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An Analysis of 'A' Level Shona Teachers' Perceptions on the Causes of Depressed Performance by Candidates in 'A' Level Shona Examinations

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Abstract

The study set out to obtain 'A' level teachers' perceptions on the causes of the current depressed performance by candidates in the 'A' level Shona public examinations. A total of 24/30 'A' Level Shona teachers in Zaka District responded to a 15 item questionnaire that sought their reflections on the issue. Teachers' views were corroborated with interviews and 'A' level chief examiners' reports. It was found out that, although most teachers are 'qualified' to teach 'A' level Shona, very few of them are aware of the required examination techniques. A case for in-service workshops for 'A' level Shona teachers as well as reviewal and synchronisation of the universities Shona syllabuses to meet 'A' level examination requirements, inter-alia, is strongly recommended.

Keywords: Perceptions, Candidates, Examinations, Causes.

Background

Shona is a national language spoken by close to 80% of the people in Zimbabwe (Hachipola, 1998) and its entry into the Zimbabwean secondary schools as a curriculum subject is perhaps as old as secondary school education in Zimbabwe itself. A number of developments have taken place in the teaching of the Shona language. It was first offered as any examinable subject for L1 speakers by Cambridge Examination Syndicate in 1957 and by the Associated Board for Cambridge Examination Syndicate at 'A' level in 1977 (Chiwome & Thondhlana, 1992). The London version of the Shona examination was more of a grammar translation test as candidates were expected to translate Shona passages into English (vice versa) and was mainly meant for L2 speakers. As for the Cambridge examination instruction could be done in either English or Shona for some sections, a system inherited and adopted by Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) up to November 2005. Henceforth, candidates were mandated to attempt all questions in Shona. But the structure of the examination remained as it was;

Paper 1- Composition (50marks)
Comprehension (30marks)

Summary (20marks)

Paper 2- Grammar (40marks)

Practical Criticism (60marks)

Paper 3- Literature 4 questions (100marks).

The subject has enjoyed prodigious popularity among candidates for quite some time as candidates were assured of scoring the highest grade possible, yet an attentive examination on the 'A' level Shona results in the last 5-10 years reveals that candidates are failing to score quality grades, let alone a mere pass, in the subject. So poor have been the grades that some schools have had to jettison the subject out of their school curriculum as the number of takers has continued to dwindle. Gone are the days when the subject used to be the most preferred option among other curriculum subjects. It was very easy for one to score a high grade in Shona that it was common to see queer combinations like Shona and two science subjects or Shona and two commercial subjects, all in a bid to beef up the points. However, the recent developments are that one can score high points in the other subjects and fail to score any points in Shona

Statistical evidence on the number of registered students has indicated that the number of candidates has continued to dwindle every year as figures below reveal;

Table 1: Number of examination entries in Shona

| YEAR | ENTRY |
|------|-------|
| 2008 | 7381 |
| 2009 | 4687 |
| 2010 | 3997 |
| 2011 | 3208 |

Source: ZIMSEC files

These statistics are indicative of a situation meriting urgent attention from all responsible stakeholders. The number of takers in any subject is a close estimation of both the importance and perceptions surrounding such a discipline. Any rise or fall in the number of takers should naturally excite the interest of many stakeholders. Performance by candidates has continued to fall as is reflected in the tables below;

Table 2: SCHOOL A

| Subject | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| History | 79.3 | 70.0 | 80.9 | 85.0 | 72.7 |
| Geography | 67.8 | 65.6 | 70.8 | 90.4 | 78.0 |
| Shona | 60.5 | 40.8 | 24.8 | 0 | 17.5 |
| English Lit | 73.5 | 79.8 | 87.0 | 80.0 | 78.6 |
| Divinity | 100 | 100 | 98.8 | 100 | 100 |

