Employing Role-play in teaching ChiShona literature at 'O' level in Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

Educators agree that active teaching helps learners to think analytically, communicate effectively, develop an understanding of others and the self. This can only be accomplished through the practice of using teaching methodologies that draw on learners' experiences. Role-play is such an active method because it offers an opportunity to 'act out' conflicts, accumulate information about social issues, take the roles of others and, in that way, impart learners with social skills. As such, role playing plays an important part in human development and offers a unique opportunity to resolve interpersonal and social dilemmas. This study examines the applicability of role-play in the teaching of ChiShona literature. The study aims to explain class activities which teachers can apply in teaching ChiShona literature. In this study, the qualitative method was adopted for data collection and data was analysed through themes. The study reveals that role-playing activities stimulate interest and understanding of literary works as well as enhance the learners' ability to appreciate literary works. As such, the study concludes that role-play reflects the ChiShona literature more effectively. The study recommends that teachers employ role-play as one of their methodologies in teaching ChiShona literature.

Key words: ChiShona literature, rale-play, Ordinary level

1.   Introduction

Teaching and learning in Zimbabwe is a process which values teaching method because methodology is regarded as an art of transferring knowledge to the students. In literature, methodology is regarded as being more significant than the material itself (Somervill, 2017). According to Bawa (2020), there is a saying which states that the teaching method is more important than the materials and the teacher is more important than the teaching method, and teacher's soul is more important than the teacher. As the teacher's creativity is the most important aspect in every learning process, teachers should think of teaching and learning activities that help learners to think critically, communicate effectively, and develop an understanding of the self and others (Bawa, 2020; Somervill, 2017). As such, for learning to be effective, there is need for a creative and innovative teacher who employs communicative teaching methods, which enable learners to engage meaningfully even with boring or inadequate material. The teacher can make learners understand whatever material under instruction by the use of good and interactive methods. Therefore, the teacher needs to apply appropriate methods that can produce good results in the teaching learning process. It is crucial therefore to involve learners during teaching and learning process so as help them overcome obstacles and ensure they retain knowledge (Mokhtar, Halim, & Kamarulzaman, 2011).

2.   Literature Review

Some researchers note that traditional teaching techniques such as drilling work with specific language purposes but not with studying literature. With literature, as with most learning, learners need to feel motivated, interested and should love what they learn (Bawa, 2020). To achieve this, teachers usually apply different teaching-learning methods such as discussion, lecturing, simulation, group work, field experience, and so on, depending on the content and materials available. There is therefore need to apply appropriate and effective teaching and learning methods when teaching literature so that learners understand and appreciate the literary works. As such, an inappropriate and boring method can be an obstacle in the process of learning literature.

Role-play is one of the most paramount methods in the teaching and learning of literature because it balances thoughts and feelings (Gabitova et al., 2018; Bawa, 2020). It allows the learner to learn through doing. "Creative role-play is like a chameleon, poking its head in and out of various curriculum areas and looking more like literature or social studies than the art form rooted in theatre" (Laila, Dawoud, Zuwati & Mohd, 2020). This means that, learners can use role play differently.   In Zimbabwe, ChiShona literature at Ordinary level is learnt for two years, that is, beginning with form three and ending with form four when the learners write national final examinations. This study discusses role-play method as a potential alternative methodology in teaching and learning of ChiShona Literature in Zimbabwe.

Different scholars define literature differently. For instance, Culler (1997:28) cited in Bawa (2020:23), states that, "literature is not just a frame in which we put language …. on the other hand, literature is not a special kind of language, ….; they function in special ways because of the special attention they receive.". Lazar (1993:2-5) formulates the definition of literature as, "literary works such as novels, short stories, plays and poems which are fictional and express messages of the texts and pay attention to the rich or uncommon". This study will adopt Lazar (1993)'s definition in ChiShona literature. Abrams (2009) defines narrative as a story that involves events, characters, and what the characters say and do, all of which are told in prose or verse.

