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Challenges encountered by English Second Language Learners and their learning strategies in selected Lesotho secondary schools

Maseriti Lineo Hyacinth Morakabi[1] & Rockie Sibanda[1]

[1] University of Johannesburg, Department of Languages, Cultural Studies and Applied Linguistics, Johannesburg, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Although English is taught at the primary level in Lesotho to provide a strong linguistic foundation, secondary school English learners continue to experience significant challenges in acquiring English as a Second Language (ESL), often resulting in poor academic performance in high-stakes examinations. This qualitative multiple-case study explores the challenges experienced by English as a Second Language learners in three selected secondary schools in Maseru, Lesotho, and examines the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Data were collected through three focus group discussions involving 12 purposively selected Grade 11 learners and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that learners experience persistent linguistic challenges, including limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, difficulties with reading comprehension and written expression, and insufficient time to complete English-language examinations. However, many participants reported that these strategies yielded only limited improvements because they were not consistently supported by effective classroom instruction, sufficient learning resources or appropriate guidance. The study recommends greater investment in student-centred pedagogical support, teacher professional development, technology-enhanced language learning, and improved access to high-quality English-language resources. The study contributes to scholarship by providing empirical evidence of the interconnected linguistic, pedagogical and contextual factors influencing English language learning in Lesotho secondary schools. It further extends current knowledge by foregrounding learners' perspectives on both the challenges they encounter and the self-directed strategies they employ, thereby offering practical implications for English language pedagogy, curriculum development and language policy in multilingual educational contexts.

Keywords: Challenges, English language learning, learning strategies, Lesotho secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

English is the dominant language of international communication, higher education, science and technology, and is consequently taught as a second or foreign language in many education systems

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CORRESPONDENCE – Maseriti Lineo Hyacinth Morakabi **Email** morakabihy@gmail.com
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worldwide.[1] In many multilingual African countries, proficiency in English is closely associated with educational achievement, employment opportunities and socio-economic mobility. However, despite its importance, teaching and learning English as a Second Language (ESL) remain significant educational challenges across many African contexts.[2] As Selim and Tasneen argue, ESL instruction becomes particularly difficult in environments where learners have limited exposure to English beyond the classroom.[3] These challenges are often compounded by teachers' varying levels of English language proficiency, limited instructional resources, multilingual classroom contexts and insufficient opportunities for authentic language use.[4]

Lesotho exemplifies many of these challenges. Despite sustained government efforts to improve the quality of education, English language teaching and learning continue to present significant concerns.[5] Although English serves as both an official language and the principal medium of instruction, many learners continue to demonstrate low levels of English proficiency, which negatively affects their academic achievement across the curriculum. This situation reflects broader challenges in multilingual education systems where English is neither the home language of most learners nor of many teachers.[6] Consequently, understanding learners' experiences of English language learning has become increasingly important for improving language pedagogy, curriculum implementation and educational outcomes.

The Constitution of Lesotho (1993) recognises English as the second official language, after Sesotho. According to the Lesotho Curriculum and Assessment Policy, learners should receive instruction in their mother tongue during Grades 1-3, before transitioning to English as the medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards.[7] In practice, however, implementation of this policy has been inconsistent. Kolobe and Matsoso report that public primary schools predominantly use Sesotho during the foundation phase regardless of learners' linguistic backgrounds, while some privately owned schools introduce English from Grade 1.[8] These variations in language policy implementation create unequal opportunities for English language acquisition before learners enter secondary school, potentially contributing to disparities in English language proficiency.

English occupies a central position within Lesotho's education system as both a compulsory subject and the language through which most other subjects are taught. Consequently, learners' success in English directly influences their overall academic performance and their access to higher education. Recent curriculum reforms have further intensified these challenges. The implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy has reduced the duration of secondary schooling from five years (Form A to Form E) to four years (Grades 8–11), while largely retaining the existing English language syllabus. This curriculum compression has increased pressure on both teachers and learners to complete the prescribed content within a shorter period, potentially limiting opportunities for meaningful language development, practice and remediation.

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[1] Yvel C Crevecoeur, Michael D Coyne, and D Betsy McCoach, "English Language Learners and English-Only Learners' Response to Direct Vocabulary Instruction," *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2014): 51–78; Patsy M Lightbown et al., *How Languages Are Learned*, vol. 2 (Oxford university press, Oxford, 1999).

[2] Zenzele Weda and Rian de Villiers, "Migrant Zimbabwean Teachers in South Africa: Challenging and Rewarding Issues," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 20, no. 4 (November 4, 2019): 1013–28, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-018-00649-6.

[3] M. A. Selim and J. W. Tasneen, "The Problems of English Language Teaching at Primary Level in Rural School of Bangladesh," *Unpublished Master's Thesis, Institute of Education Research, University of Dhaka*, 2016.

[4] Abha Gupta, "Principles and Practices of Teaching English Language Learners," *International Education Studies*, 2019; Lightbown et al., *How Languages Are Learned*.

[5] Thekiso G Khati and M V Khati, "Proficiency in English as a Second Official Language (ESOL) in Lesotho: A Survey on Views of Examiners and Moderators," 2009; Beatrice Ekanjume-Ilongo, "The Teaching of English as a Second Language: The Case of the National University of Lesotho (NUL)," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 6, no. 6 (November 7, 2015): 1157, https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0606.01; Lihotetso Gloria Matee, "Opportunities and Challenges in a Pilot Implementation of Integrated Curriculum," 2019.

