work, let alone assisting him. You try to explain this side; some of the learners will be talking or doing other things. You cannot even see who they are sometimes. Even when you try to do some marking they will disturb you because you spent a lot of time shouting.

Group participant - I sometimes cannot reach all the learners. Assessment is also difficult to execute meaningfully because of overcrowding. We have four skills to consider and it is very difficult to finish everything on time. The other two skills, oral and reading take a lot of time I can tell you. You can easily take two weeks doing the same thing”.

The quotations highlight the number of frustrations that the EFAL intermediate teachers working in overcrowded classrooms have to deal with. Below is a quotation that elucidates a teacher who has lost hope, and does not see the need to invest energy in solving the problem at hand.

Group participant – I do not do anything special. The government should reduce the number of the learners in the classes. Everything will just fall into place.

It has to be noted, though, that the individual interviewees also mentioned the same conundrums, but the main difference lied in how the two sets of teachers handled the situation. While the group participants looked despondent, the individual interviewees seemed to be more hopeful and upbeat. The latter trend was also noted during the classroom observations. This may explain why the individual interviewees and the observed teachers were able to produce desirable results, despite the fact that their schools were also overcrowded. This reinforces the importance of having a positive outlook as propagated by Paul Freire and by those who promulgate the theory of hope. The strategies discussed in the upcoming sections may be the result of this positive attribute.

Ways to improve pedagogy

This section focuses on those strategies mentioned and observed that can promote effective pedagogy in overcrowded intermediate phase EFAL classrooms. These are the insights that can be classified as good practice. However, the impact of each will differ based on context.

Effective planning and preparation

What transpired, especially during the classroom observations, is that evidently, the teachers at the well-performing schools valued planning and preparation. They always had their files with them, and would sometimes verify certain things from their files, like, for example, how an activity should be structured. That is how it was noticed that they plan for each lesson. Based on personal experience, we know that no planning takes place at some schools, despite the fact that it is a requirement in terms of the regulations. The question is, how do the teachers who do not plan hope to solve the problem of overcrowded classrooms without investing time in proper planning? For instance, in the previous section, it was indicated that some teachers complained about lack of time, because the classes were too large. Muijs and Reynolds (2011) highlights the reality that effective planning will not only assist the teacher in terms of effective content delivery, but that it will also assist them in terms of time management, classroom space and discipline issues. The observed teachers have proven that this unassuming practice is critical for an overcrowded EFAL classroom.

Integration of language skills

The CAPS prescribes four language skills in the intermediate phase namely, listening and speaking, writing and presenting, reading and viewing, as well as language structures and conventions (DoBE, 2011). In the same document, there is a teaching plan that guides teachers in terms of content and pacing. One of the challenges that were mentioned regularly by the participants during the interviews was that the teaching plan is loaded and impractical to complete. They indicated that if one focuses too much on quality one struggles to complete the plan. If one rushes through the plan, quality suffers.

The individual interviews and the observations indicated that some EFAL teachers use the integration of skills as a solution to this problem. They pay attention to more than one language skill in one lesson, as the quotation below signifies.

P1 I try to integrate language with the reading and writing, you know, to reinforce what they learned previously. Say, maybe we are supposed to deal with adjectives. I will make them read first, then in the same passage they will identify adjectives. I will explain first, though, what adjectives are. We try to save time that way, but the

learners should understand that this is not a reading lesson. The emphasis here are the adjectives ...

Instead of treating adjectives independently, this language item is integrated into the reading session. It is not clear in this instance whether the teacher uses integration for reinforcement or as a way to prepare the learners for an upcoming lesson. What is key is that the teacher has realised that to treat each language skill individually is time-consuming, especially in an overcrowded classroom. This resonates with the view of Lenski and Verbruggen (2010:25-26) who suggest that integrating language skills can benefit EFAL teachers working in overcrowded classrooms. This can happen in different ways. A teacher can choose not to spend a lot of time on a particular language item, knowing that it will be integrated into the upcoming lesson. The other option is for the teacher to introduce the language item during a reading session, with the knowledge that during the next lesson this item will be the focus. This will result in the teacher using less effort and time, because the learners already have an idea about the topic, or the language item. This idea can be extended to the other skills in several ways, and the teacher can modify this approach based on their context.

