

Teachers as change agents: Teaching English First Additional Language in schools in Gauteng



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Background: Teachers are responsible for curriculum implementation and transformation. Therefore, they are viewed as the primary agents of change in teaching and learning. As agents of change, they are responsible for being innovative and creative in their teaching and learning in their English First Additional Language (EFAL) class.

Objectives: The study aimed to explore South African teachers as agents of change in teaching EFAL in their Grade 3 classes.

Method: This study adopted a qualitative research approach with an interpretivist paradigm. The researcher wanted to explore teachers' lived experience as agents of change in the Foundation Phase class. A case study design with purposive sampling was used.

Results: The findings revealed that teachers understood their roles and responsibilities as change agents in their classrooms. They agreed they were responsible for implementing the curriculum to improve basic literacy skills among EFAL learners.

Conclusion: The study found that teachers, as agents of change, needed support in continuous professional development to implement the curriculum. They also highlighted the need for help from their school management teams.

Contribution: This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of the EFAL teacher. They are no longer mediators of learning but agents of change in teaching, learning and curriculum adaptation. Their roles go beyond imparting knowledge to learners. They are developers and mediators of critical thinking, decision-making, communication, use of technology and relationship-building skills.

Keywords: agents of change; teachers; Foundation Phase; English First Additional Language; EFAL.

Introduction

Within the school's learning environment, teacher agency is the teachers' capacity to construct and direct their professional growth to contribute to teaching and learning in their classrooms (Bourne 2016). According to Liu, Wang and Zhao (2020), teachers are the primary agents of change in teaching and learning. As agents of change, they are responsible for being innovative and creative and keeping current in implementing the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) skills among learners: problem-solving, decision-making, communication and interpersonal skills. This study focuses on teachers as change agents in promoting literacy development in the English First Additional Language (EFAL) Grade 3 class in the Foundation Phase in three schools in Gauteng province in South Africa. In South Africa, Foundation Phase learners are between 5 and 9 years old. The Grade 3 class is the learner's third year of formal South African schooling.

Due to the challenges in implementing the prescribed South African National Curriculum Statement (NCS), a panel of experts was appointed to investigate these challenges (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2009). The panel's task was to review curriculum implementation and listen to the voices of all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, subject advisors, school leaders and learners. The Minister wanted the expert panel to provide her with recommendations for streamlining and strengthening the NCS (DBE 2009). One of the recommendations was to allow teachers the flexibility to implement change in their classrooms through the use of diverse teaching and learning methods to accommodate all learners. The Minister believed that teachers in South African public schools could make informed decisions to adapt teaching and learning in their context (Govender 2018). The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) gave teachers the opportunity and willingness to act and make changes to teaching and learning

(Department of Education [DoE] 2001). Since teachers are vital to change and curriculum implementation (Bourne 2016), this study explored how teachers as agents of change in the Foundation Phase promote language development among EFAL learners. For this study, the researcher asked the question: How can teachers as agents of change promote literacy development in their EFAL class in the Grade 3 Foundation Phase?

Aims and objectives

This study explored teachers' role as change agents in teaching EFAL in the Foundation Phase (Grade 3) class. The primary objectives of this study were to explore (1) how teachers exercise agency in response to teaching EFAL in the Grade 3 class, (2) what factors support (enable) and inhibit teacher agency during curriculum implementation, and (3) what support teachers as agents of change require to improve their teaching of EFAL in the Foundation Phase class?

Teachers as agents of change

The CAPS in South Africa (DBE 2009) and the curriculum in the UK have defined teachers as agents of change (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson 2013). This is a significant shift in emphasis from teachers being ardent policy implementers to decision-making in policy implementation. To allow for adaptation and accommodation of learners, White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education in South Africa (DoE 2001) articulated that teachers can adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the learners in their respective classrooms. In the classroom, the role of the teacher is central to the learner's success. Kirkwood and Tucker (1990), cited in Bourne (2016), state that teachers are more influential than textbooks and other resources as the primary source of information for learners. McCloskey (ed. 2014) believes that the role of the teacher in the classroom is promoting and transmitting specific knowledge and approaches to improve teaching and learning. As agents of change and curriculum implementation, teachers must ensure that the curriculum is effectively implemented at the classroom level (DBE 2009; Wang 2022). Within South African communities and globally, teachers are seen as individuals who can help bring about positive changes in the lives of learners through effective curriculum implementation. Tikly and Barret (eds. 2013) state that teachers are viewed as leaders who can guide, support and advise young learners within the school's learning environment and the community. Bourne (2016) believes that there are three distinct locations where teachers can be identified as agents of change. These locations include the classroom, the broader community and society.

