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# The Factors Contributing to Writing Difficulties among Grade 8 Learners of English First Additional Language in the Grade 8 of the O.R. Tambo Coastal District, South Africa

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## Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the factors contributing to writing difficulties among Grade 8 learners of English First Additional Language (EFAL) in the Grade 8 of the O.R. Tambo Coastal District, South Africa. The research adopted a phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of EFAL teachers. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of twelve teachers from twelve schools across the district's four circuits. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that learner writing challenges are multifaceted, stemming from severe spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and sentence construction errors. The study identifies the root causes as socio-economic disadvantage, lack of parental support, English being a 'foreign' language in a predominantly isiXhosa-speaking environment, inadequate foundational skills from earlier grades, overcrowded classrooms, curriculum implementation pressures, and the negative impact of social media on formal writing. Framed by Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Systems theory, the findings illustrate that writing problems are not merely pedagogical but are deeply embedded within the learners' broader social, economic, and educational ecosystems. The study concludes that a multi-dimensional intervention strategy, targeting all levels of the learner's environment, is essential for significant improvement.

## Keywords

English first additional language, writing challenges, socio-economic factors, teacher perceptions, Bronfenbrenner's theory, grade 8

## INTRODUCTION

Writing is an essential competency for academic achievement and the dissemination of global information (Bora, 2023). In South Africa, where English frequently serves as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) despite being a First Additional Language (FAL) for the majority, proficiency in writing is essential. Literacy levels in South Africa are critically poor, since national and international evaluations continually indicate substantial weaknesses in reading and writing skills among Grade 8 learners (Carter, *et al.*, 2024). The Eastern Cape Province, particularly the O.R. Tambo Coastal District, ranks among the lowest-performing areas, with pass rates frequently falling below 50% (Department of Education, 2015). Learners in the district where this study took place predominantly originate from socio-economically disadvantaged rural homes, with no exposure to English or print-rich surroundings, rendering English acquisition comparable to learning a foreign language (Mataka, 2015). Although current literature emphasizes the worldwide aspects of second language (L2) writing difficulties a notable research deficiency persists in comprehending the contextual factors

that influence these issues from the viewpoint of the teachers responsible for imparting the skill: the EFAL teachers. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the specific writing challenges and their underlying causes as perceived by teachers in this specific under-resourced context. The objectives of this study were to:

- Identify writing difficulties that are encountered by grade 8 learners who learn English as the First Additional Language at the Grade 8 in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District
- Examine the factors that lead to learners' writing challenges in English First Additional Language at the Grade 8 in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Challenges in English First Additional Language (EFAL) Learning

The South African School Language Policy (SLP) is guided by constitutional principles and the South African Schools Act (SASA, 1996), which advocate for multilingualism and grant schools' autonomy to develop language policies tailored to their contexts. Many schools where isiXhosa is the first language (L1) adopt English as a First Additional Language (EFAL). The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS, 2011) emphasizes writing as critical skill, expecting learners to achieve proficiency by Grade 8 (DBE, 2011). Durga & Rao (2018) underscores the importance of developing the writing skills in the early stages. However, writing in EFAL remains a significant challenge for learners, influenced by linguistic, cognitive, pedagogical, and socio-contextual factors.

### Challenges and contributing factors in English First Additional Language Writing

The acquisition of writing proficiency in English First Additional Language which is also known as second language (L2) is widely regarded as the most complex and demanding skill for learners to master (Kormos, 2023). Unlike receptive skills, L2 writing necessitates the simultaneous application of structural accuracy, strategic language use, and communicative clarity, making it a significant indicator of successful L2 acquisition. This complex process is fundamentally cognitive; as Effatpanah and Baghaei (2021) contend, it rigorously engages a writer's memory, verbal command, and analytical thinking capacities.

