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Language Teachers' conceptions of literacy in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to identify secondary school teachers' conceptions of literacy and how they influenced their classroom practice. The study was conducted in Zimbabwean secondary schools among students and teachers whose home language was Shona. Shona was taught as a school subject and English was the medium of instruction. The data was collected through a survey (N=811), classroom observations, and interviews with teachers. The majority of the teachers had narrow conceptions of literacy that were primarily oriented towards recall of information, literal meaning, and mechanical skills. The primary teaching goal was to prepare students for national examinations. The main policy implication of the study is that the Ministry of Education should come up with a national literacy policy that addresses the shortcomings of the language curriculum

Conceptions of Literacy—Definitions and Meaning

Michaels and O'Connor (1990) define literacy as the ability to reason and problem-solve in multiple discourses with print. Different discourses require very different ways of "reading between the lines." Literacy then is about "ways of being in the world and ways of making meaning with and around text" (Michaels and O'Connor 1990:11). Lockeed and Verspoor (1991) and Cook-Gumperz (1986) conceptualize literacy as a cognitive tool for learning new information, ideas, attitudes, and values. They view literacy is one of the basic components of schooling on which further learning and cognitive growth depend.

Freire (1970, 1985), MacLaren (1988), and Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) are advocates for a form of critical literacy that interrogates the role of dominant interests in the generation of knowledge. McLaren (1988:218), for instance asserts that:

all texts, written, spoken, or otherwise represented, constitute ideological weapons capable of enabling certain groups to solidify their power through acts of linguistic hegemony.

According to Freire, the major weakness of dominant approaches to literacy is that they ignore the learner's creative capacity and encourage a passive acceptance of the status quo. Critical literacy always implies a political reading of the world, accompanied by a transformation of the oppressive relations which constitute that world. Thus critical literacy is seen as a means of liberating the creative capacity of the students as well as a means of transforming their world outlook. Giroux's (1997:218) proposal for a critical pedagogy is consistent with this point of view:

...the language of critical pedagogy needs to construct schools as democratic public spheres. In part, this means that educators need to develop a critical pedagogy in which the knowledge, habits, and skills of critical rather than simply good citizenship are taught and practiced. This means providing students with the opportunity to develop the critical capacity to challenge and transform existing social and political forms, rather than simply adapt to them.

Literacy involves the ability to engage in reading, writing, reflecting, dialoguing, critiquing, comprehending and interpreting, all leading to transforming one's understanding. Reading should involve questioning the text: Who is speaking? Who listens? What is written? What is avoided? Which ideas are privileged? Writing is a creative activity involving self-expression, discovery and critical thinking and is influenced by considerations of the purposes for writing, the intended audience. It is a process of selecting, generating, developing and arranging ideas in ways which suit the form, purpose and audience selected (Michigan Board of Education, 1985; Englert and Raphael, 1989). It involves creating meaning between the writer, his/her sense of the intended audience (reader), his/her knowledge of the subject matter of the text he/she is writing, as well as the purpose for which he/she is writing.

Context of the study

In Zimbabwe, the curriculum is centrally directed through the Ministry of Education. There are three official languages, English, Shona, and Ndebele. The Education Act of 1987 provides the legal framework for language teaching and use. The provisions of the Act for the official languages are as follows:

1. The three main languages of Zimbabwe, namely Shona, Ndebele and English shall be taught in all primary schools from the first grade as follows:

- a. Shona and English in all areas where the mother tongue of the majority or the residence is Shona or*
- b. Ndebele and English in all areas where the mother tongue of the majority or the residence is Ndebele.*

2. Prior to the fourth grade, either Shona or Ndebele may be used as the medium of instruction depending upon which language is more commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils.

3. From the fourth grade, English shall be the medium of instruction provided that Shona or Ndebele shall be taught as subjects on an equal time allocation as the English language (Government of Zimbabwe, 1987).

The study focused on language practice in secondary schools where the native language of the students was Shona. English was the language of instruction and Shona was taught as a school subject. The data on language use in secondary schools is based on data collected through a survey of Shona language teachers. (n=811). Data was also gathered through interviews and classroom observations. The objective of the interviews was to provide an opportunity to probe the issues raised by the questionnaire data and to afford the respondents opportunities to articulate their understandings, beliefs, views, and opinions about literacy issues. Classroom observation was conducted with the aim of learning how the themes investigated were enacted and operationalized in classrooms. Sixteen teachers were observed teaching, each for a total of 3 to 4 lessons.

