



Factors contributing to low academic achievement of National Certificate Vocational level 4 English in TVET Colleges: A case study

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Abstract

The dropping performance in National Certificate: Vocational [NC(V)] level 4 English in South African Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges has attracted the attention of administrators, academicians and researchers alike due to the declining rate of students who are getting certified. While the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa is using the TVET Colleges as drivers of the economy in terms of reducing the unemployment rate, it is therefore imperative to dig deeper and unearth what might have delayed the realisation of the government's objectives. Through the use of a case study design, this study employed a qualitative semi-structured interview, observation, government policy documents and questionnaire to find answers on the factors that contributed to the low academic achievement of NC (V) level 4 English in one of the TVET Colleges in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Twelve participants, including lecturers, students and head of department were randomly selected from those involved in English level 4. The findings of the study reveal that students, lecturers, and TVET College are responsible for the low academic performance of NC (V) level 4 students. This study therefore finds it crucial for the DHET and the college to strengthen its management practices and policies on lectures and students to deal with the factors that contribute to low academic achievement of NC(V) level 4 English.

Keywords: *further education and training, national students financial aid scheme, Department of Higher Education and Training, academic achievement*

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1. Introduction

The Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College, coined from the former Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges, was first used by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO) in 1999. The change in the name was directed at repositioning the FET Colleges to be inclusive of also vocational education. This would make them more relevant as institutions that are focused on specific careers. As they are to align their curriculum with what is practically happening in the world of work, most of the companies are expected to tap directly from these colleges. The artisans and blue-collar workers, to mention a few, are in high demand and these colleges must be ready to provide several institutions with them.

The education in South Africa is in the helm of the government sector and private sector. The TVET Colleges and the universities are either public or private. Notwithstanding that, the TVET colleges must be in the forefront in providing certain skills that the labour market needs. However, the extremely low throughput and certification rates of 35.5 per cent for National Certificate: Vocational [NC(V)] English Level 2-4 at these institutions prevent colleges from achieving this goal (Stander et al., 2022). Since the introduction of the NC(V) training, there have been a very high student dropout and a very low pass rate in English (Ngwato, 2022; Sebola, 2022). This is a clear indication that there is a serious challenge in English literacy in TVET colleges. The attainment of NC(V) level 4 English is therefore crucial not only as a prerequisite for certification but as a medium of instruction in the workplace. Proficiency in English is regarded by many as a gateway to economic empowerment, for both individuals and South Africa as a whole (Madileng, 2022). Considering that most of the modules or subjects require English for effective attainment of specific outcomes in these institutions, there seems to be a challenge in terms of its performance. Thus, this paper is reporting on the factors that contributed to the low academic achievement of NC(V) level 4 English in one of the TVET colleges in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. This was explicitly achieved through the following objectives: 1) to identify the factors leading to low academic achievement of NC (V) level 4 English students in TVET colleges; and 2) to explore how and why those factors contribute to low achievement of NC (V) level 4 English students in TVET colleges.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Factors contributing to low academic achievement of NC (V) level 4 English in TVET College

This section discusses factors which contribute to low academic achievement of students in English NC (V) level 4 at TVET Colleges globally, in Africa and South Africa except for Limpopo province. Socio-economic factors largely contribute to students' low academic achievement in different subjects which include, among others, English in TVET Colleges (Souriyavongsa et al., 2023). The following socio-economic factors were identified as some of those that contribute to students' low academic achievement in English at TVET Colleges - demographic factors, family factors (family income level, parents' level of education), gender, language barriers, student factors (student's culture, attitude of the students, peer factors), and teacher factors.