The challenges confronting L2 writers are multifaceted, spanning linguistic, psychological, cognitive, and pedagogical domains (Byrd & Abrams, 2022). A primary obstacle is structural incompetence, manifested in deficiencies in grammar, punctuation, and lexical choice, which directly impedes text coherence and comprehensibility. These linguistic shortcomings frequently contribute to a cycle of diminished learner confidence and anxiety. This psychological barrier is often exacerbated by pedagogical approaches that are misaligned with learners' diverse cultural backgrounds and preferred learning styles (Gulzar et al., 2024). Furthermore, factors such as negative transfer from the first language (L1), limited L2 reading exposure, low motivation, and insufficient practice are identified as compounding variables that intensify these core difficulties.

Pedagogical shortcomings constitute a significant and independent area of concern. Research indicates that teachers often lack adequate training in effective writing pedagogy, particularly in providing timely, formative feedback and in implementing strategies to foster learner motivation (Yang et al., 2023). These methodological gaps are frequently situated within broader institutional constraints, including large class sizes, the use of outdated textbooks, and exam-oriented curricula that privilege rote memorization over creative expression and process-oriented writing (Ghaleb, 2024). Beyond the classroom, socio-contextual factors such as socioeconomic disadvantage and limited access to educational resources further negatively impact writing development (Choudhary, 2025).

At a foundational level, learners commonly struggle with the mechanics of writing. These include persistent difficulties with spelling, often stemming from challenges in mastering L2 letter-sound relationships (Zelghi, 2021), and poor handwriting, characterized by incorrect letter formation and inconsistent spacing, which hampers readability. Paragraph construction presents another major hurdle, with learners producing disorganized texts featuring poorly linked ideas and underdeveloped topic sentences (Rizkina & Adani, 2024). As Ferris and Hedgcock (2023) emphasize, successful writing requires the meticulous balancing of multiple components such as content, organization, audience awareness, and mechanics as a challenge that is considerably magnified in an L2 context.

The effective and physical factors play a non-trivial role. Emotional barriers, including anxiety, insecurity, and a lack of motivation, can profoundly deter learners from engaging in writing tasks (Ghaleb, 2024). In some cases, these are compounded by physical challenges such as underdeveloped fine motor skills or visual perception issues, which further constrain a learner's ability to master the orthographic and mechanical demands of L2 writing. In summary, the literature reveals L2 writing to be a profoundly complex endeavor influenced by an interconnected web of cognitive, linguistic, pedagogical, socio-contextual, and affective variables.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This analysis is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development, which provides a robust, multidimensional framework for understanding the second language writing acquisition as a process shaped by a complex system of interacting socio-contextual layers (Smit et al., 2020). This model posits that a learner's development is influenced by a nested hierarchy of systems: the microsystem (immediate environments like classroom and family), the mesosystem (linkages between microsystems, such as school-home interactions), the exosystem (broader social

structures that indirectly influence the learner, like educational policies), and the macrosystem (overarching cultural beliefs, ideologies, and societal norms) (Burakgazi,2025). This theoretical lens is particularly salient for examining the challenges faced by learners in resource-constrained environments, where factors such as poverty, limited literacy exposure, and community dynamics within the mesosystem profoundly impact writing acquisition (Smit et al.,2020). Crucially, this framework positions teachers within the mesosystem as pivotal agents capable of mitigating these challenges through scaffolded, culturally responsive pedagogy.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Research Approach and Paradigm**

This investigation adopted a qualitative research approach, situated within an interpretivist paradigm, to explore the nuanced experiences and perceptions of English First Additional Language (FAL) teachers. The qualitative method was deemed most appropriate as it facilitates the production of thick, detailed descriptions of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences, allowing for the interpretation of the meanings behind their actions (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). This approach is particularly valuable for gaining deeper insights into complex, context-specific issues such as language teaching and literacy challenges (Flick,2020). The study aimed not to generalize but to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon within its natural setting the schools and classrooms of the participants.