[6] Gupta, "Principles and Practices of Teaching English Language Learners."

[7] Ministry of Education and Training, "Curriculum and Assessment Policy: Education for Individual and Social Development" (MoET, Maseru, 2009).

[8] Maboleba Kolobe and Lifelile Matsoso, "Effects of Language Status on Assessment and Educational Development of Basotho Learners from Minority Languages' Backgrounds.," *International Journal of Language Education* 4, no. 3 (2020): 378–88.

These structural challenges are reflected in national examination outcomes. English remains one of the consistently underperforming subjects in the Lesotho General Certificate of Secondary Education (LGCSE) examinations. Poor performance in English has far-reaching consequences, as it not only lowers learners' overall academic achievement but also restricts access to tertiary education, where a credit pass in English is often a minimum admission requirement. Given that English functions as both a subject and the language of learning and teaching, inadequate proficiency may also constrain learners' achievement across other curriculum subjects.

Although previous studies in Lesotho have documented challenges in specific aspects of English language learning, including reading comprehension, essay writing, and grammar, much of the existing research has focused on discrete language skills or on teachers' perspectives. Comparatively little attention has been paid to learners' own experiences of learning English and the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges within contemporary multilingual classrooms. Furthermore, limited research has examined learners' use of self-directed learning approaches, such as digital technologies and voluntary reading, as mechanisms to improve English language proficiency. This represents an important gap in the literature.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring both the challenges encountered by English as a Second Language learners and the learning strategies they employ in selected secondary schools in Lesotho. By foregrounding learners' voices, the study seeks to generate contextually grounded evidence to inform English language pedagogy, curriculum implementation and language policy in Lesotho and comparable multilingual educational contexts. The findings are expected to contribute to scholarship on second-language learning while providing practical recommendations for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to improve English language teaching and learning.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Which challenges do English as a Second Language learners encounter in learning the English language?
2. Which strategies do they employ to address these challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Language Learning in Lesotho Schools

The quality of English language learning at the secondary school level in Lesotho cannot be understood in isolation from learners' educational experiences during the primary school years. Existing literature suggests that the linguistic challenges observed in secondary schools are cumulative, reflecting the interaction among language policy implementation, classroom pedagogical practices, and learners' exposure to English across the schooling system, rather than isolated instructional shortcomings. Primary education in Lesotho is part of the 10 years of basic education, providing learners with the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for lifelong learning.[9]

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy stipulates that learners should receive instruction in their mother tongue during Grades 1–3 before transitioning to English as the language of learning and teaching from Grade 4 onwards.[10] English is simultaneously taught as a compulsory subject throughout primary schooling alongside Mathematics and Science, which receive greater curriculum time because of their status as core subjects.[11] While this policy reflects internationally recognised principles of additive bilingualism and mother-tongue-based multilingual education, evidence suggests that its implementation has been inconsistent across schools in Lesotho.[12] Consequently, learners enter secondary school with varying levels of English proficiency, creating unequal opportunities for academic success.

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[9] MoET, "Curriculum and Assessment Policy: Education for Individual and Social Development."

[10] MoET, "Curriculum and Assessment Policy: Education for Individual and Social Development."

[11] Mohaeka Raselimo and Mahao Mahao, "The Lesotho Curriculum and Assessment Policy: Opportunities and Threats," *South African Journal of Education* 35, no. 1 (2015): 1–12.

[12] Jim Cummins, *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*, vol. 23 (Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 2000); UNESCO., *Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in Education: A Tool on Whose Terms?* (GEM Report UNESCO, 2023), https://doi.org/10.54676/UZQV8501.

The literature consistently demonstrates a disconnect between language policy and classroom practice. Nkome found that many primary school learners struggled to communicate in English because classroom interaction remained largely dominated by Sesotho, even after the official transition to English-medium instruction.[13] Learners reportedly lacked confidence in speaking English and frequently avoided participating in class, fearing making mistakes. Similarly, Moea observed that teachers often relied primarily on Sesotho during instruction due to their limited confidence in English, thereby reducing learners' exposure to meaningful English input.[14] When considered together, these studies suggest that learners' limited English proficiency cannot be attributed solely to individual learners' abilities; rather, it reflects broader systemic challenges involving teachers' language proficiency, classroom language practices, and inconsistent implementation of language policy.

These findings resonate with international research on second language acquisition, which argues that successful language learning requires sustained exposure to comprehensible input, meaningful interaction and opportunities to use the target language in authentic communicative contexts.[15] When classroom interaction predominantly occurs in learners' first language, opportunities to develop communicative competence in English become considerably restricted. Consequently, linguistic deficiencies established during primary education are likely to persist into secondary schooling, where English simultaneously functions as both a subject and the medium of instruction across the curriculum.

Although previous studies have identified important shortcomings in primary English language education, they have largely concentrated on policy implementation or teacher practices. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how these early educational experiences shape learners' perceptions, learning strategies and language development during secondary schooling. This represents an important gap that warrants further investigation.

Challenges Encountered by ESL Learners in Lesotho

Research on English language teaching and learning in Lesotho consistently demonstrates that learners experience persistent linguistic, pedagogical and contextual barriers that negatively affect their academic achievement. However, rather than representing isolated language problems, these challenges appear to be interconnected manifestations of broader educational and systemic constraints.