Family factors (family income level, parents' level of education). Wang and Guan (2020) assert that low income in some families demotivates some students to focus on English lessons in China universities. Moreover, in the United Kingdom some students struggle to concentrate to the curriculum when their families experience inadequate nutrition (Ngwato, 2020). Most experts in Pakistan argue that socio-economic status affect the academic performance of students because the socio-economic needs of students remain unattended to (Souriyavongsa et al., 2023). The income in the families affects some students; a student cannot learn on an empty stomach. A grown-up who is trying to learn may be affected by family problems. This impacts them emotionally and as such, they cannot perform as expected. In practice, TVET Colleges usually do not use the age cohorts as a barring factor for one to enrol with the college, hence, all people of different ages may enrol with TVET College. Researchers argue that socio-economic status affect the academic performance of students because the basic needs of students remain unfulfilled.

In South Africa, Limpopo province is seen as one of the poorest provinces in which most families have poor backgrounds. Sinaga and Pustika (2021) edify that family background is one of the most significant and weighting factor in determining the academic performance of students. The students at the TVET Colleges in South Africa do not get a free meal as is the case in primary and high schools. This may hit hard on those who could hardly afford it because of family background. Getie (2020) argue that one of the social contexts to be taken into consideration is the various parent factors such as education, religion and socio-economic

status. Consequently, educated parents are able to support their students and they value the importance of English in academic institutions. Parents engage students in intellectual activities that do help them to develop a positive attitude towards learning. Ngoveni (2018) agrees that South Africa students from higher socio-economic status families are more likely to perform better than those who come from lower socio-economic status families. In addition, Matsolo et al. (2018) state that 92% of the TVET college students in Gauteng province do not receive the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) financial assistance. Since these students stay in places far from the college, they are being financially punished in terms of the transport costs that they incur. According to Ngwato (2020), TVET college's students living in isolated areas of South Africa experienced the worse kind of poverty that contribute to their poor academic performance.

Gender. Getie (2020) is in a view that the girl child shows a positive attitude towards the better achievement of English than boys in Ethiopian schools. The girl learners have better interaction with their teachers and they develop a positive attitude towards the target language than boy learners. Rahman et al. (2021) argue that even though women have a good attitude towards learning English in Bangladesh, they still face more challenges in accessing opportunities because of the prevailing perceptions and practices in the male-dominant society.

Language barrier. The dominance of the mother tongue plays a major role in education. Getie (2020) reveals that anxiety in foreign language classes is often related to listening and speaking, with difficulty in speaking in class. Similarly, English language teachers are challenged to create a favourable condition in the classroom by employing methods to reduce anxiety, negative attitudes and stress about the language and their achievement too. At the primary level, the learners' instructional language is the mother tongue. These learners who are taught in the mother tongue at the primary level find it difficult to grasp English at TVET Colleges. Similarly, in Tanzania, learners are taught in Kiswahili at the primary level (Mosha, 2014). However, English is the medium of instruction in secondary schools and tertiary education in the same country. Students in both secondary schools and tertiary institutions lacked the foundation in learning English. This created a problem for most of them. Souriyavongsa et al. (2023) add that factors that contribute to English language as a barrier of learning include lack of support to use English in the home environment, students' limitation of vocabulary proficiency and lack of motivation towards the target language. Students normally feel comfortable speaking their languages and are proud of them.

Student factors (student's culture, attitudes of students, peer group). Getie (2020) edifies that students' attitudes towards the target language inform the determination with which the student can confront the challenges in the English language. Therefore, the students manifest various attitudes towards the target language, special value of learning the second language, the particular use of the target language, and themselves as members of their own culture (Getie, 2020; Stops et al., 2022). Thus, learners with positive attitudes will experience success while those with negative attitudes will experience failure. Students may develop a negative attitude towards the English language or the English teacher. That will lead to such students not doing well in this language. Getie (2020) further accentuates that students' peer group has a remarkable influence on the attitude towards learning a foreign or second language. Mabunda and Freek (2020) are of the view that instead of students focusing on the low performed English assessments, they simply prioritise participating in other subjects during their practical lessons. Students can have similar interests, feelings or attitude, in common with certain individual difference. Students attitudes towards the language can be reinforced or affected by college/ university peers emerging from classes, unions, sororities, fraternities and churches.