### **Research Design**

A phenomenological research design was selected as the specific framework for the study. This design is concerned with understanding individuals' perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of their lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Montealegre et al.,2025). The phenomenon under investigation was the teaching of literacy to English FAL learners in the Grade 8. This design was advantageous as it valued unique teacher perspectives and sought to understand the essence of their shared experiences, rather than studying the challenge in a vacuum

### **Sampling**

A non-probability, convenience sampling strategy was employed to select twelve participants (one from each of twelve schools). This method was chosen due to pragmatic constraints, including the geographic spread of the full population and the busy schedules of teachers (Golzar et al.,2022). The selected schools were those deemed viable and within easy reach of the researcher, making the sample readily accessible . While this limits the generalizability of the findings, it is a recognized strategy for achieving a deep, qualitative understanding of a specific context.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which served as the sole research instrument. This method allowed for a flexible yet guided two-way conversation, enabling the researcher to ask a set of predetermined questions from an interview schedule while also having the freedom to probe for deeper meaning and clarity (Ruslin et al.,2022). This approach was essential for gathering rich, descriptive data on the teachers' beliefs and experiences.

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

Data analysis was an inductive, thematic process. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data were organized, coded, and categorized to identify emergent themes that captured the essence of the participants' shared experiences (Ahmed et al.,2025). Trustworthiness was ensured through techniques such as piloting the interview schedule, prolonged engagement, and member checking, where findings were returned to participants to verify accuracy.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Stringent ethical protocols were followed, including obtaining written permission from the Department of Basic Education, district officials, and school principals. Informed consent was secured from all participants. The principles of confidentiality, anonymity, respect, and the right to privacy were upheld by using pseudonyms, securing data, and ensuring no participant was identifiable in the reporting (Arifin,2018).

## **PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

### **Theme1: The major writing challenges that are encountered by grade 8 learners**

The findings revealed that there are several writing challenges encountered by learners in a Grade 8 classes namely; spelling challenge ,punctuation marks (commas, question marks, exclamation marks, etc) paragraphing, sentence construction, comprehension problems and difficulties in some genres (Poetry and Drama).

#### **Sub-theme 1: Spelling problems**

Most of the participants found spelling a huge challenge in their learners. One participant from School A said that:

*Spelling is very bad when they are writing, they do not know how the word is pronounced, most of them, and only few of them can spell.*

The other participant from School I added that learners are really experiencing problems in spelling. This participant responded as follows:

*There are problems in spelling in the same words such as “come-came”, beautiful and beautifully there are suffix problems. They do not know how to put suffix. Children cannot spell because they lack understanding of a word. Others just write English words in isiXhosa.*

The other participants responded as follows:

Teacher B: *Most of them have problems in spelling due to the lack of English basics, lack of exposure.*

Teacher C: *They cannot spell most of the words when they are writing essays.*

Teacher D: *My learners have a spelling challenge in homonyms and homophones. They cannot spell; they instead write English words in their mother tongue (IsiXhosa).*

### **Sub-theme 2: Punctuation marks**

The participants mentioned punctuation marks as the challenging part in the learners' writing. Commas, question marks and exclamation marks emerged as the marks that are challenging. Teacher F stated that:

*It is difficult for the learners to master punctuation, they use capital letters in the middle of the sentence, they start sentence with small letters. They do not know where to put the commas and full stops.*

Teacher L added that:

*It is very bad, they do not know where to use capital letters, commas and question marks. When talking of exclamation marks you seem to be a far from them.*

Teacher C: *In punctuation they are not good, example they do not put question marks at the end. Other marks are observed.*

Teacher D: *My learners have a tendency of not using capital letters when writing Proper Nouns. They do not understand what commas and full stops are for. They cannot differentiate between the two.*

Teacher I: *There is a problem in punctuation; they cannot identify when to use a comma and full stop. Instead of the comma they put a conjunction “and”. Also, exclamation marks are challenging.*

However, there are participants who mentioned that some punctuation marks are at least mastered by their learners. For instance, one participant said:

*Apostrophe and full stops are mastered. But in exclamation marks and question marks there is a problem, they instead put full stop.*

### **Sub-theme 3: Writing paragraphs**

From the data collected it has emerged that learners cannot write in good paragraphs. Almost all the participants are lamenting about the inability to write good paragraphs in the learners. The teachers responded as follows:

