

Pedagogical practices in non-formal adult literacy classes in Zambia

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Abstract

In Zambia, adult literacy education is mainly provided in the form of non-formal literacy classes, with a general emphasis on the economic purpose of alleviating poverty. The aim is to increase the number of skilled citizens who are literate. Exploring (1) the pedagogical practices used in this context and (2) facilitators' choices of certain teaching–learning methods, this article presents a study which was conducted in Katete District in Eastern Zambia. It involved two literacy programmes; one run by the Government of Zambia's Department of Community Development; and the other run by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Tikondane. The study was framed by international standards of both adult learning and non-formal learning pedagogies. In a qualitative case study, the participants comprised 9 literacy managers (5 female, 4 male), 12 facilitators (8 female, 4 male) and 78 adult learners (56 female, 22 male). Data were collected through interviews, observations and focus group discussions. Observing that both programmes' literacy classes were dominated by the teacher-centred lecture method, the researchers found that lecture-based instruction, when applied in a participatory manner, is capable of producing considerable learning gains. However, the authors contend that many learners would have benefited more from a learner-centred approach. Another finding was that the majority of the facilitators based their pedagogical decisions on their perception of the adult learners as illiterate and ignorant. Consequently, the facilitators saw their role as a mandate to eliminate illiteracy and ignorance. In sum, the authors conclude that the pedagogical practices applied in the two literacy programmes fell short of international pedagogical standards of both adult learning and non-formal learning.

Keywords adult learning; literacy; pedagogy; pedagogical practices; non-formal, formal and informal learning

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Introduction

This article presents the findings of a study on pedagogical practices used in non-formal adult literacy classes in Katete District in Zambia. The aim of this study was to explore pedagogical practices in relation to international standards of non-formal and adult learning pedagogies, and from the perspective of *literacy as social practices* (LSP), whereby reading and writing are embedded in the real-life contexts of the learners (Nabi et al. 2009). In this article, we

consider *adult learning* both in school and in non-school contexts (Rogers and Street 2012). We use *pedagogy* both in terms of teaching and learning (Lane-Kelso 2015), while *pedagogical practices* refers to numerous educational behaviours on the part of both the facilitators and the learners that support teaching and learning (Crowther et al. 2010; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002). *Non-formal adult learning* refers to meaningful lifelong learning activities that are organised and carried out outside the formal education framework and meet the learning goals of adults in different contexts (Rogers 2014). *Formal learning* involves intentional educational experiences that occur in an educational institution such as a school and are characterised by structured learning objectives, fixed times and certification (UIL 2009). Finally, *informal learning* results from daily activities and is unstructured and unplanned in terms of learning objectives, time and learning support. As authors of this article, we acknowledge that even though informal learning may at times be intentional, it does not involve certification (Rogers 2014; UIL 2009).

Background

In Zambia, adult literacy education is mainly provided in the form of non-formal literacy classes, with a general emphasis on the economic purpose of alleviating poverty. This emphasis is premised on the conviction of the literacy providers, particularly the government of Zambia, that the acquisition of literacy skills will empower youth and adults to participate fully in national development (MoESVTEE 2015, p. 23). In practice, the provision and the focus are guided by geographical location. For example, in urban areas, the emphasis is on literacy skills for reading and writing to prepare youth and adults who wish to return to formal schooling, and for those in need of livelihood skills for income-generating activities. In rural areas, the focus is on teaching literacy skills to improve agricultural production as a means to alleviate poverty (MoESVTEE 2012). In order to achieve these targets, the government of the Republic of Zambia has directed that learner-centred pedagogy should be used in all adult literacy classes in the country (ibid.). This policy was partly informed by a government evaluation of the adult literacy programmes (National Assembly of Zambia 2009), which revealed that the traditional (teacher-centred) approach to instruction has not in fact helped much in achieving national literacy targets (MoE 2010; MoESVTEE 2012). However, despite this change of emphasis at the policy level, we lack adequate information on what has been happening in terms of pedagogy in adult literacy classes in Zambia, particularly in terms of the application of learner-centred pedagogy.

Our rationale for investigating the application of pedagogy in adult literacy classes was twofold: (1) literacy is an important aspect of everyday communication and human development as a whole (Prinsloo 2013; Rogers 1999; Hanemann 2015); and (2) pedagogy plays an important role in both the acquisition of new literacies and the improvement of literacy practices (Nabi et al. 2009). In our study (and throughout this article), we opted for the plural term “literacies”, since it refers to multiple forms of literacy as opposed to a single universal form (Street 2006). In our view, this study is relevant to both literacy providers and facilitators, and aims to enhance understanding of different modalities for helping learners to achieve learning goals in different settings. Our focus on pedagogical methods is based on an understanding that the success of a learning programme is fundamentally anchored in the selection and use of appropriate pedagogical strategies, as attested by scholars such as Maurianne Adams (2016), Gail Caruth (2014) and Jo Westbrook et al. (2013).

Most national studies which have explored the teaching of literacy in Zambia have focused on Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Chansa-Kabali et al. 2014; Kalindi et al. 2017; Serpell 2014; Walubita et al. 2015). Meanwhile, international studies (Arbaugh et al. 2016; Avsec and Jamšek 2015; Boakye et al. 2014; Brooks 2016; Kazanjian and Choi 2016; Lane-Kelso 2015) on literacy pedagogy in Zambia have concentrated on literacy for children in formal schools and higher education, while paying little attention to non-school-based adult literacy. This emphasis on literacy for formal learning purposes has resulted in a research gap in relation to non-school-based literacy programmes. This focus may be partly due to the thinking of some scholars in Zambia (e.g. Kalindi et al. 2017; Luchembe 2016; Serpell 2014) that it is the acquisition of literacy skills for school-related purposes which will lead to a breakthrough to all forms of literacy.

