

In-Service English Teachers' Curriculum Literacy and Pedagogical Decision-Making in Lesotho Secondary Schools: The Contextual Role of Instructional Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This study explores in-service English teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making in Lesotho secondary schools, while considering instructional leadership as a contextual factor influencing the enactment of classroom practice. While previous research has established links between teacher knowledge and student outcomes, there is limited qualitative evidence regarding how teachers interpret and enact the curriculum within their specific school contexts. Guided by Borg's theory of teacher cognition and informed by instructional leadership as a contextual lens, the study employed an interpretivist, qualitative, multiple-case study design. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations involving four purposively selected in-service English teachers and were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that teachers demonstrate sound curriculum literacy by employing learner-centred pedagogical strategies, including scaffolding, collaborative learning, multimodal instruction, the use of sample essays, and adapting instruction to learners' capabilities. However, translating curriculum literacy into effective pedagogical decision-making is constrained by contextual factors such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, and time constraints. The study further reveals that instructional leadership provides an important contextual condition that can enable or constrain teachers' enactment of curriculum literacy, although the study's primary focus remains teachers' cognition and pedagogical decision-making. The findings suggest that effective curriculum implementation depends not only on teachers' professional knowledge and beliefs but also on supportive instructional leadership that enables teachers to respond effectively to contextual challenges. The study concludes that strengthening instructional leadership in Lesotho secondary schools is essential for enhancing curriculum implementation, supporting teachers' pedagogical decision-making, and improving teaching and learning outcomes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received yyyy-mm-dd

Accepted yyyy-mm-dd

KEYWORDS

In-service English teachers
curriculum literacy
pedagogical decision-making
Instructional Leadership
Lesotho Secondary Schools

INTRODUCTION

The teacher occupies a central role in the educational process, serving as the primary source of instruction within the classroom (Santos & Miguel, 2019). The effectiveness of teaching is closely tied to how teachers manage the learning environment, interact with students, deliver lessons, provide constructive feedback, foster motivation, and apply the curriculum (Lekhetho, 2021; Madina & Mara, 2025). Consequently, teachers are pivotal to the successful implementation of the curriculum. For a proper interpretation of the curriculum outline and its effective implementation, teachers need curriculum literacy, as success is achieved only when the curriculum is implemented efficiently (Aslan, 2018). Curriculum literacy is defined as mastering the elements of the curriculum- being able to interpret information and making an appropriate and adaptable plan of what and how to teach (Bolat, 2017).

While curriculum literacy is central to effective teaching, it does not operate in isolation. Emerging research suggests that instructional leadership within schools plays a critical role in shaping how teachers interpret, implement, and adapt curriculum in practice. Instructional leadership involves guiding teaching and learning through goal setting, supervision, resource allocation, and professional support, all of which influence teachers' pedagogical decision-making.

Many authors have shown that quantitative research in English language education tends to reduce complex classroom realities into measurable variables, which makes it effective for identifying statistical relationships but inadequate for capturing the contextual, dynamic, and lived experiences of teachers and learners (Wang, 2018; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2019; Panthee, 2020; Khatri & Karki, 2023). Another study by Anteneha and Anshub (2024) shows that teachers adopt fidelity, adaptation, or enactment approaches to curriculum implementation, yet quantitative studies rarely capture the nuanced decision-making and contextual negotiation underlying these practices. Similarly, Aava et al. (2024) found that in Nigerian junior secondary schools, curriculum implementation is constrained by limited teacher preparation, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate resources, indicating that quantitative approaches alone cannot fully explain or address the complex realities of English language teaching.

Although there is broad agreement that curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making are central to effective English language teaching, scholars differ regarding the methodological approaches used to investigate these constructs and the factors that shape their enactment in practice. Whereas Panthee (2020) and Khatri and Karki (2023) argue that the dominance of quantitative approaches limits understanding of teachers' lived experiences and curriculum enactment, Yolcu and Sari (2025) focus on teachers' curriculum literacy competencies, demonstrating that many teachers struggle to interpret curriculum documents and align instructional practices with curricular expectations. Extending this discussion, Asghari, Alemi and Tajeddin (2022) show that pedagogical decision-making develops through professional learning, suggesting that curriculum literacy is dynamic rather than fixed. Similarly, Anteneha and Anshub (2024) demonstrate that teachers' curriculum implementation varies between fidelity, adaptation, and enactment according to contextual realities, highlighting the importance of teacher agency. Collectively, these studies converge in recognising that teachers' knowledge and professional learning underpin effective curriculum implementation, yet they differ in the extent to which they acknowledge the influence of contextual and organisational conditions on teachers' pedagogical decisions. Consequently, two important gaps remain. First, relatively little qualitative research has examined how curriculum literacy, pedagogical decision-making, and contextual influences interact in everyday classroom practice. Second, the role of instructional leadership in mediating teachers' curriculum enactment remains under-explored, particularly in Lesotho's secondary schools. Responding to these gaps, this study employs a qualitative multiple-case study guided by Borg's theory of teacher cognition and complemented by an instructional leadership lens to explain how in-service English teachers negotiate curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making in practice. The aim of the study is to explore in-service English teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making through