Since teachers are agents of change within their classrooms, they are viewed as individuals responsible for ensuring change in their educational community and professional development. Considering the 4IR skills, Paine and Zeichner (2012) argue that future teachers should be developed according to global educational competencies and skills. Global education should encourage and support

learners to be confident to act in their learning and inspire hope among learners to make a difference in society. Fisher (2001), cited in Bourne (2016), states that teachers who want to promote and be agents of change should also recognise, acknowledge and accept that change within the work environment comes with its challenges. Therefore, they should be given professional development opportunities and opportunities for self-reflection on their teaching practices. Teachers need the necessary skills to engage with others and colleagues to support their vision as enablers of change in their classrooms. For this reason, the researcher opines that teachers must reflect on their needs and identify personal and professional developmental areas to help them become better teachers.

English First Additional Language

In South Africa, the CAPS serve as the policy document to be used by all public schools for those learners whose mother-tongue language is not English (DBE 2011). The CAPS was amended, streamlined and strengthened to become the official curriculum for all public schools in South Africa. One of the many policies in the Foundation Phase was the CAPS: *Foundation Phase – Grades R-3, FAL* (DBE 2011).

In this study, FAL should be understood as (DBE 2016a; DBE 2016b):

a language which is not a mother tongue but as a language which is used for certain communicative functions in a society as well as the medium of learning and teaching in education. (p. 11)

According to the DBE (2011) and the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) (DoE 1997), any learner who is competent in their mother-tongue language has the knowledge to transfer these skills from their home language to an additional language, in this instance to EFAL. Fesi and Mncube (2021) believe that mother-tongue speakers may experience challenges adopting basic literacy skills due to differences in orthography among languages. Sibanda (2018) and Venketsamy and Sibanda (2021) concur that EFAL learners do not have the necessary knowledge of the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), which is primarily English; therefore, they may face barriers to teaching and learning.

In the formative years of schooling, the aim is to develop learners' ability to understand and speak the language in their mother-tongue; however, according to Hoffman (2017), parents believe that their children should be exposed to EFAL in the Foundation Phase. According to Hammer et al. (2007), learning a second language provides the most benefits when it begins during early grades. Hoffman also states that learning a second language (EFAL) allows children to participate in social and economic engagements. Venketsamy and Sibanda (2021) agrees with the DBE (2011) that the primary aim of EFAL is to give all learners competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills for everyday social conditions and cognitive academic skills for learning in English.

Through CAPS, the DBE envisages that teachers will support learners as agents of change to develop the fundamental skills in EFAL to improve their language competency. Developing these skills depends on teachers' activities and strategies to support teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase (Venketsamy & Sibanda, 2021). In most South African public schools, English is the LoLT. However, according to the LIEP (DBE 1997), all learners must be taught in their mother-tongue language in the Foundation Phase. From Grade 4 onwards, learners are taught through the medium of English or Afrikaans (Fesi & Mncube 2021). With the introduction of CAPS (DBE 2011), EFAL was introduced in the Foundation Phase as a subject. Learners are required to study four subjects: two languages (Home Language and EFAL) and Mathematics and Life Skills. Research by Sibanda (2018) has found that in most Foundation Phase classrooms, English is the LoLT and within this diverse classroom, there are learners whose mother-tongue is not English. Therefore, as change agents, teachers must adapt and accommodate learners to develop their literacy competencies. The researcher believes that teaching basic literacy skills to EFAL learners requires using different teaching methodologies: whole language approach, audiolingual, task-based language teaching and communicative language teaching.

The researcher believes that Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and learning styles is an appropriate strategy for teachers to implement in their EFAL classes. His multiple learning styles give teachers the opportunity to plan their lessons to accommodate various learning styles to promote literacy development. These learning styles include 'visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, linguistic, inter- and intrapersonal' (Chick 2010). Sibanda (2018) found that using multiple learning styles can improve literacy competencies among EFAL learners in Grade 3. Furthermore, Sibanda (2018) proposed alternative strategies that Foundation Phase teachers could implement, such as evidence-based, problem-based, play-based and reciprocal teaching strategies. Despite various strategies proposed for teaching young learners, Spaul (2013) and Venketsamy and Sibanda (2021) found that many South African teachers need more appropriate content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to teach their subjects effectively. He further highlighted other factors contributing to teachers' challenges in teaching learners in public schools. These include inadequate support from school management, the absence of ongoing teacher development and training programmes, and limited textbooks and other resources. To promote effective strategies for the teaching of EFAL, young learners should engage in listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities (DBE 2011). The researcher believes that through continuous engagement in listening, speaking, reading and writing activities, young learners will develop the necessary vocabulary skills to strengthen their language development. However, this depends on teachers as change agents in promoting literacy development in their Foundation Phase class.

