

Scaffolding Creative Writing under Constraints: Teacher Cognition, Pedagogical Practice and Implications for Instructional Leadership

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This empirical study investigates creative writing instruction in Lesotho secondary schools, focusing on the use of scaffolding under resource constraints. While scaffolding is widely recognised as an effective strategy, teachers often face challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, and uneven learner abilities, which hinder its implementation. Guided by Borg's theory of language teacher cognition, the study explores how teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences shape their practices. A qualitative design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with four English teachers. Findings reveal that although teachers value scaffolding in creative writing, systemic pressures and learner-related issues lead them to rely on teacher-led instruction, creating a misalignment between pedagogical intentions and classroom realities. The study highlights the need to connect teacher cognition with practical strategies that account for contextual constraints. It further suggests that strengthening creative-writing instruction requires attention not only to teachers' pedagogical knowledge and beliefs but also to the instructional conditions within which these are enacted, with implications for instructional leadership in resource-constrained schools.

Key words: *Scaffolding, creative writing techniques, teacher cognition, instructional leadership*

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Introduction

Creative writing is one crucial skill students must be taught in the English classroom to develop their imagination and creativity. Creative writing strengthens students' creative and critical thinking skills, thus helping them approach real-life situations creatively, while also allowing students to learn how to learn, show initiative, and engage in activity with their full intellectual, physical, volitional, and affective potential (Barton, et al., 2024; Wu & Wang, 2024). While creative writing is an integral part of learning, assessment, and reporting, global evidence suggests that such writing is often stifled in favour of quick, on-demand writing, which is typically found in high-stakes assessment practices (Gibson & Ewing, 2020). Other challenges experienced in writing classrooms include limited resources, time constraints, and heavy workloads (Jansen & Ngema, 2024; Mata & Gavrilute, 2025).

For creative writing to be effective in the English classroom, both teachers and students should work together to achieve their shared goal. Several strategies are used by English teachers in teaching creative writing, including scaffolding. Scaffolded instruction is based on constructivism and the zone of proximal development theory, which holds that teachers or other adults with strong professional expertise should participate in learning activities with students and provide external support to help them complete tasks. Scaffolding is a crucial strategy in effective teaching and allows teachers to use various forms of instruction. Research in EFL/ESL contexts highlights the effectiveness of scaffolding instruction and emphasises students' initiative in mastering writing knowledge and skills, significantly improving their ability to construct knowledge and write independently (Wu & Wang, 2024). Additionally, scaffolding improves students' writing quality, motivation, collaboration, and engagement (Popoola & Osikomaiye, 2021; Chairinkam & Yawiloeng, 2024; Jumaniazova, 2025). However, critics point out that in large classroom settings with resource constraints, scaffolding often tends to be teacher-centred and complex to sustain (Halimi et al., 2020; Kusuma, 2022), with other issues including over-reliance, often leading to failure to generate independent writing (Taub et al., 2023; Basuki et al., 2024). Studies conducted in the Lesotho context echo similar challenges. Morakabi (2024) discovered that teachers' practices remain teacher-centred because of structural constraints such as low learner proficiency and resource limitations, despite teachers being aware of learner-centred

approaches, which scaffolding forms a part of, creating a disconnect between curriculum expectations and classroom practices. Similarly, Ekanjume-Ilongo (2015) reported systemic constraints, such as large class sizes and poor preparation among students at the National University of Lesotho. Both studies highlight the systemic challenges that hinder the effective implementation of scaffolding in Lesotho schools. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by examining the alignment or misalignment between English teachers' beliefs about scaffolding in creative writing classrooms and their classroom practices, with highlighted constraints. While the above studies highlight the different scaffolding strategies used in the teaching of creative writing, little has been done to examine the scaffolding strategies teachers use under resource constraints in their contexts. This study, therefore, is unique in that it used Borg's theory of teacher cognition as a framework for qualitative inquiry to highlight the practical scaffolding strategies teachers use in their resource-constrained classrooms to teach creative writing skills. The aim of this study is to investigate creative writing instruction in Lesotho secondary schools, focusing on the role of scaffolding under resource constraints. The paper is arranged as follows: theoretical framework, methodology, findings, and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Borg's (2003) theory of language teacher cognition, which emphasizes the interplay between teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences in shaping classroom practices. This theory was later expanded in *Teacher Cognition and Language Education* (2015), which emphasized that teachers' mental lives (which comprise of what they know, believe, and think) interact dynamically with classroom practices, institutional contexts, and professional development (Borg, 2018). Borg's theory argues that teachers' cognition is central to shaping their classroom decision-making and the enactment of curricular mandates.