a qualitative lens, guided by Borg's theory, to deepen understanding of how teachers negotiate, adapt, and implement the curriculum in practice. In addition to focusing on teachers' cognition, this study considers how instructional leadership conditions within schools may enable or constrain the translation of curriculum literacy into classroom practice, thereby extending the analysis beyond individual teacher knowledge to include institutional support structures. The primary aim of this study is to explore how in-service English teachers translate curriculum literacy into pedagogical decision-making through the lens of Borg's theory of teacher cognition. In addition, the study considers instructional leadership as a contextual factor that may enable or constrain teachers' enactment of curriculum in classroom practice. Accordingly, instructional leadership is examined to provide contextual understanding rather than as an independent phenomenon to be investigated. The paper is arranged as follows: theoretical framework, methodology, findings and conclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is underpinned by Borg's theory of teacher cognition in language education, which was developed in the early 2000s through his influential review article in *Language Teaching* (2003), in which he synthesised research on teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and practices (Borg, 2003). He later expanded this framework in *Teacher Cognition and Language Education* (2015), emphasising that teachers' mental lives, which comprise what they know, believe, and think, interact dynamically with classroom practices, institutional contexts, and professional development (Borg, 2015; Johnson, 2018; Borg, 2018). Borg's theory argues that teachers' cognition is central to shaping pedagogical decision-making and curriculum implementation, as it influences how they interpret and enact curricular mandates. This theory is relevant to this study since it provides a lens for examining in-service English teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making, highlighting the importance of understanding the interplay between teachers' internal beliefs and their external instructional actions. This theory complements the study's qualitative approach, ensuring that teachers' lived experiences are highlighted.

While Borg's theory of teacher cognition provides a robust framework for understanding teachers' internal decision-making, this study is further enriched by incorporating instructional leadership as a complementary lens. Instructional leadership emphasises the role of school leaders in shaping teaching and learning through actions such as setting clear academic goals, monitoring instruction, supporting professional development, and ensuring the availability of teaching resources (Day et al., 2016). Within this study, instructional leadership is not treated as a primary theoretical factor but as a contextual and organisational factor that interacts with teacher cognition. This integration allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how pedagogical decision-making is influenced not only by what teachers know and believe, but also by the leadership structures within which they operate. Accordingly, Borg's theory of teacher cognition constitutes the principal theoretical framework guiding this study, while instructional leadership serves as a complementary contextual lens for interpreting the organisational conditions that shape teachers' curriculum enactment.

METHODS

The study is located in interpretivist paradigm. According to Willis (2007) and Creswell and Poth (2018), Interpretivism focuses on understanding how people make sense of their social world through exploring meanings, experiences, and perspectives. Reality is seen as socially constructed (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022), and knowledge arises from interaction between a researcher and participants (Macdonald, 2025). We have chosen to locate our study in interpretivist paradigm since it seeks to understand the lived experiences, beliefs, and decision-making processes of in-service English teachers in relation to curriculum literacy; therefore, the interpretivist paradigm is appropriate as it emphasizes the exploration of socially constructed meanings

