



# **Afrikaans First Additional Language teachers' experiences teaching online during COVID-19 at two public high schools in Gauteng, South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across South Africa were forced to turn to online education. As with other subjects, Afrikaans First Additional Language (AFAL) teachers had to find ways to continue teaching their learners online under COVID-19 restrictions. For many, this was a daunting task and unfamiliar territory. This research explores how AFAL teachers from two public schools in Gauteng Province experienced online teaching during COVID-19. For this research, seven participants were selected through purposive sampling to participate in either semi-structured individual interviews or a focus group. Additional data was gathered from various documents from the two schools. Analysis of the data demonstrated that online communication created several barriers while teaching. In addition, learners' poor work ethic had a ripple effect and work provided online had to be retaught once learners returned to school. Although teaching AFAL online is not necessarily the recommended approach, there are certain advantages to incorporating online platforms in a classroom setting. Despite various challenges, teachers continued to provide learners with work while trying to make an abnormal situation as normal as possible.

**Keywords:** *Afrikaans; ICT's; Languages, Teaching online*

## **Introduction**

### **Lockdown 2020 and implications for education**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to education systems worldwide (König, Jäger-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020). In an attempt to curb the spread of COVID-19, South Africa's government acted swiftly. On the 23rd of March, president, Cyril Ramaposa, announced that South Africa would go into near

complete lockdown from the 26th of March 2020 (South African Government, 2021). By August 2020, South Africa had been under lockdown for five months, though the government made some adjustments to restrictions as time passed (van der Berg & Spaull, 2020). For the initial five weeks of hard lockdown, children could only leave their homes to seek medical attention, and for the first ten weeks, all educational institutes were closed (van der Berg & Spaull, 2020). This closure applied to all educational institutions, from preschool to tertiary institutions.

Learning and teaching moved to online platforms to ensure that COVID-19 lockdown restrictions could be adhered to as outlined by the government. When schools started to reopen on the 3rd of August, grade 12 learners were the first high school learners to return (South African Government, 2021). After that, beginning with grade 11's, other grades systematically returned to schools (South African Government, 2021). In South Africa, approximately 70% of high school classes have more than 40 learners, and 26% have more than 60 (van der Berg & Spaull, 2020). Maintaining the government-implemented social distancing protocols became challenging with so many learners per class. In an attempt to solve the social distance problem within classrooms, learners attended school on alternating days, weeks, or during alternative times of the day (Businesstech, 2020). Teachers had to continue with remote online teaching on days when learners did not attend school.

During COVID-19 restrictions and school closures, online education was no longer optional, but unavoidable (Dhawan, 2020). It was no longer a question of whether online teaching could provide quality education but how institutions decided to approach and apply online education (Dhawan, 2020). Teachers and educational institutions that were previously reluctant to move to online education suddenly found that they had no choice (Dhawan, 2020). That said, teachers' and learners' resistance to moving lessons online during remote online education could be expected (Gacs, Goertel & Spasova, 2020). In light of COVID-19 restrictions and school closures, the choice to move education online can be described as emergency remote learning, which is significantly different from planned online education.

Whereas planned online education is designed with long-term application and sustainability in mind, emergency remote learning has a short-term outlook and realistically achievable outcomes (Gacs et al., 2020). With planned online education, the decision to move online is made in advance, and teachers have time to prepare. The primary goal of emergency remote learning is to provide learners with temporary access to education as necessitated by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic (Moser, Wei, & Brenner, 2021). Emergency remote learning is meant to be a short-term solution to education-related challenges. During emergency remote learning, teachers often have limited resources at their disposal and possibly limited prior training regarding online teaching (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021).

In a short period, countless teachers worldwide had to start teaching using online platforms, using the internet as one of the primary forms of communication while they and their learners stayed home (Boa, 2020). To adjust to their new teaching environment, teachers had to find and embrace new teaching styles and online platforms (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021), while ensuring that non-stop teaching and learning occurred (Bao, 2020). Teachers and educational institutions would be judged on their ability to maintain quality education during emergency remote learning due to school closure (Dhawan, 2020). Teachers had to ensure they maintained at least minimum contact time with their learners to support their development and educational growth (König et al., 2020).