Findings from the study

Four themes, drawn from the survey, interviews, and classroom observations have been used to organize the analysis of data and presentation of findings. The four themes are:

1. Perspectives of sources language of instruction, curricular goals and content.
1. The role of public examinations in shaping curriculum goals.
2. Conceptions of reading comprehension.
3. Conceptions about writing/composition

The following discussion is arranged around the four themes.

Theme 1: Teachers' perspectives of sources language of instruction, curricular goals and content.

As previously noted, English is the language of instruction in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Shona, rather than English was the native language of both teachers and students in the schools surveyed. The dominance of English has been a matter of concern. This practice, which in line with official policy, adversely affects the ability of students to understand and communicate in the subject areas (Manamike, 2001; Government of Zimbabwe, 1999). It was for this, among other reasons, that the government appointed commission on education of 1999 proposed that steps should be taken to develop Shona and other native languages to a point where they would eventually replace English as the languages of instruction, replacing English (Government of Zimbabwe, 1999). In view of these concerns, the views of language teachers about the respective roles of English and Shona in the curriculum were solicited.

The teachers were asked: "Is it possible to develop Shona so that it can replace English in communicating scientific concepts." The responses were 161 (20%) agreed, 546 (67.8%) disagreed, and 98 (12.2%) were not sure or not committed to one way or the other. Closely related to this was the statement: "All non-science subjects should be taught through the medium of Shona." The responses were 91 (11.4%) agreed; 645 (80.5%) disagreed, and 65 (8.1%) not sure. Another statement was: "For most students, Shona language captures the essence of their thinking and belief systems than English which is widely used in teaching school subjects." The responses were 509 (64.4%) agreed; 123 (15.6%) disagreed; and 158 (20%) not sure. Item 18 said, "When it comes to success in life, English is more important than Shona because it is a world language." Responses were 594 (74.4%) agreed; 131 (16.4%) disagreed and 73 (9.1%) not sure.

These statistics indicated that an overwhelming majority of the teachers did not believe that it was possible to develop Shona (spoken by over 75% of the population) to replace English in communicating scientific concepts. The problem of communicating scientific concepts was the commonest explanation given. Yet a suggestion that non-science subjects be taught through the medium of Shona was overwhelmingly rejected. At the same time the majority of these language teachers conceded that Shona language captured the essence of the students' thinking and belief systems rather than English which was widely used to teach school subjects. These views were expressed by Shona teachers who were expected to help develop the Shona language to the highest level.

The role of public examinations in shaping curriculum goals.

Public examinations are an important measure of educational achievement in Zimbabwe, both from the perspectives of official educational decision makers and school personnel. The students' pass rate in public examinations has continued to be used as a benchmark of educational quality.

Teachers responded to the statement: "The teacher's primary aim should be to give students good education rather than to make them pass final examinations." Responses were 457 (57.1%) agreed; 198 (24.8%) disagreed; and 145 (18.1%) not sure. The second statement on this theme of examinations was: "Writing activities for students should be mostly modeled on how they will be tested in final examinations." The responses were 540 (67.8%) agreed; 129 (16.2%) disagreed and 128 (16.1%) not sure.

The third statement on this theme was: "Students' assignments should be derived from past public examinations or be closely modeled on those exams as a way of preparing students for their finals." The responses were as follows: 548 (68.3%) agreed; 127 (15.8%) disagreed; and 127 (15.8%) were not sure. It thus appears that the examination paradigm greatly influenced what students experience in the course of their schooling as well as how teachers conceptualize their roles and functions in their interactions with students and the content of their teaching.

A sub-set of 41 teachers were interviewed and asked to comment on what influence, if any, examinations had on their teaching. Most of the teachers responded very elaborately and in some cases quite passionately. Only 8 (19.5%) teachers asserted that examinations had a positive influence on their work. The majority, 32 (78%), argued that examinations had a negative influence on their work. They said examinations compelled them to rely on past exam questions as a way of preparing students to do well in their final exams. They were forced to concentrate on those aspects which regularly appeared in examination questions at the expense of other equally important areas which were not examined, like oral skills, attitudes, and character development. One teacher said about 60% of his teaching came from past examination question papers. These teachers used terms such as "restrictive," "drilling," to capture some of the negative influences of examinations on their instruction. Here are two excerpts from the interview transcripts about teachers' views on the influence of examinations on their teaching:

I think they (exams) influence teachers a lot because the main goal is to make students pass the exam. Mostly you make yourself teach what is in line with the exam to the extent that many teachers use the past examination papers. If you want to be very creative and you want to take students out for drama, people will think that you just want to bask in the sun, or if you are in class they think you are making noise. So you just confine yourself to making the kids pass the examination.