Our study was motivated by our identification of a neglect of the study of pedagogy in adult literacy programmes. It is important for literacy programmes to adapt to the ever-changing teaching and learning environment, in which *literacy* is now generally seen in terms of multiple situated and social practices (Street 2014), and *pedagogy* as socially constructed and learner-centred (Schweisfurth 2015; Westbrook et al. 2013). In attempting to bridge this research gap, our study sought to answer two research questions:

- (1) *What pedagogical practices are used in non-formal adult literacy education in Zambia?*; and
- (2) *How do the facilitators select the teaching–learning methods?*

Before addressing these questions, we review the two pedagogical perspectives which framed our study.

Pedagogical perspectives that framed the study

The two pedagogical perspectives which framed our study are those of *adult learning* and *non-formal learning*. The review in this section looks at international standards of pedagogy in both domains, thus providing a framework for the analysis of the findings of our study and for subsequent conclusions.

Standards of adult learning pedagogy

Adult learning pedagogy is rooted in instrumental, humanistic, experiential, social and transformational learning theories (Bélanger 2011; Taylor and Hamdy 2013). Based on the core pedagogical propositions in these theories, our starting point for success in adult learning was an understanding of learners' contexts (Brookfield 1995) in terms of personal attributes, abilities and capabilities, including their goals and motivations for participating (Nabi et al. 2009). Without this understanding, it is almost impossible for the educator to effectively meet the learning goals of adult learners (Clegg 1970). Research has established that adult learners are characterised by diverse backgrounds, needs and aspirations, including physiological and psychological differences in their modes of learning (Ntiri 1999). In principle, adult learning is centred more on individual needs than on collective or group learning needs. By nature, adult learners possess varied learning needs. Therefore, successful learning is only possible when educators carefully design and select teaching–learning strategies to address individual needs and remain committed to the teaching–learning process (Merriam et al. 2012).

Natalia Biryukova et al. (2015) established that adult learning programmes are largely dependent on an understanding that adults are problem-oriented learners. In terms of pedagogy, educators are expected to use interactive pedagogical strategies and identify individual learners' difficulties, abilities and prior learning experiences, while also deciding how best to help individual learners in their quest to acquire new knowledge and skills. Teaching and learning are generally understood as an interactive processes (O'Neill et al. 2013), in which the educator has the responsibility to introduce learning encounters which reflect and support both individual and co-operative learning. Paul Bélanger (2011), Enzo Caminotti and Jeremy Gray (2012), Edmund Adjapong and Christopher Emdin (2015), and Stephen Brookfield (1986) found that success in adult learning hinges on understanding learners in terms of funds of knowledge, interests, aspirations and diverse ways of learning.

This understanding can then inform decisions on teaching and learning methods and teaching–learning processes (Education for Development 1996).

Josje van der Linden and Alzira Munguambe Manuel (2011) found that effective adult learning requires a teaching–learning approach which incorporates participatory pedagogies that are learner-centred. The reason for this is that learner-centred pedagogy fosters a collaborative approach to teaching and learning, *valuing learners as partners* in the generation of knowledge, not as mere recipients of information provided by their teachers (Moate and Cox 2015). Accordingly, educators should create a teaching–learning environment that encourages learners to actively engage in class, and prompts them, through self-directed and reflective learning, to consider how they wish to utilise the skills and knowledge acquired in class (Klocker 2009; Kolb 2014). Learner-centred pedagogy resonates with the understanding that adult learning is non-linear and multidimensional and occurs daily in social contexts (Rogers and Street 2012; Trivette et al. 2009). More importantly, it reflects a democratic approach to teaching and learning in which learners take ownership of the learning process. Therefore, when well-managed, learner-centred pedagogy can effectively support teaching and learning.

Standards of non-formal learning pedagogy

The idea behind non-formal learning is to promote learner-centred pedagogical environments for active learning that are socioculturally appropriate and match the interests and aspirations of learners (Education for Development 1996). It is based on the assumption that the pedagogy associated with non-formal learning is more flexible than that applied to formal learning. However, practices vary, depending on whether the non-formal learning is independent of or complementary to formal learning (Romi and Schmida 2009). Alan Rogers (2014) has attempted to provide some clarity by suggesting that the first thing to consider is that non-formal, formal and informal learning are all part of a continuum of learning, that non-formal learning, like formal learning, is intentional, both by the provider and the learner.

Rogers also identifies two dominant approaches to non-formal learning. In the first approach, non-formal learning comprises formal learning activities involving some which lead to certification, and others which do not. In the second approach, non-formal learning is an adjunct of formal learning, comprising extracurricular activities such as school clubs.

The instruction methods used in non-formal learning are better adapted to learners than those used in formal learning because they operate on the principle of flexibility and occur in a variety of settings with learners of different orientations (Rogers 2005). Thus, the accepted

international standards of non-formal learning pedagogy require that it should be learner-centred, promoting active learning and the development of effective learning environments (Education for Development 1996). Rogers observes that in some non-formal learning programmes, the “context and learners can influence the timing, length and location to meet the intentions and aspirations of learners” (Rogers 2014, p. 62). Furthermore, a qualitative study by Diana Silberman-Keller (2003) found that non-formal learning pedagogy is basically applied dialogue which is characterised by a conversation around teaching and learning processes. There is no universal non-formal learning pedagogy. Rather, the purpose, context and learning goals inform the pedagogical methods for situated learning activities.

Thus, applying a learner-centred pedagogy in non-formal learning involves creating and increasing opportunities for learners to actively participate in class and supporting them in conducting purposive self-directed learning activities (Education for Development 1996). In sum, *learner-centred pedagogy* offers different modalities to facilitate teaching and learning, leading to increased learning gains, while *teacher-centred pedagogy* is biased towards expository instruction as a primary instructional strategy which promotes rote learning and largely reduces learners to knowledge consumers (Moate and Cox 2015).