Quality teachers. Another concerning factor is that of quality teachers. One of the damning teacher factors is the failure to finish the syllabus. Teachers must do what is required of them in the curriculum; otherwise, students will bear the brunt. Macaro and Aizawa (2024) state that the incompetency of teachers can cause poor performance in English. They further indicated that some of these teachers who are forced to teach it, just read to students and students do not do well even in oral and written work. Ngwato (2020) maintained that there are few well-qualified teaching staff or lecturers at the TVET colleges in many countries in Africa. If lecturers are not qualified in the subjects they teach, then it is evident that it is not much that can be expected of them in ameliorating the underperformance of students.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The critical social theory was identified as appropriate for use in this study. It originates from the Marxist- oriented Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and New York. There does not seem to be a universal definition of critical social theory. However, Habermas (1971) defines critical social theory as a system of self-preservation that serves two functions: self-assertion against nature and the organisations of men's interrelations. According to Freire

(1972), critical social theory is curiosity about the object of knowledge and the willingness and openness to engage in theoretical readings and discussions. Lebeloane (1998) defines it as developing a conception of reality that ties ideas, thought and language to social and historical conditions which are based on criticism, notions of power and control.

Lebeloane (1998) advances that the interest of critical social theory is characterised by its reflection on the past (history), reference to the present and exploration of how to improve for the future. It does that through its constitutive and emancipatory actions that are free of disempowerment through ideological dominance. That is, it has an interest in improving the quality of human existence by setting human beings free from their way of thinking (Lebeloane, 1998). Social critical theory penetrates phenomena to identify distorted ideals that deliberately mislead or fragment the consciences of individuals and or groups to a level of powerlessness and accepting anything or everything without questioning its legality (Cohen et al., 2007).

In contextualizing the preceding characteristics for the study, a humanised pedagogy of equal permanent relationship of dialogue between students and lecturers in the TVET college under study is propagated. Both parties are emancipated central subjects of unveiling reality which is to explore the factors contributing to low student achievement in an English first additional language at the TVET College. That is done by centralizing social justice and unveiling knowledge whereby students should have a word, lecturers should raise their voices and be heard.

3. Research Methods

This section explicitly discusses the research method based on the research design, the data collection methods and sampling used in the study. Furthermore, issues of ethical matters are explained. Finally, data analysis is presented.

3.1. Research Design

The study employed the case study design. Since the case study is qualitative in nature (Mouton, 2022), it aims aim to provide an in-depth description of small number of cases. Case studies investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This design allows the researcher to get a deeper understanding into selected cases for investigation (Mutongoza, 2021) and the researcher aim to investigate between the phenomenon and its context (Martinsou & Huemann, 2021). Therefore, the study

aimed at reporting on the factors that contributed to low academic achievement of NC (V) level 4 English.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

In this study, the interview and observation methods were used. In an interview, each participant defines the situation in a particular way (Cohen et al., 2007). According to Pandey and Pandey (2015), interview is a systematic method by which a person enters more or less imaginatively into the inner life of a comparative stranger. In the same vein, Centellas (2016) maintains that interviews are a non-passive, interactive form of research. The open-ended questions were adapted to the level of the participants. The researchers randomly selected and interviewed both students and lecturers using a compiled list of questions.

Data was collected from participants by securing an appointment with each interviewee and interviewing them in person within a reasonable time of the day and at their convenient places, for example, the interviews were conducted at TVET college campus. Each participant was informed about the data collection process for the study and that they could withdraw from the project if they wished to since the participation was wholly voluntary as stated in Sanjari et al. (2014) and Sivasubramaniam et al. (2021). The participants were notified that a voice recorder would be used at the time of data collection. Their confidentiality was, however, guaranteed.

