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Cultural-historical basis of literacy practices in TshiVenda-speaking South Africa's primary classrooms

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Abstract

The study examines literacy practices within TshiVenda-speaking Grade One classroom in rural South African primary schooling to uncover the evolving cultural-historical processes of classroom teaching and learning that regulate children's learning and development, including reading acquisition.

An experienced TshiVenda Grade One teacher was observed and subsequently interviewed on her approach to teaching reading. The analysis reveals complex multi-layered instructional practices which the teacher embodies and enacts in the 'here and now' of her schooling and literacy instruction; oscillating between two contradictory, historically-embedded approaches to literacy instruction.

Introduction

The notion of literacy as a cultural practice can be traced in developmental psychology research framework, to the ground-breaking work of Scribner and Cole (1981) who; using the Vygotskian theoretical framework as basis for analysis of literacy practices among Vai people of Liberia, have found that literacy practices were tied up to the cultural practices of society. Unlike in western literacy tradition, Cole and Scribner found that literacy practices among Vai communities were not aimed at providing new knowledge and new ways of thinking about everyday-life problems but rather limited familiar topics, background knowledge and the writers' circumstances (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 238).

In this study, Scribner and Cole argue that literacy among the Vai had a unique function; fundamentally different from that associated with formal schooling, and therefore had

different consequences on psychological development and functioning. For example, Vai literacy engaged individuals with familiar topics without introducing new ways of looking at things. The reason for this, according to Scribner and Cole (1981) was because of the peculiar orthography of Vai script and its specific uses within Vai social organization.

Following Havelock's (1976, 1978) position, Scribner and Cole (1981) argue that the orthography of a writing system has a major impact on its uses and possible cognitive consequences because:

None-alphabetic systems permit only limited exploitation because they are "inefficient". Their inefficiency comes about because of the way they represent the spoken language. While an alphabet represents minimal sound units, a syllabary maps larger, incompletely analyzed linguistic units. As a consequence, a single character in a syllabary may have several alternative phonetic interpretations. Without a representational system that approximates a one-to-one mapping between sounds and graphic units, the reader must rely on contextual information to disambiguate the message (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 239).

Therefore, Scribner and Cole found that the peculiar way in which sound units are graphically represented within Vai literacy places constraints on possible ways in which Vai script may be employed. For example, the reader finds it difficult to grasp the meaning of sentences at the same time that he or she has to figure out the semantic units in the text. The same difficulty is encountered by the writer, who likewise is to choose the representation of a sound packet (syllable) that best fits a given piece of speech; constraining the variety and novelty of written messages. The consequence of learning to read and write in this language on cognitive development and functioning, argued Scribner and Cole (1981), is fundamentally different from that which should be expected of an alphabetic script. However, as the authors note, the constraints that Vai literacy places on reading and writing is not necessarily, and only limited to its syllabic organization as no orthographic system preserves all the features of spoken language. Further, the Japanese syllabary system may be considered efficient because of the regularity of the sound-symbol correspondences (Scribner & Cole, 1981).

The social constraints, to do with the lack of development of Vai literacy into an integral part of the wider societal activities, according to Scribner and Cole (1981), further exacerbated the situation. That is, increasingly complex socially organised economic and intellectual activities evolve among the Vai in total separation from their traditional literacy practices and result in the lack of application of the script to a variety of situations and new social practices. Meanwhile, the lack of possibilities for expanding the Vai script into unfamiliar social situations further constrains the content of Vai letters to familiar topics that draw from the recipient's background knowledge and the writer's circumstance and hence, restrict the potential for exploring what is new and unfamiliar (Cole, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Therefore, the unique contribution of Scribner and Cole's research, in my view, is its contextualization of literacy practices as embedded in—and developing from—concrete and practical activities of society and culture and; therefore, not as reified symbolic representation of reality.

To this end, Vygotsky referred to literacy practice as a "particular system of symbols and signs whose mastery heralds a critical turning point in the... cultural development of the child". The process of literacy acquisition for a child, therefore, involves what he termed

“second-order symbolism”, comprising of a system of graphic signs that designate verbal sounds and words that comprise spoken language. In this view, the child would relate differently to the words and sounds comprising spoken language as opposed to written text since the two forms of symbolism arise from different forms of learning and developmental activities in which the child participates (cf. Vygotsky, 1978, p. 106).

It is this unique and context-specific nature of the developmental activities in which TshiVenda-speaking children participates; as well as their developmental consequences, that the present paper examines. The paper also seeks to reveal how these activities, including the specific linguistic context of TshiVenda literacy practice, as well as the cultural-historical¹ traditions of schooling, influences and shapes today's instructional activities and, consequently, children's learning and development. The development of literacy within TshiVenda-speaking classrooms has a peculiar trajectory, spanning early missionary activities in the region during late eighteenth century to current practices within TshiVenda literacy classrooms. The changing contextual conditions of literacy instruction within these classrooms, and the cultural-historical challenges that Tshivenda language faces in today's South African society may not be very different from that which faced Vai communities several decades ago.