Theoretical framework

According to Ferreira (2012) and Hu (2022), a theoretical framework provides a lens and a perspective of the research results in the study. The researcher found Fuller's (1969) Concerned-Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) most appropriate for this study. In the 1960s, Fuller coined the concept of teacher concerns. This theory focuses on the concerns teachers have about teaching and learning. This model is based on an analysis of teachers' concerns, especially about the 'self', the 'tasks' and 'students and the impact of teaching' (Fuller 1969). The rationale for using this framework was teachers' concerns as agents of change in teaching EFAL to learners in the Foundation Phase.

Furthermore, they needed clarity on their roles and responsibilities as agents of change in the Foundation Phase. This framework provided the lens through which teachers' concerns are recognised so that necessary support could be provided to them as agents of change. This support would assist them in improving the teaching and learning of EFAL learners in Grade 3. The CBMoTD recognises the stages of teachers' concerns regarding their role as change agents in the classroom (Fuller 1969). The first concern is about themselves – focusing on their knowledge and understanding of the concept of 'change agents' in teaching EFAL in the Foundation Phase; second are their concerns about the task, which refers to their ability to transfer content and pedagogical knowledge to learners and, finally, there are their concerns about learners and the impact of their teaching, thus referring to the CK and PCK that are necessary to develop the literacy skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in their EFAL class.

The CBMoTD model (Fuller 1969) describes the three stages as (1) *self-concerns* which summarises how teachers view themselves in their teaching and learning environment especially self-reflecting on their ability to teach the relevant skills to young learners and their experience of the so-called 'new subject' in the Foundation Phase. When teachers are not confident to teach these skills, it could negatively affect learners' ability to develop the necessary language skills and become competent, impacting their language acquisition and learning in the higher grades. The study, therefore, also explores how teachers are supported by their heads of department and curriculum advisors to teach basic literacy skills in the Foundation Phase. (2) *Tasks or situation concerns* focus on a teacher's everyday tasks and duties (Veldsman 2018). Emanating from the model and the three stages, the researcher posed the following questions to align the focus of this study to the theoretical framework: 'Am I equipped with sufficient knowledge as a change agent to develop basic EFAL skills in the Foundation Phase?' and 'Do I understand the pedagogical content and subject matter knowledge?' Teachers must be given appropriate guidance and support to ensure effective curriculum implementation as agents of change. (3) *Concerns of impact on learners' learning* include teachers' knowledge, skills and values which they need to impart to learners so that young learners may attain their optimal potential

(Fuller 1969). Questions that could be asked are, 'How can I, as a curriculum change agent, support my learners who are learning an additional language?' and 'What strategies do I use as an agent of change to support learners who experience challenges in learning EFAL?'. These three stages should be seen as being progressive and a movement from one stage to the next (Conway & Clark 2003; Fuller 1969). Foundation Phase teachers, heads of departments and curriculum advisors must have good content and pedagogical knowledge of their subject matter. Their knowledge and understanding should emanate from the curriculum policy documents and beyond. The CBMoTD aims to identify and eliminate teachers' concerns and anxieties regarding their role as curriculum change agents, implementation and transformation (Franey 2016; Veldsman 2018). All teachers should be confident in their knowledge to successfully implement basic literacy skills in their EFAL classes.

This study focuses on the different phases of teachers' concerns in teaching the basic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The CBMoTD model has been used to eliminate teachers' concerns regarding their subjects and offers essential support for successful teaching and learning (Conway & Clark 2003). Therefore, the researcher opines that the model is appropriate in this study to ensure the effective and efficient development of basic skills among EFAL learners and the roles and responsibilities of teachers as change agents. This model attempts to engage teachers to self-reflect and continuously identify their professional development to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Fuller (1969) argues that this model can effectively motivate teachers to teach EFAL in the Foundation Phase. Research findings by Vermunt (2009) and Veldsman (2018) explained that teachers, as agents of change, are more concerned regarding the lack of professional development and ongoing support to improve their teaching pedagogy. Through the CBMoTD framework, teachers can confidently identify their professional development needs to enhance their knowledge and skills in the teaching of EFAL in their classes. This model creates the opportunity for teachers as agents of change to be self-reflective in their practices and to introduce new teaching strategies. Furthermore, it is assumed that they can reflect on and improve their lessons to accommodate all classroom learners.