Several studies have documented learners' difficulties with written language. Tlali found that secondary school learners experienced significant challenges in writing argumentative essays due to inadequate vocabulary, weak grammatical competence, and poor organisation of ideas.[16] Likewise, Lebona reported that learners frequently produced incorrect tense sequences in continuous writing, while teachers attributed these errors to learners' limited language proficiency and the absence of appropriate instructional resources.[17] Viewed collectively, these studies indicate that learners' writing difficulties are multidimensional, extending beyond grammatical errors to include broader weaknesses in academic literacy, discourse organisation and linguistic competence.

Research on reading comprehension presents similar patterns. Likhoeli found that learners struggled to interpret English texts, while teachers acknowledged a lack of specialised instructional strategies for teaching comprehension.[18] This finding is particularly significant because it shifts the explanation for poor learner performance from learner deficiencies alone to limitations within classroom

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[13] Mamothimkhulu Nkome, *Determining Reasons for Learners' Poor Communication Skills in English in Some Lesotho Primary Schools* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2015).

[14] Kananelo Sylvester Moea, "Problems Faced by Lesotho Piloting High School Teachers in Implementing the 2009 Curriculum and Assessment Policy," *Merit Research Journal of Education and Review* 10, no. 4 (2022): 69–73.

[15] Stephen Krashen, "The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications," *Laredo, Beverly Hills/Longman*, 1985; Lightbown et al., *How Languages Are Learned*.

[16] Phenyane G Tlali, "Learners' and Teachers' Perspectives and Causes of Poor Argumentative English Essay Writing: A Case of Form D Students in Three Selected High Schools," *Roma: NUL*, 2018.

[17] T. Lebona, *Causes of Improper Tense Shifts in Learners' LGCSE Continuous Directed Writing* (Lesotho: National University of Lesotho, 2019).

[18] M. Likhoeli, *Challenges Faced by ESL Teachers in the Teaching and Learning of Reading Comprehension* (Lesotho: National University of Lesotho, 2020).

pedagogy and teacher preparation. The convergence of findings across writing and reading studies therefore suggests that both learner competence and instructional quality influence learner achievement.

The literature also demonstrates that classroom conditions and educational policies shape English language learning outcomes. Tlali and Thamae found that learners frequently misunderstood examination instructions and failed to use language accurately in written tasks. Rather than viewing these challenges simply as linguistic weaknesses, their findings suggest that limited English proficiency interacts with assessment practices, cognitive demands and examination conditions to influence learner performance.[19]

Collectively, studies reveal remarkable consistency regarding the nature of English language learning challenges in Lesotho secondary schools.[20] Nevertheless, these studies also exhibit common methodological and conceptual limitations. First, they predominantly investigate discrete language skills—such as reading comprehension, tense usage or essay writing—rather than examining learners' holistic experiences of learning English. Second, much of the existing literature focuses on teacher perspectives, learner performance, or written products, while paying comparatively little attention to learners' own voices on how they experience these challenges and the strategies they adopt to overcome them. Third, although digital technologies have become increasingly important in language education internationally, there is limited empirical evidence regarding how Lesotho secondary school learners utilise technology and independent learning strategies to support English language acquisition.

International scholarship has increasingly demonstrated that learner autonomy, technology-enhanced language learning, and extensive reading contribute significantly to second-language development by increasing opportunities for authentic language exposure beyond the classroom.[21] These developments have transformed language learning globally, yet little is known about whether learners in Lesotho employ similar self-directed learning practices or how contextual constraints influence their effectiveness.

The present study addresses these gaps by adopting a holistic perspective that simultaneously explores the challenges encountered by English as a Second Language learners and the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges within authentic school settings. By foregrounding learners' perspectives through focus group discussions, this study extends existing scholarship beyond analyses of learner performance. It contributes empirical evidence regarding learner agency, technology-mediated learning and self-directed language learning practices in Lesotho secondary schools. In doing so, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of English language learning within multilingual educational contexts. It provides evidence that may inform language pedagogy, curriculum implementation and educational policy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and informed by Krashen's Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory.[22] Together, these complementary theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding both the social processes through which learners acquire English and the linguistic conditions that facilitate second language development. While Sociocultural Theory explains how learning is mediated through social interaction and participation in meaningful

[19] Phenyane Geremiah Tlali and Mamothibe Amelia Thamae, "Causes of Poor Argumentative English Essay Writing at Lesotho Secondary Education," *Journal of African Education* 4, no. 1 (April 17, 2023): 213–34, https://doi.org/10.31920/2633-2930/2023/v4n1a9.

[20] Tlali, "Learners' and Teachers' Perspectives and Causes of Poor Argumentative English Essay Writing: A Case of Form D Students in Three Selected High Schools"; Lebona, *Causes of Improper Tense Shifts in Learners' LGCSE Continuous Directed Writing*; Likhoeli, *Challenges Faced by ESL Teachers in the Teaching and Learning of Reading Comprehension*; Geremiah Tlali and Amelia Thamae, "Causes of Poor Argumentative English Essay Writing at Lesotho Secondary Education."