South African and TshiVenda² language context

Scribner and Cole's interpretation of Vai literacy practices continues to be pertinent for understanding the developmental consequences of early reading and writing. In spite of leading socio-economic and political role that post-apartheid South Africa now plays in sub-Saharan Africa, it nonetheless continues to experience enormous disparities that derive from its apartheid history, the effects of which continue to be felt in contemporary schooling performance (cf. Fleisch, 2008).

¹ I use the concept “cultural-historical” and “socio-cultural” interchangeably as these concepts suggest a process that is essentially the same, although they may be used with varying emphases, such as in Cole's (1996) “culture-specificity” approach. Wertch and Tulviste (1992) argue that Vygotsky used the notion of the “social” and the “cultural” as essentially having the same meaning. Vygotsky, in fact, argued that: “...everything that is cultural is social” and that “Culture is the product of social life and human social activity” (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 164).

² TshiVenda is a language spoken by a little over million South African inhabitants found predominantly in the northern part of the country, bordering Zimbabwe (see, Muthivhi, 2013). The term *TshiVenda*, which is alternatively spelt; “*Tshivenda*”, refers to both the language and culture of the people. The land where *TshiVenda* language and culture is practiced is referred to as Venda while the people who live in Venda are called *VhaVenda* (cf. Westphal, 1962; Kirkaldy, 2002). The language is also generally referred to as *Venda*, while reference to the people was, sometimes in the past, also spelt as *BaVenda* (cf. Styat, 1931). In this paper, I use the spelling, *TshiVenda*, now used more widely in official circles, so as to emphasize the preface, “*Tshi-*”, which should refer to both the language and the culture of the people of Venda and I retain the capital letter “V” so as to make it easier for readers who may be familiar with earlier literature about the land and the people—often viewed as having been influenced by a ‘colonial’ perspective’—and hence, making no necessary distinction between the land, the people and their language and the culture, respectively.

Recent tests on primary school learners' reading ability by local and international test regimes have concluded that the majority of South African primary school learners; especially those in historically disadvantaged school contexts that had received less attention during apartheid South Africa, performed below their age levels (cf. Fleisch, 2008). It should however be noted that while these learners' learn in schools that mostly have no basic infrastructure and teaching and learning resources, the learners themselves generally come from poverty stricken family background (Fleisch, 2008). Also, most of these learners learn through a language medium that is not their home language—mostly in English from the fourth grade, or fourth year of schooling.

There is therefore a complex problem of the language medium that pervades the South African primary school system, which is also compounded by the general lack of confidence on the part of the majority of teachers with regard to communicating exclusively in English, as well as the low levels of subject matter mastery. In South Africa, the majority of learners learn through their home language during their first three years of schooling, after which they switch into an additional language medium—mostly English (Muthivhi, 2008; Fleisch, 2008).

According to school policy, the majority of children in South Africa begin schooling in Grade One at six years of age. However, most of these children come to school with no prior experience of formal literacy, since they do not attend early learning or kindergarten centres. Also, these children would not have received sufficient orientation towards reading from their everyday, home backgrounds as their parents—themselves been schooled during apartheid heydays, have mostly not received adequate schooling or have dropped out of school before attaining sufficient reading competence (Fleisch, 2008). As a result, teachers generally bear sole responsibility for orienting children into formal reading and writing, and therefore have to begin the process at the very basic level such as introducing letters of the alphabet. This would be a very different situation for the advantaged children—mostly from middle class backgrounds, who would have the privilege of going through pre-school learning or early childhood development centres in South Africa (cf. Harrison & Muthivhi, 2013).

TshiVenda, predominantly spoken in the far northern part of South Africa—in Venda, is a minority language spoken by just over a million people (Statistics South Africa, 2011). Small groups of speakers of the language reside in Gauteng province, the country's major industrial and commercial centre, anchored by the city of Johannesburg; some five hundred kilometres to the south of Venda. TshiVenda is used as medium of instruction in the first three years of schooling within the schools that catered for speakers of the language, most of which are located in the far-northern part of the country. It is offered as a language subject in these schools until the twelfth grade or final year of general schooling. Two universities located in the northern province of Limpopo in South Africa, the University of Venda and the University of Limpopo, respectively, offer TshiVenda as a language course which could be taken up to graduate level studies (Kirkaldy, 2002).

However, apart from social usages in a government-sponsored TshiVenda language radio station, the language has no other significant social profile in political and economic activities and its space continues to diminish in competition with English, in particular. A version of Tshivenda-English combination is gradually taking root and becoming more widely acceptable among many TshiVenda schooled youth. Meanwhile, TshiVenda language, although still generally spoken more widely in Tshivenda-speaking far-northern

parts of South African, in the Southpansberg mountains, it nonetheless remains, essentially, an oral language with very little usefulness outside of the home and everyday-life activities in which home-users of the language participate. There is also a remarkable scarcity of reading materials for TshiVenda speaking children, who have to make do with meagre publications in the form of readers and textbooks normally intended for classroom usage (Muthivhi, 2008). The Bible, traditionally used, both for formal schooling and religious purposes within TshiVenda communities, continues to be the most widely accessible text for TshiVenda-speaking readers and is still extensively used in schools for purposes of reading instruction.