*Most of them they enjoy writing short of paragraphs, they understand what to do, and they always say English is difficult, I always advise them to use the books for lower grades like grade 4, 5, 6. They do not correctly write that, there is no link of paragraphs, like the topic sentence. They are having a challenge; they cannot identify a topic sentence.*

Teacher J: *Sequencing ideas is a problem. They repeat the same points. They do not understand why there are paragraphs. They break paragraphs unnecessary.*

Teacher I: *They are trying to write paragraphs; there are too many errors in a paragraph e.g. spelling and helping verbs. There is no connection in the first paragraph with the second paragraph. Take the same information that has been already stated in the previous paragraph and use it leaving the previous one incomplete and meaningless.*

Teacher K: *It is not good. They write incomplete paragraphs.*

However, only one participant stated that her learners are good at writing paragraphs. She responded as follows:

*Most of them are good in paragraphs, due to the planning that they first do.*

### **Sub-theme 4: Sentence construction**

Sentence construction was reported by the teachers as the problem that is inhibiting learners' writing. For instance, Teacher E said:

*There is a huge problem. They just write for the sake of writing.*

*I cannot understand what they are writing as you know that a sentence must have a subject, verb and an object.*

Teacher A: *They write for the sake of writing, they are unable to express themselves in English, they know their mother tongue but in English they become stuck.*

Teacher F: *The learners are having difficulties when constructing sentence. They use short sentences with a lot of mistakes.*

Teacher G: *They cannot differentiate between the subject of the sentence e.g. Luna they go. They use illogical sentences.*



Teacher I: *In simple sentences they try, in complex sentences they find problems. The ideas and gist just get lost and vanish.*

Additionally, Teacher J emphasised that:

*Not at all, they write with mistakes. It really affects them in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Paper, which deals with creative writing. If by the next they will write Paper 3, I know I will be marking learners who will get zeros.*

### **Sub-theme 5: Comprehension challenges**

In Grade 8 English FAL class, there is a problem to learners when it comes to answer the comprehension, where they are given a text and then required to answer the set questions based on that text. The teachers had this to explain:

*They cannot properly respond to comprehension, they do not have clear understanding, lack of analytical skills. They just read without understanding. They cannot answer. Others copy the comprehension as it is.*

Teacher A: *Some of them cannot answer in full sentences they just answer shortly.*

Teacher E: *I think the majority in my class cannot answer comprehension. They just read without understanding.*

Teacher I: *They can answer what is written in the text. They find reasoning difficult.*

Teacher D from School D added that:

*They respond when the text has been first read to them, for instance the text can be talking about what happens in the urban area, my duty is to make examples of what they see in their everyday lives.*

### **Sub-theme 6: Difficulties in some genres**

The participants made a mention of learner experiencing challenges in answering poetry. This is due to the hidden meanings of the figurative language used in poems. The teachers were all in one accord and said:

*Poetry is challenging because of the figurative language. They cannot explain what they tend to guess. Poetry is challenges due to the figurative language, they cannot deduce the meaning, they are always having an attitude that it is difficult. They cannot understand poetry, they always say "I do not understand what is being said here]. Figurative language is challenging. I must explain the literal meaning out of the figurative language that is in the poem.*

However, one participant (Teacher E) mentioned that learners are good at drama and in short stories. He stated:

*We cannot always criticise our learners at least they are good in Drama and Short stories.*

## **Theme 2: Factors leading to learners' writing difficulties**

The following sub-themes regarding causes of learners' writing problems emerged:

### **Sub-theme 1: Lack of foundation from the previous grades**

In relation to the above sub-theme Teacher A said:

*They (learners) were not thoroughly taught in Foundation phase, even in mother they struggle. The learners do not even know IsiXhosa as their mother tongue.*

In agreement with what the participant from School A noted, Teacher J responded as follows:

*You see Foundation phase is giving us problems. They are not given enough chance to write.*

