

Exploring Literacy Pedagogy in Kikaonde in Selected Grade One Classrooms in Solwezi District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Background: The primary literacy programme, a Zambian literacy programme, has been implemented in Solwezi, using Kikaonde as a medium of instruction for the past 10 years, yet literacy levels remain low.

Objectives: The objectives of the research were to investigate pedagogical knowledge that teachers possess when teaching literacy and understand the factors that influenced their selection of the teaching methods.

Method: The study used a case study design, employed the constructivism theory of learning and interpretivism paradigm, with a sample of 15 teachers from six schools.

Results: The results revealed that teachers possessed knowledge of several methodologies yet frequently failed to engage learners in active engagement. Their selection of techniques was anchored on their conviction in their efficacy and instruction received during continuous professional development meeting. The study suggests employing diverse teaching approaches (eclecticism) and discusses implications.

Keywords: Literacy, pedagogy, literacy methods, Solwezi District, Kikaonde language

INTRODUCTION

The medium of instruction in Zambia from grade one to university after independence was English. (Gordon, 2014; Kombe & Mwanza, 2014). According to Marten and Kula (2008), using English as the sole medium of instruction in school was designed to promote national unity in a multilingual nation. English-only instruction had significant drawbacks; thus, the government revised the language policy in 1977. After extensive deliberations, the 1977 education reforms still advocated the use of English as the medium of teaching while allowing the use of the seven official local languages namely Kikaonde, Ibibemba, Tonga, Nyanja, Silozi, Nyanja and Luvale (Banda & Mwanza, 2017; Kombe & Mwanza, 2014). The advice to use English as the only language of classroom instruction was made with full awareness of its drawbacks (Kombe & Mwanza, 2014). The 1996 and 2014 language policy revisions remained in effect until 2024. According to Banda and Mwanza (2017), the government changed the 2014 language of education policy to utilise one of the seven official Zambian languages from grade one to four and English from grade 5 to university.

Muyebaa (2009) records that English was questioned as the only language of education. This followed multiple studies showing poor English and local language performance among Zambian learners (Sampa & Halaoui, 2005; Williams, 1993). Recent RTI International and World Bank surveys suggest low reading levels (Brombacher et al., 2015; Filmer et al., 2018). The Ministry of Education initiated the Primary Reading Programme (PRP) and Primary Literacy Programme in 1999 and 2013, respectively, to enhance literacy levels in the country. The Primary Literacy Programme was introduced in 2013, but Phiri (2015) found that 65% of grade four learners had trouble writing words. The teaching of literacy in Zambia has also not been without challenges. Nkolola-Wakumel and Simwinda (2008) found that most Zambian languages lack technical and scientific words, making it difficult to create school materials in the native tongue. The attitude of Zambians towards their languages has also hampered mother tongue literacy education. Human resources in Zambian languages are few, hindering mother tongue literacy and inadequate preservice training among teachers. Against this background, there is little research on teachers' literacy teaching pedagogical knowledge in Kikaonde and instructional method choices, which this study investigated.

Problem statement

Zambia's Primary Literacy Programme has run for ten years. The national literacy framework guides early grade literacy instruction and language use from grade one to four (Ministry of Education & Education, 2013). Studies conducted during the literacy programme's implementation found low reading levels (Kabir, 2023). Kombe and Mwanza (2014) and Lukama (2016) identified inadequate college teacher training as one of the challenges to literacy development in Zambia. Teacher training involves the preparation of teachers in pedagogical knowledge and practices. The study examined literacy pedagogy in Solwezi District, Zambia, in grade one classes. The study asked: What is the teacher's pedagogical knowledge of literacy teaching methodologies in Kikaonde language in grade one classes in Solwezi district? Why do teachers choose literacy teaching approaches and strategies they use to teach literacy in Kikaonde?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher's pedagogical knowledge of teaching approaches in mother tongues

Matuga (2001) defines pedagogy from a wider perspective as the "art and science of teaching." Harris et al. (2009) refer pedagogical knowledge to knowledge of the learning and teaching process, practices, strategies, and methods used in a classroom where formal education takes place, as well as having information about learners with regards to their learning.

