



Challenges in preparing pre-service teachers for self-directed learning in South African rural ESL contexts

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Abstract

This study investigates challenges faced by pre-service teachers in South African rural universities in preparing for self-directed learning (SDL) in English as a second language (ESL), particularly for rural school settings. A systematic literature review analysed peer-reviewed publications in English from 2000 to 2024, sourced from Google Scholar and Scopus databases. Key challenges include limited access to resources, inadequate training in SDL strategies, insufficient institutional support, cultural and linguistic barriers, and restricted opportunities for practical teaching. These issues hinder the development of essential SDL skills required to adapt ESL teaching to the unique needs of rural environments. Over the past 24 years, these persistent challenges have been exacerbated by cultural and linguistic diversity, further complicating teacher preparedness for effective ESL instruction. The findings highlight the necessity for enhanced access to digital resources, tailored professional development initiatives, and strengthened partnerships between universities and rural schools. Addressing these areas is critical to equipping pre-service teachers with the tools and autonomy needed for effective teaching in resource-constrained rural contexts. This study uniquely contributes by identifying how cultural and linguistic diversity in South African rural settings exacerbates challenges in preparing pre-service teachers for self-directed learning (SDL) in ESL, highlighting specific strategies such as tailored professional development and strengthened university-school partnerships to address these persistent barriers.

Keywords: Self-Directed Learning (SDL); English as a Second Language (ESL); Rural Education; Pre-Service Teacher Preparation; Cultural and Linguistic Diversity; Teacher Professional Development

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1. Introduction

In South Africa, rural education faces significant challenges that impact the preparation of pre-service teachers, particularly in developing self-directed learning (SDL) skills for teaching English as a second language (ESL). Rural schools often grapple with limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural complexities, which create unique demands on both teachers and learners (Abdel Latif, 2022). These constraints contribute to disparities in educational outcomes between rural and urban areas, highlighting the need for effective teacher preparation tailored to resource-constrained settings (Ajani, 2019). The importance of SDL in equipping teachers to navigate these challenges cannot be overstated. SDL enables teachers to take ownership of their learning, adapt to diverse classroom needs, and develop innovative teaching strategies. For rural ESL teachers, SDL is crucial in bridging cultural and linguistic divides while addressing the specific needs of their learners (Ajani, 2023). However, rural pre-service teachers often face obstacles such as limited access to digital resources, insufficient practical teaching opportunities, and a lack of institutional support (Ajani, 2024a; Amani, 2021).

Additionally, the linguistic and cultural diversity of rural South Africa complicates ESL instruction. Teachers must navigate multilingual classrooms, respect indigenous languages, and align their teaching with language policies, requiring a blend of SDL and cultural competence (Ajani et al., 2025; Mthembu and Pillay, 2021). Addressing these challenges necessitates holistic teacher training approaches that integrate SDL strategies, cultural awareness, and practical teaching experiences (Bhatt, 2021). This main aim of this study is to explore how rural universities can address these issues by prioritising SDL in their teacher education programmes. By enhancing access to resources, fostering collaboration, and providing targeted professional development, these institutions can prepare pre-service teachers to become adaptable, resilient, and effective teachers in challenging rural contexts (Bravo and Cervetti, 2014; Choi et al., 2021).

The connection between self-directed learning (SDL) and the specific challenges faced in South African rural ESL classrooms lies in SDL's ability to empower teachers to address the resource and contextual constraints inherent in these settings (Ajani and Ngema, 2024; Alshuhaibani, 2020; Azano and Stewart, 2015). For instance, limited access to teaching materials and digital resources necessitates that teachers develop the capacity to seek out, adapt, and create instructional content independently (Adebola and Tsotetsi, 2022; Azano et al., 2019). SDL equips pre-service teachers with the skills to engage in continuous learning, enabling them to innovate solutions and tailor their teaching practices to meet the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of their learners. By fostering SDL, teachers are better prepared to navigate multilingual classrooms, bridge language divides, and implement learner-centred teaching strategies effectively despite resource limitations (Bhatt, 2021; Black and Mayes, 2020).