through qualitative methods, ensuring that the dynamic interplay between teachers' internal beliefs and external practices is fully captured. This study used a qualitative research approach through multiple case study design where semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations were used to collect data. Kothari and Garg (2016) define multiple case studies as involving detailed exploration of several cases within a single research project, allowing for comparisons and the identification of patterns across different contexts. A qualitative approach was relevant for this study since we sought to unearth in-service English teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making. For this study, four in-service English teachers were purposively selected and invited to participate. The study was conducted in four government secondary schools located in urban areas of Lesotho. The schools are not identified to protect participants' identities. All schools implemented the national English curriculum and served learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The urban setting provided an opportunity to explore teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making within comparatively well-connected educational environments. For this study, four in-service English teachers were purposively selected. Purposeful sampling resides on the proposition that information-rich samples are to be selected to have an in-depth view of the phenomena (Shaheen et al., 2023; Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). In-service English teachers were selected because they are directly responsible for interpreting and implementing the English language curriculum in secondary schools and therefore possess first-hand experience of curriculum literacy, pedagogical decision-making, and the contextual challenges that shape classroom practice. Participants were further selected based on the following criteria: they were qualified secondary school English teachers, they were actively teaching English at the time of the study, they had practical responsibility for interpreting and implementing the national English curriculum, and they possessed sufficient teaching experience to reflect meaningfully on curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making. Selecting teachers with these characteristics ensured that participants could provide rich descriptions of their interpretations of the curriculum, instructional practices, and classroom decision-making. The four participants possessed teaching qualifications in English language education and represented varying levels of professional experience. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 8 years, allowing the study to capture perspectives from teachers at different stages of their professional careers. Pseudonyms (Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, and Teacher D) are used throughout the manuscript to protect participants' identities. The participants answered the following research questions: How do in-service English teachers translate their curriculum literacy into pedagogical classroom decisions? What contextual factors enable or constrain the translation of curriculum literacy into pedagogical decisions? The interview and classroom observation protocols were specifically designed to explore teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making in relation to curriculum implementation. Accordingly, no interview questions, observation items, or documentary analyses were designed to investigate the instructional leadership practices of principals or heads of department directly. Consequently, any leadership-related insights presented in this study emerged inductively from teachers' descriptions of the instructional conditions within their schools, including resource availability, workload, curriculum support, and organisational arrangements that influenced their classroom practices. These findings, therefore, reflect teachers' perceptions of their instructional context rather than direct evidence of formal school leadership practices. The participants were met in a single phase: they were observed in their classrooms while teaching, and interviews were conducted afterwards.

Data collection was conducted over a four-week period. Each week, one participant was observed during a 40-minute classroom lesson and subsequently interviewed for 50 minutes in a semi-structured format. This process continued until all four participants had been observed and interviewed.

The study observed all ethical considerations. We adhered to principles such as obtaining consent forms and protecting participants' identities by using pseudonyms (Creswell, 2018). In addition, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data were analysed

using a multiple-case study design (Creswell, 2013), incorporating semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to generate rich, contextual data. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve authenticity, after which the researcher engaged in familiarisation by repeatedly reviewing the transcripts and noting initial impressions and recurring patterns (Brink, 2018). Thematic coding was then conducted inductively, breaking the data into smaller segments, grouping them into categories, and refining these into broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2023) that captured the core aspects of in-service English teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making. Cross-case analysis was subsequently undertaken to compare and contrast findings across participants (Schlunegger, Zumstein-Shaha, & Palm, 2024), thereby highlighting both commonalities and divergences. This approach enhanced the study's robustness by synthesising individual themes into a broader understanding of how in-service English teachers translate their curriculum literacy into pedagogical decision-making. Although the study primarily focuses on teachers' experiences, attention was also given to contextual conditions reflective of instructional leadership practices, such as resource availability, time structuring, and classroom organisation, which indirectly shape teachers' pedagogical decisions.

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, several strategies consistent with qualitative research were employed. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, whereby participants were given the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts and to confirm that their views had been accurately represented. In addition, peer debriefing was undertaken through discussions with experienced qualitative researchers who critically reviewed the emerging themes and interpretations, thereby reducing the possibility of researcher bias.

Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting the research process, including data collection procedures, coding decisions, theme development, and analytical reflections. During the coding process, the researchers independently reviewed the emerging themes, then compared interpretations and resolved any differences through discussion until consensus was reached. This collaborative coding process strengthened the consistency and dependability of the analysis.

To promote confirmability, the researchers engaged in ongoing reflexivity by critically reflecting on their assumptions, professional backgrounds, and potential influence on data generation and interpretation throughout the study. Reflexive notes were maintained during data collection and analysis to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than researchers' preconceptions. Finally, transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participants, and data collection procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

The rigorous process of transcription, coding, and cross-case analysis ensured that the findings were credible and reflective of participants' lived experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In-Service English Teachers' Curriculum Literacy And Pedagogical Decision-Making

Use of sample essays

The teachers relied on textbook samples and their own generated material to explain and clarify concepts in their English classrooms. Zhou (2021) states that using sample texts helps learners improve their writing by comparing their own work to the given samples. Another study by Elsulukiyyah and Aisyah (2019) points out that authentic printed material can improve students' writing achievement, and it is recommended to use authentic material in writing class and other language classes. Also, a study conducted by Lukitasari et al., (2019) found out that critical analysis tasks, such as evaluating sample essays, significantly enhance students' critical thinking skills. In an interview, Teacher A noted, *"I download sample compositions from the internet... and notes from the teachers' guide textbooks... to use in my classroom to identify features of the*