TshiVenda uses a Latin alphabet and was first translated into its present written form in the early 1870s by the Berlin Mission Society (Muthivhi, 2011). According to the Berlin Mission Reports (Berlin Mission Reports, 2004; Kirkaldy, 2002; Westphal, 1962), the process by which current orthography of the language was produced involved native speakers saying out words for European missionaries to devise letter combinations that best approximates the phonemic sounds the speakers produced. This process of translation took place over a lengthy period of time and occurred both in South Africa and in Europe, specifically at Berlin University (Kirkaldy, 2002). Further work was later carried out by South African TshiVenda linguists, most of whom, descendants of early missionaries (Berlin Mission Reports, 2004).

Early missionary reports describe how nineteenth century TshiVenda speakers who had just been introduced to the Bible, mistook the reading of Bible by the missionaries for traditional activities in their culture which they associated with reading. For example, the missionary reports recount of occasions when missionary audiences among the Venda would argue that the work of the missionary was akin to that of a Venda diviner who reads about hidden secrets and mysteries represented by the script on a divining bowl or constellation of his divining bones. Therefore, those who had just acquired the ability to read through attending catechism classes would read for others and would be assumed to be capable of revealing the secrets of the missionary's god. The process was likened to that in which a diviner would read the graphic script on a divining bowl or tablets and thereby, reveal to his or her audience the hidden messages the gods and ancestors would want to reveal (cf. Styat, 1931; Kirkaldy, 2002; Berlin Mission Reports, 2004).

While possibilities for using TshiVenda in its written form continues to diminish with time, English—with its perceived superior status as a language that readily provides access to socioeconomic opportunities, progressively gains greater acceptance and widespread usage among the younger generation. Ironically, TshiVenda remains a primary means for literacy acquisition for the majority of TshiVenda-speaking children between the ages of five and nine in the first grade through to the third grade of schooling. However, and more recently, instructional policy framework for South African schooling has become more centralized, demanding that a more uniform instructional approach to literacy be employed in all schools (Department of Basic Education, 2009). This policy framework, described in detail below as it applies to, and implemented in, TshiVenda literacy classrooms, emphasizes acquisition of literacy through “meaningful activities involving reading real books and writing for genuine purposes” (Joubert; Bester & Meyer, 2008, p. 87; Department of Education, 2002). This meaning-based, semantic approach to literacy instruction—in its implementation, seems to contradict the more traditional, phonetic approach which begins with the process of decoding sound-letter relationship, characteristic of traditional TshiVenda literacy instructional methodology.

This paper, therefore, reports on the cultural processes—involving historical changes in schooling and literacy instructional approaches, and reveals the continuities and discontinuities of the traditions of literacy practices within TshiVenda classrooms, manifested through the teacher's instructional activities and her narrative of how she employs contradictory instructional approaches to inculcate reading competency on the part of her learners.

Design of the research

The present study is generally inspired by Vygotsky's theory-method, which considers methodology as arising from, and inextricably interconnected with, theory. Therefore, the study employs qualitative observation of classroom instructional activities as they naturally unfold, with a view to understanding the underlying cultural-historical regularities of schooling and classroom teaching and learning. The researcher assumes minimal participant role in that he only took part in activities where he was invited to volunteer an opinion by teacher or learners. That is, the researcher assumed both the role of an outsider as well as an insider in that he was, in fact, not part of the official teaching staff of the school and was actually viewed as an inquirer whose interest was limited to the collection of research data for purposes of knowledge acquisition. However, the researcher was also partially an insider because he had been conducting research in the same schools for more than ten years in the past, as well as the fact that he was also a local TshiVenda-speaker with whom both teachers and learners were able to identify and, perhaps, readily trust. For example, the researcher was able to develop sufficient rapport with informants, such that they were ready to trust him with information they would otherwise not have easily divulged with any other researcher.

While classroom observation allowed the researcher access into the teacher's actual instructional approach to reading, the interview provided further insights into the teacher's understandings of her practices as well as the policy framework in which her teaching takes place. Data, thus obtained, was then subjected to a theoretically informed interpretive frame, in line with Vygotsky's contention that historical-developmental methodology should seek to uncover the essential nature of phenomena by revealing the dynamic process through which it comes to assume its present form and thus not limit methodology to mere description of surface structure of phenomena.

Using ethnographic observation of the instructional practices unfolding in their natural settings of classroom teaching and learning, Vygotsky's historical-developmental methodology was naturally extended to encompass the researcher's immersion into the life-world of his research participants. In this way, the researcher was able to obtain participants' explanation and meanings of their actions and practices, which the researcher, subsequently, interrogated using theoretically informed interpretive frame and thus, transforming first level data into an explanatory hypothesis (cf. Spindler & Hammond, 2000; Geertz, 1975). That is, the interpretation and analysis of the data obtained through naturalistic observation of the teacher's classroom teaching and learning activities; in line with the fundamental cultural-historical methodology derived from Vygotsky's framework, was guided by the researcher theoretical conceptualization of the research problem.