Drawing on teacher cognition theory, this study examines the misalignment between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices in Lesotho's secondary schools. This framework allows exploration of how their knowledge of scaffolding strategies is incorporated into resource-constrained settings. The theory is relevant to this study because it offers a lens for understanding the disparities between English teachers' beliefs and practices and their impact on students' creative writing skills.

Instructional Leadership as an Interpretive Lens

The main theoretical framework for this study is Borg's theory of language teacher cognition, but instructional leadership is added as an interpretive lens to explore the context in which language teachers implement their pedagogical beliefs. Instructional leadership is generally about developing and sustaining conditions that support effective teaching and learning, such as a focus on instructional priorities, the organisation of instructional programmes, and the creation of environments conducive to effective classroom practice (Southworth, 2002). This is especially important for the present study, as teachers' accounts show that the implementation of scaffolding is influenced by more than just pedagogical knowledge and beliefs; it is also shaped by contextual factors such as resources, class size, time allocation, workload, and examination demands. Instructional leadership does not mean that leadership practices were directly studied in this research. Instead, it offers a lens to view the implications of teachers' experiences. The teachers' descriptions of resource limitations, multiple instructional demands, and challenges in maintaining a learner-centred approach suggest that there are broader organisational and instructional issues that could be addressed at the instructional leadership level. Instructional leadership, in this sense, is an extension of the concept of teacher cognition, in that teachers' pedagogical decisions are made in institutional settings that can facilitate or hinder instructional practice.

Borg's theory, therefore, helps to understand the relationship between teachers' cognition and classroom practice, and the perspective of instructional leadership helps to understand how the instructional conditions may facilitate or hinder the implementation of the teachers' pedagogical intentions. This complementary positioning allows the study to maintain its core focus on teachers' experiences and to elicit implications for the leadership of teaching and learning in resource-constrained settings.

Methodology

An Interpretivist paradigm was used in this study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), and Lim (2024), Interpretivism focuses on emphasis on socially constructed realities through exploring subjective meanings, experiences, and perspectives. This paradigm was chosen because this study seeks to understand participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and decision-making processes with regard to strategies used in their resource-constrained settings, and interpretivism is concerned with the exploration of socially constructed meaning through qualitative methods, allowing for the capturing of teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices. This study used a qualitative research approach through multiple case study design where semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations were used in the collection of data. Creswell (2023) defines multiple case study design as exploring several bounded cases for similarities and differences in themes, as opposed to a single case, thereby enhancing credibility and legitimacy. A qualitative approach was suitable for this study because the researcher sought to understand the participants' beliefs and practices regarding scaffolding technique in the teaching of writing skill in resource-constrained settings. Four English teachers from four schools were purposefully selected for information rich data as they were relevant sources for such. The participants answered the following research questions: How do English teachers' beliefs influence their use of scaffolding strategies in creative writing instruction under resource-

constrained conditions in Lesotho secondary schools? What systemic pressures shape the alignment or misalignment between teachers' pedagogical intentions and their actual classroom practices in creative writing instruction in Lesotho secondary schools? The participants were met and observed once while teaching creative writing; they were then interviewed after the classroom observations. The classroom observations lasted for 40 minutes because they were single lessons, while the interviews took 50 minutes for each participant. Data collection took a month as each teacher was interviewed and observed in one week.

The study adhered to ethical principles, including informed consent, anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, and participants' right to withdraw (Creswell, 2018). Data collection employed semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, which were analysed using a multiple case study design that emphasises replication and cross-case synthesis (Creswell, 2023). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure authenticity, followed by iterative familiarisation and inductive thematic coding to identify recurring patterns. Categories were refined into broader themes that captured teachers' beliefs and pedagogical decision-making regarding the use of scaffolding strategies in resource-constrained settings. Cross-case analysis further illuminated both commonalities and divergences, enhancing the robustness of findings. This rigorous process, aligned with Kim's (2024) emphasis on contextualised qualitative inquiry, ensured that the results credibly reflected teachers' lived experiences while accounting for systemic constraints shaping classroom practices.