Moreover, SDL directly supports teachers in addressing the socio-cultural complexities of rural ESL classrooms by enhancing their adaptability and problem-solving skills (Conner, 2022). Through SDL, teachers develop cultural competence and critical awareness, which are vital for aligning their teaching with local language policies and respecting indigenous languages (Mokoena and Moloi, 2024). For example, practical SDL strategies, such as collaborative learning and reflective teaching practices, allow teachers to better understand and integrate learners' cultural backgrounds into their instruction. This connection underscores the need for

teacher education programmes in rural universities to prioritise SDL as a foundational approach (Mutseekwa et al., 2024). Doing so will not only address the immediate challenges of resource-constrained environments but also cultivate resilient, autonomous teachers capable of fostering inclusive and effective learning experiences in rural South African schools (Matiyenga and Ajani, 2024).

2. Literature review

2.1. Rural education

Rural education in South Africa remains deeply entrenched in systemic inequities, including under-resourced schools, socio-economic challenges, and a shortage of qualified teachers (Cummins, 1983). These disparities result in limited access to quality education, perpetuating a cycle of inequality between urban and rural learners (Ajani, 2024c; Cummins, 2009). Infrastructure deficits, such as poor classroom conditions and inadequate learning materials, further constrain teaching and learning efforts. Additionally, rural schools often serve linguistically and culturally diverse populations, where English, introduced as the medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards, functions as a second or third language for many learners (Dincer and Yesilyurt, 2017). This dynamic places an immense burden on teachers, who must navigate limited resources while addressing learners' diverse linguistic needs.

Socio-cultural factors also play a pivotal role in shaping rural education. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory highlights the importance of learning through social interaction and community engagement (Farren, 2016). For rural learners, limited exposure to English at home or within their communities creates barriers to academic success, making the role of the teacher even more critical. Pre-service teachers in these settings must not only master subject content but also develop culturally responsive strategies to meet the needs of their learners. Without sufficient institutional support, these demands often overwhelm teachers, affecting their ability to deliver quality education (Ford, 2019).

2.2. Pre-service teachers' challenges in TESL in rural schools

Teaching English as a second language (TESL) in rural South Africa presents specific challenges for pre-service teachers. The lack of qualified ESL mentors, inadequate teacher preparation programmes, and limited practical teaching opportunities exacerbate these difficulties (Gitadewi et al., 2022). Many pre-service teachers enter rural classrooms with insufficient language proficiency, which undermines their confidence and effectiveness in delivering English instruction (Mhlana, 2020). This gap is further compounded by the absence of resources, such as textbooks and digital tools, which are critical for effective ESL teaching (Haidari et al., 2019).

The socio-cultural and linguistic diversity of rural classrooms presents additional challenges. Learners often face significant language barriers, with minimal exposure to English outside of the classroom. Pre-service teachers must develop innovative strategies to bridge this gap, but the lack of structured training in culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy often leaves them ill-prepared (Frans, 2017). Moreover, systemic issues such as overcrowded classrooms and underfunding hinder teachers' ability to apply these strategies effectively, highlighting the urgent need for reforms in teacher education programmes that address these challenges.

2.3. Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is a pedagogical framework that empowers learners to take responsibility for their own learning, encompassing goal setting, resource identification, and self-assessment (Kamble et al., 2021). In teacher education, SDL equips pre-service teachers with the autonomy and resilience necessary to navigate complex and under-resourced environments. The theory's emphasis on learner autonomy aligns with the demands of teaching in rural contexts, where external support is often limited (Kim et al., 2015). SDL fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning, enabling pre-service teachers to adapt their practices to meet diverse classroom needs (Komiyama and McMorris, 2017).

For rural teachers, SDL is particularly relevant as it promotes resourcefulness and innovation. By identifying their own learning needs and seeking solutions, teachers can overcome systemic barriers such as limited access to professional development opportunities (Ajani., 2019). However, implementing SDL requires a supportive educational framework, including access to digital resources, mentorship, and collaborative learning opportunities, which are often lacking in rural South Africa. Addressing these gaps is critical to realising the full potential of SDL in teacher education.

2.4. SDL in TESL in South African rural schools

2.4.1. *SDL by pre-service teachers*

In the context of TESL in rural South African schools, SDL serves as a critical tool for pre-service teachers to navigate resource constraints and develop effective teaching practices. Teachers who engage in SDL are better equipped to assess their teaching needs, set achievable goals, and seek out resources independently (Ngubane et al., 2020). This autonomy is vital for adapting to diverse classroom needs, including multilingual and culturally heterogeneous learners (Nel et al., 2014). SDL also encourages reflective practice, allowing teachers to continuously evaluate and refine their approaches, thereby improving their instructional effectiveness.