Methodology

Since our two research questions were qualitative in nature, our study followed a qualitative research methodology. This approach is concerned with the search for an understanding of phenomena in real-life contexts (Nieuwenhuis 2015), and we considered it most appropriate for our investigation of pedagogical practices in non-formal literacy programmes. Guided by Peter Rule and Vaughn John (2011), we further enhanced this approach by a case study design which we used to gather in-depth data on the pedagogical practices applied in the literacy classes we studied. The case in this study comprised the two non-formal adult literacy programmes presented in the next paragraph, and the pedagogical practices were the focus or unit of analysis.

The government-run non-formal adult literacy programme was revamped in 2004, but it is still inconsistent. In some centres, classes are not run every year. The venues for classes are churches, learners’ back yards, community halls, and other spaces which are easy for the adult learners to reach, and the language of instruction is Cicewa.¹ The classes are free of charge

¹ Zambia currently has 46 living languages. Of these, 37 are indigenous and 9 (including the official language English) are non-indigenous (Eberhard 2019). The educational languages of Katete District in Eastern Zambia are Cicewa and English.

and are held once a week: some in the afternoons based on convenience for both learners and facilitators, and others are held in the evenings after people have finished their chores . The non-formal adult literacy programme run by Tikondane, a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), was initiated in 2006 and is still running to date. The venues for its classes are at the Tikondane literacy centre, and other central spaces which are easy to reach, and the language of instruction is Cicewa. In both programmes, the enrolled adult learners' first language is Cicewa. Most of the learners have either never been to school or dropped out of formal schooling at an early age.

Our research team consisted of ourselves (the two authors of this article). As principal investigators, we physically collected and analysed the data, and we report our findings through this article. The participants of our study were 9 literacy managers (5 female, 4 male), 12 facilitators (8 female, 4 male) and 78 adult learners (56 female, 22 male). These participants were (a) from the government Department of Community Development programme (7 literacy managers, 10 facilitators, 62 adult learners); and (b) from Tikondane programme (2 literacy managers, 2 facilitators, 16 adult learners). The literacy managers were involved in running and monitoring the respective adult literacy programmes. Many of them originally trained as rural and urban development workers. The facilitators were mostly volunteers, the majority of them untrained in educating adults. Their professional backgrounds varied, ranging from retired primary school teacher, police officer, military personnel, to non-professionals. Lacking teacher training, as will become apparent in our findings, many of them resorted to modelling their own teaching style on what they had experienced either as children during their own formal schooling, or as adult literacy learners themselves. The research area was Katete District, which is located in eastern Zambia. The five sites for the government-run programme were active literacy centres in Kafumbwe, Mbangombe, Chimutende, Katete central and Kagoro. The venue for the two literacy classes in the Tikondane programme was Tikondane literacy centre in Katete.

As required by the qualitative research approach, we used purposive sampling to select both the participants and the research sites (Creswell 2014; Maree 2015). Our decision to interview the *literacy managers* was guided by the fact that they were responsible for coordinating adult literacy programmes at each literacy centre. For this reason, the managers were seen as rich information sources.

In principle, each class was allocated to two *literacy facilitators*. However, the reality on the ground was that each class had only one facilitator, and for this reason we considered it necessary to include all the facilitators from the literacy classes that were included in the

study. The facilitators were selected on the basis that they were key participants involved in the application of the pedagogical practices that this study sought to understand.

The *adult learners* were selected and included in the study on account of their being the intended beneficiaries of the pedagogical practices. Inclusion was based on the learners' regular attendance to classes and this was facilitated by the use of the attendance registers. Once these participants were identified, they were approached individually and asked to participate in the study. Those who accepted were asked to sign a consent form.

To collect data from the literacy managers and facilitators, we conducted a total of 17 interviews – in English with the managers, and in Cicewa with the facilitators: five face-to-face interviews with literacy managers from the government literacy programme; two interviews with literacy managers from Tikondane; eight interviews with facilitators from the government literacy programme; and two interviews with facilitators from the Tikondane programme. Four facilitators withdrew their participation in the study without giving their reasons.

To collect information about the adult learners' experiences, we conducted class observations and learner-focused discussions in Cicewa. The six class observations included four in the government literacy programme and two in the Tikondane programme. The seven learner-focused discussions included five in the government literacy programme and two in the Tikondane programme. Each learner-focused discussion involved groups of 10–12 participants who had enrolled in the literacy classes and whose attendance was verified through registers.

The data were analysed through an inductive thematic analysis. This involved the transcription and open coding of the audio-recorded interviews, focus group data and observation field notes. We analysed each set of data individually. Ethical issues considered included the safety of the participants, confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Findings

This section has two parts. Part A presents the findings that relate to the government-run literacy programme, while part B presents our findings from the Tikondane literacy programme. In both programmes, the findings focus on our two research questions, and all participants' names are pseudonyms.

Part A: Government literacy programme

The findings are in two categories; the first focuses on the first research question, “pedagogical practices in the literacy classes”, while the second focuses on the second research question, “the selection of teaching–learning methods”.

Pedagogical practices in the literacy classes

During the interviews, we asked the managers and facilitators how the literacy classes were organised and conducted in terms of instruction methods. Their responses covered the purpose of teaching literacy and the instruction methods.

Purpose of teaching literacy

We spoke individually to five literacy managers – Banda, Malembeka, Chanda, Monde and Nyirenda – from the government-run adult literacy programme.² Literacy manager Banda’s response began with a description of the adult learners as illiterates. She said,

“It is important to realise that we have to teach literacy to the illiterates. Then, we decide on the lesson and the teaching methods suitable for getting rid of illiteracy. This understanding is what guides us, managers and facilitators, [in our] teach[ing].”