Findings and Discussion

English Teachers' Beliefs and Scaffolding Practices in Lesotho Secondary Schools

Scaffolding Techniques

The teachers believe in breaking down complex tasks into manageable components to help students understand. They believe that teaching creative writing by building one paragraph at a time helps students understand and learn more quickly than overwhelming them with the whole composition at once. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the *Zone of Proximal Development* provides a foundational framework, highlighting that effective teaching and learning involve structuring classroom instruction to enable students to progress from what they can do independently to what they can achieve with guidance from more knowledgeable others. Ognase (2026) contributes to the evidence for scaffolding's effectiveness in enhancing writing skills. Similarly, Sidky (2019) points out that teachers should use collaborative learning, guided instruction, and supportive teaching to improve students' writing proficiency. 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."* Teacher C highlighted, *"I usually pair listening and reading with writing such that I give them an extract to read aloud in class, then ask questions from the passage. The next step involves asking them to identify literary devices from the passage that can be used when writing a composition, followed by instructing them to write a composition step by step and employ the devices learned from the passage read in class."* On the same issue, Teacher D responded, *"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 to construct even a mere sentence... taking the composition paragraph by paragraph works better."* This belief by the participants translates into a structured, step-by-step approach that makes complex tasks manageable. The above practices align with research by Chairinkam & Yawiloeng (2024), which indicates that scaffolding strategies enhance EFL students' writing development in Thailand. In the same light, Jumaniyazova (2025) highlights that scaffolding significantly improves writing quality, student motivation and engagement. However, Singh et al. (2020) state that students' abilities differ, so a teacher who does not vary scaffolding techniques to accommodate all students in the teaching and learning is likely to have inconsistency in the learning outcomes. Scaffolding may also lead to overreliance, thereby stifling students' autonomy and critical thinking (Basuki et al., 2024). These findings align directly with Borg's theory of teacher cognition, showing that teachers' beliefs about scaffolding strongly shape their instructional choices, even in resource-constrained contexts. This study argues that while such beliefs promote structured, supportive learning, systemic challenges often create a misalignment between teachers' intentions and their actual classroom practices. The following section discusses modelling and collaborative scaffolding.

Modelling and Collaborative Scaffolding

The teachers believe that creativity comes from exposure; hence, they use sample essays, photocopies from textbooks, and their own-created essays to teach creative writing. Again, group work and peer review are used to help learners learn from each other, though the teachers acknowledge challenges with uneven participation. They believe that shared responsibility yields positive results. While this is their belief, classroom observations revealed a misalignment between beliefs and practices, with uneven participation and student passivity that often constrained these efforts, highlighting the tension between teacher beliefs and classroom realities. These findings raise implications for instructional leadership. Instructional leadership is associated with creating conditions in which teachers can develop and sustain pedagogical practices that promote learner participation and autonomy. Zhou (2021) and Lopez et al. (2026) point out that using sample texts helps learners improve their writing by comparing their own work to the

given samples, highlighting that modelling helps students understand writing objectives, structure, and processes, leading to measurable gains in composition quality. Equally important is a study by Zheng et al. (2026), which purports that collaborative writing activities improve student writing performance, peer interaction quality, and communicative competence. Taken together, both the teachers' beliefs and practices and literature highlight that breaking complex tasks into smaller components, modelling, and collaborative learning enhance the teaching and learning of creative writing. During the interview session, Teacher A highlighted, *"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... My students work together on a given task and in that group, it is learners of different capabilities so that they help one another, and we expect the slow learners to be the ones most engaged in the writing process and to take responsibility to keep busy..."* Teacher B pointed out that, *"Because there are only a few copies of the textbooks, I mostly rely on downloaded material from the internet. To ensure learner access and facilitate discussion, I then make copies for my class so that they discuss something which they also see... I use comprehension passages for active reading, sometimes in groups, other times individually, followed by question-and-answer sessions to check their understanding."* Sharing the other teachers' sentiments, Teacher C said, *"I usually make copies for students to share in groups, with each group receiving both compositions. Then leading the discussion and commenting on the essays to help students see the difference and identify elements of a good narrative."* Teacher D highlighted, *"Lecturing works for my class because they are weak students and need to be told what they need to know. I thereafter put them in groups to work on, say, an introduction, or just one paragraph to help one another, then we present our work to discuss it together and correct what should be corrected."* The groups mentioned by the teachers were observed during classroom observations and many of the students were passive thereby making the given activity almost futile as the teacher ended up taking over through lecturing methods, highlighting a gap between beliefs and practices. The information above confirms research by Storch (2023) and Gadd & Parr (2025) that teachers should be careful with the structuring of activities to engage students, such as peer review and collaborative learning, to avoid passivity and disengagement from students' side. While collaborative learning is widely promoted, Kirschner, Sweller & Clark (2021) caution that when peer collaboration lacks proper teacher guidance, it may fail, particularly for students without foundational knowledge therefore, leading to disengagement and uneven participation. Jointly, these contrasting views demonstrate that the effectiveness of collaborative learning lies not in the practice itself, but in its appropriate structuring and sustained facilitation, transforming peer activities from passive exercises into meaningful engagement.