Method

In this study, the researcher utilised a qualitative research approach, employing an interpretivism paradigm because he wanted to understand the lived experiences of teachers teaching EFAL in the Foundation Phase (ed. Maree 2020). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) state that interpretivism recognises that an individual's reality is socially constructed and cannot be determined objectively. Interpretivist research is about understanding social phenomena and participants' lived experiences by delving into their actions, perceptions and experiences (Creswell 2014; ed. Maree 2020). For this reason, the researcher opted for a case study design.

This case study design focused on teachers as agents of change and the strategies they use to teach EFAL in the Foundation Phase.

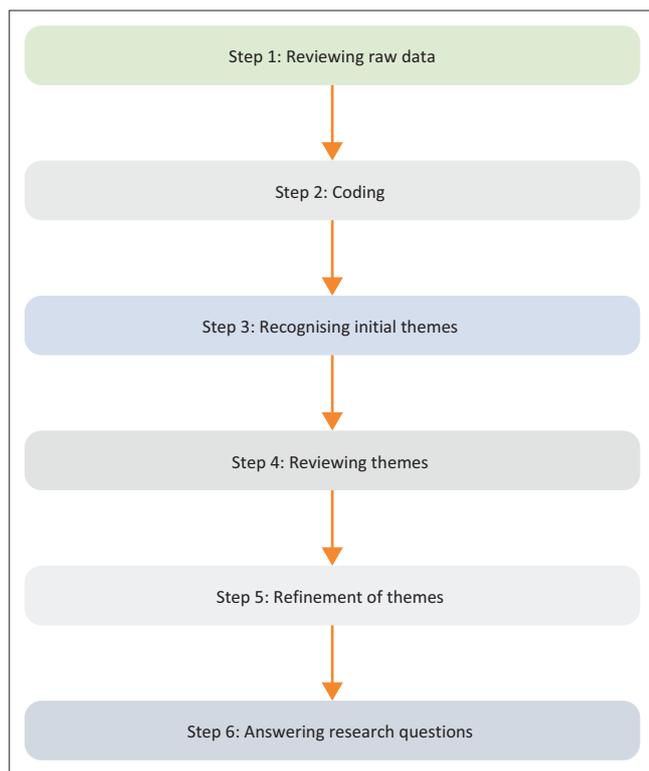
The participants in this study were purposively selected from three primary schools in Gauteng. Two (2) Grade 3 teachers from each school were purposively selected using specific inclusion criteria. The schools were selected using the following criteria: EFAL is a subject offered in the Foundation Phase and the school accommodated learners from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. Participants were selected according to the following criteria: each participant must be a Foundation Phase teacher, teaching Grade 3 EFAL. They had to have at least 3 years of teaching experience. They must teach in a South African public school, implementing the CAPS. The rationale for purposive sampling was that the selected participants were best suited to help answer the research question since they have adequate knowledge and background in teaching (Creswell 2014).

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions to collect the data in this study. The semi-structured questionnaire was shared among the Department of Early Childhood Education staff to ensure the language was appropriate and clear (Bertram & Christiansen 2014; ed. Maree 2020). This served as a pilot to validate the semi-structured interview schedule for correctness. Once this was validated, the researcher conducted individual interviews with each participant, according to their time and schedule. Interviews were conducted at each participant's school after working hours to avoid disrupting the school's teaching programme. The open-ended questions allowed the researcher to probe further into teachers' experiences as agents of change in teaching EFAL in the Foundation Phase. The researcher collected and analysed the data using Creswell's six steps in data analysis (Figure 1). To prevent misrepresentation of the data, the researcher audio-recorded the data and then transcribed them (ed. Maree 2020). After collecting the data, the researcher read through the data, divided the data into segments of information, labelled the information with codes, reduced overlapping and redundant codes and finally collapsed codes into themes.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data, the researcher cross-checked and compared data with audio recordings. The data were analysed thematically. Verbatim quotes were used in the presentation of the findings. Cohen et al. (2018) state that qualitative research allows for flexibility in data analysis. They further state that the interpretation of the data may also be subjective, unlike quantitative data.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 29 June 2016. The ethics approval number is EC 15/11/01. All ethical principles, informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, honesty and openness, access to