[21] Phil Benson, *Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning* (Routledge, 2013); Robert Godwin-Jones, "Using Mobile Technology to Develop Language Skills and Cultural Understanding," *Language Learning & Technology* 22, no. 3 (2018): 1–17; Christothea Herodotou et al., "Innovative Pedagogies of the Future: An Evidence-Based Selection," in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 4 (Frontiers Media SA, 2019), 113.

[22] Lev S Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, vol. 86 (Harvard university press, 1978); Stephen Krashen, "Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition," 1982; Krashen, "The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications."

cultural contexts, Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory explains the linguistic conditions necessary for successful language acquisition.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory conceptualises learning as a socially mediated process in which cognitive development occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others within culturally meaningful environments. Central to the theory is the notion that learning is constructed through language, collaboration and participation in social activities rather than through individual cognitive processes alone. One of the theory's most influential concepts is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance or scaffolding from teachers, peers or other knowledgeable individuals.[23] Scaffolding enables learners to internalise new knowledge and develop increasingly independent language competence gradually.[24]

The relevance of Sociocultural Theory to this study lies in its recognition that English language learning is shaped by learners' interactions within multiple social contexts, including classrooms, peer groups, families and wider communities. These environments provide opportunities for collaborative dialogue, language practice, and negotiated meaning, all of which contribute to second-language development.[25] Conversely, limited opportunities for meaningful interaction in English may constrain learners' language development despite formal classroom instruction. The theory therefore provides an appropriate lens for interpreting how learners experience English-language learning challenges and how social relationships and learning environments influence the strategies they employ to overcome them.

Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory complements Sociocultural Theory by explaining the linguistic processes underpinning second-language development. Central to Krashen's framework is the Input Hypothesis, which proposes that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence (i + 1).[26] Rather than emphasising explicit grammar instruction, the theory argues that meaningful exposure to authentic language in low-anxiety environments facilitates language acquisition. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis further suggests that emotional factors such as anxiety, confidence and motivation influence learners' ability to process linguistic input, with high anxiety reducing opportunities for language acquisition.[27]

Within the context of this study, Krashen's theory provides a useful framework for explaining why learners continue to experience challenges despite prolonged exposure to English in school. Difficulties such as limited vocabulary, poor reading comprehension, weak writing skills and grammatical inaccuracies may reflect insufficient access to comprehensible input, limited opportunities for meaningful language use and affective barriers that inhibit language acquisition. The theory also offers a conceptual basis for understanding learners' use of self-directed learning strategies, including YouTube, digital media and voluntary reading, as additional sources of authentic linguistic input beyond the classroom.

The integration of Sociocultural Theory and Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory strengthens the conceptual foundation of this study, as each theory explains distinct yet complementary dimensions of English language learning. Sociocultural Theory foregrounds the importance of social interaction, collaboration and contextual influences on learning, whereas Krashen's theory explains the linguistic mechanisms through which language is acquired. Together, these theories enable a holistic interpretation of learners' experiences by recognising that successful English language learning depends not only on access to comprehensible linguistic input but also on supportive social environments that encourage meaningful interaction, learner participation and language practice. This integrated theoretical framework therefore informs the interpretation of the challenges experienced by English as

[23] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.
[24] David Wood, Jerome S. Bruner, and Gail Ross, "The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving *," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17, no. 2 (April 7, 1976): 89–100, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1976.tb00381.x.
[25] J. P Lantolf and S. L Thorne, *Sociocultural Theory and the Genesis of Second Language Development* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
[26] Krashen, "The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications."
[27] Krashen, "The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications."

a Second Language learners and the learning strategies they employ in selected secondary schools in Lesotho.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore and understand English language learning in Lesotho secondary schools. Furthermore, a qualitative approach was applied in this study because the researchers intended to interpret how English language learners at the selected schools describe their experiences and construct meaning of English language learning. A multiple case study design was chosen to provide an understanding of learners' experiences of English language learning at the three selected secondary schools.

Sampling, methods and analysis

Three secondary schools located in Maseru were selected through convenience sampling because they were readily accessible to the researchers. Although convenience sampling has limitations regarding broad generalisation, it is considered appropriate in qualitative case study research where the objective is to obtain rich, contextually grounded accounts rather than statistically representative findings. The selected schools also provided meaningful variation in institutional context, comprising a church-owned school, a government-owned school, and a private school. This diversity enabled the study to explore learners' experiences across different school governance contexts while maintaining a common curriculum and medium of instruction.

The study intentionally focused on three information-rich cases because qualitative case studies prioritise depth of understanding over breadth of coverage. All three schools offer the Lesotho General Certificate of Secondary Education (LGCSE) curriculum, use English as the language of instruction, and teach English as a compulsory core subject. These shared characteristics enhanced the comparability of findings across cases while allowing contextual differences to emerge. Consequently, the findings are intended to provide analytical rather than statistical generalisation, enabling readers to determine the transferability of the findings to similar educational settings. Purposive sampling was used to select the 12 Grade 11 (formerly Form E) learners(four from each school) who participated in three focus group discussions. The learners included two boys and two girls from each participating school. Although the sample comprised only 12 participants, this size is consistent with qualitative case study research, where the emphasis is on obtaining rich, detailed accounts from carefully selected participants rather than achieving numerical representativeness. Participants were selected because they had direct experience of learning English as a second language within the selected schools and were therefore well positioned to provide information-rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

Data saturation was achieved through an iterative process of concurrent data collection and analysis. Following each focus group discussion, the researchers transcribed, coded and compared the data before conducting the subsequent discussion. This constant comparative process enabled the researchers to monitor the emergence of new codes and themes throughout the study. By the third focus group discussion, no substantially new themes, categories or perspectives emerged; instead, participants consistently reinforced previously identified patterns related to challenges and coping strategies in language learning. This redundancy of information indicated that thematic saturation had been reached, and additional participants were unlikely to contribute novel insights. Consequently, participant recruitment ceased after the twelfth learner. Thematic analysis was utilised to explore the challenges learners encountered and the strategies they used in learning English.