The questions were open-ended. Each participant was asked questions and follow-up questions if it was necessary (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). A voice recorder was used to gather data by recording the interview process as supported by Maree (2013). Each voice recording session was marked to avoid mixing the information when it is transcribed in preparation for data analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, a questionnaire enabled participants to respond to a list of questions.

Data was also gathered through unstructured observation. According to Zikmund and Babin (2007) and Moodley (2020), observation is one of the qualitative data-gathering techniques. As the researchers are closest to the site, they used that advantage to collect certain information by scrutinizing the certification rate of the students. That is, researchers were flexible in taking notes from graduation ceremonies without relying on predefined guidelines. The unstructured observation was used in this study because some observed behaviours,

incidents and any other relevant information were recorded and referred to during interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.3. Sampling

The purposive sampling procedure, which is part of non-probability sampling, was used in this study. The choice or selection of the elements or units to be included in the sample relies on the judgement of the researcher (Vehovar et al, 2016). Consequently, English level 4 students and lecturers constitute the sample of this study. One HOD for English level 4, one senior lecturer of English level 4, four lecturers of English level 4 and six students of English level 4 took part in the study. Participants were easily recruited as the researchers had access to the chosen sample. In addition, the subject NC (V) level 4 English is offered in the same institution.

3.4. Research Ethics

Consent. According to Manandar and Joshi (2020), consent is a desire to participate in the research by agreeing to a specific statement. Consent is applied during the collection of data process. Since data has to be confidential, the researcher and the participants must agree on the way the data has to be handled. Consent has to be obtained from the respondent to avoid him/her pressing legal charges against the researcher on certain information disclosed without consent (Manandar & Joshi, 2020). The researchers first got permission from the participants to be interviewed. Informed consent was sought to incorporate the rights of autonomous individuals through self-determination (Fouka, 2011). The written letters were given to participants to seek their permission as per Maree (2012). The researchers offered the prospective participants the freedom to choose if they want to be part of the research.

Furthermore, the researchers requested permission to conduct research from the campus principal and campus manager before commencing with the research at the TVET College. The researchers' ethical clearance certificate which they received from the Unisa College of Education's Ethics committee and proves that approval was granted to conduct research for the study was presented to the TVET College campus principal and campus manager.

Anonymity. The participants were not obliged to disclose their names during the interview, that they could remain anonymous. The use of the participant's real name was not a

requirement in the research and they had a choice to use a pseudo name or remain anonymous. They were told that they may not be recorded or remain anonymous if a recording is used or other data-capturing devices (Parveen, 2017). Anonymity in this study helped the researchers to collect information from interviewees on the factors contributing to low academic achievement in English at TVET colleges without disclosing their identity.

Confidentiality. The information that the participants provided during the interview was kept privately by the researchers. Fouka (2011) maintains that individuals are free to give and withhold as much information as they wish to the person they choose. The researcher must maintain the confidentiality of records and other confidential information (Parveen, 2017). The participants are likely to give out their information to the person they trust. Therefore, the success of research relies mainly upon the trustworthiness of the researcher.

3.5. Data Analysis

In contextualizing data analysis, Ravindran's (2019) method of analysing data was applied in this study. Raw data was analysed using four steps, namely, preparation of data; reading and reflecting; coding, categorising and developing themes. In preparing raw data, it was gathered and transcribed from participants. Thereafter, it was reduced to a manageable level by arranging it into identifiable patterns, and similar features then categorising and coding it in a way that was easy for the researchers to interpret. The openness of the participants in providing information further helped to facilitate drawing themes about factors that contributed to poor academic achievement. A similar strategy was applied for data which was gathered as observation notes, official hard copy records, electronic text and non-textual materials. That was done to facilitate a better understanding of the phenomenon.

4. Results

The views expressed by the Head of Department (HoD), senior lecturer (SL), lecturers (L) and students (S) are presented hereunder unedited.