Table 3: SCHOOL B

| Subject | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------|
| History | 67.5 | 58 | 60.2 | 78 | 74.7 |
| Geography | 76.9 | 76.2 | 78.0 | 80.4 | 72 |
| Shona | 36.7 | 21.7 | 32.5 | 10.9 | - |
| English | 68.3 | 72.6 | 78.5 | 67.9 | 70 |
| Divinity | 90.5 | 100 | 94 | 89.5 | 79.9 |

Table 4: SCHOOL C

| Subject | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|--------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|
| History | 75 | 60 | 68 | 77.3 | 74 |
| Geography | 80 | 85 | 78.5 | 86 | 94.5 |
| Shona | 50 | 46.6 | 32 | 56.4 | 48 |
| English | 76.9 | 76.2 | 78.0 | 80.4 | 72 |
| Divinity | 98.2 | 94.6 | 100 | 100 | 90 |

If these statistics are not intriguing, then what will? This state of performance has been a worrying development for both teachers and students who bear the responsibility in any examination outcome. Teachers, who are tasked with the interpretation of the national curriculum at school level (Bishop, 1985) are easily labelled as the cause of the problem. Students' efforts are very important in determining outcomes. Both the teachers and students suffer emotional embarrassment associated with underachievement when results come out. Psychologically, students are compelled to develop disaffection and estrangement towards the subject and the teacher. This has the potential of causing unnecessary tension between the parents and the teachers as the expectations and the invested trust of the former upon the latter would have been trampled upon. In some cases some teachers have received a vote of no confidence from parents and pupils resulting in them either transferring from the school or opting for lower forms.

The current scenario seems to be flowing against current efforts at raising the status of indigenous languages. The Report on the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training of (1999), African Languages Research Institute (ALRI), Shona Language and Culture Association (SLCA) and other advocacy groups have stepped up efforts at improving the status of the African languages to a point where they have suggested that they be taken on board as media

of instruction in schools. Against this backdrop, the current persistent decline in 'A' level Shona pass rate runs counter to these voices. If Shona is proving that difficult to its L1 speakers, it would be very difficult to convince those who may want to support its use in various domains of life. More so, any subject that eventually finds space in the curriculum should justify its inclusion in that curriculum, but the depressed pass rate in 'A' level Shona serves to smear further the battered image of African languages in schools. The National Cultural Policy of 1996 notes that Zimbabwe's indigenous languages constitute a rich linguistic and literary heritage for all people and should provide fertile ground for enhancing national understanding. What emerges from all this is that the cultural policy reflects awareness on the part of policy makers and relevant stakeholders on the fact that these languages should be allowed space to in the curriculum.

From 2006 onwards there was a shift from teaching Shona using both English and Shona as media of instruction to the exclusive use of Shona. It would be interesting to examine from the teachers' perspective whether this strategy was any intervention or an interruption.

Research Objectives

This research intends to find out:

- teachers views on the causes of depressed performance in public examinations
- suggest solutions to the declining pass rate.

Methodology

Using the questionnaire as the main research instrument, the study sought the views of at least one 'A' level Shona teacher per school from the district's 30 'A' level schools on the current depressed performance by candidates in 'A' level Shona public examinations. 24 out of 30 (80%) 'A' level Shona teachers responded to a 15 item questionnaire comprising of closed and some open-ended questions. An open-ended questionnaire was considered critical in that the instrument afforded teachers the opportunity to proffer their unbounded opinions, an opportunity that allowed them the latitude to expand on their responses on closed questions (Cohen & Manion, 1994).

The research also used the interview technique to secure an in depth view of the problem from 5 randomly selected A level Shona teachers in the district. The questions allowed the teachers to elaborately express their views on the subject under review as enunciated by (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The instrument served as a fool proof intervention to corroborate the questionnaire.