Brumfit and Carter (1986:15) cited in Yeasmin, Azad and Ferdoush, (2011:285) affirm the point that "a literary text is authentic text, real language in context, to which we can respond directly."   According to Lazar (1993), literature can be used to develop the learners' abilities to infer meaning and to make textual interpretations. This is because literary texts are rich in multiple levels of meaning which can be used by the learner (Laila et al., 2020).

This study will use one of Marley's (2012) approaches to literature teaching programs. The study applies role-play as posited by Kolb (1995) who regards it as earning an unbroken process based on experience and not the result. This process enables solving of the problems and conflicts in the world, community, society and family. As a result, learning becomes a holistic process to endow the world with common relationships between the individual and the environment in knowledge. Brown (2007) discusses games, role-play and simulations, drama, projects, interview, brainstorming, information gap, jigsaw, problem solving, decision making, and opinion exchange as teaching techniques which can be used in the teaching of literature. From all these, the paper considers only role-play since it allows two activities where it gives a role to one or more members and that way improve analysis of literary texts.

Why focusing on Role-play?

Role-play was defined by Lauber (2007:186) as "reality practice." Role-play is important for study because it enables learners to practically develop communication skills and different approaches to conflict. Role-play may transform the attitudes of learners, leading them to acquire new perceptions about how reality works. This could assist learners to sensitise themselves, to appreciate ideas, sensibilities, feelings, and values of others. Role play will also enable learners to have access to some ethics training.

Role-play is an effective way of learning normally in a situation where learners have reading problems, experience shortage of text books and have high teacher-pupil ratios. Role play would motivate students to be more imaginative (Bawa, 2020). Role-play allows learners to rehearse so that they can prepare for what they are going to say. This process lowers the anxiety in learners and gives them the opportunity to demonstrate how to use ChiShona in real life situations.

Many authors such as, Stinson, 2015; Leon-Henri & Jain, 2017; Gabitova et al., 2018; Fong et al., 2018; Haag, 2018, Bawa, 2020), have reckoned the positive influence of role-play in improving emotional skills. For example, role-play positively affects students' feelings and sympathy, lowering negative feelings of isolation and fear of refusal. It also trains learners how to express their emotions. Role-play also develops the learners' emotional intelligence and sensitivity skills. On the other hand, role-ply improves the learners' cognitive skills such as imagination, intention, critical thinking and opinions (Gabitova et al., 2018). It teaches them to solve problems and issues such as equity and collaboration. As a result, learners gain a better level of consciousness (Stinson, 2015; Leon-Henri & Jain, 2017; Gabitova et al., 2018; Fong et al., 2018; Haag, 2018, Bawa, 2020).

Role-play skills have a positive impact on learners' environment because learners are able to create a comfortable, enjoyable, funny, healthy, lively and satisfying atmosphere (Haag 2018; Bawa 2020). As a result, learners will feel free to make uncertain decisions without any stress, fear of being wrong, anxiety and threatening feelings. On top of that, role play provides a collaborative, meaningful, enthusiastic, relaxing and constructive learning environment which gains the learners' attention. Role-play is an educational method that provides learners with some relaxed atmosphere that enables them to freely express ideas and opinions, and discover their gifts (Gabitova et al., 2018; Leon-Henri & Jain, 2017; Fong et al., 2018; Bawa, 2020). In general, role-play learning enables learners to apply their acquired knowledge and skills from their academic subjects into social and environmental issues (DeCoursey & Trent, 2016; Fong et al., 2018; Greenfelder & Brouillette, 2017;)

A number of researchers have agreed that role-role-play enhances different kinds of learners' involvement in classroom situations, such as verbal engagement, real and communicative participation in the right situation and intellectual contribution. This is because these activities allow learners to take active part and solve various issues. Generally, learners love participating in drama-based activities and working with others (Kalogirou et al., 2019; Leon-Henri & Jain, 2017). Role-play techniques thus build and improve positive learning attitudes among learners and reduce negative ones such as sex discrimination (Leon-Henri & Jain, 2017).