taught composition. Sometimes I bring a composition created by myself to encourage my students to also write." Additionally, Teacher B said, *"I mostly rely on downloaded material from the internet. To ensure student access and facilitate discussion, I then make copies for my class so that they discuss something which they also see."* Teacher C said, *"I rely on the internet for essays to use as examples in my class, but sometimes I photocopy a composition sample from our teachers' textbook to use so that my students can see and learn the appropriate style of writing expected from them."* The statements above therefore make it clear that the participants believe in the effective use of sample essays to enhance teaching and learning in their classrooms. In light of the participants' sentiments, they confirm research by Falardeau (2024), which supports explicit writing instruction (EWI) using modelling, which is often via sample essays, to improve student writing performance and self-efficacy through analysis and emulation. However, Gibbon (2025) argues that sample essays limit students' creativity and authentic development, thereby stifling their choices as they must follow the features of a model text (Keen, 2025).

Rather than simply demonstrating teachers' knowledge of the curriculum, the use of sample essays illustrates how teachers draw upon accumulated pedagogical knowledge and prior instructional experiences to interpret curriculum expectations and select teaching resources that support learners' writing development. In Borg's conception of teacher cognition, instructional decisions emerge from the interaction between teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and classroom realities. The teachers' reliance on self-developed and externally sourced exemplars therefore reflects active professional judgement in adapting available resources to achieve curriculum goals, despite contextual limitations.

From the teachers' perspective, the reliance on self-sourced instructional materials suggests that institutional support for teaching resources was perceived as limited. These interpretations are based on teachers' reported experiences rather than direct investigation of school leaders. The findings, therefore, indicate that stronger instructional support structures, including coordinated resource provision and curriculum guidance, may enhance teachers' implementation of diverse instructional strategies. The following section discusses another pedagogical strategy: scaffolding.

Scaffolding

The teachers believed in breaking down complex concepts, such as the paragraph-by-paragraph method of composition building, into manageable, easier-to-understand aspects for students, which is an indication of curriculum literacy by structuring learning in a progressive manner. Scaffolding represents a critical manifestation of curriculum literacy, as it requires teachers to interpret curriculum goals and translate them into step-by-step instructional support (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2014) that bridges learners' current abilities with desired outcomes. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the *Zone of Proximal Development* provides the foundational framework, emphasising that effective teaching involves structuring tasks so learners can progress from what they can do independently to what they can achieve with guidance. Adding to this, Green (2020) highlights how scaffolding academic literacies enables teachers to align classroom practices with curriculum expectations, ensuring that learners gradually acquire genre awareness and rhetorical skills. Similarly, Bertram, Johnson, and Goldring (2022) demonstrate that scaffolding practices in South African classrooms embed reading and writing into disciplinary teaching, showing how curriculum literacy is enacted when teachers consciously design tasks that make complex curriculum demands accessible. In the interview, Teacher A said, *"Some of the ways to ensure a successful classroom is to avoid giving students a full composition to work on from the word go; they should be taught paragraph by paragraph and once they understand, they can move on to the next paragraph."* Teacher B also noted, *"...For example, when the slow ones are working on writing a paragraph or two, the fast ones are now writing a whole composition."* Sharing the same sentiments, Teacher C highlighted that, *"...The next step involves instructing them to write a composition step by step and employ the devices learned from the passage read in class."* Teacher D also pointed out, *"Giving them a whole composition to write only causes a lot of work for me as a teacher because,*

as I mentioned earlier, they are very weak, and it is a struggle to get them construct even a mere sentence... taking the composition paragraph by paragraph works better." The four teachers consistently highlighted scaffolding as a pragmatic way to manage diverse learner needs, often breaking writing tasks into smaller steps.

The findings above align with research by Bertram, Johnson, and Goldring (2022), which states that scaffolding academic literacy practices in South African classrooms embeds reading and writing into disciplinary teaching, making curriculum demands more accessible. In the same light, Blair, de Oliveira and Avalos (2024) argue that scaffolding multilingual learners requires teachers to adapt curriculum content into language-based supports, directly linking curriculum literacy to pedagogical decision-making. In digital contexts, Awia et al. (2025) demonstrate that scaffolding through a flipped classroom enhances learning outcomes, illustrating how curriculum literacy can translate into innovative pedagogical strategies.

Scaffolding illustrates teacher cognition as an anticipatory decision-making process. The participants interpreted curriculum expectations alongside learners' existing capabilities and deliberately sequenced instruction to bridge the gap between what learners currently know and what the curriculum requires them to achieve. Rather than applying the curriculum mechanically, teachers exercised professional judgement by restructuring learning experiences in response to learner readiness, demonstrating how cognition informs curriculum enactment in practice.