One of the biggest challenges faced by AFAL teachers was finding a way to communicate with all their learners. Between 76.7% and 95.3% of households in South Africa have at least one functional cell phone within the household (Department of Statistics South Africa, 2019). Having said this, it cannot be assumed that all learners had access to a mobile device or could access their schoolwork every day since they might have had to share the mobile device with other family members. These issues of equity arise in a few local studies (Lautenbach & Randell, 2020). In addition, between 1.6% and 21.7% of households have internet at home (Department of Statistics South Africa, 2019). Although remote learning can be described as a lifeline for some learners, for the most vulnerable learners, this was not a feasible option (UNICEF, 2021).

The high cost of data in South Africa also needs to be considered as a factor that influenced teachers' ability to connect with their learners. Due to these high data costs, countless learners found themselves in a situation where they could not continue their studies while staying at home under COVID-19 restrictions (Duncan-Williams, 2020). However, learners were not the only ones with connectivity problems since not all teachers have internet access and the necessary resources at home. Teachers faced a moral and ethical dilemma while teaching online. Would they be seen as abandoning their less privileged learners if they continued teaching the syllabus even though some of their learners could not access all of the lessons? (Gustafsson & Deliwe, 2020).

### ***Background: Afrikaans as home and first additional language***

As a language, Afrikaans has progressed "from being dismissed as mere "kitchen Dutch" to being a fully-fledged higher-function language capable of expressing the most advanced and intricate concepts of literature, philosophy, science, justice, commerce, etc. on a par with the world's leading languages" (Botman, 2010, p.2). Afrikaans has claimed its place among South Africa's eleven official languages. The last census conducted in South Africa in 2019 showed that approximately 6.8 million South Africans speak Afrikaans as a home language (Alexander, 2021).

At the same time, about 10.3 million South Africans speak Afrikaans, the third largest language in South Africa, as a first additional language (FAL) (Alexander, 2021). Afrikaans plays an essential role in the South African education system from the foundation phase to tertiary education as a language of instruction. Primary and high school learners usually learn a home language and a FAL as compulsory subjects (Stein, 2017). A FAL is taught to learners as a second language, and as a result, learners are often less proficient in this specific language than they are in their home language (Stein, 2017). Learners who struggle with the language often have negative feelings towards the language.

Learners may feel that there is no place for AFAL outside the classroom, and therefore they see no need to learn the language (Akbari, 2015). Nevertheless, teachers expect learners to reach a point where they can successfully communicate in the FAL they are taught (Stein, 2017). By allowing and encouraging learners to read, write, speak and hear Afrikaans frequently, they can start to appreciate the language and see the value in learning it (Adam, 2007).

### ***Strategies for teaching AFAL during COVID-19 restrictions***

Planning and preparation are vital for successful online education (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020), as well as having more than one plan of action when creating and delivering content, especially during emergency remote education. Teachers, alongside school management, would have had to decide which online platform would best suit their needs while teaching online during COVID-19 school closure (Bailee & Lee, 2020). It was fundamental that a plan for effective communication between teachers and learners was put in place and that everyone has the skill they need to use the platform chosen for this (Gacs et al., 2020). Teaching online could be described as a daunting task for novice teachers and those new to the online education environment. Countless teachers had to learn how to teach online through their own trial and error (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021). Novice teachers often lacked first-hand experience and knowledge about available tools and how to use them effectively (Bailee & Lee, 2020).

One way of making online lessons more effective is to include multimedia, such as YouTube videos. When teachers correctly include multimedia in lessons, learners have multiple opportunities to understand and master content (Kebritchi, Lipschuets & Santiago, 2017). Teachers who had to be sensitive to the amount of data learners would need to use while learning from home would, probably, have had to limit the multimedia they included in their lessons. Many teachers opted to use WhatsApp to communicate with their learners while schools were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021).