In attempting to contextualise this response, we asked Banda about her understanding of literacy learning. She said,

“it is not about me, but as a government department we look at adult literacy learning as an intervention that provides a chance for the illiterate youth and adults to either start school (for those who never attended school) or to continue with school (for those who stopped along the way). This definition is important when it comes to the teaching of literacy, because it says everything about the purpose of the literacy that we teach.”

Literacy manager Malembeka’s response was that in her view, teaching literacy was about eliminating illiteracy in her community. She said,

“Illiteracy is not good. Many small-scale farmers in this community are prone to be swindled as they sell their farm produce. So, if they acquire the literacy skills, this problem will come to an end, the mindset of the people will change for the better, and the whole community will benefit.”

² We translated all of the statements presented here into English for the purposes of this article.

Another literacy manager, Chanda, said,

“When I look at the youth and adults in this community I feel sad, because the majority are illiterate such that they cannot make meaningful decisions to improve their lives. They spend time drinking alcohol that is endangering both their health and future. So, I decided to be teaching literacy so that I can make a contribution to the problem of ignorance and illiteracy in my community.”

Whereas Chanda saw teaching literacy as important for improving the community, Monde said,

“the teaching of literacy is too concentrated on simply reading syllables and vowels. What I know is that adult literacy learning is not just about teaching reading and writing, but also showing learners how they can use literacy skills in life. For example, to show learners how to do banking, farming and business with literacy.”

Similarly, literacy manager Monde expressed concern about the focus on teaching syllables and vowels in the literacy classes. He said,

“I have seen that [in] almost every literacy class I visited in 2016 in September, the lessons concentrated on syllables and vowels. It is not a bad thing, but the syllables and vowels did not talk about writing anything in real life. The teaching was as if learners wanted to learn for the sake of learning. Some of them told me that they could not even write their own names. I doubt if we can eliminate illiteracy in our communities.”

On the other hand, literacy manager Nyirenda said the notion of eliminating illiteracy and ignorance is unattainable, because every person has a form of illiteracy and ignorance. He said,

“The idea of teaching literacy to eliminate illiteracy and ignorance is retrogressive and difficult to attain. Every person has some degree of illiteracy and ignorance, and [this] will always be part of us, no matter what we do to eliminate them. So, I do not teach literacy to eliminate illiteracy, but to help learners do different things with literacy. If they cannot write, read and count properly, I teach them to do it better.”

From the eight facilitators from the government-run programme we interviewed, only two talked about the purpose of teaching literacy. These were Mwale and Lumpa. Facilitator Mwale said,

“When learners are looked at as illiterates, the teaching is also directed at teaching literacy to deal with the problem of illiteracy. It is not good; it causes us to teach in a

way [where] we look at learners as empty vessels. Illiteracy is in different forms, and we all have it. This makes it incorrect to label someone illiterate.”

In addition, facilitator Lumpa said,

“Teaching literacy speaks to the improvement of the lives of the illiterates in many different ways – buying and selling, health, farming and communication. I do not just explain but show learners the ways in which literacy can be used to improve themselves.”

Instruction methods in literacy classes. We asked literacy managers Banda and Malembeka, Mumbi and Chanda to explain the instruction methods used in the literacy classes. Literacy manager Banda said,

“The methods are not flexible to allow considerable learner participation, partly because we use volunteers who have no training in [teaching] adult learn[ers]. Despite this, I advise and encourage the facilitators to be less formal in their teaching. Adult learners tend to feel bored and discouraged to learn when the teaching is too structured. Unfortunately, the use of rigid teaching methods such as [teacher-centred] lecture teaching has persisted among the untrained literacy facilitators.”

In addition, literacy manager Malembeka said,

“Most of the facilitators are volunteers and have no training in teaching methods – including us, we need urgent training. Currently, the majority are teaching adults like children in primary schools. Perhaps that is what they know.”

Furthermore, literacy manager Mumbi said,

“We teach literacy to adults like children who are in a primary school. We decide the lesson and tell learners what to do. Some facilitators even use primary school books as teaching guides ... this is not what we were taught on participatory teaching during the short training a few of us were given ... many others were not trained at all. Learners should be actively involved in setting learning goals and evaluating teaching–learning”.

Responding to our question “How should the teaching be differentiated from [the methods used for] children?”, he said,

“participatory teaching and learning can also work for children, but the difference is that children are told what to learn whereas adults have [their] own learning goals when they come to class. This is [one if the] reason[s why] I feel participatory teaching and learning is relevant to adult learning.”

Similarly, literacy manager Chanda observed that learning is not limited to a particular place or context. It takes place everywhere and any time, and it is enhanced by the instruction methods that are familiar to the learners.

“The learners who attend literacy classes come from the village communities in which they learn by observing and doing. So, I use teaching methods that are familiar to the learners, such as focus group discussions and stories, because they enhance learning and are familiar to learners because they are used in the village meetings”.

The facilitators from the government-run programme – Phiri, Jere, Kunda, Lumpa, Mudenda, Daka and Joseph – said that the instruction methods depended on the lesson and topic in hand. They said a lesson on literacy skills requires the use of teacher-centred lecture instruction, whereas non-literacy based lessons involve the use of focus group discussions, narratives, drama and role plays. Facilitator Phiri said,

“I use classroom teaching because that is how I was taught in college many years ago. I remember very well how my lecturers presented their lessons; that is what I do when teaching literacy.”

In support of this, facilitator Jere explained that “classroom teaching” (i.e. teacher-centred lecture instruction) is appropriate for reading and writing drills.

“The illiterates require [the] classroom-teaching method because it is appropriate for drills on reading and writing. The idea is that learners should master literacy skills.”

Similarly, facilitator Kunda said that classroom teaching helps learners to better and more quickly understand lessons.

“I first write the vowels and syllables on the board or flipchart. I read through and ask learners to repeat after me as many times as possible so that they can master the lesson.”