These findings also point to the limited presence of structured instructional leadership practices; instructional support, such as collaborative planning and shared instructional guidance, appeared to be limited. Because these interpretations are derived solely from teachers' experiences, they should be understood as perceptions of the instructional environment rather than direct evidence of school leaders' practices. In the following section, we discuss the integration of collaborative learning.

Integration of collaborative learning

Through peer feedback and group work, the teachers incorporated cooperative learning in their classrooms to demonstrate knowledge of the curriculum. However, uneven participation and student passivity observed during observation sessions often constrained these efforts, highlighting the tension between curriculum ideals and classroom realities. Scholars reinforce this point as Gillies (2021) emphasises that structured peer interaction is essential for productive collaborative learning. Furthermore, Johnson and Johnson (2022) argue that cooperative learning must be consciously designed to ensure equitable participation, and Lopez and Nasir (2024) highlight that collaborative learning is itself a curriculum practice, requiring teachers to interpret and adapt curriculum demands into inclusive group settings. Taken together, both the teachers' experiences and the literature suggest that while collaborative learning is a powerful manifestation of curriculum literacy, its effectiveness depends on deliberate structuring, facilitation, and accountability mechanisms to overcome challenges of uneven engagement. In the interview, Teacher A said, *"I give the groups a well-constructed sample essay and a poor one for them to read through in groups and comment on to identify features of each that make them good or bad. Students then engage in discussions through commenting on the essays; sometimes I give them their own work to exchange with peers, then review their work as they analyse and evaluate each other's work."* Teacher B pointed out, *"...I use comprehension passages for active reading, sometimes in groups, other times individually, followed by question-and-answer sessions to check their understanding."* The same groups were observed during class observations, and many of them were passive, making the exercise almost futile. This challenge further reflects a gap in instructional leadership; teachers perceived insufficient instructional guidance and professional support as constraints on the effective implementation of collaborative learning. Since school leaders were not directly studied, this interpretation reflects teachers' experiences of their instructional context rather than an evaluation of formal instructional leadership practices. The teachers highlight the potency of collaborative learning in their classroom decisions as it enhances students' participation.

The participants above confirm Ali's (2025) research that peer review enhances student engagement, but it should be structured properly to avoid passivity in the classroom. Another study by Carless and Winstone (2021) highlights the need for carefully structured peer and teacher feedback to be effective; students may disengage. However, not all scholars agree on the effectiveness of collaborative learning; Kirschner, Sweller & Clark (2021) warn that when peer collaboration lacks proper teacher guidance, it may fail, especially for learners lacking foundational knowledge, leading to disengagement and uneven participation. Therefore, while collaborative learning reflects teachers' curriculum literacy in practice, its effectiveness ultimately lies in appropriate structuring and sustained facilitation to transform peer activities from passive exercises into meaningful engagement.

The collaborative learning practices adopted by the participants demonstrate that teachers' beliefs about learner participation, peer interaction, and knowledge construction directly shaped their instructional choices. At the same time, the observed uneven participation among learners illustrates how teachers continuously negotiate between their intended pedagogy and classroom realities. This dynamic interaction between cognition and context reflects Borg's proposition that classroom decisions evolve through ongoing interpretation of instructional situations rather than predetermined teaching routines.

Multimodal strategies

The teachers use visual aids to diversify instruction, showing curriculum literacy in catering to varied learner needs. According to research by Linder and Falk-Ross (2024), and another by Alabi (2024), using visual aids and digital tools helps enhance student engagement as it connects classroom content to varied and diverse students' needs. In the interview, Teacher A said, *"...what I sometimes do is bring my laptop to the classroom to show them a story in pictures because we do not have projectors."* Teacher D also indicated, *"On the days when we are dealing with compositions, like currently, I bring teaching aids in the form of visuals like compositions narrated in comic form in drawings for them to see and not only imagine..."* The teachers highlight the effectiveness of visual teaching, as it enhances students' understanding. The findings align with a study conducted by Nguyen and Pham (2024) that points out that teaching with pictures and graphs helps learners enjoy learning and helps them stay focused on the teaching and learning session. Kochkorova (2025) adds that visual tools enhance students' motivation, participation, understanding, language acquisition, and inclusivity in the learning environment. However, Maphosa and Bhebhe (2024) caution that overreliance on visuals may stifle creativity and limit learners' ability to engage in deeper analytical thinking.

Teachers' use of visual and multimodal resources demonstrates adaptive professional reasoning in response to contextual limitations. Rather than viewing limited technology as an obstacle to effective teaching, participants modified their instructional approaches by selecting alternative resources to facilitate learners' understanding. This illustrates that teacher cognition extends beyond curriculum interpretation to include continuous instructional adaptation within resource-constrained environments.