Vygotsky's methodological maxim holds as central analytic grounding:

To study something historically means to study it in the process of change; that is the dialectical method's basic demand. To encompass in research a process of a given thing's development in all its phases and changes—from birth to death—fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence, for “it is only in movement that a body shows what it is” (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 64-65—emphasis in the original).

Through presentation of a case study of first grade teacher, this paper posits an analytic frame that focuses on the dialectical intertwining of prevailing instructional practices within TshiVenda classrooms in South Africa, and the literacy tradition of this linguistic context; as embodied and enacted by teachers in the here-and-now of their schooling and classroom teaching and learning.

The main participant in the study reported in this paper, therefore, is the teacher and her twenty-nine learners, although the learners during this case observation were largely passive participants, never taking an active part interviews. The study continues from an earlier, larger empirical research conducted between 1996 to 2000 (cf. Muthivhi, 2008); which revealed subtle continuities of past instructional practices of schooling even when the post-apartheid transformational agenda was embraced and change was, in fact, taking place. Four primary schools in the vicinity of the town of Thohoyandou were visited over a period of four weeks; with one week spent in each of the four schools. Two of the schools constituted the research site of the initial research while the other two were only added during the present study. Twelve different teachers were observed across the four schools, nine from the junior primary level—grade one to grade four, and three were observed in the senior primary school—grade five to grade seven). However, the amount of time spent with each teacher was depended on a number of contextual factors such as continued availability and number of subjects taught. Most senior primary teachers taught specialist subject matter and could therefore only be observed during periods when their specific subject was on offer. Junior primary teachers mostly taught whole-class and could therefore be observed for an extended period of time—where available. The present, Grade One senior teacher was observed for a prolonged period of time extending over two hours since she was a class teacher and had her learners with her all the time.

The observation across the four schools revealed that teachers generally taught consistently with existing instructional policy framework, although they simultaneously reproduced instances of their past practices of classroom teaching and learning. Indeed, the senior, Grade One teacher in the present study was not alone in her use of two contradictory approaches to literacy instruction. One of her colleagues, who I had already observed, joined in during our conversation and explained to me that she could have taught using the traditional approach; which they often use, had she new that this was what I wanted to see. This account by the teacher's colleague further supports the paper's proposition of a fundamental connection between the cultural context of schooling and its literacy tradition on the one hand, and the evolving, contemporary practices of TshiVenda schooling and classroom teaching and learning on the other hand.

The cultural context of literacy practice³ in TshiVenda classrooms

Contemporary South African curriculum on early literacy instruction could be understood as emphasizing meaning-based, semantic rather than the traditional, phonic approach. In this context, the meaning-based, semantic approach involves instructional approaches that focus on learners abstracting meaning from text, on their own, through a process generally called ‘immersion’ (cf. Joubert, Bester & Meyer, 2008)). Here, the teacher introduces a meaningful text, such as in the form of a story, which she\he reads out for learners and thereafter asks them to identify words and then relate them to meaningful situations. Words, often called ‘sight words’ are often presented together with graphic images of objects to which such words generally refer. Learners are expected to learn to read using their general knowledge of the world as well as making inferences about it using the vocabulary represented by the sight words. Sight words, or written words in text, also serve as mnemonic devices for the relationship between meanings on one hand, and the related words on the other hand.

Describing this approach, Joubert, Bester and Meyer (2008) state that the approach—which they call “balanced approach”—proposes the teaching of reading through meaningful activities which begin with children’s emergent literacy, involving reading real books and writing for genuine purposes. The authors further argue that learners are expected to “know” and “do” things like reading real books and writing, in order to learn to read and write competently (Joubert, Bester & Meyer, 2008, p. 87; Department of Education, 2002).

There is, however, a cautious acknowledgement of the importance of the phonic approach in policy statements. That is, the importance of the phonic approach, or decoding method, which begins by introducing an awareness of sound-letter relationship to learners is, however, acknowledged; although only in passing and never elaborated in any detail. This situation, in practice, seemed to intrigue many TshiVenda teachers observed during research generally, and the present teacher in particular. Traditional TshiVenda teachers’ literacy practices were deeply rooted in the phonic tradition, a tradition of literacy that also resonances with the orthographic tradition through which TshiVenda text came into existence.

A further setback to teachers’ potential capacity to comprehend the substance of the curriculum policy statements is probably the apparent lack of clear explanation of the basis for such approach and its relevance given the prevailing instructional approaches. For example, the curriculum policy statement introducing the meaning-based, contextual and interpretive approach to literacy instruction, posits what is referred to as *Learning Outcome 3*:

³ The concept of practice is used here, in the sense in which Cole (1996) has described it; as constituted in activity systems and comprising a social activity that has become part of the accepted, taken-for-granted and conventional ways of doing things.