Although some managers and facilitators had a negative opinion of teacher-centred lecture instruction, facilitator Kunda said,

“some learners enjoy classroom teaching; they openly express their satisfaction and appreciation for this method.”

Facilitator Lumpa's approach was to attempt combining teacher-centred lecture instruction with songs to enhance learner comprehension. She said,

“Classroom teaching is for teaching literacy skills, while songs are for learners to remember the lesson. Together with learners, we sing songs in the lesson. I do this for every lesson and learners like it.”

Facilitator Mudenda also reported using teacher-centred lecture instruction for a similar purpose. She gave two reasons: holding learners' attention and achievement of teaching-learning objectives.

“Classroom teaching is important for learners to pay attention when I am teaching. It is also useful for learners to achieve their learning objectives of reading and writing and [...] for achieving my teaching objectives”.

Facilitator Joseph also attempted to combine teacher-centred lecture instruction with focus group discussions to facilitate group learning.

“I use focus group and lecture teaching simultaneously to facilitate group learning. This helps learners to develop a better understanding of reading and writing skills, because they share different literacy experiences and, in the process, they develop into a group with a common learning objective.”

Similarly, facilitator Mwale said,

“I combine classroom teaching with narratives for the purpose of enhancing learner understanding of the lessons. From experience, I have seen that learners who have difficulties to understand a lesson through explanations understand well when they listen to a story as well.”

However, for facilitator Daka the important aspect of teaching literacy was to understand learners in terms of their literacy learning needs.

“My experience is that the main value in teaching literacy is when the facilitator understands how to work with adults. I have observed that even when I use classroom teaching, the secret is that I know how to work with adult learners. So, classroom teaching does not become a hindrance in my teaching because it helps me to meet the learning expectation of my learners. This strategy has been working well.”

These statements show that the literacy managers and facilitators had different orientations on the instruction methods that are used and should be used in literacy classes: these include expository (lecture-style) and participatory teaching. However, while most of them considered teacher-centred lecture instruction to be important in teaching literacy skills, some attempted to incorporate participatory methods aimed at enhancing learners' acquisition of literacy skills.

The four observations we conducted in classrooms of the government-run programme involved the facilitators Kunda, Phiri, Mudenda and Mwale, and also revealed a teacher-dominated approach to teaching. For example, facilitator Kunda's lesson was on vowels and syllables which were pre-written on a flipchart and stuck on the wall (shown in Figure 1). He pointed at the vowels and syllables while speaking them aloud, and the learners repeated these after him. After doing this three times, he turned to individual learners who read the vowels and syllables. Although he paused a few times to allow learners to ask questions, no questions were asked. The lesson ended after 48 minutes. During the follow-up interview, Kunda said,

“I have been teaching like this for six years and it has proved to be an effective method for literacy skills. So, I do not see the need for trying other teaching methods.”

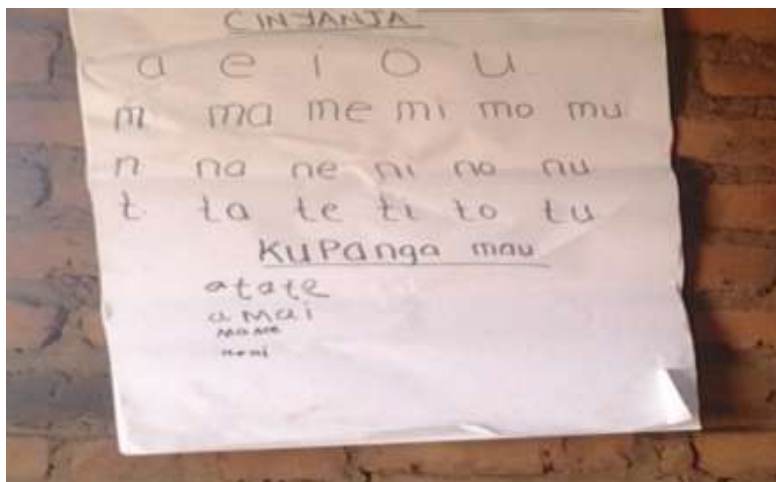


Figure 1 A pre-written lesson on vowels and syllables
Photo: Noah K. Sichula

The second classroom observation was a session taught by facilitator Phiri. His lesson differed from the usual focus on vowels and syllables. It involved health literacy and incorporated reading and writing Cicewa words such as “*munkwala*”, which means medicine, “*budongo*”, which means hygiene, and “*matenda*”, which means diseases. Phiri began his teaching session by brainstorming the diseases that are caused by poor hygiene. Afterwards,

he introduced a lesson which he wrote on the board, “*budongo pa tupi*”, meaning personal hygiene, and “*budongo mu mundzi*”, meaning hygiene in the village community. Then he repeatedly asked learners to read after him. During the follow-up interview, Phiri said,

“starting with brainstorming is important, because it helps to determine the knowledge gaps among the learners before I proceed to teach. I actually develop a lesson from it. Somehow it tells me what learners wish to learn.”

The classroom observation took place in the church building shown in Figure 2 and lasted for 54 minutes.



Figure 2 Church building used for adult literacy classes
Photo: Noah K. Sichula

Our third classroom observation was that of facilitator Mudenda’s class, which was conducted in an open space in the back yard of one of the literacy participants. Before beginning the lesson, Mudenda organised the learners to sit in rows. Next, she proceeded to write a number of Cicewa syllables on a blackboard (shown in Figure 3). This was followed by reading aloud and demonstrating to learners how to write the syllables. Her blackboard management was a challenge. For example, the commas separating the four syllables were hardly visible. For beginner readers, this resulted in almost running everything together into one word, “*ndandendindo*” instead of “*nda nde ndi ndo*”. In addition, the blackboard was placed too close to the ground and was difficult for learners beyond the front row to see clearly. After teaching for 24 minutes, Mudenda asked learners to copy the syllables into their exercise books. Thereafter, she orally tested learners on what they could remember from the lesson.