Another teacher had this to say about the same issue:

We go back to the administration. When they announce the examination results they will say so many passed, and so many failed. In a way the whole blame goes to the teacher. The teacher is forced to be examination oriented. The teacher is there to teach for examinations, and in that way it creates problems because if you teach for the exam there is no way you can pay attention to everything. Most teachers concentrate on examination by using past exam papers. That is, if you are teaching on verbs you have to search through past examination papers and see how they have been setting the examination on verbs for the last five years.

Classroom observations were consistent with data collected through interviews and questionnaires discussed in the preceding sections of this chapter. The reading comprehension lessons that were observed were taught in a manner greatly influenced by the testing paradigm. There were few, if any, instances when students were led to critique, evaluate, and reflect critically on the content of the reading passage. The main objective on the part of the teachers appeared to make students read and then be able to recall factual details of the passage as demonstrated by their ability to answer correctly the questions set by the textbook writer.

In summary, the majority of the teachers believed that exams had many negative influences on their work – they forced them to teach to the test and ignore non testable aspects of knowledge. The teachers modeled their literacy instruction on how students were tested in national examinations.

Theme 3: Conceptions of reading comprehension.

Teachers were surveyed on their conceptions of the role of interpretation in reading. The statement presented to teachers was: "Reading is mostly a matter of interpreting the text than getting the correct answer." Responses were 425 (53.4%) agreed; 205 (25.8%) disagreed; and 166 (20.9%) not sure. These statistics show that a good majority believed that interpretation of the was an integral part of reading. However, 25.8% of the respondents disagreed with the claim that reading is mostly a matter of interpreting the text than getting the correct answer. Presumably these teachers believed that reading was solely about extracting literal meanings for text. Equally significant are the 20.9% of the respondents who were not sure, suggesting a lack of clarity on the issue. In follow-up interviews, teachers were asked, "What are the objectives for teaching reading skills?" Here are a few examples of interactions between the researcher and teachers:

Researcher: What are the major objectives for teaching reading in Shona?

Teacher: Basically it's to teach them to read fluently. Most of our boys here have problems in reading Shona. They are very slow, they stammer here and there, so we encourage them to read fluently and to read and understand. Comprehensive reading, not just going through words without understanding.

Researcher: Can you elaborate on comprehensive reading? What does it involve?

Teacher: Comprehensive reading is reading and understanding.

Researcher: What kind of understanding are you talking about?

Teacher: Reading, answering questions, understanding and being able to relate.

Another Shona teacher's response to the question on her objectives for teaching reading was "It helps the children to enjoy more books in life and also the students would be able to read Bibles and so on."

Teachers were probed to explain what they understood by the term 'reading.' Many of the respondents showed some surprise at being asked this question, and the interviewer had to explain that he wanted to understand what principles guided them in their instruction of reading, and the response might include their perceptions of students they would call good readers, average readers, poor readers and non readers. The idea of asking language teachers for their personal operational definitions arose from a conviction that teacher definitions would be a good indicator of how they conceptualized reading. Jones (1984) argues that both teachers and learners hold particular and identifiable theoretical orientations about reading which in turn significantly affect expectancies, goals, behavior and outcomes at all levels of the reading process. He further argues that a teacher's overall concept of reading strongly influences his/her method of diagnosing reading difficulties and of teaching reading. Farr and Rosser (1979) maintain that "as you are guided toward your own definition of the reading process you will arrive at your own decisions about what to teach and how to teach it." (p 14.) This question, together with a similar question on writing, turned out to be the hardest for the interviewees. Here is an example of a definition which fall into this category.

Reading in most cases is when you have a passage you go over it and try to find out what it is all about. You want to understand what is being said in the passage. That is how I define reading.

A more comprehensive definition was obtained from six of the teachers interviewed. The following are examples:

I suppose it's understanding a given sentence or a section of a reading passage. It's not only understanding, but getting the meaning of words in the sentence. The student must be able to relate it to others; that means going back and reflecting upon what the person has read. So it's not just words on paper as

such, it's bringing those words to life. The ability to imagine and create a reflection on what he has read.

Another teacher said:

I think reading is to be able to understand and also after reading one must be able to come up with his own judgment about the passage. That means that the person has understood the passage.