Ethical considerations

Necessary measures were taken to obtain authorisation for conducting this study. Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' institution (Protocol: REC-02-169-2022), the Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training and school principals. Informed consent was secured from adult participants. For participants under 18, assent was secured after the research process was explained in simple terms.

The participating secondary schools are referred to as A, B and C, and the learners were assigned pseudonyms.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Demographic results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the learners who participated in the focus group discussions led by one of the researchers in this study. Pseudonyms were used for learners to ensure their anonymity in the table.

Table 1: Demographic information of the learners *(pseudonyms)*

School	Student's name	Gender	Age	Primary School Attended	First Language	Language of instruction
A	Seseu	F	17	Government	Sesotho	English
	Sekonyana	M	17	Private	Sesotho	English
	Matselele	M	19	Government	Sesotho	English
	Hlelisi	F	18	Government	Sesotho	English
B	Kananelo	M	18	Government	Sesotho	English
	Itumaleng	F	17	Private community	Sesotho	English
	Lerato	F	17	Government	Sesotho	English
	Nthaneo	M	17	Government	isiXhosa	English
C	Poloki	M	16	Private	Sesotho	English
	Mohlooa	M	17	Private community	Sesotho	English
	Realeboha	F	17	Private	Sesotho	English
	Tumi	F	17	Private	Sesotho	English

Thematic Results

Challenges encountered by ESL learners

Linguistic and Grammatical Challenges

The focus group discussions revealed that learners had limited exposure to English outside the school environment, as Sesotho was the dominant language used in their homes and communities. Most participants indicated that English was primarily encountered in the classroom, thereby restricting opportunities to practise the language in authentic everyday contexts. As a result, learners reported experiencing persistent linguistic and grammatical difficulties that negatively affected their academic performance.

Participants consistently indicated that they struggled to write coherent essays, construct grammatically correct sentences and respond effectively to comprehension questions. They reported difficulties using appropriate and consistent verb tenses in both creative and directed writing. Learners also highlighted limited vocabulary, particularly when answering meaning-in-context questions and writing compositions. Several participants acknowledged poor spelling skills, noting that they frequently misspelt even common English words.

These challenges were particularly evident in the focus group discussions with Seseu and Sekonyana (School A) and Nthaneo (School B). Hlelisi (School A) additionally identified punctuation as a major challenge, explaining that incorrect punctuation often affected the clarity and coherence of written responses.

Similarly, learners from School C—Tumi, Realeboha and Poloki—reported difficulties answering comprehension questions that required them to paraphrase information or provide synonyms for words used in the reading passages. Tumi and Poloki further explained that their poor performance in comprehension tasks consistently resulted in low marks in English language assessments.

These findings suggest that learners' challenges extend beyond isolated grammatical errors to encompass broader weaknesses in vocabulary development, reading comprehension and written

communication. Collectively, these linguistic difficulties appear to limit learners' ability to express themselves confidently and accurately in English, thereby constraining their overall academic performance.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these findings may be interpreted as evidence that learners have limited opportunities to develop English proficiency through meaningful social interaction and collaborative language use. The gap between learners' current language abilities and the communicative demands of English-medium instruction highlights the need for appropriate scaffolding provided by teachers and peers within learners' Zone of Proximal Development. Regular participation in authentic communicative activities may enable learners to gradually internalise linguistic knowledge and develop greater confidence in using English.

Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory provides an additional explanation for these findings. According to the Input Hypothesis, language acquisition is facilitated when learners receive comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence (i + 1). The participants' difficulties with vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension suggest that they may have had insufficient exposure to meaningful English input both inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, an overemphasis on memorising grammatical rules without adequate opportunities for authentic language use may limit learners' communicative competence and overall language development.

Time Constraints in English Language Tests

The findings indicate that participants perceived the time allocated for Section 2 (Directed Writing) of the English language examination to be insufficient to complete the required task effectively. Learners explained that directed writing was more demanding and cognitively challenging than creative writing because it required careful interpretation of instructions and adherence to specific writing conventions.

Participants also questioned why the two writing tasks carried equal marks despite being allocated different amounts of time. Many felt that the shorter time allocation disadvantaged them because they needed additional time to read, interpret and respond to examination questions in a second language. Consequently, learners recommended increasing the examination time allocated to Section 2.

Several participants further explained that limited English proficiency made it difficult to understand examination instructions, increasing the duration required to process questions before responding. These findings suggest that examination performance may be influenced not only by learners' writing ability but also by the interaction between language proficiency and time constraints during assessment.