Documentary evidence was found useful in triangulating the responses obtained through the questionnaire and the interview as supported by Gall, Gall and Borg, (2003). The chief examiners' reports were compared and contrasted with teachers' views on candidates' performance in public examinations.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Data secured though the questionnaire method, interviews and documentary analysis demonstrate that the subject of quality in performance has been received with a variety of

feelings and interpretations by 'A' level Shona teachers. From the research, it became apparent that teachers believe that the syllabus, the examination board, the school and teacher training institutions and universities have a critical role in determining the quality of results in the subject.

Subject Breadth

The question of the subject being too broad was reflected by 50% of the teachers who felt that the subject is too broad and needs refocusing. Compared to other subjects like English, which centres on literature, the Shona examination goes further than literature (Paper 3). In addition to literature student study two more papers, Paper 2 which covers Practical Criticism and Grammar and Paper 1 which covers Composition, Comprehension and Summary. In the interview, some teachers felt that the subject is overbroad and cumbersome yet it has the same timetable slots as English which only examines literature. However, though the argument presented is germane, it however fails to account for the recent slump in performance by candidates in public examinations. The subject has been in the curriculum as it is today for years. This calls for a thorough search for more plausible explanations.

Quality and Attitude of Students

Some interviewees were blaming the poor performance on the quality of students in schools. They said that the more brilliant students choose to do science or commercial subjects and the less brilliant are then forced to do Shona. It was the reflection of 80% of the teachers who responded to questionnaire questions that the subject suffers acute attitudinal prejudices by students. When asked to explain their responses one teacher said,

“The attitude of pupils is very negative. They take it as useless (sic) subject and they are after commercial and science subject (sic). They say it is a difficult and useless subject.”

Another teacher said,

“Pupils are often discouraged by parents, friends and peers from doing Shona. They think that English is more prestigious than Shona.”

This was also observed by Ogutu (2006) who said, “Young people and adults alike want to be part of the prestige surrounding the English language as the language of international communication. This blinds people to the importance of their own languages in their lives.” When people are dispossessed of their will to do anything, there is no bidding; they are bound to fall for attitude determines altitude, that is, how far one can go. Ambition, resolve, and the energy with which one applies themselves in any engagement stem from their attitude.

The National Syllabus

The research also sought to find out teachers' views on the efficacy of the Shona syllabus as a teacher's guide in the teaching of the subject. Most teachers interviewed were of the opinion that the national syllabus in place is not a useful guide as it is skeletal and arid. They said that the syllabus does not constitute a useful teaching, learning and assessment guide as is expected of a normal syllabus. There are no elaborate aims, objectives, content and assessment details of the

course. Batidzirai & Chikonyora (2000); Gondo (2008); Nderecha (1995) concur that without a detailed syllabus there cannot be any meaningful teaching and learning in Shona at whatever level. One interviewee lamented that ‘the current ‘A’ level Shona syllabus document is nowhere near a semblance of a syllabus sketch’. It only outlines the structure of the examination papers leaving the teachers to interpret the relevance of teaching content from the examination. The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU), the custodians of the curriculum in Zimbabwe have abdicated their responsibility of guiding teachers on what to teach to ZIMSEC. Teachers can only know what is in the syllabus from what ZIMSEC sets in the examination when in reality ZIMSEC was meant to be an assessment tool for CDU yet now it resembles the proverbial tail that wags the dog. Examinations are drawn from the curriculum, not the curriculum from the examination. An examination controlled curriculum is a misnomer. In most schools, as 71% of the teachers reflected, there is not a single copy of the national syllabus, yet teachers are supposed to teach without this very important document anyway.

Human Power Resources

From the composition of teachers who responded to the questionnaire, it was apparent that although teachers lack the relevant and necessary ‘A’ Level teaching experience most of them are qualified to teach up to that level as reflected in the table below.