König et al. (2022) identifies three broad fields that make up pedagogical knowledge. These are knowledge of instructional processes, student learning, and assessment. Knowledge of instructional processes includes, among others, teaching methods and classroom management, while student learning has to do with individual students' dispositions and their learning processes (König et al., 2022).

There are several advantages offered by teachers who possess pedagogical knowledge in literacy. Barends (2022) mentions that teachers who have strong pedagogical knowledge can easily and effectively integrate theory and practice in literacy education. Furthermore, such teachers can design integrated learning experiences that can benefit learners by carefully utilising pedagogical choices such as reflection, learner support, service learning, and situated learning (Barends, 2022). Secondly, pedagogically literate teachers are better placed to make informed decisions in selecting suitable and appropriate teaching techniques and methods, which ultimately impact positively on the learning of a child (Koçoğlu et al., 2022). Additionally, teachers who continuously develop their pedagogical content knowledge over time through experiences become experts in literacy teaching (Kukner & Orr, 2015).

Studies on teachers' pedagogical knowledge and training in literacy have been conducted in Africa and Zambia. In Africa, Phajane (2012) examined the methods used by foundation phase teachers in the teaching of Setswana, the home language, to grade 1 learners in Bojanala District, South Africa using a case study design. The findings of the study revealed that all the four teachers used the phonics method, the traditional method and the sentence method on a limited scale implying that the teachers were not well equipped in literacy teaching methods. The researcher recommends the inclusion of suitable approaches and methods of teaching reading to beginners in the teacher training curriculum. This study, therefore, identified a gap in the pedagogical knowledge of teachers among foundation phase teachers in South Africa.

In Zambia, Chuunga (2013) conducted a study in Monze district, in which he investigated how teachers practiced the teaching of reading towards supporting learners with reading difficulties at the lower primary level using a case study design. The study revealed that teacher support rendered to these children included extra teaching outside the normal learning time, homework, and the display of learners work on walls for them to revise, even though there was little indication of planning for these activities on the part of teachers both in their planning books and lesson evaluations. The study further revealed that teachers used strategies such as direct-group-based teaching, small groups, question and answer, one-on-one teaching, paired reading, chorus reading, and group and individual task presentations. The study conducted by Chuunga differs with the present as it focused on grade 4 learners which the present study focused on grade one learners. Secondly, the study did not ascertain the pedagogical knowledge of teachers, which the present study seeks to address. While the support given to learners with reading difficulties is cardinal in literacy development, it can only be meaningful if teachers have pedagogical knowledge.

Nanchengwa (2016) investigated teaching techniques teachers in private schools in Mufulira District in Zambia, were using to teach literacy to grade one learners and factors considered when allocating time for the lessons. The findings revealed that the most preferred techniques used to teach literacy were phonics and the look and say methods. Furthermore, the study revealed that the factors considered when allocating time for the teaching of literacy were the objectives the teacher intended to achieve in a particular lesson. The study by Nanchengwa (2016) differs with the present study in several ways. Firstly, her study was investigating teaching techniques in private schools while the present study was exploring literacy pedagogy in public schools.

Sichula and Genis (2019) also conducted a study in Katete District in the eastern province of Zambia and sought to explore the pedagogical practices used in the non-formal literacy classes in two literacy programmes. One literacy programme was run by the government, while the other was run by a non-governmental organisation. The study also sought to ascertain the facilitators choices of certain teaching and learning methods. The study was qualitative in nature, employing a case study design. Findings from observations revealed that literacy classes were dominated by teacher-centred lecture methods. Furthermore, most of the teachers in the programme based their pedagogical decisions on their perceptions of the adult learners as illiterate and ignorant. The author contends that many learners would have benefited from learner-centred approaches. The present study is similar to the one conducted by Sichula and Genis in terms of methodology but differs in the type of learners and purpose.