The integration of SDL into teacher education programmes enables pre-service teachers to address linguistic and cultural challenges proactively. For instance, by exploring Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and incorporating culturally relevant teaching strategies, teachers can make learning more accessible and engaging for rural learners (Ntombela et al., 2021). However, the success of SDL depends on institutional support, such as providing access to teaching materials, digital tools, and professional development opportunities. Without these resources, the burden of self-directed learning may become overwhelming for pre-service teachers.

2.5. Challenges in SDL for TESL

Pre-service teachers face significant challenges in implementing SDL within TESL in rural schools. Limited access to digital technology and internet connectivity remains a major barrier, preventing teachers from accessing online resources and professional learning networks (Nunez and Leon, 2015). Additionally, the lack of mentorship and peer support hinders their ability to develop effective SDL practices. Many rural teachers work in isolation, which reduces opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing (Ollerhead, 2018).

Motivational factors also play a crucial role in SDL. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory emphasises the importance of self-efficacy in driving learning behaviour (Owen et al., 2020). For pre-service teachers in rural areas, maintaining motivation can be challenging in the face of systemic barriers such as underfunding and overcrowded classrooms. Building self-efficacy through structured mentorship programmes and collaborative learning opportunities is essential for fostering successful SDL practices. By addressing these challenges, teacher education programmes can create a more supportive environment for pre-service teachers, enabling them to thrive in rural TESL settings.

3. Methods

This systematic literature review aimed to explore the challenges faced by pre-service teachers at South African rural universities in preparing for self-directed learning (SDL) in teaching English as a second language (ESL) within rural schools. A structured approach was used to synthesise existing knowledge (Gupta et al., 2025), drawing on 45 peer-reviewed articles selected from an initial pool of 230 publications sourced from Scopus and Google Scholar databases. This broad search strategy ensured the inclusion of relevant studies that covered the intersections of SDL, pre-service teacher training, and ESL, particularly in rural educational settings across Africa and South Africa (Aulakh et al., 2025).

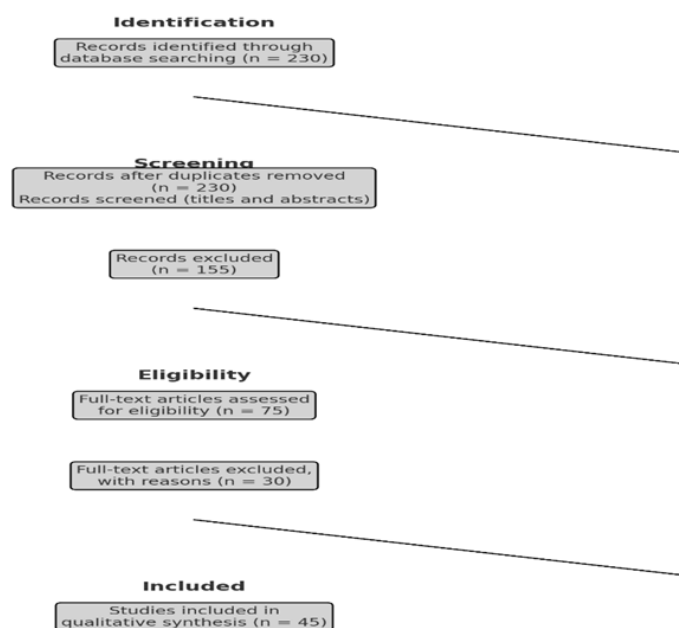


Figure 1. Search flow for literature sources

Based on the Fig. 1, the review followed clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to maintain the relevance and quality of the selected studies. Articles were included if they focused on SDL, pre-service teacher training, and ESL in rural educational contexts, particularly within African settings. Only peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024 and written in English were considered to ensure both recency and relevance.

Excluded from the review were non-peer-reviewed sources, non-English articles, and studies outside the scope of SDL and rural education.