WhatsApp is convenient, easy to use, and financially more accessible than many other online platforms (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021). Teachers could share voice notes and messages through WhatsApp groups, and learners could complete the work when they had the time and resources (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021).

Using social media like WhatsApp and Twitter to communicate with learners could increase learners' participation (Habibi et al., 2018). Email, video and online discussion forums were other popular forms of communication (Bailee & Lee, 2020).

AFAL teachers found that they could no longer rely on non-verbal communication while teaching (Bao, 2020; Gacs et al., 2020). Teachers could no longer rely on facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice while they taught as they would have in a conventional classroom situation (Bao, 2020; Gacs et al., 2020). The inability to express themselves as they would have could have caused problems while teaching content such as literature. In an attempt to rectify this problem, teachers turned to synchronous learning and used online platforms like Google Meet, where they could teach through live streaming. Synchronous learning allows for real-time interaction in a virtual classroom where teachers can provide learners with instant feedback and opportunities to practice speaking and listening skills (Dhawan, 2020).

Using an online platform like Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams created a positive learning environment for learners since this form of teaching felt more like the conventional classroom that they know (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021). Moreover, while using Zoom, learners could use the transcript function, while teachers could record lessons to share later for those learners who missed them (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020).

This leads to the question guiding this inquiry: *What are the experiences of Afrikaans First Additional Language teachers teaching online during COVID-19 at two public high schools in Gauteng province?*

## **Method**

A phenomenological research design was used for this study to gain insight into how AFAL teachers from two public high schools in Gauteng experienced teaching online during COVID-19 restrictions. The researcher worked within the constructivist interpretivist paradigm to determine AFAL teachers' experiences of COVID-19 related online education. The use of the constructivist interpretivist paradigm allowed the researcher to focus on understanding the individual instead of concentrating on universal laws (Kivunja & Kuyine, 2017).

## **Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study. Purposive sampling was used to identify and choose participants who are knowledgeable of, or have experienced, a specific phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). Teachers were chosen and included in the sample based on the following criteria:

- Teachers who taught AFAL during 2020 or during 2020 and 2021.
- Teachers who taught AFAL at either of the two public high schools which formed part of the study.
- Teachers who taught AFAL online during the initial COVID-19 school closure in 2020.
- Teachers who taught AFAL during further COVID-19 restrictions.

The two schools that formed part of the study are public high schools situated in Gauteng. Furthermore, both schools offer their learners the choice of being taught either Afrikaans or IsiZulu as their FAL from grade 8 onwards. The researcher interviewed 4 of the 6 AFAL teachers from school A during semi-structured individual interviews. From school B, 3 of the 5 AFAL teachers formed part of a focus group discussion. Thus, data was collected from a sample of 7 participants. These 7 participants account for 63% of the available population found within the two public high schools.

### ***Permission and ethical considerations***

Permission to conduct this research was obtained from the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee. Permission to use documents from school A, including newsletters from the school's management team, and school policies, was obtained from the deputy principal. Similarly, the principal of school B permitted their school documents to be used on the basis that all information that could identify the school was removed. All participants gave informed consent before participating in the research. Participants were informed beforehand that they were free to deny participation in the study and that they could withdraw at any time. The names of all participants and schools were kept anonymous and confidential.

### ***Data collection***

Semi-structured interviews, and a focus group were used to collect data relating to AFAL high school teachers' online teaching experience during COVID-19 school closure and restrictions. The researcher collected data through 4 semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group with 3 participants. With semi-structured interviews, a guide was used with topics and questions that need to be covered during the interview (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). The interviewer had some leeway about the questions asked and the order of the questions while collecting data in a conversational style (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study to allow the researcher to collect in-depth information. Participants were allowed to lead the conversation where needed while the researcher ensured that the discussion stayed on topic. Additional data was collected through a single focus group. To strengthen the findings, the researcher collected additional data from relevant schools' newsletters from both schools.