On the whole, reading tended to be conceptualized narrowly, focusing on fluency, pronunciation, punctuation and the ability to recall literal information from print. Whatever other conceptions of reading teachers may have, these seem to be overshadowed by the examination paradigm. Classroom observation data indicated a largely unquestioned assumption that reading comprehension skills are acquired by learners through a process of practicing answering comprehension questions. There appeared to be an absence of a literacy teaching discourse which helps teachers to reflect on the meaning, goals and instructional strategies which can be used to promote reading skills beyond the need to prepare students for public examinations.

Theme 4: Conceptions about writing/composition

The last theme is about language teachers' conceptualization of the writing curriculum. Reading and writing are closely related cognitive activities which complement each other. They complement each other in the sense that writers write for an audience who are the readers. Successful writers, therefore have a conscious sense of their intended readers (audience). They endeavor to meet their readers' interests, capacities, and sense of purpose. Writers make assumptions about the interests, purposes for reading, abilities of the readers and the context in which what they write will be read.

The teachers were asked to respond to the statement: "Writing activities should focus more on the use of correct grammar, good expression and presentation of ideas rather than revealing the writer's thinking process." The responses were 407 (51.2%) agreed; 217 (27.3%) disagreed; and 171 (21.5%) were not sure. One would argue that the respondents put a premium on mechanical aspects of writing rather than on the creative aspects of it. In follow-up interviews, the teachers' views and opinions about the writing were probed. They were asked: "What are the objectives of the writing curriculum for the level you teach as you understand them?" The aim of the question was to get from each interviewee his/her own understanding of the goals of the writing curriculum based on his/her interpretation of various curricular sources (for example syllabi, textbooks, examinations), and his/her perception of students' needs in terms of writing skills.

Most of the teachers were content with stating only one objective. Altogether 17 (49%) of the 35 interviewees who were asked this question gave one objective for the writing curriculum. A total of only 10 (29%) gave two objectives. Here are some examples of the responses given by one teacher:

The objectives for teaching writing mainly are to prepare them (students) for examinations so that when they write the examinations they will not have

problems of punctuation, grammar mistakes or tenses. They will be able to write a good composition. I will be teaching them to construct good sentences. Good word division.

Another teacher responded in this way:

So that they (students) will be able to write letters, write books. Writing is putting the knowledge you have in mind on paper. I think all the work I give them teaches writing.

The teachers were also asked: "How is writing defined at this school? Is this your own view of what writing is or should be?" Of the interviewees who responded to this question only one teacher defined writing as a process of creating ideas or thoughts and organizing them for social interaction. Here is what the teacher said:

I would define writing as a process of creating meaning by committing your ideas on paper. It goes beyond merely giving someone e.g. a report; there is that element at a lower level, but at a higher level I would look at it as a creative process. A writer is really creative, putting together ideas. Piecing together, as it were, personal experience, personal reflection so as to create meaning. If you tie it with reading, again I would see also reading as a creative process, as an attempt to create meaning by interacting with the text.

The rest of the teachers said something like this: "I think it's putting what you are thinking on paper." or

Writing is about writing a composition, writing a comprehension or answering questions. To look at the question and think about it critically and organize the information and then write.

Still another one said, "Writing is putting ideas on a piece of paper and organizing them according to the purpose." Most of the definitions emphasized communication processes. What was not touched on is the development of personal voice by the writer as he/she reflects on life experiences. Many of the responses were very brief, usually one sentence responses.

Finally, on this theme, teachers were asked to describe how they typically instructed writing skills. The aim of the question was to learn how interviewees linked the objectives for writing they had talked about earlier on with their instructional strategies in a coherent manner. Twenty-eight teachers were asked this question through interviews. Here are some samples of the responses:

You cannot say now I am teaching writing but you just make sure every time you are teaching there must be a writing exercise. After every topic there should be a written exercise to show that the pupils have understood. In writing you can't use (not clear) like in talking; that is why writing has to be regular.

This response did not clearly articulate the purposes of writing instruction and was typical of other responses received. Another, slightly more expansive response given was:

I give them the basic of what is supposed to be in that type of a composition. I tell them how the introduction is written, then the main body of the composition, then the conclusion. I give them the skeleton of the composition. After that the pupils can ask me some questions on what they are not clear. Then after that I give them another topic to work on.