Head of department. The following factors summarise the findings by the HoD:

Quality of the lecturers. The management concurs that the qualifications of some of the lecturers at their college leave much to be desired. These lecturers are not capable of doing even the simplest things like managing the classroom or keeping an attendance register. They also believe that the students do as they wish in the presence of these lecturers. Some of these

lecturers did not get enough training in the subject that they are teaching, like English. As such, they are not confident or rather they do not display the necessary skills in delivering the English curriculum. The students are very observant of what is happening in the class. If the lecturer is not good enough in his/her discipline or subject, students will react by not attending satisfactorily.

“To start with....ee as much as we are at the college level our observation is to say eish... there is quite a number of incompetency of lecturers. Under normal circumstances, if lecturers are hired, they need to undergo training. They must come up with their own skills that they have acquired before they will improve results and eh...eh. there is a lack of professional training. And also the issue of classroom management ability, where classes need to be managed at all costs, the presence of students, and their conduct in class whether they have understood what they have been taught”

Time management. The HoD and senior lecturers have realised that the college is not doing much in terms of managing the teaching time. At the beginning of the year, the college spends a lot of time admitting students. This encroaches even in the time that is supposed to be used in teaching. So the lecturers will, in most cases, find it difficult to cover the curriculum. Students will be disadvantaged and happen to go to the examination room with insufficient knowledge.

Workload. The management is also blaming itself for the issue of allocation of the duties to lecturers. Some of the lecturers are required to deliver the curriculum and at the same time, they must also render extra-curricular activities. If the two are to be done at the same time, then the clash occurs and the lecturer has to decide which one to sacrifice. If the lecturer chooses extra-curricular activities, English students will then be at the receiving end of the undesirable outcome. During the year this may seem to be interesting to the students as they will enjoy time off, but taxing at the end of the year when the results are not that good.

“The issue of workload at the college level where lecturers are supposed to deliver the curriculum at the same time they have any other extra curriculum to attend to. On top of that, we also have lecturers’ financial status, where these lecturers might be having challenges in line with finance. Once you are not financially stable is not easy for you to deliver the curriculum. It is the responsibility of students that leads, eh...that also leads to unsatisfactory academic performance in English. But as long as lecturers are happy and students

are being attended to, this will address the issues that we are talking about that are mainly contributing to poor performance of some students, who just drop out seeing that they cannot make it at the end of the year."

Absenteeism. There are those students who are bunking the English classes. English is a fundamental subject and most of the students believe that what is crucial to them are the core subjects. They do not take into cognition the fact that they must satisfy the requirement of their diploma by also passing English. Maybe they think that the English teacher will just be sympathetic to them and offer them marks from nowhere. They miss some of the tasks that do contribute to the continuous assessment mark. This type of behaviour is what contributes to underperformance in (NC) (V) English level 4. However, the disappointing part of the story is that it is not only students who do not attend well. Some of the lecturers on the other side do not attend their periods. This will free up time for the students to enjoy but hit them hard at the end of the year in terms of poor results.

Socio-economic status. The management has just observed that there are those lecturers that do have financial difficulties following them. These are some of those lecturers who will be absent themselves from the work. They are not financially capable and find it hard to cope with the budgetary demands of their families. This problem will then uncontrollably overlap with their work environment and affect the poor students. The salaries of the TVET lecturers are not that good. Students who are from poor families absent themselves from classes because they do not have clothes to put on for the rest of the week, especially ladies. They cannot put up with the competition of dressing.

Lack of resources. The college does not have sufficient resources like tablets for the students. During the COVID-19 era, it was difficult to teach students online as a result of a lack of resources. The lecturers were also not given the data to render online services.

"Ehrr... The first one being the lack of resources, ehrr... we sometimes have a challenge because some of the activities that the student do require them to use the internet"

Senior lecturers. The following factors summarise the findings by the senior lecturers:

Code-switching. Some of the students, who are admitted to the college, find it hard to communicate in English. The college does admit students who have just passed grade 9. There are those lecturers who think that teaching students in English only will disadvantage those

who cannot speak the language. Hence, they teach also in the vernacular like Sepedi. Teaching English in Sepedi or Venda is meaningless. But, circumstances sometimes do dictate according to these lecturers. What remains is that the student is going to be tested in English.