### **Sub-theme 2: English is a foreign language to the learners**

From the data collected the participants reported that writing English by the learners is a challenge as it is not their mother tongue. They emphasised that English is a foreign language to the learners whom they are teaching. In view of the above sub-theme; Teacher E said:

*English is a foreign language to our learners because most of the times at homes there is 100% isiXhosa usage and that is where they grew up.*

In agreement, Teacher D and J stated:

*English is a something that they are not used at it, to them when you speak English you look as if you are from another country, it seems as if you are talking something foreign to them. They are not exposed in English; this area is Xhosa dominant.*

### **Sub-theme 3: Curriculum changes**

Changing from one curriculum to another brings confusion to teachers. They reported that in the olden curriculum there was too much time that was allocated for writing in the classroom setting. They also reported that CAPS is not dictating them to spend the prescribed time stated in the document. Teacher K responded as follows:

*There is insufficient time for me, there is too little time at school to teach writing, CAPS give us limited hours to teach writing per Cycle (two weeks).*

The participants (Teacher E & G) agreed and reported as follows:

*The Curriculum policy (CAPS) instructed us that I must finish teaching writing a particular time, which consequently make the teachers rush syllabus, yet they leave learners as blank slates. CAPS is difficult to implement.*

Teacher B angrily said:

*System of education dismally fails us as teachers and learners.*

#### **Sub-theme 4: Parental involvement**

From the data collected it has emerged that parents in the rural areas where this study took place are illiterate and others are not involved at all in their children's education. Teacher C from School C responded as follows:

*In rural areas like in my school the parents are not supportive, for instance if you give the learners homework parents do not intervene in their childrens' education. We try as teachers to support our learners. Learners do not practice writing at home. Some learners do not understand writing at all.*

Participant of School F additionally said:

*Their parents are not helping them, even those who are educated they say, "I left school so many years ago my child."*

#### **Sub-theme 5: Illiteracy**

The parents cannot offer help to their children pertaining the schoolwork because they are illiterate. Teacher K stated explained:

*It is challenging to give homeworks to the learners because their parents are illiterate.*

Teacher L added:

*These parents just say they never went to school even a single day.*

#### **Sub-theme 6: Social media**

Nowadays whether you are in neither rural nor urban area, the fact remains that there is a use of social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc) amongst young fellows. The data that emerged also touched on the negative influence of social media on the learners. Teacher D responded as follows:

*We are in that time where learners are using social networks, where they use shortened informal way of writing, such as slang and that negatively impact their formal way of writing. For instance, they write words like 'you-U', night-nyt, love-lv, before-b4'. What is that?*

#### **Sub-theme 7: Code switching**

From the data collected it has emerged that when teachers are teaching English or any subject they tend to use and do explanations using their mother tongue (IsiXhosa). Teacher L explained as follows:

*Too much code switching in other learning areas such as Natural Sciences, Technology gives too much problem in terms of allowing learners to express themselves in English.*

Teacher I & E were in agreement and added:

*Too much code switching in the previous grades is a challenge. Sometimes teachers tend to use IsiXhosa during their lessons.*

#### **Sub-theme 8: Learners are careless**

Carelessness also emerged as the cause of writing problems in learners. One of the respondents (Teacher I) said:

*The cause of writing problems is carelessness, they take work for granted.*

Teacher F responded as follows:

*Others are negligent, they do not do homeworks, and hence they do not get feedback from us.*

#### **Sub-theme 9: Shortage of resources**

The data collected from the teachers revealed that resources to capacitate teachers and learners are insufficient to ensure the proper teaching of learners. Teacher C said:

*In my school there are no resources to teach writing.*

Teacher D added:

*I, as a teacher must improvise all the times, because there is no teaching resources.*

#### **Sub-theme 10: Overcrowded classes**

The teachers mentioned a crucial issue of overcrowded classrooms. For instance, Teacher E said:

*I am supposed to be teaching 35 learners per classroom (1:35) but instead I have 78 learners in one class, do you think that proper teaching and learning can happen in such a classroom?*

Teacher J also lamented:

*I have 83 learners in my classroom, whilst teaching others are not concentrating; others are talking because I cannot afford to reach all the learners in class.*

So, overcrowding is a serious cause of writing problems as teachers cannot afford to have reached all learners in the classroom.