All interviews were transcribed and then translated from Afrikaans to English in this research. Data from individual interviews, the focus group and relevant documents was analyzed to identify themes relating to the research aims. Themes relate to:

- the challenges Afrikaans First Additional Language high school teachers faced while teaching online during COVID-19 restrictions.
- how these Afrikaans First Additional Language high school teachers experienced teaching online during COVID-19 restrictions.
- strategies Afrikaans First Additional Language high school teachers can adopt when teaching online during COVID-19 restrictions.

Thematic analysis was used to pinpoint data patterns to construct relevant themes and categories (Bowen, 2009). The researcher used inductive coding to identify themes and connect examples from the transcript and documents (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

## Results

The data was analyzed and through inductive coding five main themes emerged: Availability of resources, Importance of communication and interaction, Completion of syllabus, Teaching AFAL online: Expectations and strategies, and Experience of teaching AFAL online. Data was analyzed and coded with three broad, pre-formulated themes in mind, namely: teaching AFAL online, challenges of teaching AFAL online, experience of teaching AFAL online.

### ***Finding A: Availability of resources***

One of the biggest challenges of teaching AFAL online during COVID-19 restrictions was the need for more resources. Three of the participants added that they were concerned about the availability of their resources, especially data. P3 explained that "I later started giving them data but it bankrupted me", and "I held competitions and said the guy who sends me a nice essay gets a gigabyte." P3 paid for the data she sent to these learners at her own expense in an attempt to assist her learners and provide them with the means to access their online work. P4 commented that: "I think I had two parents who told me, the children have to work from their computers. If they cannot work from their computers, then there is no data or means to do it. So, they only had to share one computer in an entire family."

The participants agreed that not all of their learners had access to the resources they needed to access their work online while working from home. However, participants from the focus group added that many of their learners have data for social media but needed data to access their school work. "So, they do not have data for it but they can Instagram and Facebook" (P2). These participants suggested that many of their learners could not priorities and use their data to

access their school work. Also relating to resources needed to teach online, P1 commented: "I think data from our side, if I did not have a friend who said, you know what, here is my unlimited Wi-Fi, here is my internet access, you can use it, then I would not be able to do it." This point was re-iterated by P2 "I was at a point where I took my laptop with me when I went somewhere, to a friend's house, use their Wi-Fi, quickly send the stuff I need to do, then I keep it aside just in case." Just like their learners, these teachers needed specific resources for online education to be possible and teaching to continue.

### ***Finding B: Importance of communication and interaction***

Communication is fundamentally essential when teaching a FAL. One of the participants described communication as "the heart of the language" (P3). The participants shared similar views and spoke about the challenges of not seeing their learners' while teaching online. Teachers need to "be able to communicate with the children. They must hear the language, if they do not hear the language, then they lose it completely." (P4). P1 thought that "it's important to be able to see the kids. To be able to see that they understand you, they know what you are talking about", and P5 felt that "nothing beats talking and feedback." For the participants, it was necessary to interact with their learners to see whether or not they understood the work. P 6 felt that it was challenging for her because "they hear you talking, but it's not like you can see a reaction. You can't see if the child frowns and doesn't know what you're saying. In other words, there is no feedback." One of participants added additional insight into how this lack of interaction negatively influenced the learners. "I think it made them a little discouraged. Because how are they going to understand the work?" (P7). As an added challenge to teaching AFAL online during COVID-19 restrictions and school closure, the participants received very little communication from the learners and their parents, even when they contacted them directly.

### ***Finding C: Completion of syllabus***

The participants in this study all agreed that their learners' poor work ethic was one of the most significant challenges of teaching AFAL online during COVID-19 restrictions. The participants reported feelings of anger and frustration over the large number of learners who did not complete their work while working from home. When asked how many learners had worked online P7 said that "more than half of the class didn't." P2 reported that she had "like 5 out of a class who actually did what you wanted." P3 commented that "there were the normal guys who always get 80, their book is full, everything is done, but I wanted to reach those other kids too." Similarly, P5 said, "you knew your strong learners would still have the self-discipline, and your average guys, the guys who usually work hard."