Some researchers (Baranovskaya & Shaforostova, 2018; Greenfelder & Briolette, 2017; Kalogirou et al., 2019) agree that, role-play boosts the passion of learners to learn a language and use it in real life. These role-play activities also push learners to be more collaborative, attend classes, take part actively and explore new data (Baranovskaya & Shaforostova, 2018; Greenfelder & Briolette, 2017; Kalogirou et al., 2019)

Role-play also increases the teacher's self-confidence. It allows the teacher to deliver his/her literature more confidently and persuasively (Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017; Bawa 2020). It encourages the teacher to adopt new teaching styles, ideas and opinions from the modern teaching perspective. It allows teachers and learners to work in partnership and break school head's and teachers' fixed social rules (Baranovskaya & Shaforostova, 2018; Stinson, 2015). As a result, authority moves between learner-learner, learner-teacher and role–role. When that happens, both literature teachers and learners are able to evaluate learning progress (Baranovskaya & Shaforostova, 2018).

Role-play also helps newly qualified teachers, with little experience in the teaching of literature, to explain literature concepts independently and effectively, and analyse texts with learners. Finally, role-play enhances the reaction skills of the teachers to deal with the unpredictability of the drama classroom (Wong, 2014; Laila, Dawoud, Zuwati &Mohd, 2020).

Role-play is a flexible teaching technique because it requires no specified tools, or environment. From the above benefits, we can say that role-play is a way of working through a situation, scenario or problem by assuming roles and practicing what to say. We can as well say it is an instructional method where learners take on the responsibility of representing different character roles within predefined scenarios. Role-play enables learners to become anyone in a short space of time and take on other people's opinions, hence increase their learning motivation.

Types of role-play

Basically, there are two main types of role play which are 'fishbowl' and 'round robin' techniques. Fishbowl role-play is what Lauber (2007) refers to as the standard role-play approach. This is where some individuals perform a role-play and the others watch. This activity causes nervousness to some individuals who are reluctant to role-play or those who feel shy to take up roles. As such, to avoid nerve-wracking among learners, the literature teacher should set up the stage as closely as possible to the real-world, rotating and replacing players as per their request. He/she should give them written scripts, and make them rehearse before acting. The round robin technique is an interactive and entertaining classroom activity used to teach informally and it includes all learners. It gives students equal opportunities to share because everyone is asked to speak one after another (Vallikat, 2022). He further states that students sit in groups debating different academic issues then move to the next group. It is a technique with different tasks performed at the same time in different groups. It promotes different critical thinking skills, confidence, presentation skills, and helps learners to get to know, respect and value each other.

1.2   Theoretical frame work

This study is informed by the Social Constructivism theory by Vygotsky (1986). The social constructivism theory views knowledge and reality as responsible for the creation of relationships through the interactions of individuals in a community, society and families. To the social constructivists, knowledge is constructed from societies and cultures. Individuals in society are the ones that create meaning through their interactions with other humans and with their environment. Hence, learning is a social process. To them, meaningful learning occurs when people are involved in social activities. As such, communities/ classrooms can be conducive places for interactions between the teacher and learners and between learners, which can produce knowledge. ChiShona literature as a subject at 'O' Level requires such conducive environments so that learners could create and construct knowledge as they interact.

3.   Materials and Methods

The study used a qualitative design to understand how role-play could be applied in the teaching of ChiShona literature at Ordinary level in Zimbabwe. Textual analysis of three ChiShona novels could enable the researcher to demonstrate how performance could be used to interpret selected ChiShona literature literary texts.
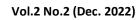
4.   Findings

This section presents descriptions of the form and content from the selected texts where role-play could be applied. It also offers the researcher's perceptions of the place of role-play in the teaching of ChiShona literature as well as the new insights and possibilities. The study will use the following themes: (i) the author' style of writing. (ii)   characters (iii) literary theory and (iv) conflicts and their resolutions.