### ***Sub-theme 11: Writing disorders***

The participants also mentioned that writing disorders can be a challenge to learners' writing. Teacher J pointed out that learners are in rural areas and they are having disorders and psychological problems.

One participant asserted, *"We are unable to work with slow learners due to lack of training."*

Inclusion of learners with special educational needs means that mainstream schools have the responsibility of making adjustments to accommodate the needs of all learners. Due to lack of teachers who are trained for that, such learners become to be in a disadvantage.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **The major writing Challenges encountered by English FAL learners**

#### ***Spelling and Punctuation***

The teachers' predominant concern with spelling closely corresponds with Daries & Bowles (2024) research, which cites orthography as a substantial obstacle for second language (L2) learners. This obstacle is not solely a memory problem but is fundamentally anchored in phonological awareness. A teacher observed that learners "do not know how the word is pronounced," highlighting a significant disparity between the phonetic system of English and its orthographic representation. The transfer of phonological norms from isiXhosa (the First Language or L1) exacerbates this issue, resulting in spellings that mirror L1 pronunciation. The issues with suffixes (e.g., "beautiful" versus "beautifully") and homophones indicate a deficiency in morphological comprehension and meaning-oriented spelling techniques, which are crucial for transcending mere rote memorization (Matwangsang & Sukying, 2023). Likewise, the widespread problems with punctuation, especially the incorrect application of commas, question marks, and exclamation marks, indicate a deficient metalinguistic awareness. Learners have not yet completely understood that punctuation serves as a semantic and syntactic instrument to elucidate meaning, indicate links among concepts, and direct the reader's interpretation (Yegenmammedova & Dowletov, 2025). The inclination to substitute a conjunction such as "and" for a comma, or to resort to a full stop, indicates a strategy of evasion and a deficiency in confidence. This discovery supports Amponsah (2018) claim that punctuation errors frequently arise from "insufficient learning or ineffective instruction," indicating that these mechanics are not taught as essential components of the writing process but rather as separate, decontextualized rules.

#### ***Sentence Construction and Paragraphing***

The issues extend beyond mechanics to the fundamental architecture of writing: constructing sentences and organizing them into cohesive paragraphs. The teachers' assessments of "concise sentences with numerous errors," "illogical constructions," and a failure to manage complex sentences signify a significant deficiency in syntactic advancement. This discovery is essential to Ibrahim's work (2022), which asserts that grammar and sentence structure pose the greatest challenges for L2 authors. The learners' writing demonstrates characteristics identified by Nyasimi (2014) as run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and issues with subject-verb agreement and modifier placement.

The inability to compose coherent paragraphs directly results from these sentence-level difficulties. According to Ridwan (2025), learners frequently "circumlocute and reiterate phrases prior to articulating the principal points." The teachers' remarks regarding the absence of topic sentences, inadequate sequencing, and lack of logical coherence between paragraphs underscore a deficiency in discourse competence of the capacity to coherently organize ideas for the reader. This indicates that learners are not engaging in rhetorical thinking; they are neglecting the reader's requirement for a coherent and structured flow of ideas. They concentrate on generating language at the word or sentence level, saturating their cognitive capacity and allocating minimal resources for planning, organizing, and reviewing their work—processes crucial for proficient writing (Mwangi, 2022).

#### ***Comprehension and Genre-Specific Challenges***

The writing problems are inextricably linked to reading comprehension. The finding that learners cannot answer comprehension questions in full sentences or often copy directly from the text is a critical indicator of their struggle to interact meaningfully with text. This aligns with Syahfutra & Niah (2019) who posit that comprehension is a complex, multifaceted activity that calls on the reader's thinking and problem-solving skills. The learners appear to be decoding words without accessing meaning, a passive reading strategy that fails to retrieve prior knowledge or monitor understanding (Allehyani, 2025). This breakdown in comprehension directly affects their ability to write responses, summaries, or analyses, as they cannot first understand and process the source material.