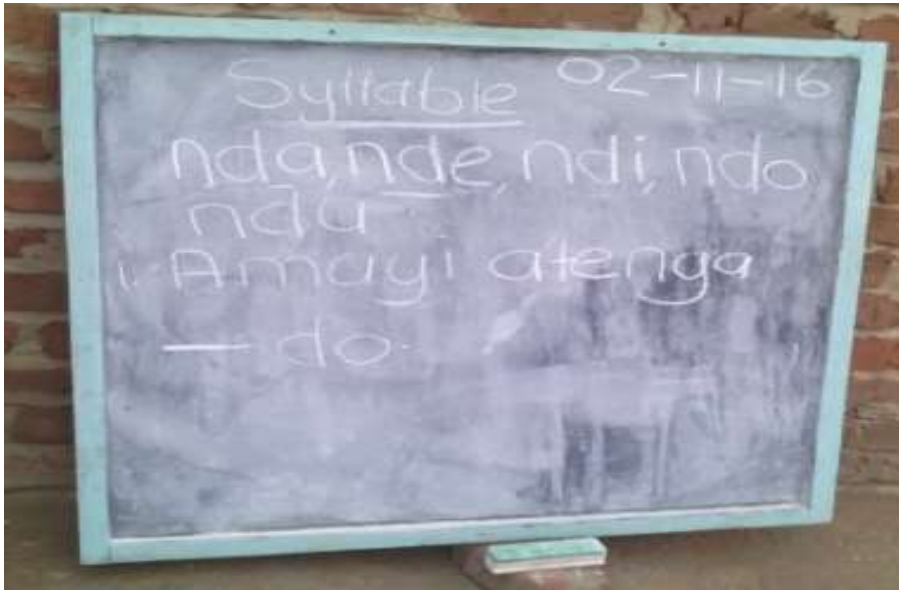


Figure 3 Lesson on syllables

Photo: Noah K. Sichula

During the follow-up interview, Mudenda said she was interested in delivering the lesson she prepared for that day.

“It was necessary for me to give the learners as much information as possible so that they could revise on their own. It is good for their better understanding.”

Our fourth and final class observation involved facilitator Mwale. His lesson was on environmental health literacy, specifically on disposing of farm and household waste. Mwale had a small black chalkboard mounted on the wall in a dimly lit room (see Figure 4). He described and explained the two methods of solid waste disposal in Cicewa: “*ku shoka*” (incineration) and “*ku fwikila*” (landfilling). He also explained the advantages and disadvantages associated with each of these methods. The learners observed, listened and repeated in unison whatever he asked them to do. Towards the end, Mwale asked learners if there were any questions, and one female learner asked about the better method of the two. Mwale responded, “that will be discussed in our next meeting”, and ended the session, which had lasted for 42 minutes.



Figure 4 A community hall used for the adult literacy classes
Photo: Noah K. Sichula

The selection of the teaching–learning methods used

To address our second research question, we talked to seven facilitators in the government-run programme – Jere, Daka, Joseph, Mudenda, Lumpa, Phiri and Mwale – on how they chose their teaching methods. Facilitator Jere said it depended on the lesson to be taught; for example, a lesson on literacy skills would involve teacher-centred lecture instruction, because this was easy for learners to understand. She said,

“Classroom teaching is the only method that works well for teaching literacy skills. It is easy to use and learners understand easily. It is good especially for learners who have never attended school”.

Responding to our question “How is classroom instruction relevant to learners who have never attended school?”, Jere said,

“I want them to experience how it feels to be students or pupils in school.”

Similarly, facilitator Mwale said,

“Sometimes I teach based on the choice of the learners. Some learners demand that I teach them like pupils, especially those who have never gone to school.”

Facilitator Daka said the selection of teaching methods was based on the teaching style the respective facilitator is accustomed to.

“My teaching is inspired by my liking classroom teaching because I am used to it for every teaching situation. I do not want to try a method that I have to start getting used to. That will just disturb my teaching style.”

For facilitators Joseph, Mudenda, Lumpa and Phiri, inspiration was drawn from their previous experience with teacher-centred lecture instruction. Joseph said,

“My choice of teaching methods comes from participating in literacy classes as a learner. I observed how the literacy instructors taught and copied the teaching style.”

In the same vein, facilitator Mudenda said,

“I used to attend adult literacy classes in the past and when the facilitator left, I took over and started teaching like he used to.”

Facilitator Lumpa remembered his own time in formal schooling and said,

“I used to observe very carefully how my teacher taught when I was at school. That is how I have been teaching. ”

Furthermore, facilitator Phiri said,

“I make my own decisions because the topics and methods for this village are based on what the learners want to learn.”

To complement and crystallise the views expressed by the facilitators, our study also incorporated learner-focused discussions. These discussions took place at Kafumbwe, Mbangombe, Kagoro, Chimutende and Katete central. At Kafumbwe, nine participants (six female and three male) participated in the discussion. The learners said that both teacher-centred and participatory methods were used, but the dominant approach was teacher-centred:

“Our teacher always writes on the board, and we are able to see what is written. He teaches and we listen carefully.”

The literacy group at Mbangombe was composed of eleven participants (nine female and two male). They reported that,

“The teacher writes *a e i o u*, then we are asked to come up with words. Afterwards, she goes around to see what we have written. It is good, because we are able to know our mistakes.”

The learner-focused discussions at Kagoro involved a group of eight females and four males. The learners reported as follows:

“We learn in this open space without chalk and board, our teacher comes with a book and simply teaches us from her book by directly talking to us.”

By contrast, the learners at Chimutende (9 females, 4 males) reported that the teaching–learning approach practised in their classes was participatory and involved the exchange of information:

“When we come to class, our teacher wants us to share what we know, and he also shares what he knows about the topic. So, the teacher does not teach alone; we share the knowledge and experiences.”