Reading and viewing: the learner will be able to read and view for information, for enjoyment, and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional values in texts" (extract from policy statement on literacy instruction).

Further, a statement on learner assessment states that learners are expected to develop "phonic awareness" and make "meaning of written text" (Department of Education, 2002).

There is, for example, no clear articulation of how these distinct processes of reading by making meaning of written text through viewing and interpreting texts on the one hand, and the phonic awareness aspect of such learning on the other hand, would be attained; let alone how the two logically articulate with each other. Beside the Teacher's Guide (herein below referred to as the Big Book), which merely leads the teacher on; in steps, as to how she carries out the largely discreet instructional activities that will presumably lead to anticipated forms of learning on the part of learners, teachers has no clear understanding of the underlying reasons for change. As a result, the essential means necessary for an ontological transformation of the traditional approach to literacy instruction remains opaque and largely inaccessible to teachers, who are mostly left to their own ingenuity. A consideration of TshiVenda alphabetic structure and its associated literacy practices reveals the basis for the contradictory instructional approaches that characterize TshiVenda-speaking classrooms.

The nature of TshiVenda alphabet and modes of literacy practice

TshiVenda orthography is based on Latin alphabet and comprises of twenty one alphabetic letters. Three letters of the alphabet; 'c', 'j', 'q' do not occur in the orthography, although related vocal sounds occur; except for 'c' which is generally represented by 's' sound. A word is the standard unit for a meaningful sound and the formation of a word is generally achieved through a combination of two, to up to four letters. Apart from some complex combinations of up to three alphabet letters and a vowel, TshiVenda also has a complicated dental consonants such as: 'ṭ', 'ḍ', 'ṭ' and 'ṇ'. This means that a single alphabetic letter may be pronounced in up to three different ways, depending on whether it has a dental circumflex symbol under it or not. The same applies with the soft palate consonants such as: 'n' 'nw' (cf. Poulos, 1990).

The acquisition of early reading ability in TshiVenda tends to be quite complex and depends largely on prior mastery of the spoken language. Words that may appear the same in their written form may carry fundamentally different meanings depending on the tonal structure of the syllables. Meanwhile, complex combinations of consonants with vowels to produce syllables, and the occurrence of multiple consonant sounds, resulting from the different ways in which a dental circumflex symbol is placed (see Table 1 below) further accounts for the peculiarity of TshiVenda literacy practices (cf. Westphal, 1962).

The orthography of TshiVenda has an essentially phonic structure, owing to its historical basis on missionary translation activities. Early reading activities in TshiVenda classrooms usually begin with what is considered more simpler part of the alphabet, made up of the four vowels; namely, a,e,i,o,u. The vowels function to complete the sound pattern of the consonants, transforming consonants into syllables, or units of a word. Reading therefore proceeds from simpler, single consonant to more complex multiple consonants words. For example, simpler consonants would involve a combination of a single alphabet letter and a vowel, such as in words like *lala*—sleep, and *lela*—care.

There are eighteen single letter consonants that can be combined with any of the five vowel letters to form syllables (see the *reading progression scale* in Table 1 below). The TshiVenda reading scale below has been adapted from a grade one TshiVenda teacher's original scale and is aimed at illustrating the structure of the language and the literacy instructional practices as they manifest within TshiVenda classroom context. Syllables of two or more in number combine to form word; which is the basic unit of meaning in TshiVenda language. Because reading instruction activities emphasize the ability to recognize the letters of alphabet and their correct articulation; depending on their different combinations to produce specific sound patterns, it is possible to know how to read TshiVenda text without regard for—or comprehension of—the meaning of the text.

Grade One literacy practice

The conversation with the Grade One senior teacher⁴ about her teaching, after the observation of her reading lesson, reveals the underlying contradictions in contemporary TshiVenda classroom practice with regard to early literacy instruction. During the interview, immediately after the lesson, the teacher raises a concern about learners who did not seem to be at the right age level for schooling but were inappropriately registered as five and half year old for her class⁵. The teacher expresses this concern, specifically in regard to certain learners she says were behind in their reading and have therefore not acquired the minimum competency in reading, expected for children in the first grade at that time of the year.

The teacher further explains that these children present problems with reading and writing, since their physical maturation is not yet adequate for the learning activities that involve longer attention span and motor abilities. The teacher also expresses a concern about one learner who she reported, was diagnosed with a learning disability but had to be accommodated in her class because the authorities could not assist in relocating the learner to an appropriate institution that could provide for specialized and support.