The author's style of writing Mavesera's Makaitei (2016)

Mavesera (2016) chooses the first-person narrator, the persona who is typical of the modernist technique. Muchemwa (2001:42) contends that "The use of personal names allows for a more dramatic presentation of characters that gives them the opportunity to narrate their stories without authorial intervention". The novel, *Makaitei,* is divided into a total of thirty-five chapters. Ten are narrated by male characters while eleven are narrated by females. Four chapters are narrated by things. This makes the whole narrative gender balanced. Muchemwa (2001;42) observes that:

> *The allocation of narrative power shows the importance of the female and male perspective. There is gender equality, where men and women are given equal opportunities in the story of an extended family that has borrowed alien cultures to solve its problems.*

This, in very broad terms, amplifies the roles of gendered narrators. Mavesera has done the unusual in presenting the family story from the female perspective. *Makaitei (2016)* is presented through this polyphonic style which means that many family voices are heard crying under cultural exploitation, abuse and suffering. This is also in a context where the country is adopting foreign cultures which citizens do not fully understand. All family members were given a chance to express their views.

Scene Type 1

The scene can have these characters drawn from the literature class: Takaendesa, Makaitei, Chenai, Chenjerai, Nevanji and Samere, each of whom represents chapters in the novel. *Takaendesa* lies on a hospital bed, very ill, and watches as his family members ignore him. Each member says something reflecting his/her selfishness and characteristics and showing what he/she did and was supposed to do.

Other learners will be asked to watch and analyse, then react, distinguishing the skills involved. Students' comments and views should address the author's style and the creative skills displayed by the learners in the performance. Learners could focus their comments on the action and on how it enhances their understanding of:

- Their views on what was going on

- How the actors felt

- What the writer wanted to present in the real world

Scene Type 2

There can be another scene on the characters as chapters which educators call dramatize. This can be done using Mavesera's *Makaitei (2016).* This scene can have actors like *Chenai, Chenjerai, Makaitei, Nevanji, Samere, Patience and Tete Sekai.* Each character would present the personality of the 'actual' character in the text as well as his /her contributions to the problem in the text. Participants should include action that is related to the characteristics of that represented character. For instance, *Chenai* is a daughter-in-law whose views are not respected in the family. However, she is the only caring person as she attends to the hospitalized, sick Takaendesa as well as the entire family. Chenai complains about how Takaendesa's children are neglecting their sick father.

Makaitei is single. She does not value marriage because she realises how Chenai an educated person is being treated and used by her un-educated brother Chenjerai. She had relationships with boyfriends who do not want to marry her because she reveals her independent, assertive and mature nature. She is morally, mentally, economically, and physically supportive to Chenai as a sister-in-law approving of the sisterhood concept of Africana Womanism. She communicates with her brothers abroad requesting them to send money for their father's treatment. She also visited their sick father in hospital with Chenai.

Chenjerai is an unemployed, uneducated and ungrateful husband who does not respect his wife. He also fails to visit his sick father in hospital but writes emails to his brothers abroad requesting for hospital fees. Nevanji, the first-born son who is in London, neither wishes to be associated with family nor Zimbabwean issues. This is because of the cultural change he has experienced. He now believes in a nucleus family and has forgotten about his responsibilities as the first son as per the extended Shona family culture. Samere is a 'senior bachelor' who resides in America. He is selfish, uncultured, arrogant and disrespectful. He does not want to assist with hospital bills but is willing to buy a casket if his father dies.   He is not willing to pay for an undiagnosed illness. Tete Sekai

believes in Shona traditions, takes her brother's children to a traditional healer to seek assistance on the cause of her brother's illness.

In the discussion on this scene, learners can talk about what the actors displayed as characters. The discussion could focus on the actions, words, emotions and sarcastic issues. They can comment on how the actors presented the issue of family roles, responsibilities and family relationships according to the African ideology and practices. This can enhance their understanding of how Western European/American cultures affect the Shona family members' relationships and responsibilities as depicted by those in the diaspora.