Nearly all the responses given by the teachers were of similar quality as those given above. The responses tended to concentrate on mechanical aspects of composing, especially the division of written texts into introduction, body, and conclusion. Classroom observation of lessons revealed that writing of essays and compositions was less frequent than answering comprehension questions. Of all the lessons observed among sixteen teachers, there was only one lesson where students engaged in creative writing. Most of those lessons were focused on giving students theoretical knowledge about how to organize a composition into three parts consisting of an introduction, body, and conclusion. Most of the skills emphasized in the lessons on writing observed were those emphasized in examinations so that one got the impression that writing was mainly important for examination purposes.

The overwhelming majority of the teachers interviewed defined writing in a manner which suggests that it is a process of communicating ideas and experiences through print. As a group, the interviewees mentioned four instructional activities they typically use to teach writing. These are 1) prewriting activities (such as understanding the topic, generating ideas); 2) directing students' attention to salient points, such as intended audience and purpose for writing; 3) focusing on organizational and mechanical aspects (for example paragraphing, spelling, punctuation); and 4) evaluating written work. It appeared that most of the interviewees were guided by the need to prepare students for public examinations. There was a great concern with correct grammar, expression and arrangement of ideas than the quality of the writer's thinking process.

Conclusions and Implications

Social constructivist perspectives of teaching and learning value multiple perspectives and put a premium on students' active engagement in their own learning through critical reflection, questioning, critiquing, and inquiring whatever is the subject matter. Throughout this process students make use of their own existing knowledge and experience to make sense of what is presented to them.

Data collected through interviews, questionnaires and classroom observation suggest that the teachers primarily conceptualized the goals of their literacy instruction through the lenses of public examinations. Examinations seem to have a strong pervasive influence on teachers to the extent of determining most of the activities they engage on in their instruction.

The majority of the teachers interviewed had a narrow range of reading objectives, mostly confined to the process of getting meaning from printed texts and to train students to overcome mechanical problems, such as pronunciation, fluency, and intonation. These objectives tend to make readers passive recipients of written texts. Classroom observation data confirmed teachers' preoccupation with a desire to train students to look for literal meaning and to pay attention to mechanical problems of reading. There was little evidence, if any, that the majority of the teachers considered

it necessary to lead students to reflect critically on the subject matter of what they were reading. Only a few teachers asked open ended questions after reading a literature text as a way of encouraging students to appreciate the development of the plot in the text.

The study did not find evidence of the existence of notions of literacy which, as McLaren (1988) argues, link language competency to the acquisition of public discourse in which empowered individuals are capable of critically engaging the social, political and ethical dimensions of everyday life. Rather, there was ample evidence that we need to take heed of Eisemon's (1988) warning that school acquired literacy does not necessarily promote problem solving skills if it is acquired in a teaching environment which is oriented towards preparing students to recall information for national examinations. As Alvermann and Moore (1991) and Winograd and Johnston (1987) argue, emphasis on literal information becomes the norm because the acquisition of facts seems to be easily accomplished and is more readily measured than critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

One major policy implication of this study relates to the need for the Ministry of Education and Culture to come up with a national literacy policy for both primary and secondary schools, and teacher education colleges as well. Such a policy statement should be based on research findings and should address issues relating to definitions, nature and processes of reading and writing as well as their instruction. This study has shown that there is an apparent lack of expert guidance to teachers and possibly to colleges of education in literacy issues. There is an apparent assumption that language teachers, either through their training, or practical knowledge of language instruction, have adequate literacy expertise for their instructional needs. Such an assumption seems to be unfounded.

One important implication of the findings of this study relates to public examinations at various stages of secondary education. The majority of the teachers acknowledged that examinations had a negative effect on their instruction, especially their tendency to impose some kind of limitations on what they focus. For instance, many teachers asserted that writing activities are given more attention than oral aspects of the language because examinations are set only on reading and writing. What seems to be even more serious are the limitations imposed on their conceptualization of reading and writing by the examination paradigm.

There is no doubt that examinations are an essential component of the education system, especially in their role as indicators of the quality of students' achievement, and in turn, the quality of the education students get. The advantages derived from a system of public examinations should be considered alongside their inherent limitations and possible negative influences. This study has provided data which show strong evidence that examinations are exerting great influence on how literacy teachers conceptualize literacy instructional goals and practices. Some of the influences have a limiting effect on teachers' conceptions of literacy, mainly making them focus on low level cognitive aspects of literacy which are easy to measure through examinations. It is necessary to review current examination practices and their influence on what goes on in the classrooms. Such a review should identify subtle negative influences of examinations as they are currently administered. There

is strong evidence that examinations, rather than curriculum guides or syllabi, drive the curriculum which students experience in their secondary school classes.

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