From the discussion, the teacher shows deep concern for her learners learning and mastery of basic reading skills. This is an experienced teacher who has been teaching for more than thirty years. Recent changes in curriculum policy, on how teaching should be organised, had a negative impact on teaching as many teachers have become less confident that policy changes would help them assist their learners learn better. The effect of the Outcomes Based Education policy framework, which has seen two major revisions in only about ten year period, was also detrimental to the development of children's reading competency in primary schools. Reading ability, for example, dropped considerably when newly envisioned instructional approaches failed to produce results (Chisholm *et al.*, 2005; Fleisch, 2008). As a result, there is a contradictory undertone in the teacher's statement as she discusses the two instructional approaches she employs; referring to the traditional one, rooted in TshiVenda literacy tradition as 'our approach'—also identifying it with a famous local primary teacher who she says had popularised the approach within Venda schools. On the contrary, the teacher refers to the official approach in the curriculum framework, which she is required by to implement as the 'method that we were

⁴ I refer to the teacher in the current study anonymously as "Grade One senior teacher".

⁵ According to policy, children in South Africa begin formal schooling in Grade one, at the age of five years turning six in that same year.

given'. By this the teacher seems to suggest a relative distance in regard to ownership of the instructional approach, which she however has to implement out of duty.

'The method that we were given': Meaning-based, interpretive approach

Describing the lesson she had just given, the teacher reports that, according to the preparation they were given, the first part of her teaching in the morning involved leading learners into reciting days of the week, months of year and then the four seasons in the year. The teacher further explained that she asks her learners questions that aim at assessing their listening skills. She explained a poem, which she says she has just done with her learners and says that it aimed at developing learners' speaking skills. After the poem, the class did phonic words that were aimed to show learners how to make words from sounds. That is, learning to read and write. Lastly, learners were given five words and asked to use these to make five sentences as homework. The teacher explains that this task develops learners' language competence. In her own words, the teacher further explained what she had done during this lesson:

[...] I gave the word "*tombo*"—[stone] which, in a sentence would be, "*Ndo posa tombo*"—[I threw a stone]. Another example involved a word "*hama*"—[milking] for which one learner responded, giving the sentence: "*Ndi namela hamma*"—[I ride in a Hammer]. I correct such instances of error in the learners' responses by providing correct sentences such as: "*Ndi hama kholomo*"—[I milk the cow] (Extract 1 from interview with Grade One senior teacher).

The different steps in this lesson were listed in the guidebook the teacher had. The first activity is possibly intended to get learners recall and commit the names of the days that make up a week; the months that make up a year and the four seasons in a year. The activity takes a traditional form of drilling children to commit knowledge into memory by leading them in chorus recitation—something that have always been part of the tradition of teaching and learning in these schools, long before contemporary changes in curriculum policy framework (cf. Muthivhi, 2008; Muthivhi & Broom, 2008).

The teacher's explanation of the instructional steps for this lesson is consistent with her understanding of the official policy on how instruction in reading should proceed. The lesson emphasizes instructional activities that should develop learners' skills for listening and speaking, to activities aimed at developing reading and writing skills. The later is achieved through fostering awareness of sound structure of the constituent parts of words; namely, the phonic aspect of reading acquisition. The later part of the lesson focussed on giving learners the opportunity to actually work with words; the meaningful unit of a sentence, to make sentences themselves. A complete lesson is, therefore, comprised of these different steps and the teacher seems to implement these in vicarious manner.

It is the following part of the lesson, after that the teacher had given the instructions on task to be completed as homework, which actually reveals the frustration the teacher seems to be having with the official approach to literacy instruction. Ironically, this frustration happens at the point during the lesson where the emphasis was on breaking up of words into their constituent parts, or the phonic approach. It was at this point that the teacher felt that the meaning-based, interpretive approach posited in official policy statement might not be adequate for getting her learners to master the basic skills of reading successfully, as she would want.

The teacher further explains that for homework, she instructs her learners to choose only five words from the list but that they could choose to do more words if they wanted because; these days, teachers do not have to place limits on what learners should do. After giving the instruction on homework task, the teacher proceeds to help them with a written exercise, giving learners letters and asking them to write on air, as imaginary letters. The teacher then explains that she gives this task because most learners have difficulties writing letters correctly. In her own words, the teacher explains:

We write on air and even go out to write on sand. In this way learners learn how to write letters like “h”, “b” and “f” correctly, although some still write them incorrectly. I even invite them to write the letters on the blackboard to enable them to practice writing letters before I give them an exercise book to write on. From there, I show pictures (on posters) and ask learners to tell me what is happening (in pictures). One learner would say (interpreting the event or situation depicted by the picture): *Mudededzi u a funza*—(The teacher is teaching] or *Vhana vha a vhalala*—(Children are reading). I then write these sentences on paper, paste the sentences on the blackboard, and ask learners to count the words [...]. Then I cut out each of the words in the sentence with a pair of scissors and paste each word on the blackboard, beginning with *Mudededzi*. I ask learners how many parts (*madingo*—syllables) the word *Mudededzi* has. Learners count the parts into four: “*Mu-de-de* and *-dzi*” and they would give the answer as, “four”. Then I cut out these four parts of the word and paste them on the board to demonstrate the component parts of the word (Extract 2 from interview with Grade One senior teacher).