Factors that influence teachers' choices of literacy instructional methods and strategies

There are several factors that influence a teacher's choice of literacy instructional methods and strategies. Abbott (2023) states that a teacher's perception of literacy instructional coaching can play a crucial role in shaping their approach to teaching literacy. This is mainly because when teachers perceive coaching as influential, they are more likely to incorporate recommended methods into their instruction. Ilosvay and Pepe (2018) also state that the teachers' definitions of literacy and the support they receive from the schools in designing literacy instruction for the different learners can also determine their choice of instructional methods.

Wissink (2019) also notes that teachers' self-efficacy has been identified as a contributing factor in the actual implementation of new literacy instructional knowledge. Teachers who feel confident in their abilities to teach literacy are more likely to integrate effective instructional methods into their teaching practices. Additionally, the knowledge and understanding that teachers have of foundational literacy skills, such as phonological awareness, can impact their instructional decisions (Hudson et al., 2021). This implies that teachers who possess a deep understanding of foundational literacy skills are more likely to incorporate a variety of teaching methods into their teaching. Brum (2021) also states that the beliefs that teachers hold about literacy instruction can influence the strategies they choose to employ. Teachers who believe in the importance of a particular method or approach are more likely to utilise it in their classrooms.

The other factor that determines teachers' instructional choices is the utilisation of formative data, which in turn shapes their literacy instruction (Kreamer et al., 2019). Formative data includes, among others, data gathered from learners' exercises and feedback received during the teaching and learning process, to mention only a few. The use of data gathered from learners' exercises can help teachers ascertain which approaches and methods are suitable for learners in that context.

Moje (1996) also opines that teachers' perspectives and beliefs about literacy instruction, including their attitudes towards using literacy strategies, significantly impact their instructional decisions. Other than perceptions, research by Jenkins (2018) suggests that professional development plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' literacy instructional practices and preferences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study used the constructivism theory of learning (Alanazi, 2016; Dagar & Yadav, 2016; Koohang et al., 2009) as a suitable theory to explore literacy pedagogy and instruction in selected primary schools in Solwezi. According to the constructivism theory of learning, students should dedicate a significant portion of their time to learner-centered activities in the classroom, as this allows them to actively create new knowledge (Dagar & Yadav, 2016; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997; Splan et al., 2011). The role of the teacher is to facilitate learning.

Another tenet of the constructivist theory of learning is collaborative learning, a type of learning that allows learners to develop, compare, and understand multiple perspectives on an issue and come up with a consensus while sharing a workload (Gilakjani et al., 2013; Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005). The theory helped the researcher understand that active learning can only take place in learners when they are actively involved in the learning process. The teacher should use methods and strategies such as group and pair work, which provide space for learning and active participation while the teacher facilitates this process. Furthermore, the theory helped the researcher understand that collaborative learning can only take place when the teacher uses methods and strategies that allow learners to develop, compare, and understand multiple perspectives on an issue while comparing workloads.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design, research setting, participants and sample

This study used qualitative approaches and employed a case-study research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It was conducted in six primary schools situated in both urban and rural parts of Solwezi, which is 606 kilometres from Lusaka, the capital city. Kikaonde is used as a medium of instruction for teaching literacy from grades 1 to 4. Some areas in Solwezi are urban, whose population has access to hydroelectric power and internet facilities in schools. Learners in rural schools are not exposed to modern life and amenities such as electricity.

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 teachers, drawn from six schools, to participate in interviews aimed at exploring their pedagogical knowledge of literacy teaching approaches and reasons for their choice of methods. Three were urban primary schools, while the other three were rural schools. Most rural schools have single streams, while urban schools have multiple streams. Four teachers were drawn from each of the three urban schools because they have multiple streams, while one teacher was drawn from each rural school because they had a single stream. Six of the teachers who participated in the interviews, had their literacy lessons observed three times, twice every fortnight.