Strategies Used by Learners

Use of Digital Technology in English Language Learning

The findings show that learners actively incorporated digital technology into their English language learning practices, with YouTube emerging as the most frequently used learning platform. Participants reported watching animations, films, talk shows and educational tutorials to improve their English language skills.

Most learners explained that they preferred YouTube because its visual and audio features made learning more engaging and easier to understand than relying solely on textbooks. They watched tutorials on creative writing techniques, reading comprehension strategies and examination question-answering methods. Participants also indicated that listening to native and proficient English speakers on YouTube improved their pronunciation, vocabulary and speaking confidence.

These findings demonstrate that learners were not passive recipients of classroom instruction but actively sought additional opportunities to improve their English proficiency through self-directed learning.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, YouTube can be viewed as a mediating cultural tool that extends learning beyond the classroom by providing authentic language models and opportunities for observational learning. Through exposure to authentic communicative contexts, learners can access scaffolding that supports language development and broadens their linguistic repertoire.

Despite these benefits, participants also reported several challenges associated with using YouTube. They expressed concern about frequent exposure to irrelevant or inappropriate content and indicated that the high cost of mobile data limited their ability to use the platform regularly. These findings suggest that although digital technologies have considerable potential to support autonomous language learning, unequal access to digital resources remains a significant barrier in the Lesotho context.

Voluntary Reading as a Learning Strategy

Participants described voluntary reading as another strategy they employed to improve their English language proficiency. However, many reported that despite their efforts, they continued to receive low marks on English language assessments, prompting some to question the effectiveness of their reading practices.

Many participants explained that their English-language teachers encouraged them to read novels, newspapers, and magazines to improve their vocabulary and reading comprehension. For example, Itumaleng from School B stated:

"Firstly, I read a lot of novels, and I consulted my teacher, who advised me to also pay attention to the key words when I answer questions so that I do not wrongly answer the questions." (Focus Group Discussion with Itumaleng, 2022)

Similarly, Mohlooa from School C remarked:

"Nna ne ke bala linovel, likoranta le limagazine (I used to read novels, newspapers and magazines), but I really do not think they are helping me, so I end up stopping because I still get low marks or even fail." (Focus Group Discussion with Mohlooa, 2022)

These findings indicate that learners recognised the potential value of voluntary reading but were uncertain about how to use reading materials strategically to improve their language proficiency. Although novels, newspapers and magazines provide authentic and culturally meaningful language input, simply reading these materials may not automatically improve language proficiency without appropriate guidance and purposeful reading strategies.

From a sociocultural perspective, authentic reading materials connect classroom learning with learners' everyday experiences, thereby creating meaningful opportunities for language development. At the same time, Krashen's theory suggests that voluntary reading is an important source of comprehensible input that can promote vocabulary growth, reading fluency, and overall language acquisition. However, participants' experiences indicate that the benefits of voluntary reading depend largely on learners' ability to actively engage with texts and on teachers' capacity to provide appropriate scaffolding and reading support.

Participants further indicated that they occasionally consulted grammar books and English textbooks prescribed for lower secondary classes to reinforce their understanding of English grammar and sentence construction. This finding further demonstrates learners' willingness to adopt multiple self-directed learning strategies. However, the effectiveness of these approaches appeared to vary depending on the availability of teacher guidance and appropriate learning resources.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the linguistic challenges experienced by the participants can be broadly categorised into lexical (vocabulary), syntactic (grammar and sentence structure) and semantic (meaning and comprehension) difficulties. Learners reported limited vocabulary, inconsistent verb tense use, difficulty constructing coherent sentences and paragraphs, poor spelling and punctuation, and challenges interpreting meaning-in-context questions. Collectively, these findings suggest that learners' difficulties extend beyond isolated grammatical errors to encompass broader weaknesses in communicative competence and academic literacy. These linguistic challenges are likely to reduce learners' confidence in using English, limit their classroom participation and negatively affect their ability to produce coherent spoken and written texts.

The findings further suggest that these linguistic difficulties are closely linked to learners' limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Most participants reported that Sesotho was the dominant language used in their homes and communities, resulting in relatively few opportunities to practise English in authentic communicative situations. This finding supports Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which views language development as a socially mediated process that occurs through interaction within meaningful cultural and communicative contexts.[28] Learners who have limited opportunities to engage in English conversations with teachers, peers or proficient speakers are less likely to develop the linguistic competence required for academic success. Rather than reflecting individual learner deficits, the findings point to the influence of broader sociocultural conditions that shape language learning opportunities.

Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory provides a complementary explanation for these findings.[29] The participants' limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies and reading comprehension difficulties suggest that they may not receive sufficient comprehensible input (i + 1) to facilitate sustained language acquisition. Where learners rely predominantly on explicit grammar instruction or have limited opportunities to engage with authentic English language materials, language development is likely to be constrained. The findings therefore reinforce the importance of creating language-rich learning environments that combine meaningful interaction, authentic communicative experiences and appropriate scaffolding to support English language acquisition.

The findings also highlight the value of collaborative learning in addressing linguistic challenges. Vygotsky argues that learners develop new knowledge through interaction with more knowledgeable others within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).[30] Collaborative classroom activities, peer discussions and teacher scaffolding may therefore enable learners to negotiate meaning, receive immediate feedback and develop greater confidence in using English. Such supportive learning environments may also reduce anxiety, thereby lowering learners' affective barriers to language learning and encouraging more active participation in classroom communication.