The teachers used peer review and group work as a way to enhance collaborative learning in the teaching of creative writing skills through student-centered approaches though they faced some challenges. From the stated findings, this study argues that teachers' beliefs in modeling and collaborative scaffolding strongly shape their instructional choices, but classroom realities often constrain their enactment. The findings suggest that while these approaches can enhance creative writing through exposure, peer support, and structured guidance, their effectiveness ultimately depends on careful structuring and sustained teacher facilitation to overcome challenges of passivity, uneven participation, and resource limitations.

Systemic Pressures Shaping Alignment or Misalignment between Teachers' Pedagogical Intentions and their Actual Classroom Practices in Creative Writing Instruction in Lesotho secondary schools

Limited Resources

While teachers' pedagogical intentions encourage scaffolding and active student engagement, systemic pressures often create a misalignment between their beliefs and classroom practices. Limited resources were highlighted as one of the issues hindering proper scaffolded learning. A study conducted by Bethela & Udaya (2026) found that without materials such as storybooks or worksheets in creative writing classrooms, scaffolding became difficult and teacher-centred, limiting learner autonomy. Chonge and Egesa (2026) also conducted a study in Kenya and found that inadequate storybooks, restricted digital access, and limited supervision constrained the effectiveness of creative writing instruction, and that students without structured reading material performed poorly in creative writing. Similar sentiments were shared in America by Hurtado Llomitoa (2026), who discovered that a lack of resources, such as textbooks, leads teachers to rely on rote, lecture-based methods of teaching. In the interview with Teacher A, he said, *"Books are very important because they are specifically prescribed to teach students what is in the curriculum, and online material also gives views from several individuals as to how they treat a certain aspect of creative writing, so a teacher can have varied ways to address different topics, but our school does not have enough resources... It's usually not easy to find such aids as our school struggles, but 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 B said, *"I rely on materials from the internet, and this requires me to use my own money for surfing the internet as the school does not provide any support for this. This lack of support for digital resources places a direct financial strain on me as a teacher, but for the sake of my students, I have no other choice but to use my own money."* On the same point, Teacher C mentioned, *"When the school has enough photocopying ink and paper, I make copies for my class to paste in their note-books as part of the notes. However, this is seldom done as this would require a lot of paper as the classes are very big, highlighting a pervasive challenge related to large class sizes and limited resources."* Teacher D highlighted, *"We sometimes photocopy some material for students, say, for example, we are dealing with an*

argumentative composition, because it is usually difficult for them as their grammar is already poor, bringing samples from books for them to see helps a lot..." The results show that without resources such as textbooks and workbooks, it becomes a challenge to teach creative writing to teachers' already struggling groups of students; hence, they resort to photocopying for students and rely on traditional lecturing methods. This way, scaffolding becomes a problem because most lessons are delivered through teacher-centred approaches that deny students autonomy. These obstacles are echoed in studies conducted by Gqontshi (2019), Hurtado Llomitoa (2026), and Rashid, Malik & Ghauri (2026).

The findings, from an instructional-leadership perspective, extend the meaning of resource constraints beyond their tangible consequences. From the teachers' accounts, it can be seen that the implementation of scaffolding is influenced not only by teachers' pedagogical knowledge and beliefs but also by the pedagogical conditions in which these beliefs are put into practice. The need for teachers to seek out resources, fund Internet access, and develop their own teaching materials suggests that much of the responsibility for maintaining good teaching practices may lie with individual teachers. The findings of the present study have implications for the ongoing inquiry into how instructional leadership enables the provision, coordination, and equitable use of resources to support pedagogically responsive instruction, but are not empirical results from a direct study of school leaders' practices. It is important, then, to consider resource provision as less than an administrative issue and more as one of the conditions that enable or constrain the enactment of instruction.

In light of the above finding, it can be deduced that teachers know and understand scaffolding and its effectiveness in creative writing, but limited resources force them to adopt teacher-centred approaches that restrict learner autonomy. The findings suggest that scaffolding in resource-constrained schools is complicated: without textbooks, storybooks, or digital tools, teachers cannot break tasks into manageable steps or provide guided support, leading to passive participation. Overall, the study highlights that while teachers' pedagogical intentions align with best practices, systemic resource limitations undermine scaffolding, revealing the tension between belief and practice in creative writing instruction.