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for analysing the data, enabling the identification of key patterns and themes within the literature. The process involved several steps: first, familiarisation with the content of each article, followed by initial coding to highlight recurring concepts. The coded data were then organised into broader thematic categories relevant to the research objectives. The identified themes were further refined and reviewed to ensure their accuracy and relevance to the research focus on SDL challenges for pre-service teachers. This systematic approach allowed for a structured synthesis of the findings and ensured a comprehensive examination of the available literature (Reynolds, 2024).

This thematic analysis was guided by Knowles' (1975) self-directed learning theory, which emphasizes learner autonomy, motivation, and self-regulation, providing a structured lens to identify and examine key themes and patterns in the challenges and solutions discussed in the literature. To enhance the rigour and reliability of the review process, two independent reviewers participated in the screening, selection, and coding of the articles.

This approach helped to mitigate potential researcher bias and ensured consistent categorisation of the data. Any discrepancies between the reviewers were addressed through discussion and consensus, adding an additional layer of validity to the findings. The use of multiple reviewers contributed to the credibility of the thematic analysis and ensured a balanced and comprehensive interpretation of the data. The selected studies spanned a diverse range of contexts, methodologies, and research designs, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches (Arianpoor et al., 2024). This diversity provided a holistic perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced by pre-service teachers in rural contexts as they develop SDL competencies for teaching ESL. By incorporating different methodologies, the literature review offered a nuanced and well-rounded understanding of the complex issues surrounding teacher preparation in resource-constrained rural environments.

Data extraction involved identifying and documenting the main challenges, strategies, and recommendations discussed in the articles (Lee et al 2024). These elements were categorised into themes and cross-referenced with the theoretical framework of SDL to ensure alignment with the study's guiding principles. This process facilitated a contextualised and theoretically grounded synthesis of the literature, highlighting the critical barriers to effective SDL implementation and the strategies needed to overcome them. The analysis of the extracted data was synthesised into key findings that provided a coherent understanding of the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in rural South Africa (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis highlighted major barriers such as limited access to resources, inadequate training, insufficient institutional support, and socio-cultural and linguistic obstacles. These findings underscored the need for enhanced support systems, targeted resources, and comprehensive teacher training programmes to foster SDL skills in rural contexts.

Overall, the methodology employed in this study ensured a systematic, rigorous, and reliable review of the existing literature on SDL for pre-service teachers in rural ESL settings (Lee and Chang, 2024). By using thematic analysis and a clearly defined selection process, the review contributed valuable insights into the specific challenges and potential solutions for developing SDL among pre-service teachers in resource-

constrained educational environments. This research serves to inform policies and practices that can better support the professional growth and effectiveness of rural teachers in South Africa.

Thus, to enhance transparency, this study adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure a rigorous and systematic review process (Aulakh et al., 2024). The PRISMA framework was employed to document and report the search, screening, and selection phases, ensuring clarity and reproducibility (Arianpoor et al., 2024). Each stage, from identifying an initial pool of 230 articles to narrowing the selection to 45 peer-reviewed studies, was systematically documented. This approach ensured that only relevant, high-quality studies aligned with the research objectives were included, thereby strengthening the reliability and validity of the findings (Reynolds, 2024). This systematic review was manually conducted by the authors, as the steps carefully undertaken and validated by other experienced research colleagues.

4. Findings

The systematic literature review revealed key challenges and insights regarding the preparation of pre-service teachers at rural universities in South Africa for self-directed learning (SDL) in English as a second language (ESL) (Piseth, 2020). The findings are organized under five themes: access to resources, language barriers, teacher readiness for SDL, institutional support, and cultural and socio-economic factors. Each theme demonstrates the interconnected obstacles and potential opportunities for cultivating SDL competencies in rural settings, informed by relevant literature from 2000 to 2024, as evident in the Table 1.

Table 1. findings from the accessed literature sources (Authors, 2024)

Themes	Key Findings	Authors	Years
Access to Resources	Limited access to textbooks, digital tools, and internet connectivity hinders SDL engagement in rural areas.	Ajani (2024b); Sebolai (2016); Tao and Xu (2022); Tshotsho (2013); Piseth (2020); Sadeghi et al. (2014); Ngubane et al. (2020); Bravo and Cervetti (2014); Cheng & Lee, 2018.	2013–2024
Language Barriers	Dual burden of mastering and teaching ESL creates challenges for pre-service teachers in multilingual contexts.	Xiao & Yang (2019); Ngubane et al. (2020); Yanti et al. (2021); Cummins (1983); Ntombela et al. (2021); Kim et al. (2015); Haidari et al. (2019)	1983–2021
Teacher Readiness for SDL	Lack of experience in self-regulation,	Ryan and Deci (2000); Komiyama and McMorris	2000–2024