“In some instances you will find a lecturer teaching English in vernacular and students will not write a question paper in vernacular but will write it in English. Some students attended a school where they were taught English in their mother tongue, so they expect the status quo to remain even at the college. Unfortunately, we use English as a medium of communication and instruction at the college hence they ended up failing”.

Management support. English lecturers state that they sometimes hold events like English day where students showcase their abilities in debates and other activities. They invite the management of the college but nobody avails himself/herself to such an event. This is a clear indication that such events which are meant to motivate the students are not given a thumbs up by the management. In the ultimate end, the lecturers may stop holding them with the view that maybe they do offend their seniors.

“We usually hold an English academic day and management do not attend it or rather requests a report in relation to the event. This event does motivate the students to have an interest in English. Sometimes students are left on their own without lecturers for a long period. This lack of lecturers leads to the curriculum not being treated fully. Ultimately students do fail the subject”

Attitude towards English. Some students just do not attend English even if they are on the college campus. They attend their core subjects and leave. This, according to English lecturers, is the attitude that these students have towards English as a subject. They are in the college to learn about civil engineering, electrical engineering, and not English.

“Again, right... you know during the year our students just don’t come to class, they don’t attend regularly. Remember we have got err... core subjects and err... fundamental subjects, so English is a fundamental subject. I think some students do not take English seriously and they do not attend English. English as a fundamental subject, most students do not take it seriously”.

Lecturers. The following factors summarise the findings by the lecturers:

Code-switching. The lecturers are resenting the presentation of lessons by co-lecturers in a vernacular like Sepedi, Xitsonga or Tshivenda. They say this act compromises the subject of English as students are not tested in vernacular but in English. They think that this affects students' performance negatively.

"I have come to realise that most students concentrate on the main subject, core subjects, which are engineering subjects and they turn to forget about English hence some lectures finding unproblematic to teach the language in vernacular such as Sepedi or Xitsonga" (L3)

Absenteeism. The bunking of classes by students and other lecturers is an unfortunate state of affairs and must be discouraged at all costs. The curriculum will never be completed and students are on the receiving end.

"In some other cases, lecturers do bunk the classes. Sometimes this is caused by a situation where the lecturer is overloaded." (L1)

"There is poor attendance on the part of students and lecturers. Students who perform badly are usually those who do miss the lessons. There are lecturers who teach NC (V) subjects like English during the day and Nate subjects in the evening. Such lecturers do bunk the NC (V) lessons and attend the Nate subjects in the evening as they are strictly monitored. Students who do not have enough money and who stay far from the campus might bunk classes as a result of lack of transport fare". (L4)

Socio-economic status. The majority of students at TVET College depend solely on NSFAS funding. This fund has certain requirements that a student must meet before obtaining funding. Some needy students may be deprived of the opportunity to study if they do not satisfy those requirements.

"OH... Socio-economic status: the student might forfeit NSFAS funding as a result of failing. This student will be forced to stay outside the college campus. You will find that the student hasn't got enough food." (L4)

Students. The factors identified by the students include the following:

Peer pressure. Students indicate that their actions are sometimes influenced by their counterparts and they cannot ignore that if they want to be a party to the group. "If you are in

Rome you do what the Romans do”, so goes the adage. If some students willingly say they do not attend an English period, some will unwillingly not attend also.

“Umm... if you think you know everything you’re not going to be willing to learn more and ehh...as a result you will fail. So umm...peer pressure is making one to neglect your school work. Us, as students, do not attend classes regularly and that slows us performance.” (S1)

“Peer pressure, absenteeism of both lecturers and students, lack of study material mm... lack of financial support, lack of support, lack of communication and relationship between the students and lecturers.” (S6)

Favouritism. Some students insinuate that there are lecturers who seem to be favouring other students among the whole group. The favour that a student gets, she/he might have earned by being intelligent or by some other means.