From this, the teacher continues to describe how the lesson proceeded, explaining that, in the case of the word “*funza*”, there are two parts; namely, “*fu-*” and “*-nza*”. The teacher further explains that at this instance, she cuts out the word into two component parts and then illustrates to her learners—practically, what this means; before proceeding to teaching about sound patterns. This part of the lesson dealt with the division of words into their syllabic parts. The teacher assisted learners in identifying syllables that make up words. Although the lesson resonances with the phonic-based, decoding approach rather than the meaning-based, interpretive approach that foregrounds immersion into text, activities such as cutting, pasting and writing on the blackboard seem to derive from the official policy statements about learning by doing, authentic activities and making inferences about the world.

The last part of the lesson focussed more explicitly on sound-letter relationship, or purely phonic approach as was traditionally practiced. For example, teacher asked learners what sound the letter “*m*” have when “*u*” is placed with it to make “*mu*”. After this, the teacher proceeds to “*d*” and “*e*” making “*de*” and “*dz*” and “*i*”, combining to form “*dzi*”. The teacher explained that, “We use this and other methods to get learners to read. Those who are ahead of others and could read, but I sometimes give them the Bible to read”.

This last part of the lesson, and the teacher’s explanation of what she does, is quite revealing, in that it is at this stage that the teacher discloses that she uses other methods as well. By this she implied the phonic or alphabetic decoding method, which naturally resembles the instructional activities in this very last part of the lesson. Also, the teacher reveals—at this point, that she gives Bible to learners who have already mastered the

reading required by policy at this level. With the considerable shortage of school reading texts, the Bible as continues to be an important text for learning to read in TshiVenda⁵.

The teacher concludes her explanation by pointing that she actually combines different methods for teaching reading because the method she has just used for my observation is, in fact, not adequate for getting her learners to read successfully. At this instance the teacher reaches for the cupboard and takes out materials she says, contain information about a method for teaching reading that she learnt, and has mastered, over the many years she has been teaching. The teacher referred to this method as her own method—using the plural “we”, meant to refer to herself and other teachers in her TshiVenda-speaking school context.

‘Our own approach’ to teaching reading: phonic or alphabetic-decoding method

After that teacher has taken out the materials from the cupboard and opened the book from which she intended to show the researcher how she goes about teaching reading, she realizes that the researcher was recording the text in these materials using his video recorder. Upon realizing this, the teacher immediately became apprehensive, informing the researcher that she would not want to get into trouble with the authorities. However, the teacher regained her composure after regaining confidence of the researcher, after that the researcher had re-assured her of the fact that he was not accountable the local school authorities and that this was an independent scholarly research, which will potentially benefit policy development processes on educational provision for TshiVenda-speaking children sometime in future.

This was not an easy time for teachers in South Africa broadly, since they were generally expected to implement a recently revised instructional policy framework, which require strict adherence policy prescriptions (cf. Department of Basic Education, 2009). After the researcher had reiterated the assurance to the teacher, that her identity will not be disclosed in the dissemination of the research findings, and reminded her that her extensive experience would be crucial to young teachers who will be studying to become teachers in future, the teacher kindly allowed the recording process, even becoming encouraging to the researcher and clearly showing greater motivation to reveal more information about her teaching. Therefore, the clarification of the social status of the researcher, delineating it from the authority structure in the teacher’s professional setting, was crucial in getting the teacher speak freely about her practice.

As the teacher begins to speak more enthusiastically about what she termed ‘our own method’, she opens a book on what she refers as the ‘reading progression scale’ (see, Table 1 below). The teacher describes this devise as a tool that she uses to facilitate her learners’ reading progression during their first year of schooling. The teacher also explained that she uses this instrument as a tool for monitoring and assessing her learners’ individual progress on their acquisition of reading competency, as well as a tool for mediating reading competency.

⁵ The shortage of textbooks and readers for school learners is common in South Africa today and the situation is extreme for rural and marginalized languages such as TshiVenda (cf. Muthivhi, 2008; Fleisch, 2008)

The underlying orthographic structure of TshiVenda text, embodied in the reading progression scale, is also instantiated by the actions of the teacher as she enacts the socio-cultural practices of TshiVenda literacy instruction. The reading progression scale lists consonants in an order that reveals the graded levels in which reading acquisition is mediated. Table 1 below, is a model representation of the teacher's original reading progression scale. The original scale was handwritten on an A3 size page of a book, also used as attendance register. In the original scale, each learner's first name and family name appeared on the far left hand side of the marginal line. However, the names have been omitted in the model presented in Figure 1 below. After every name, there are squared blocks, making a total number of fifty-eight square blocks. A learner is ticked off once he or she masters words that are made up of a consonant represented at the top of the scale.

The teacher explained that she has used this particular approach to teaching reading for over thirty years of teaching and that this was with great success. The teacher further explains that she leads her learners, individually, through the different stages in the scale, starting with the vowels, then with words that start with the letter "l", ticking off each learner as they progressively master the words at each stage through the scale. Each learner who completes successful reading of the first 45 consonants in the reading scale receive a book to read. It is only at these stage that learners are permitted the privilege of taking a reader home with them. As readers are in short supply and there are more learners in class than the number of readers available, the teacher reports that she often gives learners Bibles to read.