Heavy Workloads and Time Constraints

The teachers also complained of heavy workloads and time constraints, which they highlighted as hindering their intention to use varied scaffolding techniques and other learner-centred approaches, thereby contributing to poor performance by students in creative writing, as they would not have had enough exposure to and engagement with creative writing practice. According to Bakker & Demerouti (2024), when teachers are overworked, they experience burnout and fail to deliver content effectively. Zheng, Li & Chen (2025) add that systemic pressures hinder teachers' intentions to scaffold creative writing, including exam-oriented teaching and rigid time allocations for creative writing instruction. In an interview with Teacher A, he pointed out, *"Large size classes coupled with exam-oriented tests and time constraints deny us an opportunity to drill students as thoroughly as we would want, and this way, their creativity is stifled..."* Teacher B mentioned, *"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... Most of the learners 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 C said, *"Frequent marking plays a huge role in the teaching and learning process, but it's sad that I do not frequently mark my students because it is a large class. So we would simply discuss openly in class after they have written something."* Similarly, Teacher D said, *"We do not have enough time to apply learners' grammar skills in composition writing because we have to touch on other aspects of the subject too, because the expectation is that we should have covered a certain portion of the syllabus by the end of each quarter in preparation for quarterly exams."*

The above finding suggests that when teachers are overworked and have limited time to teach creative writing, it becomes challenging to ensure students grasp the material as expected. However, studies conducted by Biskjaer et al. (2019) and Li (2025) highlight that time constraints and heavy workloads help teachers achieve conciseness and develop routines that assist students with creative writing while also adhering to the allocated time. The findings show that teachers' beliefs and intentions to scaffold creative writing are constrained by systemic pressures, including heavy workloads, large class sizes, and exam-oriented teaching, thereby creating a gap between cognition and practice. This relates to Borg's theory of teacher cognition as teachers' beliefs and decisions are guided by structural constraints. The study proposes that while these constraints hinder individualised scaffolding, they can also push teachers to develop concise routines that structure creative writing within limited timeframes.

The above findings regarding workload and time constraints also have implications for Instructional Leadership. Teachers indicate that the requirements for allocating teaching time, syllabus coverage, and examination-related demands influence their pedagogical decisions. Preferring sustained, scaffolded, and learner-centred approaches, teachers may be tempted to teach in a compressed way to get the job done. This finding, viewed from an instructional-leadership standpoint, underscores the significance of instructional priorities being communicated, coordinated, and supported in schools. The study does not offer insight into how school leaders decide on such priorities, but the results suggest that school instructional leadership must focus on the conditions that shape teachers' expectations for

implementing pedagogical practices, especially when competing demands for curriculum coverage and assessment conflict with opportunities for extended learning.

Conclusion

In summation, the study investigates creative writing instruction in Lesotho secondary schools, focusing on the role of scaffolding under resource constraints. Guided by Borg's theory of teacher cognition, this research explores how teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences shape their classroom practices. Using a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews and classroom observations of four English teachers, the findings reveal that while teachers value scaffolding, systemic pressures such as large class sizes, limited resources, and uneven learner abilities often force reliance on teacher-centred approaches. This creates incongruences between pedagogical intentions and classroom realities.

The study highlights that teachers believe in breaking down tasks, modelling, and collaborative scaffolding, but classroom observations revealed challenges such as passivity and uneven participation. Systemic issues, including a lack of textbooks, digital tools, heavy workloads, and exam-oriented teaching, further hinder effective scaffolding. In the final analysis, the study argues that linking teacher cognition to practical strategies that account for contextual constraints is essential to improving creative writing pedagogy in resource-constrained schools.

The findings have implications for instructional leadership as well. This study shows that teachers' pedagogical knowledge and willingness to scaffold are not necessarily realised in sustained learner-centred teaching in contexts where there is pressure from examinations, restricted time to teach, limited resources, and large classes. While instructional leadership itself was not specifically studied, the results of this study suggest that it is important to consider how leadership focuses on the environment in which instruction takes place. The task of supporting teachers' implementation of effective creative-writing pedagogy is more than just promoting specific classroom practices, however, as it also involves establishing teaching conditions in which these practices are viable. Instructional leadership can therefore be a key pathway for linking teachers' teaching intentions with the conditions of the organisation and instruction that make them happen.

Declarations: 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.

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