Source: Adapted from Creswell (2014). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*, Sage, USA

FIGURE 1: An overview of six-step thematic analysis.

findings and avoiding harm were upheld (ed. Maree 2020). Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the institution. The researcher explained anonymity and the significance of using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants and their sites (Bertram & Christiansen 2014). The researcher informed the participants about audio recordings to ensure trust and openness. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study without providing any reasons (Bertram & Christiansen 2014). The researcher used codes P1–P6 to represent the participants (Teacher 1–Teacher 6) in the reporting phase. Throughout the individual interviews, participants were treated with respect and this mutual respect developed a trustworthy relationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Creswell 2014; ed. Maree 2020).

Findings

The primary objective of this study was to explore teachers as agents of change in teaching EFAL in their Foundation Phase class. The following themes emerged from the individual interviews with the six participants: teachers' understanding of their role as agents of change, strategies teachers use in teaching EFAL learners to promote literacy skills and support teachers require to fulfil their role as agents of change.

Theme 1: Teacher understanding of their role as agents of change

Teachers are integral in curriculum implementation and promoting literacy development in the Foundation Phase. They are responsible for interpreting and implementing the

curriculum; therefore, they are agents of curriculum change and implementation. To elicit participants' understanding of their role as change agents, the researcher asked, 'How do you understand your role as an agent of change and curriculum implementation?' In answer to this question, P1 stated, 'As a teacher, I am responsible for implementing the curriculum. My role is to bring about a change in learners' behaviour and attitude towards literacy development'. According to P2, she believed that as agents of change, their role is to adapt the curriculum to the needs of the learners in their class. Both P3 and P5 agreed that teachers are agents of change in their classrooms and are responsible for implementing the curriculum. They believed that the role of the teachers is to ensure that the CAPS is implemented effectively to accommodate all learners. Furthermore, teachers are responsible for ensuring that learners learn basic literacy skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

P4 indicated that as an agent of change and curriculum implementer, she was responsible for acting in the interest of her learners. She also believed that she should ensure that every learner in her class is competent and confident in communicating using basic literacy skills.

P6 mentioned:

'I am a teacher and a primary agent of change in my classroom. I must find methods that are innovative and creative. We are progressing into the 21st century; therefore, we cannot teach literacy skills the way we were taught. I must come up with new methods and approaches to meet my learners' needs.' (Female, Teacher)

From the participants' responses, the researcher agrees that there is a good understanding among the participants regarding their role as agents of change and curriculum implementation. However, there were instances where the researcher had to probe for a further explanation using the 5Ws (who, what, why, where, when) and H (how) questioning technique. This technique gave the researcher a deeper understanding of the problem and its root cause.

Theme 2: Strategies teachers use in teaching English First Additional Language

As agents of change in developing literacy skills among EFAL learners, the researcher asked participants: 'What strategies other than talk and chalk do you use to promote literacy development in the EFAL class?' All the participants agreed that 'talk and chalk' was an acceptable approach to teaching EFAL in the Foundation Phase. They all believed that this method had a place in teaching and learning. The researcher probed questions on literacy skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. According to P2:

'Since most of my learners do not speak English, I often use choral verse, chanting and repetition in my class. During my reading lesson, my learners read after me. In this way, they can listen to my pronunciation and repeat after me. Often, I find my learners imitating me and how I say and read words.'

In response to the same question P3, focusing mainly on reading, said:

'I use shared reading to expose my learners to new vocabulary using text accompanied by colourful pictures. I do this to attract learners' interest in the text and to enhance their literacy skills as well as comprehension. The shared reading approach enables me to scaffold learning because children have the opportunity to read, imitate good reading habits, ask questions and respond to questions. I often allow my learners to read aloud to their peers and do silent reading.'

P6 stated that she often teaches her learners using songs and rhymes in her class. Children in her class love to sing along. Her learners could use words from songs and rhymes to build sentences. This method helped her to develop appropriate sentence construction among her learners (writing). She also indicated that her learners have different learning styles and each of her lessons is planned differently. Some days she would tell a story and then ask her learners to be creative and draw the story's beginning, middle and end. An example she provided was 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'. The researchers agreed that this approach was an effective way of teaching English to non-English-speaking learners.