Themes	Key Findings	Authors	Years
	motivation, and discipline due to passive learning environments limits SDL.	(2017); Xhaferi and Xhaferi (2020); Mahlaba (2020); Ajani (2024a); Owen et al. (2020); Kamble et al. (2021); Gitadewi et al. (2022)	
Institutional Support	Insufficient mentorship, large class sizes, and inadequate academic support structures impede SDL development.	Salleh et al. (2019); Van Zyl and Mentz (2022); Ollerhead (2018); Muñoz-Restrepo et al. (2020); Ajani and Maphalala (2023); Ajani and Govender (2019); Farren (2016)	2016–2023
Cultural & Socio-Economic Factors	Cultural norms, socio-economic constraints, and traditional knowledge systems obstruct SDL implementation.	Kayembe and Nel (2019); Dube (2020); Pretorius (2002); Simmonds and Ajani (2022); Mahlaba (2020); Ajani (2019); Frans (2017); Mkhize and Davids (2021)	2002–2022

This table provides a broader overview of the references cited, reflecting a more comprehensive range of sources related to each identified challenge theme. The themes are presented as follows:

4.1. Access to resources

Limited access to essential educational resources emerged as a critical issue affecting pre-service teachers in rural South Africa (Ajani, 2024b). The scarcity of textbooks, digital materials, and internet connectivity poses a substantial obstacle to effective SDL, particularly for ESL instruction. Sadeghi et al. (2014) and Sebolai (2016) highlighted the pervasive resource shortages at rural universities, which hinder pre-service teachers' ability to independently manage their learning. Without modern digital tools and reliable internet access, these aspiring teachers struggle to engage with SDL strategies that are increasingly reliant on technology and independent study (Soranny et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored this digital divide, as Tao and Xu (2022) reported that rural students faced significant disadvantages in online learning environments in South African rural universities.

Furthermore, the prevalence of outdated ESL materials is problematic, as it creates a disconnect between theoretical instruction and practical classroom application (Tshotsho, 2013). Providing updated and

contextually relevant resources is vital for equipping rural pre-service teachers with the tools needed to foster SDL capabilities effectively.

4.2. Language barriers

Language proficiency remains a formidable barrier for pre-service teachers in rural settings, where English is frequently not the primary language. This "dual language learning burden" affects both their ability to master ESL and teach it effectively in contexts where indigenous languages are dominant. Xiao and Yang (2019) found that low confidence in English proficiency undermines rural pre-service teachers' engagement in English-medium resources, limiting their participation in SDL activities and overall pedagogical growth. This issue is compounded by insufficient language support structures within many rural teacher training programmes, which fail to provide necessary immersion opportunities in South African rural students (Yanti et al., 2021). The lack of targeted language development initiatives leaves rural pre-service teachers ill-prepared to meet the linguistic demands of ESL instruction.

4.3. Pre-Service Teacher Readiness for Self-Directed Learning

The transition to SDL presents a significant challenge for South African rural pre-service teachers, who often lack experience with learner autonomy due to passive learning environments (Yanti et al., 2021). Effective SDL relies on self-motivation, discipline, and the ability to self-assess—skills that are frequently underdeveloped in these contexts. Rural teacher education programmes must embed more structured opportunities for guided practice and reflection to help pre-service teachers build self-regulatory skills (Xhaferi and Xhaferi, 2020). Additionally, inadequate mentorship and support networks further exacerbate these challenges, as Ryan and Deci (2000) found that rural trainees often struggle without consistent guidance on SDL strategies.

4.4. Institutional support

Institutional support is critical in fostering SDL among South African rural pre-service teachers. Effective institutions provide comprehensive services, including academic advising, language programmes, and accessible faculty, which promote SDL engagement (Van Zyl and Mentz, 2022). Unfortunately, many rural universities lack these robust structures, leaving pre-service teachers without the necessary scaffolding to succeed. Large class sizes, limited faculty resources, and insufficient peer support are significant barriers to cultivating SDL in most South African rural universities. Conversely, institutions that prioritize SDL through workshops and tailored training programmes demonstrate improved teacher readiness for independent learning and greater confidence in ESL instruction (Salleh et al., 2019).