The teachers' improvisation with limited technological tools highlights the need for instructional leadership that prioritises integrating multimodal resources through strategic planning and infrastructural support. In the next section, we discuss adaptation to student capabilities.

Adaptation to Student Capabilities

The teachers accommodated students' abilities by focusing on topics easier for students to understand, which indicates knowledge of the curriculum, and by adjusting classroom content (Narrative and Argumentative Composition) to perceived student capabilities. This aligns with a study by Ledwaba and Sefotho (2024), who note that curriculum adaptation in inclusive schools requires teachers to adjust content to accommodate diverse student needs. Sharing the same view, Gibbs (2025) highlights that differentiated instruction enables teachers to organise activities and expectations according to students' strengths and readiness, ensuring equitable access to learning. Adiniyah and Utomo (2024) further highlight that inclusive

education depends on flexible curriculum strategies that respond to learner levels, confirming that teachers must interpret curriculum demands in ways that scaffold student progress without overwhelming them. During the interview, Teacher A said, *"...They also have difficulty differentiating between the structural conventions of various composition types because other times they are expected to write a certain type of essay, but they mix up the layouts and presentation of ideas and this affects progress to the next topics to be taught, hence I decided then to focus on one type of composition depending on which the students understand, which I noticed gives them a sense of confidence in getting something of compositions right. Then we stick with that type."* Teacher C pointed out, *"...due to students' ongoing struggles, it is not all the time that I teach all the four types of composition as my groups usually struggle, therefore, I often prioritize narrative composition with the purpose of preparing them for examinations as I realized they understand it better."* Teacher D also indicated, *"...Because they honestly struggle with expression, I find it unnecessary to over-burden them with the different compositions, so we focus only on one type of composition which is the narrative because dealing with them all only confuses my students even more."* The data above suggest that adapting instruction to learner capabilities is not only a pragmatic classroom strategy but also a reflection of curriculum literacy, where teachers interpret curriculum demands in ways that balance rigor with accessibility. This finding aligns with Van Geel et al. (2023), who emphasize that adapting teaching requires differentiated instruction and assessment for learning; Ledwaba and Sefotho (2024), who show that curriculum adaptation is essential in inclusive schools; and Vartak (2025), who demonstrates that tailoring instruction to learner levels enhances engagement and achievement. While research above highlights the pragmatic value of adapting to learner capabilities, Roselle (2024) cautions that such practices can become problematic if they consistently lower expectations, as teachers may unintentionally limit students' exposure to more challenging tasks and thereby hinder long-term cognitive growth.

The participants' decisions to adjust curriculum content according to learners' readiness demonstrate the interpretive nature of curriculum implementation. Rather than delivering the curriculum uniformly, teachers exercised professional judgement by balancing curriculum expectations with learners' abilities and the demands of examinations. This illustrates Borg's view that teachers actively construct instructional decisions through the interaction of professional knowledge, beliefs about learners, and classroom experience. While these adaptations demonstrate responsiveness to learners' needs, teachers' experiences suggest that greater instructional support could help them balance curriculum differentiation with the maintenance of curriculum rigour. These conclusions are drawn from teachers' accounts and should therefore be interpreted as perceptions of organisational support rather than direct observations of leadership practices.

Contextual Factors That Constrain The Translation Of Curriculum Literacy Into Pedagogical Decisions **Overcrowded Classrooms**

The teachers complained that large class sizes hindered the implementation of interactive and engaging strategies, forcing them to rely on the lecture method of teaching. Research by Vakili et al. (2024) indicates that overcrowded classrooms hinder effective teacher-learner interaction, leading to disengagement and distractions. Brown and Green (2022) add that with large classrooms, teachers struggle to meet diverse learning needs, which can diminish their job satisfaction. In the same vein, a study conducted in the South African context by Matsepe and Maluleke (2019) found that when classrooms are overcrowded, teachers lack sufficient space for instructional activities. During the interview with Teacher B, she indicated, *"Classes are usually overcrowded, and it becomes a huge challenge to meet the needs of every learner as most of the activities have to be done in groups where sometimes other learners are just passive."* Teacher C shared the same sentiments and highlighted, *"...overcrowding contributes to playfulness and lack of concentration in learners as they get easily distracted, particularly among those sitting farthest from me as they are aware I do not see them."* Teacher D also pointed out that, *"having to give equal attention to a total of 60 students is*

always a problem, and it doesn't end there because students being students take advantage by being noisy and uncontrollable because they know there's many of them and I can't identify the unruly ones." Data suggest that overcrowded classrooms undermine interactive teaching, reduce learner engagement, and strain teacher performance, a finding echoed by Tshangana, Nomtshongwana and Buka (2023), who show that overcrowding reduces interaction and increases learner passivity. Another study by Khanyile & Biyela (2025) highlights that large class sizes force teachers to adopt coping strategies that compromise instructional quality. Liman, Jibir and Hassan (2023) also found that overcrowding negatively affects teacher performance and learner engagement in Nigerian schools.