Research materials and data processing

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from fifteen teachers that explored their pedagogical knowledge of literacy teaching approaches and the reasons for their choice of instructional methods. Each interview took about 50 minutes and was conducted within the school the teacher was teaching at. Interviews were conducted after lessons so that the school routine was not disrupted. Furthermore, eighteen lesson observations were conducted in six schools to get data on teachers' pedagogical knowledge of literacy teaching approaches in Kikaonde in grade one classrooms in Solwezi District. Three literacy lessons, once every fortnight, were observed in each school among grade one teachers. The selection of these teachers whose literacy lessons were observed was based on their participation in the interviews. Each observation took one hour during the literacy lesson in class. These observations were conducted during the normal school routine. These observations were conducted once every two weeks so that teachers do not put up a show and put their behaviour in context.

This study used qualitative methods of data analysis. Reflective thematic analysis was used (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Verbal information from interviews was grouped into identified themes and categories. From interviews and lesson observations, information on teachers' pedagogical knowledge of literacy teaching approaches and reasons for teachers' choice of instructional methods were analysed and interpretations were made to highlight their meanings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the University of KwaZulu-Natal -Research Ethics Committee to conduct the study. Written permission was sought from the District Education Board Secretary of Solwezi to conduct the study. Participants were informed on the nature of the study. Participation was voluntary. Data was only collected when participants gave consent.

Rigour

Connelly (2016) defines the trustworthiness or rigour of a study as the degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and the methods used to ensure the quality of the data. Credibility of the findings was ensured by

spending extensive time engaging with participants. Furthermore, different data collection instruments were used to obtain information. Transferability was achieved through purposeful sampling and thick description. To ensure dependability of the findings, raw data from interviews, observation notes, and documents such as lesson plans collected in the field were cross-checked. Conformability was achieved through using multiple sources of data generation methods for purposes of cross-checking information.

Limitations of the study

The findings of the study could not be generalised to other places because it was conducted in Solwezi, one district out of many in Zambia. Furthermore, the sample size was also too small to generalize the findings (Cohen et al., 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study sought to establish teacher's pedagogical knowledge of literacy teaching methodologies in Kikaonde, and the reasons teachers choose literacy teaching approaches and strategies they use to teach.

Teachers' pedagogical knowledge of literacy teaching methods in Kikaonde.

This section presents findings generated qualitatively using semi-structured interviews with the fifteen (15) teachers and lesson observations conducted in the six schools. The following were the findings:

Findings from Interviews

Teachers knowledgeable in pedagogical knowledge

Ten teachers interviewed mentioned the phonics method, the look and say (whole language) methods, demonstrations, read aloud and the question and answer while three teachers only stated the look and say method, phonics method, read a louds and demonstrations. Two teachers mentioned the look and say method, phonics method, demonstrations, pair work, group work, class discussions and read aloud. The following are some of the verbatims from the teachers.

Teacher 5 from School 3 said:

"I use the phonics method, the look and say method, demonstrations, read a louds and question and answer when teaching my learners. I use the phonics method when teaching learners the sound of the day. The method is also used when blending the sounds to form syllables and words. When blending sounds into syllables and forming words from the syllables, I demonstrate to learners how to write on the board. I also ask some of them to go in front and demonstrate how to write syllables. I also prepare flash cards for learners and write syllables and words in Kikaonde on them and request learners to look at them and read the words. That is the look and say method."