One participant felt that the learners did not complete their work because they did not care about it. Other excuses from learners included not having data or their books or seeing the work sent to them. Two participants felt that learners could have given up hope and stopped trying to do the work. "They had no data, and they gave up a long time ago. They were so negative. It's COVID, there are all the issues at home, mom and dad lost their jobs. So, they were so negative. You lost them completely, completely. No message could get them back. Nothing worked. It was actually damn sad" (P3). As a result of numerous learners who did not work at home, the participants had to reteach the work they sent learners while trying to complete the rest of the syllabus. P2 also said that when the learners started returning to school, she, "basically wrote off all my online work, pretended I never did it and just started all over again." One of the participants pointed out that they retaught the work because all of their learners needed access to the same education regardless of the resources, they had access to while working from home.

#### ***Finding D: Teaching AFAL online: expectations and strategies***

While schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were expected to continue teaching online. While the participants expected their learners to put in the same amount of effort that they did, their learners expected to be spoon fed. P3 stated that "at the end of the day, we did our best. We wished they had done that too, and they did not." Many learners expected their teachers to provide them with work while taking a more passive role in their education. Three of the participants spoke about how their learners expected them to be available at all hours of the day and night. P2 spoke about "kids who message or phone you up to 10 o'clock in the evening, 12 o'clock, 1 o'clock in the morning." P1 said, "I can't tell you how many times I would get a question, and then I don't answer him immediately, and then I get 10 question marks afterwards." The teachers from the focus group felt that learners had no sense of boundaries and expected their teachers to meet their needs when it was convenient for them as learners.

With regards to training, the participants had mixed reviews. P5 used the following metaphor to describe how she experienced the e-learning training provided by the school, "It's almost like throwing flour into a pot, the pot just got fuller, and you're still struggling to get the lid on, and then the lid pops off. And then everyone is full of porridge." P5 mentioned that the training had "helped" but that she would have preferred working at her own pace while having "something on a piece of paper, and you can go and work things out for yourself." P7 said she found the training to be more beneficial than the other participants and said, "I learned a lot there. I still use all that stuff now, and it also helped me to give the children resources." All participants had received training to use either ISTI or Google for education prior to COVID-19. Although the participants from school A had all used Google Classroom while teaching online, only one participant had seen its value beforehand.

The participants used a variety of platforms, including WhatsApp, Google Classroom and email, to teach AFAL online. Furthermore, participants used various methods, from posting notes and worksheets to sending voice notes and pre-recorded videos. The participants tried to find the most effective ways of reaching their learners. However, as someone who had used WhatsApp to communicate with the learners, P3 gave the following feedback, "I was panicking, and scared and I was also unsure about everything, and I wanted to help them, and it was a stupid thing I would not do it again." The participants tried to keep things as normal as possible for their learners and cover various aspects of teaching Afrikaans. Most of the participants found literature to be the most challenging aspect to teach online.

### ***Finding E: Experience of teaching AFAL online***

For six of the seven participants, the experience of teaching AFAL online is one that they would not like to repeat. Only one participant stated that she would willingly teach AFAL fully online again in the future. Unlike P7, the other participants had less favorable views about teaching online again. When asked the same question, other participants gave answers like, "at this point I'm very glad I never have to do it again" (P6) and "I am very glad I do not have to do e-learning anymore because it's been stressful for me" (P4). P7 explained that she would rather teach learners online who want to be helped than teach in a classroom. "I would rather sit in my home and teach someone online, who I know will do the work and needs help." P6 said that while teaching online she felt "very alienated from my job."

She explained that this was because she could no longer interact with her learners and colleagues the way that she was used to. P6 did mention several times that she felt that she "didn't have control over the work and over the learners", and this made her feel "anxious." The focus group participants were asked if they felt that their job was less rewarding while teaching online from home, to which all three answered yes. P1 explained that this was because "it feels like you are worth less. You feel you don't make that much of a difference."