Overcrowded classrooms illustrate how contextual realities influence the enactment of teacher cognition. Rather than abandoning curriculum goals, teachers adapted their instructional strategies by modifying classroom organisation, interaction patterns, and teaching approaches in response to large class sizes. These findings demonstrate that pedagogical decision-making is shaped not only by teachers' knowledge and beliefs but also by their capacity to respond professionally to contextual constraints. From teachers' perspectives, overcrowded classrooms created instructional challenges that they believed required greater organisational support, including classroom management assistance and improved instructional coordination. In the following section, we address another constraint: resource limitations.

Resource Limitations

Lack of resources is another issue the teachers highlighted, forcing them to rely on shared textbooks. Research by Chuene and Teane (2024) points out that lack of resources contributes hugely to poor performance in many South African schools. Another study by Singh (2024) highlights how under-resourced contexts hinder English teaching and often result in poor student performance. Candrawati and Purbani (2025) say that a lack of technological knowledge and other material resources, such as books, often limits teaching and learning, such that teachers are compelled to stick with traditional teaching methods, which are often not interactive and involve the students. In the interview with Teacher A, he highlighted, *"Another issue is that our school does not have enough text-books to give to students when discussing a certain topic, so we usually photocopy material to take to class, which also is a problem because it consumes a lot of time which could have been used otherwise. We can't even give students a reading task to do at home because of lack of books..."* Teacher C pointed out, *"the scarcity of physical textbooks is a major problem in my school; the available copies are only for the teachers not students, which is why I'm forced to photocopy material for my students before going to class."* Teacher D said, *"Because we don't have many copies of the textbook used in the department, we are forced to photocopy for students when going to class, and it becomes a problem on days when there is no paper for photocopying, or the photocopier is broken, then it means whatever you had planned for the day fails..."* Results show that resource limitations hinder progression in the teaching and learning. Teachers are forced to rely on photocopying or traditional lecture methods, which consume valuable classroom teaching time and reduce opportunities for learner-centered activities. These challenges are echoed across contexts by Gopining and Mohamad (2024), Mamaile and Omodan (2023), and Alhassan (2025).

These findings highlight the critical role of instructional leadership in resource mobilisation, allocation, and management, which are essential for effective curriculum implementation from the teacher's perspective. The next section discusses time constraints.

The strategies teachers adopted to compensate for limited teaching resources demonstrate that curriculum implementation is an adaptive cognitive process rather than a fixed procedural activity. Teachers continually evaluated available resources, modified instructional plans, and improvised teaching materials to sustain learner engagement. These decisions reflect the central role of teacher cognition in enabling effective curriculum enactment despite organisational constraints.

Time Constraints

The teachers complained of time constraints, which they lamented contribute significantly to unfinished syllabi and poor student performance, as students have not thoroughly learned some of the syllabus content. Qi (2025) points out that time is an essential component of student growth, but, for various reasons, such as students' inactivity and insufficient proficiency in English (Mai, Ngoc & Thao, 2024; Liu & Yin, 2021), many teachers struggle with time management. In an interview with Teacher B, she highlighted, *"...During discussions, only a limited number of students engage, with the majority remaining passive because most cannot express themselves in English, and this affects our classroom time and content to cover because I'm never sure when they understand or not, but because we have a syllabus to cover, I have to move ahead..."* Teacher D also said, *"We do not have enough time to apply students' grammar skills in composition writing because we have to touch on other aspects of the subject...which still doesn't help our situation because they fail the tests for having rushed through the syllabus..."*

The findings suggest that time limitations hinder syllabus coverage and student mastery; however, research by Kraft & Novicoff (2022), Leek et al. (2024), and Li (2025) shows that when managed effectively, time constraints can sharpen focus, build resilience, and support efficient learning, indicating that the impact of time is shaped more by teacher cognition and classroom management than by the quantity of time itself.