Table 1: Grade One teacher's reading progression scale, adapted from the original (with names of students omitted)

	Vow-els	l	b	m	s	r	f	g	H	k	n	p	t	v	w	x	y	z	d	vh	nd	ng	kh	
1	✓														Withd-rawn									
2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓				
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The original reading progression scale has 29 lines representing 29 learners in class and 19 columns, with the last column indicating that a learner has acquired ability to read books.

The teacher's report about the reasons for preferring this approach to teaching reading reveals the dialectical processes of cultural-historical change and the fact that the

discontinuities of past practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning simultaneously constitute historical continuities. For example, the teacher draws a contrast between the present approach to teaching reading and the official approach posited in policy documents, which she refers to as the method “we were given”. To demonstrate how this approach actually works in contradistinction to her own, traditional approach, the teacher argues that in the official approach “we are told what to do”. To demonstrate how the approach works, the teacher reads from the teachers’ guide, which she says she uses for her regular lessons: “Begin the day by discussing the chart and any special happenings”. After this reading, the teacher explains: “The method tells you to do this, like: Choose the capital letter ‘H’ and, revise the lower case letter ‘h’”.

Then the teacher describes what she calls “shared reading activity”, which she says she conducts with learners using a book she has collated herself. However, the local authorities have since supplied what she calls “the big book”. The teacher explains that she reads through this book, which learners also have copies, and interprets the pictures while the learners listen. The teacher explains that she reads one more time, with learners now reading with her before she instructs them to look for “sight words” or words that are repeated several times in the text. The teacher explains that she would, for example, ask learners “what they see or where they have once seen a similar object?” After this, she asks learners to find sight words in the text and to read these aloud in unison. However, the teacher concludes with a telling critique; arguing that she thinks that this method “is rushed” because most children in her class cannot yet read words at the level proposed. She explains that this is the reason she reverts back to using her own, traditional approach, embodied by her reading progression scale.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of TshiVenda literacy classroom activities reveals the contradictions of human agency during period of rapid sociocultural changes, within TshiVenda literacy classrooms in rural, linguistically homogenous South African schooling. The teacher’s instructional activities, in the here-and-now of classroom pedagogic practices, reveal the underlying contradictions within South Africa’s changing socio-political, as well as cultural-historical, processes. These contradictions of human cultural-historical activity, herein instantiated by the Tshivenda linguistic context of classroom pedagogy, is revealed as inextricably interconnected to classroom instructional policies and practices of the rapidly changing South African schooling and society.

Contemporary, post-apartheid policy processes attempting to improve the quality of schooling and classroom teaching and learning, in line with post-1994 transformative agenda, seem to have generally been welcomed by the majority of teachers. Hence, teachers generally integrate new instructional policies to guide their classroom activities. However, in doing so, teachers assume an active agentic role; actively transforming their historically imposed forms of schooling to create new learning and development for their learners. In this way, teachers actively engage in historically embedded transformative practices. These practices evolve from the experiences of past generations and are embodied in cultural tools; enacted in the here-and-now of schooling and classroom teaching and learning that simultaneously reproduce, continue, transform, and even break with past literacy traditions and associated classroom activities.

Therefore, the Grade One TshiVenda teacher's approach to teaching literacy could be viewed as both informed and shaped by her specific TshiVenda linguistic tradition of literacy instruction, as well as by her participation in contemporary South African instructional context of transformation of schooling and its associated *modernist* traditions. Therefore, the cultural tools the teacher uses to organise her teaching comprised of two distinct cultural-historically embedded instruments deriving from contradictory literacy traditions. One derived from early missionary translation activities upon which TshiVenda text was founded while the other derived from contemporary South African instructional policy framework.

From the *big book*, which constituted the teacher's guide to teaching reading, the teacher used "sight words" as basis for her contextual, interpretive approach to teaching reading while from the *reading progression scale*, which comprised of a rubric of graded TshiVenda words, the teacher led her learners in a graded decoding of sound-alphabet relationships that constituted the words they articulated. Therefore, the teacher's instructional practices; contradictory as it were, revealed to be essentially contextual, developmental, deliberative, purposive, agentic, and—in Stetsenko's (2010) sense—*activist* and *transformational*.

The teacher's practices of literacy are to be viewed as embodied and deeply connected to the traditions of her society and culture and therefore, not as reified forms of social activity driven—exclusively, through abstract conceptualisations of policy precepts about what appropriate approach to early literacy instruction involves. Rather, as Scribner and Cole (1981), Cole (1996) have demonstrated, literacy instruction is deeply connected to literacy practices in the linguistic tradition in which it is located, as well as in the evolving socio-cultural practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning. However, these practices are simultaneously connected to—and shaped by, the dialectics of history; the history of schooling and society within which literacy traditions are enacted and transformed.

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