“Favouritism also discourages students to actively participate in a class or even to ask help from lecturers which makes it hard to learn.” (S1)

Lack of motivation. The students are not being encouraged by the college to do better. There is nothing that the college does if the student performs well.

“Lack of motivation, peer pressure, favouritism, interpretation of questions and also the fact that we tell ourselves that we are seniors, and then we knew everything. We are not even given certificates of appreciation when we have done better.” (S1)

Laziness. Some students are unwilling to do the oral activities arranged by the lecturers because they are lazy to prepare. They just want to listen to the lecturer, but they cannot showcase their communication abilities in the presence of their colleagues.

“O.K... laziness, it will be because they don’t spend time talking and learning English. They are always absent due to sleepovers. They don’t take English subjects seriously.” (S2)

Late-coming. Some students stay off-campus and they walk long distances before reaching their destinations. As a result of financial strains, they cannot board taxis. Hence, they normally arrive late for class. If the English period is the first, then they happen to miss some of the content that was taught or rather the whole period.

5. Discussion

There are several factors that contribute to poor academic achievement of NC (V) level 4 English. Findings of the study reveal that factors contributing to poor academic achievement of English are quality lectures, inability to manage lecture times, unbalanced workload of lecturers, absenteeism of both lectures and students in lecture rooms, socio-economic status of students and lack of resources. In addition to these factors are code switching, lack of management support, attitude towards the language, peer pressure, favouritism, lack of motivation and laziness.

It is evident that lectures are incompetent to carry their duties in the classroom. Since English language requires the proficiency of lecturers to impart knowledge to the students (Agustina et al., 2021), some of the lectures were not acquainted with skills in delivering the language lessons. As a result, they did not display necessary skills such as managing the English class as means to prepare students to focus on the lessons. Sebola (2022) edifies that lectures who are ill equipped in the education sector and lack industrial experience contribute to poor teaching. This will undoubtedly raise concerns of how a lecturer with no experience could prepare students for the workplace.

Other than the lack of quality lectures is inability of the college to manage lecturing times. The college spends a lot of time in admitting and orienting students. The notional (teaching) time is therefore lost and lecturers end up not covering the English curriculum. The minimum time spent in teaching negatively affects students at the end of the year as they struggle to meet the prerequisite of the subject. The adherence to teaching and learning time in vocational education ensure that students are well-prepared in acquiring skills and competences for their area of expertise (Matabane et al., 2022). Thus, lost teaching time is likely to create insufficient time to prepare students for the required skills in the place of work.

Another inhibiting factor towards the achievement of NC (V) level 4 English is the unbalanced duty load of lectures. English lectures are given extra duties other than their curriculum loads. Attending to formal curriculum tend to clash with extramural activities in which lectures are also assigned to undertake. Lecturers focusing on the extra curriculum activities are unable to cover the length and breadth of English even to students who find it difficult to attain a mere NC (V) level 4 achievement.

Students and lecturers also contribute towards the crisis in the college. They tend to absent themselves during lecture periods. Students bunk English classes and are of the hope that they will meet the requirements at the end. However, if they are regularly absent from classes, they even miss assessments that contribute to the continuous assessment mark. Lecturers, on the other hand, sometimes do not attend lectures. Undoubtedly, lecturers are drivers of the English curriculum; their absence in class largely contributes to loss of teaching time. Consequently, untaught content which is examined by these lecturers adversely impact on the performance of students. Continuous absence of students and lecturers during the English lessons implies ignorance towards TVET curriculum goals. Students who hardly attend these classes could not acquire communication skills as Madileng (2022) refers English as an instrument of communication and language of production in South Africa. Socio-economic status of both lecturers and students also play a role in the poor achievement of English. Some lecturers are not financially affluent and this creates a burden to regularly report to work. Moreover, the poor financial background of students and inaccessibility of NSFAS make it hard for them to travel to the college or buy something to dress or eat. Consequently, those learners struggle to attend classes or cope with the socio-economic status of other students, especially girl students. The college also lacks sufficient resources such as tablets for students. These kinds of factors deter the efforts put by students in preparing themselves to acquire skills in changing their socio-economic backgrounds. Robert (2022) asserts that vocational skills are important to fight poverty, economic recovery and unemployment.