At Katete central, the learners (12 females, 5 males) said they wanted to be taught in the same way as their children who were at school:

“[The] majority of us have never been to school, others stopped school in grades one and four, so we want our teachers to teach us the same way our children are taught so that we can also experience how it feels to be in school. Our time to go back to school has passed because of old age.”

The above responses show that the literacy managers and facilitators had their own views of the pedagogical practices. In sum, they regarded the purpose of teaching literacy as the elimination of illiteracy, the improvement of literacy skills, and the improvement of the well-being of the community. The methods the facilitators employed included both teacher centred lecture and participatory instruction. In this programme, the instruction methods appear to have been chosen based on the facilitator’s preference, and sometimes (though rarely) based on the wishes of the learners. The interviews also yielded an important finding in relation to learner-centred pedagogy, namely that some learners, as confirmed by the learner-focused discussions and some facilitator interviews, preferred learning literacy skills in a similar manner to children in primary school.

Part B: Tikondane literacy programme

This programme had two literacy managers, Jane and Nyirenda. Jane was the director and Nyirenda was the programmes manager.

Pedagogical practices in literacy classes

The pedagogical practices encompassed the perceived purpose of literacy education and the instruction methods employed.

Purpose of teaching literacy

The two literacy managers shared a common stance that adult literacy consists of communicative practices that occur both within and outside of the classroom. Therefore, they saw literacy as having value beyond the formal school environment in improving the lives of the people. Programme director Jane said that, in her community, literacy was perceived as learning the alphabet and then being able to read and write.

“To teach literacy in this community involves localised communications that are based on local narratives, art, drama and other communicative models. Unfortunately, in this community teaching literacy is learning the alphabet and be[ing] able to read and write.”

Similarly, programme manager Nyirenda reported that literacy education was based on the reading and writing experiences of learners.

“We do not necessarily teach literacy, but help learners to improve literacy skills from their experiences. I do believe that everyone has some literacy, which is used every day. So, joining a literacy class would mean learning new skills or simply improv[ing] the[ir existing] skills.”

However, the Tikondane programme’s two facilitators said they saw the purpose of teaching literacy as being twofold, namely (1) elimination of illiteracy in the community; and (2) preparing learners for school. Facilitator Ntutuma said,

“I teach literacy because of illiteracy in the community. I also want to prepare those who intend to go back to school, either to start or continue from where they stopped.”

Facilitator Mwansa said,

“illiteracy is a hindrance to personal progress, so it has to be eliminated through literacy and [by] help[ing] the learners to go back to grade one to remove ignorance.”

The managers’ view of the purpose of teaching literacy went beyond merely eliminating illiteracy. While they were aware of how literacy can improve the general well-being of the learners, the facilitators’ view was limited to the elimination of illiteracy. This shows a divergence between managers’ and facilitators’ stances on the purpose of literacy.

Instruction methods in the literacy classes. In terms of the instruction methods employed, literacy managers Jane and Nyirenda said discovery and participatory instruction were effective for teaching literacy. Programme director Jane said,

“I have learned that discovery teaching is the best for teaching, including literacy. It makes learners independent and think deeply about the lesson, [and] in the process it reinforces their learning.”

Similarly, programme manager Nyirenda said,

“our role is to engage learners in doing something by themselves, to be independent of the teacher. So, the method is applied in a practical and participatory manner to allow learners to relate to what they do in real-life situations.”

However, in practice, the teaching was characterised by teacher-centred lecture instruction.

For example, facilitator Ntutuma said,

“Teaching is ensuring that learners master the lesson that has been delivered to them. I write the words on the board for learners to see, because when they see how the words or letters are written it is eas[ier] for them to remember than when they do not see. I have discovered that learners could pronounce a given word correctly, yet they would not know how it is written. Therefore, I use [a] direct teaching method, to teach them how to read and write in Cicewa. Speaking is not a problem, because Cicewa is their local language.”

In addition, facilitator Mwansa said,

“Teaching is talking to learners while they listen. At this literacy class, I teach them to speak in English for communication with European visitors; we receive many English speakers on different projects. I start [by] showing learners how to welcome a person,

how to politely ask for their names, and any relevant detail. I say it in [the] Cicewa language and then translate into the English language.³ So, most of the time they listen to me and then repeat after me, and they like it. So, that is how I teach.”

Again, to enrich the data for the Tikondane programme, our study also included classroom observations. The first classroom observation involved facilitator Mwansa in an English language literacy lesson with six female learners. The lesson consisted of polite requests and responses. Her teaching was characterised by talking and explaining to learners. During the follow-up interview, she said,

“This teaching method is appreciated by the learners who are always looking forward to a class, that is why I use it.”

For facilitator Ntutuma, the lesson was on vowels and syllables, which were written on a flipchart sheet and pinned to the blackboard as shown in Figure 5. During the lesson, Ntutuma made several pauses to allow the learners to seek clarifications and make contributions. She explained in the follow-up interview that this was necessary for the purpose of involving learners in her teaching–learning sessions. She said,

“learning is enhanced when learners are involved in learning and their needs are [more] likely to be met.”