P5 indicated that she often used 'show-and-tell' activities to provide opportunities for communication in her class. She stated that this method was very effective and that her learners enjoyed bringing items to show-and-tell. The benefit of the show-and-tell approach allowed learners to develop and strengthen their vocabulary on a particular topic. The participant also mentioned that learners benefitted by learning from each other (peer learning). She found this teaching strategy encouraging among EFAL learners. She elaborated by saying that show-and-tell activities offer learners the opportunity to stand in front of their friends and speak about a topic that is of immense interest to them and that they love. She found that this method helped to build her learners' confidence and practical communication skills. They became more sociable and started sharing similar interests.

Theme 3: Support required by teachers to fulfil their role as agents of change

Teachers are often regarded as instrumental in promoting classroom change and transformation through curriculum implementation. The DBE has attempted to provide necessary capacity-building workshops on the CAPS policy since 2010. Post 2010, each province was responsible for further capacity-building and ongoing teacher development workshops. Despite the planned provincial capacity-building programmes, there is still a need for further training and development. The researcher posed the following question to the participants: 'What support do you require to fulfil your role as an agent of curriculum change and implementation in your EFAL class?'

P1 stated:

'I need more in-depth ongoing workshops on implementing the curriculum in my EFAL class. The workshops presented by the

Department of Education was a once-off workshop. In these workshops, a teacher cannot learn everything.'

P2 and P3 also indicated that they needed continuous workshops, preferably each term, highlighting their roles and responsibilities as agents of change in curriculum implementation. They wanted to be exposed to different teaching and learning methods. They also indicated that sometimes they find it difficult to accept everything the department requests from them as curriculum implementers. Some of the strategies indicated in the policy document do not apply to their classes, such as phonics, word attack and compensation. P6 said:

'As an agent of change, I need to understand the different teaching strategies for EFAL learners. We must be allowed to introduce play-based teaching and learning in classes. In my school, my head of department is against the idea of teaching too often through play in the Grade 3 class.'

P5 believed that school leaders and curriculum advisors should allow teachers to try different teaching strategies and methodologies in their classes. They should not be forced to teach using a single teaching method.

All the participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6) indicated that their heads of department should have monthly meetings with them to share new approaches to teaching and learning. They also indicated that, as agents of change, they should be exposed to the latest technology for teaching and learning. They needed to be supported to use cell phone technology in their classrooms. Regarding the use of technology, P3 said:

'In my school, we have just one computer laboratory. Gaining access to the computer room is very challenging. In the foundation phase, learners are rarely allowed to use computers. To prepare our learners for the 21st century, we need to know and understand how to use computers in the lab. We should be provided with training opportunities on the latest available educational programs. Our school leaders should create the space and opportunity for us to attend these professional training and development workshops.'

All the participants indicated that teachers are viewed as individuals with higher knowledge in a community who can help to bring about positive changes in the lives of their learners.

Discussion

Teachers across the globe are perceived as agents of change, curriculum implementers and transformers within their classrooms (Bourne 2016). They are viewed as professionals in the field of education with profound insight and knowledge of teaching and learning. In this study, the researcher found that all participants understood their roles and responsibilities as agents of change in their EFAL classes. They saw themselves as transforming teaching and learning in their EFAL classes to improve literacy skills among their learners. They agreed that as an agent of change, they could influence their EFAL learners and improve their skills and competencies

in listening, speaking, reading and writing. This view aligns with Bretcht (2005), who states that the teacher is an individual who influences a client's decision in a direction that is deemed acceptable by a change agency. Since teachers view themselves as responsible agents of curriculum implementation and given their concerns for quality teaching and learning, this view aligns with Fuller's (1969) CBMoTD model. The model argues that teachers, as agents of change, are self-reflective practitioners concerned with improving teaching and learning in their EFAL classes.