Time constraints reveal how teachers constantly negotiate competing instructional priorities while attempting to maintain curriculum quality. Participants described making professional judgements regarding pacing, learners' understanding, and syllabus coverage, illustrating that pedagogical decision-making involves continuously balancing curriculum expectations against practical classroom realities. From the perspective of teacher cognition, these instructional choices represent reasoned responses to contextual pressures rather than simple reactions to insufficient instructional time. Instructional leadership is equally important in structuring instructional time, guiding curriculum pacing, and supporting teachers in balancing syllabus coverage with meaningful learning.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study highlights that in-service English teachers' curriculum literacy is not a static skill but a dynamic, contextually negotiated practice shaped by their beliefs, knowledge, and classroom realities. Guided by Borg's theory of teacher cognition, the findings reveal how teachers translate curriculum mandates into pedagogical decisions through strategies such as sample essays, scaffolding, collaborative learning, multimodal approaches, and adaptations to learners' capabilities, while also contending with constraints such as overcrowded classrooms.

Importantly, the findings reveal that teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making are not solely individual competencies but are significantly shaped by instructional leadership conditions within schools. Effective instructional leadership can support teachers through the provision of resources, professional development, and structured instructional guidance, thereby enhancing the translation of curriculum literacy into meaningful classroom practice. Strengthening instructional leadership in Lesotho Secondary Schools is therefore essential for improving curriculum implementation and overall teaching and learning outcomes.

It is important to emphasise that these conclusions regarding instructional leadership are derived from teachers' reported experiences of their instructional environment rather than from direct investigation of principals, heads of department, or school leadership practices. Furthermore, teachers themselves serve as instructional leaders in their classrooms through their interpretation of the curriculum, instructional planning, pedagogical decision-making, and adaptation of instruction to learners' needs. The study therefore demonstrates how teachers' classroom instructional leadership is shaped by organisational conditions as

perceived by teachers, while recognising that the practices of formal school leaders were beyond the scope of the present investigation.

The findings suggest several practical implications for strengthening curriculum implementation. First, principals and Heads of Department should establish structured Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) where English teachers collaboratively plan lessons, share instructional resources, discuss learner challenges, and reflect on effective pedagogical practices. Second, school leadership should prioritise the strategic mobilisation and equitable allocation of instructional resources, including textbooks, exemplar materials, and digital teaching resources, to reduce teachers' reliance on self-developed materials. Third, regular instructional support should extend beyond administrative supervision to include developmental classroom observations, mentoring, coaching, and constructive feedback to improve teaching practice. Fourth, school management teams should facilitate collaborative curriculum planning and moderation meetings that support teachers in balancing curriculum coverage with learner differentiation and assessment requirements. Finally, the Ministry of Education and Training should strengthen continuous professional development programmes that enhance teachers' curriculum literacy while simultaneously developing the instructional leadership capacity of principals and Heads of Department to support effective curriculum implementation.

By employing a qualitative interpretivist lens, the research highlights the importance of capturing teachers' lived experiences, showing that effective curriculum implementation depends on empowering teachers to balance allegiance with flexibility, ensuring that curriculum goals are met in ways that remain responsive to learner needs and contextual challenges.

Limitations

This study explored curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making exclusively through the perspectives of in-service English teachers. Consequently, no principals, heads of department, or other formal school leaders were interviewed, and no school leadership documents or policies were analysed. While teachers' accounts provided valuable insight into the organisational conditions that enabled or constrained classroom practice, leadership-related interpretations are necessarily indirect and reflect teachers' perceptions of their instructional environment rather than direct evidence of formal instructional leadership practices.

A further consideration is that teachers themselves exercise instructional leadership within their classrooms through curriculum interpretation, instructional planning, learner support, assessment, and pedagogical decision-making. Accordingly, the study provides insight into classroom-level instructional leadership while recognising that school-level instructional leadership was not directly examined.

Future research should adopt a multi-perspective approach by incorporating interviews with principals and heads of department, analysis of school policies and leadership documents, and observations of leadership practices alongside teachers' experiences. Such methodological triangulation would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how formal instructional leadership and teachers' classroom instructional leadership interact to influence curriculum implementation and pedagogical decision-making in secondary schools.

Future research should also consider conducting larger multi-site studies involving schools from diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts to improve the transferability of findings. Furthermore, mixed-methods and longitudinal research designs would provide a deeper understanding of how instructional leadership influences teachers' curriculum literacy and pedagogical decision-making over time. Finally, future studies should examine the relationship between teachers' classroom instructional leadership and formal school instructional leadership to better understand how these complementary forms of leadership collectively influence curriculum implementation and learner achievement.

Declarations: All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. Participants provided written informed consent, which they signed

Ethics Approval Statements: The study complied with all ethical considerations, including obtaining permission from the University of the Free State to conduct research. This study was ethically approved under ethics number UFS-HSD2023/2613/5.

Author Contributions: All authors contributed to the research design and implementation, the results analysis, and the manuscript's writing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

Funding: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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