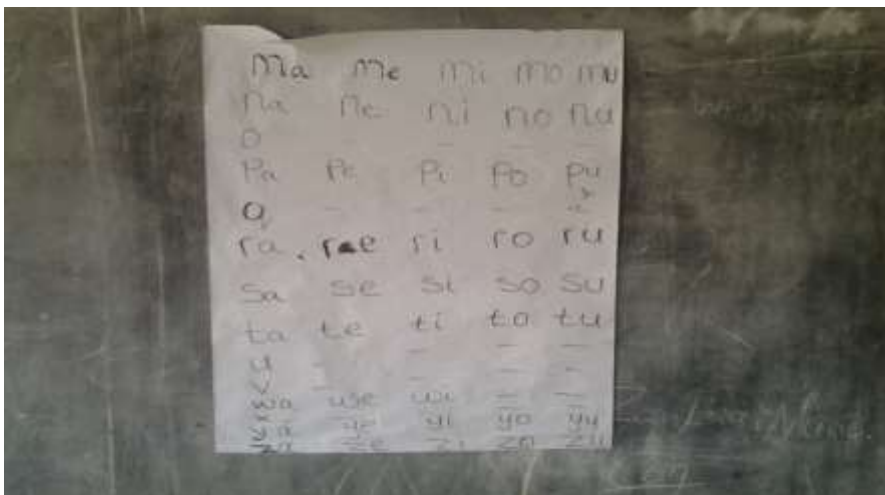


Figure 5 Syllables on a flipchart sheet used in an observed class
Photo: Noah K. Sichula

³ Tikondane had two literacy classes. One was purely conducted in Cicewa and the other was in principle English language literacy. The learners were learning from Cicewa (their local and familiar language) to English. The explanations were to a larger extent in Cicewa, but the idea was for them to learn how to speak the English language. In other words, lessons were both in Cicewa and English languages for ease of understanding.

The selection of the teaching–learning methods

Ntutuma said the choice of instruction methods was informed by her experience of teaching in literacy classes.

“I use direct teaching, talking to learners, because of my experience that this method is effective in teaching reading and writing. Even when I was in school, our teachers used the same method. Therefore, I teach through the experience of observing how my teachers used to teach.”

For facilitator Mwansa, the choice is based on knowing the abilities of her learners. She said,

“I know the abilities of my learners individually by simply looking at them.”

When we asked her “How is that possible?”, Mwansa said,

“I have been with them for a long time, so I know every single one of them very well. From this, I decide the best method [through which] they can understand the lesson. I also remember how I was taught in school from both primary and secondary schools. Putting all these together, I select the right teaching methods, and it has been working.”

The learner-focused discussions were also critical in consolidating the views shared by the facilitators. Two learner-focused discussions were conducted at Tikondane literacy centre.

The first discussion included nine females and four males. In the first discussion, one of the adult learners said,

“Our teachers teach from the big papers (flipchart sheets) as we listen. Sometimes they mark what we write, sometimes they do not. We like the teaching method, because it helps us to learn well. Some of us have never been to school. This teaching helps to experience school only that we do not write exams.”

In a second discussion, the learners were six females. One of them said,

“Our teacher teaches by simply talking, we do not write. She comes with her book, reads and begins teaching by talking. We find this teaching to be challenging because we would like to write and read so that we can remember what we have learnt. We would appreciate a method where the teacher writes on the board and allows us to write in our books because it can help us to learn faster.”

The divergence between managers and facilitators was also present in their stances on the selection of the teaching–learning methods. While the managers’ preference was for

participatory instruction, specifically the discovery method, facilitators preferred teacher-centred lecture instruction. In practice, most of the instruction was teacher-centred and concentrated on the teacher-centred lecture method.

Conclusion

Our study set out to answer two research questions: (1) What pedagogical practices are used for teaching?; and (2) How do the facilitators select the teaching–learning methods? In response to the first research question, the study concludes that pedagogical practices in these literacy classes were based on underlying assumptions and beliefs about the purpose of teaching literacy and the relative value of the teaching methods used. The most commonly perceived purpose of teaching literacy was to eliminate illiteracy and ignorance in the communities where literacy classes were conducted. This view of literacy by some managers and facilitators is not in line with the 21st-century view of literacy as multiple situated and social practices (Street 2014). During the interviews, while some facilitators talked about teaching from the perspective of the learners’ needs and using participatory methods, in reality, most of the lessons were teacher-centred, consisting of dictation and drill exercises.

The idea that literacy learners are illiterate and ignorant was an influencing factor in the facilitators’ choice of instruction methods. Evidently, they saw teacher-centred lecture instruction as the best method for teaching literacy to adult learners who were unable to read and write. Some learners, who had never experienced schooling, enjoyed lecture instruction, because they felt it provided them with an experience similar to formal school. Therefore, these learners regarded lecture instruction as learner-centred in the sense that it satisfied their expectations. However, most of the lessons we observed were too concentrated on syllables and vowels which did not in fact seem conducive to helping learners to acquire literacy skills, as it was mentioned that many learners were unable to use the knowledge of syllables and vowels, for example to write their own names.

Regarding the second research question, our study concludes that the selection of the teaching methods was dominated by the facilitators’ preferred teaching method, and only in rare instances did learners influence the choice of teaching–learning methods. IN the majority of our classroom observations, we found that teacher-centred lecture instruction was the preferred method for teaching literacy skills because the facilitators considered it less complicated to apply, and most appropriate for teaching illiterates. A few facilitators preferred a combination of lecture and participatory methods. However, even in this combination, the

purpose was to enhance learners' understanding of the lesson and not to help them apply what was being taught.

Crucially, professional training in pedagogy had little influence on the selection of teaching methods, since both the trained and untrained facilitators were influenced by their personal preferences. In addition, although the literacy facilitators demonstrated their commitment to supporting learners in meeting their learning needs, their pedagogical practices fell short of the expected standards of both adult learning and non-formal learning pedagogy.

In sum, our study concludes that not much is happening on the application of the learner-centred pedagogy to meet the expectations of the 2012 curriculum framework on pedagogy in adult literacy learning in Zambia (MoESVTEE 2012). Therefore, we would suggest the application of a holistic approach to adult literacy learning programmes in Zambia. This would include reconceptualising literacy in line with the 21st-century view of literacy as multiple situated practices (Street 2014), and aligning the instructional methods with the roles of learners and their learning goals. This will be crucial in reforming the teaching and learning methods towards the realisation of learner-centred pedagogy in non-formal literacy classes.

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