4.5. Cultural and socio-economic factors

Cultural attitudes and socio-economic constraints shape the educational experiences of South African rural pre-service teachers, affecting their SDL engagement. Socio-economic challenges such as poverty, limited access to financial resources, and the need for part-time work impede the ability of these teachers to focus on SDL (Kayembe and Nel, 2019). Furthermore, cultural norms that emphasize traditional knowledge systems can hinder adaptation to contemporary SDL practices (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

[PIRLS], 2006). Implementing culturally responsive teaching methods that integrate traditional knowledge and providing financial and logistical support are essential to overcoming these barriers.

These themes collectively highlight the intricate challenges facing South African rural pre-service teachers preparing for SDL in ESL contexts. A multi-faceted approach encompassing enhanced resource provision, institutional support, robust teacher training, and cultural sensitivity is critical to addressing these barriers and empowering effective self-directed learning.

The themes presented in Table 1 were derived through a meticulous process of thematic analysis, guided by Knowles' (1975) self-directed learning theory. Each theme emerged from repeated patterns identified across the reviewed literature, with examples explicitly linked to the findings of individual studies. For instance, the theme of *Access to Resources* reflects challenges documented by Ajani (2024b) and Sebolai (2016), who highlight how inadequate digital tools and poor internet connectivity hinder SDL in rural South Africa. Similarly, the theme of *Language Barriers* ties directly to Cummins' (1983) foundational work on multilingual education and recent studies by Ngubane et al. (2020) and Yanti et al. (2021), which describe the dual challenges pre-service teachers face in mastering and teaching ESL. Concrete examples, such as the large class sizes reported by Van Zyl and Mentz (2022) under the theme of *Institutional Support*, illustrate systemic barriers to SDL development. By explicitly connecting these themes to case studies and examples from the literature, the analysis not only underscores the recurring nature of these challenges but also contextualises them within the lived realities of pre-service teachers in rural settings.

5. Discussions

The findings of this systematic literature review underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by pre-service teachers at rural South African universities in achieving self-directed learning (SDL) in English as a second language (ESL) (Pineteh, 2013). This analysis centres on the contextual and structural obstacles highlighted by the findings and their implications for SDL theory, which emphasizes learner autonomy, motivation, and the ability to self-regulate learning. While the tenets of SDL are universally recognized, this study reveals critical contextual limitations that challenge their application in rural South Africa (Piseth, 2020).

A key issue is the pervasive lack of resources, particularly digital tools and up-to-date instructional materials, which directly hampers SDL among rural pre-service teachers. SDL theory, as outlined by Paisal et al. (2022), posits that learners must take responsibility for their learning and use available resources to guide their educational journeys. However, in rural South Africa, limited access to technology, digital platforms, and reliable internet restricts the ability of pre-service teachers to engage in independent and effective learning practices. This resource disparity not only stifles their engagement with SDL principles but highlights a structural inequity that must be addressed for SDL to be feasible in such contexts (Owen et al., 2020).

Language proficiency emerged as another critical barrier impacting SDL engagement. The dual challenge of mastering English as a second language and teaching it compounds the difficulties faced by rural pre-service teachers (Ntombela et al., 2021). SDL presumes a degree of confidence and competence in navigating learning materials independently, yet many rural pre-service teachers lack the necessary English proficiency to fully engage with English-language academic content and resources (Ngubane et al., 2020). This deficiency limits their capacity to develop as self-directed learners and emphasizes the need for targeted language development

initiatives. This insight extends beyond theoretical constructs, revealing a tangible gap between SDL ideals and real-world capabilities within rural educational contexts.

The role of institutional support—or lack thereof—further complicates SDL for rural pre-service teachers. According to Nel and Muller (2010), an effective SDL environment provides structures and resources that foster learner autonomy. However, many rural universities lack adequate mentorship programmes, language support services, and academic guidance, leaving pre-service teachers without critical scaffolding. The absence of these supports underscores a systemic failure to align institutional practices with the needs of aspiring SDL practitioners, effectively stunting their growth and potential (Munoz-Restrepo et al., 2020). This finding demonstrates that institutional capacity and resource availability are fundamental to bridging the gap between SDL theory and practice.