The study further revealed that participants perceived the time allocated for English-language writing tasks, particularly Directed Writing (Paper 1, Section 2), as inadequate. Many learners explained that they required additional time to read, interpret and respond to examination questions because English was not their first language. These findings suggest that assessment outcomes may be influenced not only by learners' writing ability but also by the interaction between second language processing demands and examination time constraints.

The complexity of second language writing has been widely documented in the literature. Tatkovic argues that writing is often more cognitively demanding than speaking, reading or listening because it requires learners' conventions.[31] Similarly, Ariyanti contends that writing errors often stem from differences between learners' first languages and the grammatical structures of the target language.[32] From this perspective, learners require additional cognitive processing time to plan, monitor and revise their written responses. The present findings therefore corroborate those of Tlali and Thamae, who similarly identified inadequate examination time as a contributing factor to poor performance in essay writing among Lesotho secondary school learners.[33] Although incomplete responses may also result from limited content knowledge or from misunderstanding of examination questions, the findings suggest that insufficient examination time is an additional barrier to learners demonstrating their true level of English language proficiency.

The findings also demonstrate that learners actively sought opportunities to improve their English language proficiency through digital technologies, particularly YouTube. Participants reported watching tutorials on creative writing, reading comprehension, grammar and pronunciation, indicating

[28] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.
[29] Krashen, "The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications."
[30] Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.
[31] Nevenka Tatković, *Interactive Communication in Education* (Visoka učiteljska škola, 2005).
[32] Ariyanti Ariyanti, "The Teaching of EFL Writing in Indonesia," *Dinamika Ilmu* 16, no. 2 (2016): 263–77.
[33] Geremiah Tlali and Amelia Thamae, "Causes of Poor Argumentative English Essay Writing at Lesotho Secondary Education."

that they were not passive recipients of classroom instruction but engaged in self-directed learning beyond the formal school environment.

This finding aligns with recent international research demonstrating that digital technologies can extend language learning beyond the classroom by providing learners with authentic linguistic input, multimodal learning experiences and opportunities for autonomous learning.[34] Syam, Samtidar and Munir similarly argue that YouTube provides engaging audio-visual content that enhances learners' motivation and sustained engagement in English language learning.[35] Likewise, Ilyas and Putri found that learners increasingly use YouTube and other social media platforms to access English language tutorials independently.[36]

The findings further support studies that demonstrate that YouTube enhances pronunciation, vocabulary development, and speaking proficiency through exposure to authentic language models.[37] In the present study, learners specifically reported improvements in pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition through repeated exposure to English-language videos. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal contextual challenges associated with digital learning, including high mobile data costs and exposure to inappropriate online content. These findings suggest that although digital technologies have considerable pedagogical potential, equitable access to affordable internet services and appropriate digital guidance remain essential for their effective integration into English language teaching and learning.

The findings further indicate that learners adopted voluntary reading as an additional strategy for improving their English language proficiency. Participants reported reading novels, newspapers and magazines to improve vocabulary, reading comprehension and general language competence. These findings demonstrate learners' willingness to engage in autonomous language learning despite the challenges they experienced in formal classroom contexts.

The educational value of extensive reading has been widely acknowledged in second language acquisition research. Kozhevnikova argues that newspapers and magazines provide authentic language exposure and broaden learners' vocabulary and cultural knowledge.[38] Similarly, Sibanda demonstrates that newspapers serve as meaningful pedagogical resources by connecting classroom learning to real-life experiences and encouraging authentic language use.[39] Krashen's concept of Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) likewise emphasises that self-selected reading materials promote vocabulary development, reading fluency and overall language acquisition by providing learners with comprehensible and engaging linguistic input.[40]

However, the present findings also challenge assumptions that voluntary reading automatically leads to improved language proficiency. Despite regularly reading novels, newspapers and magazines, several participants reported little improvement in their English language performance. This finding suggests that access to reading materials alone may be insufficient to improve language proficiency if learners lack effective reading strategies, adequate vocabulary or appropriate teacher guidance. It also

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[34] Godwin-Jones, "Using Mobile Technology to Develop Language Skills and Cultural Understanding"; Herodotou et al., "Innovative Pedagogies of the Future: An Evidence-Based Selection."

[35] Sulhidayah Syam, Samtidar Samtidar, and Munir Munir, "A Study on the Use of Youtube in Learning English Among English Department Students of the Faculty of Languages and Literature Universitas Negeri Makassar," *Journal of Technology in Language Pedagogy (JTechLP)* 2, no. 2 (2023): 278–96.

[36] Muhammad Ilyas and Miranti Eka Putri, "YouTube Channel: An Alternative Social Media to Enhance EFL Students' Speaking Skill," *J-SHMIC: Journal of English for Academic* 7, no. 1 (2020): 77–87.

[37] Seher Balbay and Selcan Kilis, "Students' Perceptions of the Use of a YouTube Channel Specifically Designed for an Academic Speaking Skills Course," *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 3, no. 2 (2017): 235–51; Irina Wagner, "New Technologies, Same Ideologies: Learning from Language Revitalization Online," 2017; Grace Mgiriama Wawuda, "Integration of YouTube Videos in Teaching and Learning of English Language Speaking Skills among Secondary School Students in Nakuru County, Kenya," *Kenya (Doctoral Dissertation, Kenyatta University)*, 2019.