Pedagogical training received in literacy instructions

All fifteen teachers that participated in the interviews said that they had received training in teaching literacy in the primary literacy programme during literacy trainings sponsored by the Ministry of Education in partnership with the United States Aid for International Development's (USAID) Let's Read Project, teacher group meetings in schools, and during zonal literacy workshops. Some of the teachers said the following:

Teacher 9 from School 4 said:

"I was trained to teach this literacy programme by the Ministry of Education in partnership with the USAID Lets Read Project. Facilitators from both the Ministry of Education and the USAID Lets Read project trained us on how to teach literacy. You must be aware that this literacy programme was implemented in 2013, and some of us joined the ministry when the programme was already running. This meant that we were to undergo some form of training. The training is on-going because we have refresher trainings time and again."

Findings from lesson observations

The lesson observations revealed that all the six teachers who participated in lesson observations possessed pedagogical expertise in various literacy teaching methods and approaches such as the phonics method, look-and-say method, demonstration approach, read-aloud, question-and-answer sessions, and group work, which only two teachers employed. While teachers had demonstrated pedagogical knowledge of several instructional methods in literacy teaching, not all instructional methods used involved the active participation of the learners, such as pair work and group work which only two used.

From the findings stated above, synthetic phonics was used to teach the pronunciation of sounds in association with letters of the alphabet and how to blend sounds to form syllables and words. The use of the synthetic phonics approach as opposed to the analytic phonics approach to teach literacy to grade one learners should be commended and ties with (Johnston & Watson, 2005), who argue that synthetic phonics should be taught in the child's first year at school. This is because the use of the approach enables teachers to teach learners the sounds of the language, how to blend these sounds into syllables, and finally how to blend the syllables formed into words. Additionally, the use of the synthetic phonics method entails that learners are exposed to the smallest units of language, which are the sounds, and build these sounds into complex units such as syllables, words, and sentences.

Amadi Ada (2019) advances some of the strengths of using the synthetic approach to phonics instruction, some of which are that its usage helps learners construct words for themselves, promotes learner-centred learning, reduces overdependence on the teacher, and allows learners to decode unfamiliar words they come across in texts with little assistance. Additionally, literature exists on the effectiveness of the use of this approach in literacy improvement.

The study also revealed that teachers used the look and say method. One of the benefits of using this method is that it facilitates the rapid recognition of frequently encountered words, ultimately leading to the early reading of whole words (McBride-Chang & Treiman, 2003). Learners can quickly memorise words learnt in their local languages using this method.

The demonstration method was also mentioned during interviews and utilised by all the 15 teachers during the observed literacy lessons. Activities conducted by teachers during literacy lessons ranged from demonstrating the blending process of sounds into syllables and syllables into words. Learners were also requested to demonstrate the blending of sounds into syllables and words on the board. The use of the demonstration method by teachers during literacy lessons has several benefits and implications for the learning process. The first benefit is that the method allows learners to use the practical application of theory and concepts, thus making the learning experience more tangible and memorable (Khomeni & Prabawanto, 2020). The implication, therefore, is that learners who participated in the demonstrations had more tangible learning experience than those who did not. In addition, demonstrations promote active learning, which is one of the tenets of constructivism.

Group work was also mentioned during interviews, but it was only used by two teachers during lesson observations. Group work is learner-centred, allows learners to interact, and provides learners with opportunities to initiate the interaction and adopt roles that would be difficult to perform if they were alone (Brown, 2001). Group work offers learners an opportunity to collaborate, which is one of the tenets of constructivism.

There were also some aspects of the use of the whole language approach in the literacy lessons. One of the activities conducted in all the lessons observed was guided reading. All the teachers who were observed, read a short story. Learners were asked to answer oral questions after the teacher had concluded reading the story. Furthermore, there were also activities involving reading aloud, as both the teachers and learners read aloud syllables and words. The use of some aspects of the whole language approach, such as reading aloud, implies that learners were more likely to improve their vocabulary and comprehension skills.

While teachers had pedagogical knowledge of several instructional methods in the teaching of literacy, not all the methods and approaches to address the weaknesses of each of the methods used were utilized. All instructional methods and approaches to literacy have some weaknesses and strengths. It is therefore very important for teachers to use a variety of instructional methods and approaches that promote the four macro-

skills of language, namely speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Furthermore, teachers should use approaches and methods that ensure the active participation of learners in the learning process. This can only be achieved if the teachers become eclectic in their teaching.