Lilo and Aponte-Safe (2019) agree that as agents of change, teachers are innovative, creative, reflective practitioners who aim to transform classroom teaching and learning. In this study, the researcher found that teachers tried several strategies to improve basic literacy skills in their classrooms. They became innovators of change in their classrooms rather than resisters. This is evident in the findings of P2, who used choral verse in her reading and listening lessons. This allowed her learners to imitate the teacher. P3 used a shared reading strategy to improve young children's reading abilities. She used in-context stories that young children could relate to, while P6 used songs and rhymes to accommodate different learning styles in her classroom. According to Brecht (2005), the innovator should try new and novel ideas that may be outside of the system and these innovators (teachers) are determined to improve their learners' performance in the subject. In this study, the researcher found that all the participants were willing to try several methods to improve their teaching and learning in the EFAL classes. The participants' willingness as agents of change correlates with Wang's (2022) study, which found that most of the teachers surveyed in his study exhibited positive attitudes and beliefs about implementing change. However, this phenomenon is only readily accepted in some situations. A study by Bonner, Diehl and Trachtman (2019) found that teachers often resist change, primarily when implementing new policies. They often need to change their mind because they want to return to their conventional teaching techniques and avoid risk-taking. This study showed that teachers were eager to try different strategies and considered being different to improve learners' understanding.

Teachers often require support from their respective education departments and school leaders to implement the curriculum as agents of change. Liu et al. (2020:548) opine that the 'ignorance of administrators towards the efforts of individual teachers to change close space for teacher agency, which causes them to resist the implementation'. This study found that all participants indicated they needed support from their department heads, school principals and curriculum advisors. They needed ongoing support and continuous professional development. The teachers' concern for professional development aligns with the CBMoTD framework which argues that teachers need professional development to keep abreast of the latest teaching and learning methods. The first concern is about the teacher's 'self', which focuses mainly on the teacher's ability to

interpret the curriculum and adapt it to accommodate EFAL in the class. The second focus is on the 'tasks' – which are of concern to teachers because they need to interpret the policy and develop activities for their learners. Finally, teachers are concerned about the 'impact' – as agents of change, they need to know if their strategies are effective in their classes. When teachers can see themselves developing professionally, they become confident in their abilities and use various strategies to improve literacy levels among EFAL learners. Wang (2022) agrees that teachers as agents of change need to be supported with professional development and resources to be effective in their classrooms. He further articulates that teachers should be provided with advanced language theories, which they could embed in their lessons and classroom practice. This study found that teachers need support in using technology, which needs to be improved in all their schools. According to Reinius et al. (2022), if an educational system does not provide training and development in advanced digital competencies, it could create 'digital death' among teachers as agents of change for the 21st century.

According to DBE (2016a,b), the CAPS explains that when learners can express their identity, feelings and ideas acceptably through the medium of instruction, they have succeeded in learning a language. Language is a vehicle that learners use to express their cultural and social diversity (Sibanda 2018). The EFAL policy document provides guidelines to teachers on what and how EFAL should be taught. The focus is also on the scope and depth of the content, using appropriate strategies to promote literacy development. Sadiku (2015) states that it is crucial to develop essential literacy skills so that learners can communicate their thoughts and ideas through speaking, listening, writing and reading. The DBE for the Foundation Phase highlights these essential skills in the CAPS documents.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study investigated teachers as agents of change in their EFAL classes. Teachers as agents of change are gaining much attention recently in implementing curriculum policies in South Africa. This study found that teachers had a satisfactory understanding of their role as agents of change in promoting and developing literacy skills among EFAL learners. They knew their roles and responsibilities to identify multiple strategies to improve listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Despite understanding their roles and responsibilities, teachers required support with continuous professional development in implementing the curriculum. They believed that various strategies would enhance EFAL learning in the Foundation Phase, for example play-based teaching and learning. Teachers agreed that they should be given the space to be creative and innovative in developing early literacy among EFAL learners through problem-solving techniques, use of technology, communication and self-reflection.

From the findings, the study recommends that teachers should be given the necessary support by all stakeholders, including school management, leadership, and departmental

officials. Teachers, as agents of change, should further become involved in curriculum development and design since they are the implementers of the curriculum at the grassroots level. Their knowledge and expertise in classroom practice would increasingly strengthen curriculum policy and design. A network of learning communities should be established, which would create a platform for teachers to share good practices to promote and develop listening, speaking, reading and writing skills among EFAL learners. The study was limited to a small sample in one district in Gauteng. The findings could yield different results with a larger sample size in a nationwide study. This study contributes to the body of knowledge that focuses on teachers as agents of change in promoting and developing literacy skills among EFAL learners in the Foundation Phase.

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Competing interests

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

Authors' contributions

R.V. was responsible for conceptualising, analysing, and writing of this article, while Z.H. contributed by reviewing and editing. Z.H. also provided critical guidance in strengthening the arguments.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author, R.V.

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