[38] Elena Kozhevnikova, "Exposing Students to Authentic Materials as a Way to Increase Students' Language Proficiency and Cultural Awareness," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 116 (2014): 4462–66.

[39] Rockie Sibanda, "Learners' Reading between the Signs in the English Second Language Classroom," *Reading & Writing-Journal of the Reading Association of South Africa* 13, no. 1 (2022): 328.

[40] Stephen Krashen, "The Comprehension Hypothesis," in *13th International Symposium and Book Fair on Language Teaching (English Teachers Association of the Republic of China), Taipei, Taiwan*, 2004; Stephen D Krashen, *Free Voluntary Reading* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011).

supports Krashen's observation that the effectiveness of Free Voluntary Reading depends on learners' meaningful engagement with texts rather than merely the quantity of reading undertaken.[41]

Taken together, the findings indicate that learners demonstrated considerable agency by adopting multiple self-directed learning strategies, including digital learning and voluntary reading, to compensate for limitations in formal classroom instruction. However, the limited effectiveness of some of these strategies highlights the need for greater teacher support, structured guidance and improved access to quality learning resources. Consequently, improving English language proficiency in Lesotho secondary schools requires a holistic approach that integrates effective classroom pedagogy, supportive sociocultural learning environments, technology-enhanced language learning and purposeful independent reading practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, this study recommends that secondary schools provide learner-centred instructional support and adequate English language resources to strengthen learners' language proficiency and improve their overall academic performance. Schools should create supportive learning environments that encourage active participation, collaborative learning and regular opportunities for learners to practise English in meaningful communicative contexts. The study further recommends that the Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training invest in continuous professional development programmes that equip English language teachers with contemporary pedagogical approaches, multilingual teaching strategies and technology-enhanced instructional practices. Such professional development should also strengthen teachers' capacity to support learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying levels of English proficiency.

The findings underscore the significant role of digital technology and voluntary reading in shaping the learning experiences of English language learners in secondary schools. While YouTube and other digital applications facilitate autonomous and self-directed learning, their effectiveness depends on purposeful integration into classroom instruction and appropriate teacher guidance. Accordingly, educators should incorporate carefully selected digital resources into English language instruction to complement classroom learning and encourage learners to engage with authentic English language materials beyond the classroom. To support technology-enhanced language learning, the Ministry of Education and Training should develop a sustainable funding strategy that provides schools with reliable internet connectivity, appropriate digital infrastructure, and access to high-quality online English-language learning resources. Investment in digital literacy programmes for both teachers and learners would further enhance the effective use of technology for English language teaching and learning.

The findings also highlight the educational value of voluntary reading as a strategy for improving vocabulary, reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. Schools should therefore establish or strengthen reading programmes by expanding access to age-appropriate English novels, newspapers, magazines and other authentic reading materials. At the same time, teachers should provide structured guidance on effective reading strategies to maximise learning outcomes. Finally, the learners who participated in this study indicated that the time allocated for LGCSE English Language Paper 1 was insufficient to complete all examination tasks. In light of these findings, the study recommends that the Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training, in collaboration with the Examinations Council of Lesotho, review the current examination time allocation to determine whether it adequately reflects the cognitive and linguistic demands placed on English as a Second Language learners. Where appropriate, consideration should be given to increasing the examination duration to enable learners to demonstrate their knowledge and language proficiency more effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges learners encountered in learning the English language and the strategies they used to address them. The findings suggest that using YouTube can enhance English

[41] Stephen Krashen, “Do Students Read During Sustained Silent Reading?,” 1998.

language learning both in schools and at the learners' homes, as it can lower anxiety and increase intrinsic motivation. The study has also shown the need for teacher training and professional development workshops on technology-enhanced language learning to improve English language teaching and learning in secondary schools. Digital technology can provide learners with a wide range of English language learning materials and activities, which can promote learner engagement and improve learners' performance. Integrating authentic materials and digital technology can foster supportive classroom environments and effective language learning strategies.

As this study was conducted in only three secondary schools in Maseru, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all secondary schools in Lesotho. Rather, the study provides contextually rich insights into the experiences of English as a Second Language learners that may be analytically transferable to similar educational settings. Although the study offers valuable insights into learners' challenges and coping strategies, caution should be exercised when extending the findings to other contexts with different demographic, linguistic or institutional characteristics. Future research should include a larger number of schools across different districts of Lesotho using maximum variation sampling to determine whether similar patterns emerge across diverse educational contexts and learner populations.

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ABOUT AUTHOR(S)

Dr Maseriti Lineo Hyacinth Morakabi completed a Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics degree with a focus on English language teaching and learning at the University of Johannesburg. She is currently working on research publications. Her research niche focuses on, but is not limited to, language teaching and learning, second language teaching and learning, sociolinguistics, morphology, language policy and planning, and English language studies.

Prof. Rockie Sibanda holds a PhD in Educational Linguistics and is an Associate Professor at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. His research focuses on literacy development and language learning in multilingual contexts, particularly among low-income and marginalised communities. His scholarly interests include promoting and protecting minority and migrant languages, multilingual education, and advancing social inclusion in educational and broader societal contexts. His work seeks to address language-related inequalities and promote equitable participation, recognition and inclusion in diverse communities.