Why teachers choose the methods and strategies they use to teach literacy lessons

The reasons why teachers choose the methods and approaches they used to teach literacy lessons are advance below:

Belief in the effectiveness of the methods and approaches

Seven teachers out of the 15 stated that their choice of methods and approaches was based on their belief in the effectiveness of the methods and approaches. The following were some of the verbatim statements made by some of the teachers. Teacher 1 from School 1 said:

"I used the methods that I feel are effective. For example, I usually use the look and say method, read-aloud, group work, and pair work when I am teaching literacy. I use the methods for several reasons. For example, when I am using the look and say methods, learners easily look at the conversational poster or even a picture and easily read or say what they can see. When using demonstrations, I am expected to demonstrate how to shape letter sounds on the board. This also helps learners to shape letter sounds in their books properly. The read-aloud also help me to model fluent reading among the learners."

Familiarity of methods through Continuous Professional Development Training

Eight teachers out of the 15 interviewed said that they used the methods and approaches they used during literacy lessons because they were familiar with them through continuous professional development training. The following were some of the verbatims from the teachers. Teacher 6 from School 4 said:

"I am familiar with the methods and approaches I use during literacy lessons. I was trained during a literacy workshop with the Let's Read Team. During the training, we were taught how to teach literacy using a variety of methods. I am also familiar with the contents of the activity bank, which helps me know which activities learners should do and what approaches should be used."

The study findings, the choice of teaching methods and approaches were based on two factors: their belief in their efficacy and their familiarity with them from continuous professional development trainings. The first finding ties with Brum (2021), who states that teachers' opinions regarding methods or approaches affect whether they use them or not in the classroom. Teachers' beliefs in the efficacy of various methods and approaches are supported by literature, yet they have significant drawbacks. The first is that believing alone is not enough to prove a strategy is effective, especially without formative data (Kreamer et al., 2019). Formative and summative assessment findings should help teachers determine appropriate instructional strategies and approaches for students.

Secondly, the study also found that teachers choose instructional methods and approaches based on their familiarity with them owing to ongoing professional development. Nichols et al. (2005) found that instructors' reported usage of selected reading approaches and strategies was influenced by numerous factors, including workshops attended. Jenkins (2018); Moje (2008) and agree that professional development is crucial to teachers' literacy instructional practices and that they are most likely to use methods and practices they have learnt through training and professional development. Professional development meetings improve teachers' pedagogical knowledge, but the choice of instructional methods and approaches can also depend on factors such as educational policy interpretation (Coburn, 2001), class size, and teaching material availability. While teachers in the study only considered two factors when choosing teaching methods and approaches, it is important to consider all factors surrounding teaching and learning, some of which have been highlighted.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that, despite using several literacy teaching methods and strategies in grade one classrooms, most teachers were not using those that involved the active participation of learners. Furthermore, the choice of

methods used by teachers was based on their belief in effectiveness and familiarity with the methods through continuous professional development training. The conclusions have several implications. The Ministry of Education in Zambia urgently needs to revise its policy on teacher training in pedagogy, particularly the theories that underpin literacy teaching methods and strategies. This is because the findings in this study suggest that there is a gap in pre-service training. Another implication for teachers of literacy is that their current pre-service teacher training programme does not prepare them fully to become effective teachers. It is recommended that teachers should actively participate in continuous professional development programmes at school and district level as one way of closing this gap. It is also recommended that curriculum designers should revise the literacy curriculum to address the implementation challenges, especially the one related to too much content to be taught in one day.

Declarations

The authors declare that they have no competing interests directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication. All research and preparation for this work have been conducted without any financial or non-financial interests that could be perceived as influencing the submitted work.

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