Another contributing factor towards the poor achievement is code-switching. Students prefer to use their mother tongue than English as a second language. Lecturers go an extra-mile teaching in either Sepedi or Venda because the college also admits students who have just passed Grade 9. These students are not that competent to communicate in English thus lecturers accommodate them in their mother language. Even though it cannot achieve the purpose of acquainting students with English proficiency, lecturers continue with code-switching and this seem fruitless as students are tested in English. The findings also reveal that there is lack of management support towards English activities such as debates. Students are believed to be motivated if their English activities are supported by the management. They would feel the importance of improving their English proficiency and will be able to connect with various companies worldwide in terms of job opportunities. Suhaili and Mohamad (2022) affirm that local and international employers place strong communication skills at the top of their priority

list, and this is the first thing they search for in every new employee interested in working for their businesses.

Some students have a negative attitude towards English. They prefer to attend only other core subjects such as Engineering other than the language. English lecturers find it more challenging to achieve outcomes in the subject if students have an untoward attitude on the subject. Some students are influenced by their peers not to value the subject. Sometimes a student who performs better would influence other peers not to attend classes and a number of students end up not achieving to the required standards. It is also important to note that some lecturers display favouritism to other students among the whole group. This form of inequality demotivates other students to perform at their ultimate best. Another factor is laziness of students towards English activities. Some students are unwilling to do the oral activities arranged by the lecturers because they are lazy to prepare. They just want to listen to the lecturer, but they cannot showcase their communication abilities in the presence of their colleagues. Late coming also deter the efforts of students to do better in the language. Some students stay off-campus and they walk long distances before reaching the college. As a result of financial strains, they cannot board taxis. Hence, they normally arrive late for class. If the English period is the first, then they happen to miss some part of the lesson.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that students, lecturers, and the college are responsible for the low academic performance of NC (V) English level 4 students. Factors that contribute to the low performance include lack of quality lectures, inability to manage lecture times, unbalanced workload of lecturers, absenteeism of both lectures and students in lecture rooms, socio-economic status of students and lack of resources. Other factors are code switching, lack of management support, attitude towards the language, peer pressure, favouritism, lack of motivation and laziness. It is evident that some of the factors are caused by the students and lectures themselves. However, some emerge from where students live (family backgrounds), and from the college. It is also established that most of the factors are coiled with students' behavioural patterns. Students have a negative attitude towards the subject. Consequently, outcomes cannot be adequately achieved if students' minds are influenced by attitudes, peer pressure and ignorance.

This study therefore finds it crucial for the DHET and the college to strengthen its management practices and policies on lecturers and students to deal with the factors that contribute to low academic achievement of NC(V) level 4 English. The recommended measures include the training of level 4 English lectures in the existing database and recruit qualified English lecturers. The revisiting of the duty load of lecturers may motivate lectures to stick to their subjects hence reduced workload. The reviewing of the funding policy by NSFAS to deal with lack of financial support may also address the students' financial problems. Moreover, the college should intensify its policies on class attendance for both lecturers and students. The college should also encourage English lecturers to do away with code-switching during the English lessons. English activities, awareness programmes and provision of incentives to academically deserving students should be exercised to support demotivated students. However, there remains a grey area in literature about explicit strategies that colleges should adopt in improving the achievement of NC(V) English level 4. Thus, there is a need to investigate the strategies so that colleges realise the increased number of students attaining NC(V) English level 4.

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