The specific difficulty with poetry, contrasted with relative success in drama and short stories, is particularly revealing. Poetry relies heavily on figurative language, inference, and cultural nuance, which require a high level of cognitive and sociolinguistic competence (Arcilla, 2024). The teachers' reports that learners "tend to guess" and express frustration ("I do not understand what is being said here") indicate that they lack the interpretive strategies needed to unlock non-literal meaning. This genre-specific struggle underscores a broader issue: writing is not a generic skill but is shaped by genre conventions and purposes. Learners may feel more comfortable with the narrative structure of short stories and the dialogic nature of drama, while the condensed, metaphorical nature of poetry presents a formidable barrier.

## The factors Causing Learners' Writing Problems

### *Systemic and Pedagogical Factors*

The blame placed on the Lack of foundation from the previous grades is a profound systemic issue. The teachers' perception that Foundation Phase instruction is inadequate points to a potential breakdown in the vertical alignment of the curriculum. If learners are not given a strong grounding in literacy even in their mother tongue in the early grades, the cumulative knowledge gap becomes insurmountable in the Grade 8. This finding is supported by research emphasizing the critical importance of early literacy development (Rhoads,2025).

The criticism of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) highlights a tension between policy and practice. Teachers feel constrained by the prescribed time allocation, arguing that it forces a "rush" through the syllabus, leaving learners as "blank slates." This suggests a possible misinterpretation or misimplementation of CAPS. While the curriculum may provide a framework, effective teaching requires flexible time management to address learners' needs. Makhubele's (2015) finding that training was too short to equip the teachers resonates here, implying that teachers may not feel empowered or prepared to adapt the curriculum effectively within their specific contexts.

Overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of resources are two of the most significant practical barriers identified. With ratios as high as 1:83, differentiated instruction, individual feedback, and sustained writing practice all proven to be effective become logistically impossible (Mogale, 2025). The lack of resources extends beyond physical materials to include a lack of specialized training to support learners with writing disorders, leading to their exclusion and perpetuating a cycle of failure.

### *Linguistic and Sociocultural Factors*

The designation of English as a Foreign Language is the central linguistic reality. Evans & Nthulana (2018) correctly asserts that a language barrier exists when the LoLT differs from the home language. The learners' minimal exposure to English outside the classroom means they have few opportunities for authentic communication and practice, stunting the natural development of language proficiency. This foreignness is compounded by parental illiteracy and lack of involvement, which Lazo (2021) identify as having a "deleterious effect" on literacy development. The home environment does not provide a print-rich culture or academic support, placing the entire burden of literacy acquisition on the school.

The phenomenon of code-switching presents a complex dilemma. While teachers use isiXhosa to ensure comprehension and build rapport, excessive use, as reported, can reduce learners' exposure to and engagement with English. This creates a dependency on translation rather than fostering thinking and communication directly in the target language. Furthermore, the negative influence of social media introduces a new dimension to the problem. Khan & Ahmad (2024) assert that the informal, abbreviated register of digital communication actively undermines the acquisition of formal writing conventions. Learners internalize these shortcuts (e.g., "u" for "you"), which then intrude into their academic writing.