Scene Type 3

Role-play can also be used to teach literary theories such as Africana Womanism (Hudson-Weems, 2004) and its characteristics using *Sekai Minda Tave Nayo* by Mutasa David and/or *Makaitei* by Mavesera. The learners can dramatise these Africana Womanist characteristics including self-namer, self-definer, genuine sisterhood, strong, whole, authentic, flexible role player, respected, in concert with male struggle, recognized, spiritual, male compatible, respect for elders, adaptable, ambitious, mothering and nurturing**,** (Hudson-Weems,2004)**.**

In discussing this scene, learners could relate the characteristics of the theory as demonstrated by the characters in the novels (as role-players) as well as what they see within women in real life. The women should somehow possess an inner strength which enables them to endure hardships in life. This can enable the learners to understand the fact that the theory is about black women activists who are family centered rather than female-centered and are focused on race and class empowerment before gender empowerment (Hudson-Weems, 2008). Through this, they can then understand that in Africa, women problems should be addressed from an African perspective.
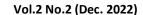
Scene Type 4

This scene can be on conflicts and resolutions. We can use Mutasa's **Sekai Minda Tave Nayo**.

This scene can involve one female actor playing the role of Sekai. Everyone else becomes part of the audience. Through soliloquy, Sekai retells her story, how patriarchal systems affected her education, and how her aunt helped her to finish secondary school and got for a university degree in Britain. She also recounts her studies abroad, and how she got a job back home where she developed her community, thus revealing how education empowers the girl child.

We can also use Mujajati's *Mwana Waamai*

> *A female student plays a one-female actor scene, enacting the role of Monica. The rest are part of the audience. Monica retells her story through monologue, particularly how she dropped from school for failing to pay school fess. She also speaks about how her father, whom she nick-named Bhinya, abused her and she got pregnant. She further complains about how some women in her society humiliate her for getting pregnant at an early age, and how her mother silenced her into not revealing that her father was responsible for the pregnancy simply because he was the bread winner. Monica also tells the audience about her baby girl's birth and how*

> *her father raped his grand-daughter, an act which led her to take the law into her*
> *own hands, locking her father in a hut and setting it on fire. This led to her arrest.*

This scene can be discussed in groups. Learners can discuss the empowerment of the girl child in Mutasa's ***Sekai Minda Tave Nayo*** and the abuse of the girl child in Mujajati's ***Mwana Waamai***. They can discuss the clarity of the matter in each text and how the text visualises and reveals their own thinking, feelings and emotions concerning society's treatment of the girl child. Students can comment on their emotions and feelings after the scenes. They can then come up with recommendations on what families, societies and government should do to improve the life and future of the girl child.

5.   Discussion and Conclusion

The study sought to discuss role-play as an interactive method that can facilitate teaching and learning in ChiShona literature, thereby improving quality learning in Zimbabwe. The paper was informed by Vygotsky's social constructivism theory which emphasises that learning should also incorporate theory and practical experiences. It revealed that the method could be helpful to poor readers, especially in situations where resources are scarce. This is because when learners are active role-players in learning situations, they tend to forget that they are actually learning because this type of learning is unstructured and informal. They also engage in creative knowledge through playing and imitating the characters in the play. This is in line with what Vygotsky (1978)'s theory emphasises where it raises the importance of interacting and accommodating in learning. The study explained that this was a one-size-fits-all method because it caters for variables like individual differences, and cultural and personal issues which might impede learners from participating in a role-pay activity.

The paper also revealed that role-play has a variety of advantages because it permits learners to apply skills related to literature. Learners will be able to apply concepts and problems they discovered in the text which might be difficult to do through other teaching methods. Role-play offers learners an opportunity to understand the subject matter, promotes learning through interaction with others. Taking up roles could help learners to discover their own strengths through participatory learning, which confirms Taylor's (1999) findings that learners find activities enjoyable where they practice the skills in a safe real-life setting. Role-play also allows learners to discover insights about themselves and others, hence build a podium from where to learn skills, attitudes and behaviors expected in society.

The paper revealed that effective role-play could be used in teaching ChiShona literature and other subjects as well. As Literature in ChiShona is now a subject at Ordinary level in Zimbabwe, findings suggest that teachers should incorporate role-play in order to enhance the teaching of the subject. In conclusion, role-play should be used to complement other teaching methods in the teaching of literature in ChiShona.

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