It is important for teachers to take time off when working in overcrowded classrooms. The group participants as quoted in section 7.1, blame lack of time on overcrowding. They also mention other issues like the inability to monitor properly, provide individual attention, difficulties in terms of curriculum coverage, and poor discipline on the part of the learners. Because a language classroom is a complex setting, all these facets will somehow impact on each other (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). On the backdrop of this assertion, the argument is that the integration of skills releases some time, and having more time enables the teacher to monitor progress, to provide feedback, to give attention to the learners at risk, and to address discipline issues in overcrowded classrooms particularly.

A selective approach to the curriculum

One of the concerns mentioned in section 7.1 is the teacher's inability to complete the prescribed set of work. This challenge is worse in an overcrowded classroom, especially because the teacher has to assess and provide meaningful feedback before moving on to the next topic. This disadvantages the learners in the sense that they miss the opportunity to learn some of the critical aspects. Some of the EFAL teachers have found a way around this dilemma, as the quotation below indicates.

P2 ... In language structures, some of the concepts repeat themselves. I check which ones we did last term then I start with those that do not repeat themselves. After finishing those ones, I will go back to those who repeat themselves.

In this instance, the teacher does not completely disregard particular topics, but defers them until later, instead. The drill is that even though these topics are not dealt with during the prescribed period, they will be addressed ultimately. Some bargaining with

the managers may also be necessary in this regard, so that they can understand the rationale for the deviation.

Cooperation in an overcrowded classroom

Cooperation satisfies some of the prescripts of constructive teaching and learning. A constructive set-up puts emphases on the active construction of knowledge on the part of the learner. As Muijs and Reynolds (2011) postulate, the social part of constructivism is that learners can learn from each another. This emphasizes the importance of strategies that promote social interaction. In line with this assertion, some of the participants indicated that they used group work for their benefit. This is despite the large number they have to deal with. This extract from one of the quotations bears testimony.

P2 ... So, I point out that they must always talk about what they are going to write about in groups.

The learners get the opportunity to discuss their work in groups before assessment. They get a chance to share ideas and explain concepts to one another. In this manner, the teacher 'shares' the workload with the learners, as the expectation is that, those who do not understand will be assisted by their peers. This is exactly what one of the participants pointed out.

P4 – ... Those who can, should assist those who cannot ...

This sums up the intended benefit namely, to facilitate understanding. This task is obviously shared with the learners. The teacher does not have to shoulder the full responsibility of explaining everything. Apart from its cognitive benefits, this approach assists in terms of reducing workload.

Another strategy that is cooperative by nature and was clearly used by some of the participants, is zig-zag formation. It was used during some of the grammar lessons during the observations. This is a strategy where learners are grouped together, after which each group member is provided with an identity in the form of a number or colour. All the learners with the same identity move to a breakaway group where they complete a particular task. Upon completion of the task, they return to their original group and share information.

P3 ... I also use that strategy where you have the 'original group' and the 'break away' group. They find information that way, on their own ...

Because each group is given a particular topic, at the end of the exercise, a number of topics would have been addressed. This assists the teacher in terms of curriculum coverage. If there are five groups, it means that five topics are addressed in one session. This reduces the teacher's workload and releases time for other activities such as assessment. What is key is that the teacher has to ensure that each group functions

effectively and that the report back to the original groups is meaningful. The teacher should also be proficient in terms of classroom organisation, seeing that the classroom is already overcrowded. Issues such as the seating arrangements, movement and transitions should be planned for.

The observations indicated that the learners were given the opportunity to discuss and summarise content in pairs or in groups after reading. This alleviates workload on the part of the teacher, and it also facilitates understanding, provided it is executed effectively. The observations conducted revealed that in some classes, the learners were provided with the opportunity to discuss ideas in pairs and groups before a speaking exercise. After this exercise, most of the learners seemed confident and eager to participate in class, thereby saving time. We know from experience that a listening and speaking activity can be very frustrating and time consuming if the learners are reluctant to take part. On the contrary, the teacher in this observed class seemed to enjoy the lesson.

The value of teaching media

Frustrations pertaining to overcrowded classrooms may lead to a limited use or complete disregard of teaching media. However, the data show that some of the EFAL teachers working in overcrowded setups do not avoid the use of teaching media. The quotation below shows that some teachers used posters and pictures as a means to facilitate understanding.