### *Attitudinal Factors*

Finally, the cause attributed to carelessness cannot be dismissed simply as a character flaw. From an educational psychology perspective, what appears to be negligence, or a lack of effort is often a symptom of repeated failure and learned helplessness (Al Sarairah,2024). When learners consistently struggle and receive negative feedback, they may disengage as a coping mechanism. This "carelessness" is thus a consequence of the other systemic and pedagogical challenges rather than a primary cause. It signals a critical need for building self-efficacy through scaffolded tasks, positive reinforcement, and creating a classroom environment where risk-taking and mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Implement Systemic Interventions for Resource and Infrastructure Deficits:** The Department of Basic Education must prioritize addressing the material and human resource shortages in rural districts. This includes building more classrooms to reduce overcrowding, ensuring the timely provision of quality textbooks and writing materials, and deploying specialized support staff (e.g., reading specialists, special needs experts) to assist mainstream teachers.
2. **Revise and Intensify Teacher Professional Development:** Move beyond one-off CAPS workshops to provide ongoing, practical, and context-specific training. This training should focus on effective writing pedagogies for large, multilingual classes, strategies for teaching grammar and mechanics in context, and methods for providing meaningful feedback on learner writing despite high workloads.
3. **Launch a District-Wide Foundational Literacy Strengthening Program:** Develop a targeted intervention program for the Intermediate and Grade 8s that explicitly re-teaches critical foundational skills (e.g., phonics, spelling conventions, basic sentence structure) that learners missed in the Foundation Phase. This program should include diagnostic assessments and remedial materials.
4. **Establish School-Based Parental Engagement Initiatives:** Schools should initiate programs that empower parents, regardless of their literacy level, to support their children's learning. This could include workshops on creating a quiet space for homework, the importance of reading and writing, and how to engage with children about their schoolwork in their home language.



5. **Develop a Pedagogical Framework for Judicious Code-Switching:** Instead of banning the use of isiXhosa, develop a clear, school-wide policy on the strategic use of code-switching. Training should help teachers use learners' L1 as a scaffold to build English proficiency, for clarification and concept development, while strategically reducing its use to maximize English exposure and practice.
6. **Integrate Digital and Social Media Literacy into the EFAL Curriculum:** Acknowledge the prevalence of social media and turn it into a teaching opportunity. Develop lessons that explicitly contrast informal online communication (slang, abbreviations) with formal written English. Use engaging digital tools and platforms to practice formal writing, making it more relevant to learners' lives.
7. **Create and Disseminate CAPS-Aligned Exemplar Resources for Rural Contexts:** Develop and provide teachers with a bank of practical resources, including lesson plans, activities, and writing prompts that are culturally relevant and based on the lived experiences of rural Eastern Cape learners. This reduces the burden of improvisation and ensures curriculum coverage.
8. **Institute Inclusive Education Training and Support Systems:** Provide all EFAL teachers with basic training in identifying and supporting learners with writing disorders and other learning barriers. Establish a clear referral pathway to district-based specialists and ensure schools have access to strategies and resources for differentiated instruction within a large classroom setting.

## CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated that the writing challenges pervasive among Grade 8 EFAL learners in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District are not a monolithic issue attributable to a single cause. Rather, they constitute a complex, multi-layered problem deeply embedded within the learners' entire socio-ecological milieu. Framed by Bronfenbrenner's theory, the findings demonstrate that these challenges are perpetuated by a confluence of factors operating at every level of the ecosystem. At the macrosystem level, broad socio-economic disadvantage and the foreign status of English create a context of limited linguistic exposure. The exosystem is characterized by systemic failures in resource provision and curriculum implementation pressures. Within the mesosystem, weak linkages between the school and the home, due to parental illiteracy and non-involvement, further disadvantage the learner. Finally, at the microsystem level, pedagogical challenges—including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate foundational preparation, and the negative influence of social media—directly inhibit the acquisition of writing skills.

Therefore, it is conclusive that isolated interventions focused solely on the classroom or the learner are destined for limited impact. The intricate interplay of these factors demands a coordinated, multi-dimensional response strategy that simultaneously targets each level of the system. Effective improvement in writing competencies requires systemic support from the education department, proactive engagement from school leadership, enhanced pedagogical capacity from teachers, and a supportive home environment. This research contributes to the field by moving the discourse from a deficit model, which often blames teachers or learners, to an ecological model that recognizes the profound influence of contextual constraints. It underscores the necessity of context-sensitive, holistic approaches to educational development in under-resourced environments, affirming that sustainable progress in literacy is contingent upon addressing the entire ecosystem in which teaching and learning are situated.

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## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors do have any conflict of interest.

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