For most of the participants, the experience of teaching AFAL online during COVID-19 was a negative one. P3 found teaching online to be emotionally challenging. "It was also emotionally hard on me. Probably on all of us. It wasn't nice to know your kids are there without school, without education, without a teacher and then worrying about everything." The first thing that P1 spoke about when asked about teaching online during COVID-19 restrictions was feelings of "frustration." Her feelings of frustration were linked to the learners' poor work ethic while working online from home. The overall consensus was that AFAL should instead be taught in a conventional classroom. One of the questions that the interviewer asked was whether the participants thought AFAL could successfully be taught online.

P1 felt that it was possible to successfully teach AFAL online if you have the “the technological skills.” Both P2 and P3 thought that it was possible “if you want to.” However, P3 also felt that the conventional way of teaching in a classroom was better than teaching online. “I also don't want it to work. The classroom is the real deal. That's how it should be.” P3 is one of the participants who did not enjoy teaching online, “When I sent my last lesson, it was my last lesson. I never did again. That was the end.”

## Discussion

Lack of resources for both learners and teachers became one of the most significant challenges these teachers had to overcome while teaching AFAL online during COVID-19. According to Juárez-Díaz and Perales (2021), teachers who teach online during emergency remote learning often do not have all the necessary resources. According to the participants, many of their learners did not have the data or digital devices needed to access their schoolwork online while they were at home. These results are similar to the findings from previous research by The Department of Statistics South Africa (2019) and Duncan-Williams (2020). However, some of the participants pointed out that many of their learners often have data to use for social media and that they perhaps could not priorities their school work.

Bao (2020) and Gacs et al (2020) explained the importance of teachers seeing non-verbal cues from their learners. Communication is such an essential part of teaching a language that one participant described communication as the heart of the language. The participant all spoke about the importance of seeing their learners while they teach and the necessity of seeing their non-verbal cues. Furthermore, some of the participants spoke about the possible adverse effects that not being able to see their teacher could have had on the learners. This was one of the main reasons why the participant would not want to teach AFAL online again.

Learners did not always complete tasks as needed or attend online lessons (Bao, 2020; Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021). For the participants in this study, their learners' poor work ethic was one of the most frustrating parts of teaching AFAL online during COVID-19 restrictions. Large numbers of learners did little to no work during the time they stayed at home and all the work that had been covered online had to be retaught when learners returned to school. The participants provided several theories as to why these learners did not work, from lack of caring to hopelessness. The learner's poor work ethic was another reason most participants would not teach AFAL online again.

Although many learners did not complete their school work as expected while at home during COVID-19 restrictions, some participants noted that leaders expected them to be available at all hours of the day. Most participants also felt that the training they had received at school regarding teaching with technology did not prepare them for teaching fully online. As noted, teachers can use various platforms

to teach online (Bailee & Lee, 2020; Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021; Habibi et al., 2018.) The participants made use of various platforms while teaching online. The participants tried to find the most effective ways of reaching their learners, as was mentioned in the study by Dhawan (2020). Though they could not agree on which platform was better, those who used WhatsApp agreed that they would not use it again. For most participants, the goal was to keep teaching while learners could not attend school and to keep things as normal as possible.

Most participants described the experience of teaching AFAL online as a negative experience and one they would not wish to repeat. Only one participant said that she would teach fully online again instead of in a classroom. Numerous negative emotions were associated with teaching AFAL online, including frustration, loss of control, concern for learners, anxiety and worst of all. When asked about the possibility of successfully teaching AFAL online, some participants were not convinced that it could be done. In contrast, others felt that it could possibly be accomplished if a person wanted to make it work.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the research sought to investigate how teachers from two schools experienced teaching AFAL online during COVID-19 restrictions. A phenomenological design allowed the researcher to understand this phenomenon better. The main findings of the research point to various challenges in teaching AFAL online. In addition, certain teachers saw the value of using online platforms and continued to post work online for their learners after returning to school.

## **Recommendations**

The following areas could be considered for future research relating to teaching AFAL online under COVID-19 restrictions:

- A comparison between teaching a FAL and a home language online during COVID-19 restrictions.
- An investigation into the factors that influenced the learners' work ethic while working from home.
- A comparison of different online platforms and their effectiveness in teaching AFAL online.

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