Teacher readiness for SDL was also highlighted as a significant concern. Many pre-service teachers in rural areas come from backgrounds where passive, teacher-centred learning is prevalent (Mahlab, 2020). The transition to active, self-directed learning requires a foundation of skills that are often underdeveloped in these individuals. This disconnect between their prior learning experiences and the demands of SDL points to a critical area for intervention within teacher training programmes. Structured opportunities for guided practice, self-assessment, and autonomous learning skill development are essential to foster the readiness needed for successful SDL adoption (Komiya and McMorris, 2017).

Finally, socio-economic and cultural factors present persistent obstacles that complicate the adoption of SDL in rural settings. Economic hardships, cultural practices that devalue formal education, and competing responsibilities like part-time work restrict the time and energy pre-service teachers can devote to SDL (Kim et al., 2015). This finding highlights a fundamental mismatch between the assumptions underlying SDL theory and the lived realities of many rural learners. Addressing these barriers requires context-sensitive interventions that prioritize cultural relevance, flexible learning opportunities, and socio-economic support.

Collectively, these findings underscore the complexity of implementing SDL in rural South Africa, revealing gaps between theoretical expectations and practical realities. Bridging this divide demands a holistic approach that prioritizes resource provision, language support, institutional scaffolding, and socio-economic responsiveness to truly empower rural pre-service teachers to become effective self-directed learners (Kim et al., 2015). This nuanced understanding contributes to the discourse on SDL by illustrating its contextual limitations and the adjustments needed to make it a viable educational practice in underserved settings.

Finally, the themes identified in this study highlight critical connections between self-directed learning (SDL) objectives and the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in rural South Africa. For instance, addressing *Access to Resources* aligns with the SDL goal of fostering learner autonomy, as pre-service teachers must develop the ability to source, adapt, and utilize educational materials independently. Ajani and Ngema (2024) emphasize the importance of equipping rural teachers with digital competencies to overcome technological barriers, while Sadeghi et al. (2014) underscore how resource scarcity limits engagement with SDL strategies. Providing updated digital tools and internet connectivity not only addresses these limitations but also enhances pre-service teachers' capacity to engage in independent and adaptive teaching practices (Ajani, 2024c).

Similarly, *Language Barriers* highlight the dual burden of mastering and teaching English as a second language (ESL), which directly impacts SDL competencies. This challenge emphasizes the need for targeted language support programmes to build confidence and enable pre-service teachers to engage with English-

medium resources effectively (Xiao and Yang, 2019). According to Matiyenga and Ajani (2024), differentiated instruction strategies can bridge this gap by integrating linguistic diversity into teacher preparation curricula. Such approaches empower pre-service teachers to navigate multilingual classrooms and align their instruction with SDL principles of adaptability and contextual relevance (Mokoena and Moloi, 2024). Strengthening institutional support and embedding culturally responsive practices into teacher education programmes can further promote SDL by addressing the socio-cultural and economic constraints unique to rural contexts (Azano et al., 2019).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the challenges of preparing rural pre-service teachers for self-directed learning (SDL) in English as a second language (ESL) is vital for improving educational outcomes in rural South African schools. This study highlights key barriers, including resource limitations, language proficiency challenges, and insufficient institutional support, which impede effective engagement with SDL. To overcome these obstacles, institutions should adopt practical measures such as structured mentorship programmes, SDL-focused workshops, and digital literacy training to empower pre-service teachers. Furthermore, incorporating culturally responsive teaching methods and providing financial and logistical support can foster a more enabling environment for teachers. By creating a supportive ecosystem, rural teacher training programmes can equip pre-service teachers with the skills and confidence required to embrace SDL, encourage independent learning, and ultimately enhance the quality of education in underserved communities.

7. Limitations and study forward

A key limitation of this study is the reliance on secondary data from existing literature, which may not fully capture the current, evolving challenges faced by rural pre-service teachers in South Africa. Additionally, the focus on rural universities might overlook variations in SDL experiences among pre-service teachers from diverse geographic and institutional contexts. The study also lacks empirical data, such as first-hand interviews or surveys with pre-service teachers, which could provide more nuanced insights into the personal and contextual barriers they face in adopting SDL. Consequently, the recommendations drawn from the literature may require further validation through primary research to ensure they address the specific needs of this population.

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