P2 We use posters. I teach four classes and at our school we must go to classes. We do not have learners coming to classes. I decorate in my register class and not the others. The classes are big and I do not have so many poster s... I use pictures to stimulate their thought when they do creative writing. They should explain in their own words what is happening in the pictures ...

One important aspect mentioned above is that of stimulating thought, but one can also argue that the use of pictures and posters will facilitate understanding as they serve to clarify certain concepts. In a way, this contributes to the activation of schemata. Scholars do support the idea that classrooms should be print-rich, as this enhances pedagogy (Fulani & Hendricks, 2014). Even during the observations, it was evident that the teachers go all out to ensure understanding, by using teaching media and by explaining intensively. Affording the learners the opportunity to explain the pictures in their own words is a constructive practice that facilitates deep understanding, especially if there is enough scaffolding on the part of the teacher. The question may be: How do all these assist in an overcrowded classroom?

In an overcrowded classroom, teachers spend a lot of time on assessment, and some even avoid this requirement completely. Teachers tend to spend a lot of time assessing if the learners' work is of poor or good quality. This is one of the moments where a teacher will experience a lot of stress and frustration. Our view is that understanding the content, and mastering the targeted skills before the assessment stage, may reduce

the stress load on the part of the teacher. For instance, in the observed classrooms, the teachers did not have to worry about providing additional assistance, because most of the learners in those overcrowded classrooms made sense of the discussions during the lesson. They also did not have to spend a lot of time on assessment and feedback, because of few mistakes on the part of the learners.

The Process approach

Amongst others, the CAPS prescribes the process approach as the best to teach language (DoBE, 2011). The pre, during and post activities associated with this approach have to be thoroughly planned for. Some EFAL teachers working with large numbers may avoid this approach because they believe it will take up too much time, due to the loaded teaching plan. The EFAL teachers from the well-performing schools had seen the need not to avoid this policy requirement, because they take the learners through the three phases. This benefits them and the learners because well-executed pre-activities means the during-activities proceed quicker and with less frustration. The picture painted here is that skipping certain steps of the process approach does not necessarily make things easier for the EFAL teacher in the overcrowded classroom. What was observed is that the teacher still spends a considerable time on the lesson, but the benefits became apparent when the teachers assessed the learners. Because of the few mistakes, the teachers assessed quicker.

Note taking

Innovation is a noticeable characteristic of good teachers, and the observations illuminated this characteristic. In some instances, the learners were allowed to take notes in preparation for their speaking task. This they did during or after listening to the teacher reading or narrating a story. However, not all of them did this. Apparently, it was limited to those who were at risk. As a result, the learners were able to take part in succeeding activities, using the notes as reference. The benefit was that the processes went quicker. The teacher did not have to spend significant time pursuing the learners to speak. Another important aspect worth noting is that the teacher was able to achieve maximum participation in that overcrowded classroom. This is in contrast to a situation where sometimes the teachers give up on some of the learners during the speaking and listening sessions. It should be pointed out, though, that the learners must stop using this practice at a certain point, and this has to be communicated to them early in the year.

Limitations of the study

The Free State Department of Education uses learners' performance in Mathematics and English as an index to classify the schools. This criteria did assist the authors in terms of sampling, but may not be full proof. The concern is that there were no measures to ensure the validity of the results from the schools. Another concern is that, as much as

the group participants did provide some insights, we would have hoped to solicit more from them. The last limitation is that logistical constraints resulted in the study focusing on one district in the Free State province.

8. Conclusions

This article highlighted the actuality that with perseverance and ingenuity, success is possible in overcrowded intermediate phase EFAL classroom. It further revealed the usefulness of the following practices for an overcrowded intermediate phase classroom: effective preparation, integration of skills, a strategic approach to the curriculum, cooperative learning, explicit instruction, the process approach and note taking. The teachers at well-performing schools had decided not to give up. The attitude resonates with the prescripts of the theory of hope, which is about a positive attitude and the resilience on the part of the teacher. These teachers have realized that resourcefulness and perseverance are the only alternatives, more so because the government is not in a position to build schools and even employ the desired number of teachers. A holistic picture painted by these findings is that there is hope for those intermediate teachers working in overcrowded classrooms.

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