Table 5: Teaching Experience and Qualifications

| | TEACHING EXPERIENCE | | | | QUALIFICATIONS | | | |
|--------|---------------------|------|-------|-----|----------------|-----------|---------------|-------|
| | 0-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16+ | A level | CE/Dip Ed | Relev. Degree | Other |
| Female | 7 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 1 |
| Male | 10 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 9 | 2 |
| Total | 17 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 16 | 3 |
| % | 71 | 21 | 4 | 4 | 8 | 13 | 67 | 13 |

This research discovered that although 67% of the candidates have relevant degrees to teach up to ‘A’ Level, they are however very slim on experience as 71% of the teachers have less than 5 years teaching experience. It could be that since most teachers are relatively green, this could be impacting on their delivery since experience is a very important variable for results in any profession. As espoused by Roberts (2009), teachers’ quality improves with experience.

Pursuant on the issue of qualifications, although it was hoped that possession of a Bachelor of Arts (B.A) in Shona , a Graduate Diploma/Certificate in Education or Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) in Shona was adequate certification for one to teach the subject up to ‘A’ level, teachers revealed that their universities had not sufficiently groomed them for ‘A’ level teaching. At least 80% of the teachers were of the view that some aspects of the examination such as Practical Criticism,

which accounts for 60% of Paper 2 and the whole of Paper 1 (100%) were never taught at university. In the absence of a proper guide to instruction the teachers are bound to grope in the dark as they seek ways of helping the students.

At present in Zimbabwe's education system, secondary schools now exclusively use Shona as medium of instruction in teaching the subject and in all examinations. University graduates who teach Shona would have received most of their instruction in English at the university, but, when they go to teach in schools, they are expected by the authorities and the students alike to teach Shona totally in Shona. There is a challenge in the use of English at tertiary level and yet a change to Shona is required when they qualify to teach at secondary level. It subsequently becomes very difficult and problematic for the university graduate teachers to adjust to this anomalous scenario. This research is therefore necessary in the way it shows the need for uniformity on the issue of medium of instruction from university level to "A' level schools so as to address the critical relationship between communication and education.

Collaborative Teaching

It was also found out that 'A' level teachers rarely practice team teaching in their schools as expressed by 75% of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire. Those who practice team teaching felt that it has an advantage of assigning members to aspects of their specialisation and interest. This is further reinforced by Letterman and Dugan (2004:77) who say that if experts from different perspectives pool their resources together students can be exposed to the strengths of specialisation. One interviewee said that if one is strong in grammar and practical criticism, then that person should be allowed to concentrate on moulding students in those areas. Those who indicated that they do not practise this collaborative approach to teaching said that they realised its importance but are incapacitated to implement it due to manpower shortage at their stations. However, collaborative teaching requires that members support each other wholeheartedly, otherwise there will be conflicts. One teacher also said that team teaching could lead to students ranking teachers according to ability and even rejection of other teachers by students. The strengths inherent in team teaching, however, outweigh the weaknesses.

Material Resources

From the interviews teachers indicated that relevant resources are very important for curriculum implementation at any level. Teachers expressed mixed feelings on the adequacy and relevance of resources in their schools as indicated on the table.

Table 6: Textbook Situation in Schools

| Paper | No Text | outdated | Average | Good | Very good |
|--------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| 1 | 0 | 12 | 9 | 3 | 0 |
| 2 | 0 | 6 | 13 | 4 | 1 |
| 3 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 15 | 0 |

From the statistics given, most schools either have obsolete or irrelevant teaching and learning equipment. Most teachers' responses on the quality of materials ranged from outdated to good. Teachers (71%) were of the opinion that low pass rate was attributable to inadequacy of reading materials. Reading materials for Paper 1 were considered outdated to average as reflected by 87.5% of the teachers while materials for Paper 2 were considered deplorable as reflected by 79.2% of teachers. As for Paper 3 teachers' responses clustered around average to good as shown by 83.3% of the teachers. Most books were considered outdated since they have been overtaken by the ever-changing examination expectations. For instance the new regulation that all Shona examinations be answered in Shona requires that the textbooks in schools be revised to accommodate these new developments. This innovation had a double-barrelled impact on instruction since it required entirely new texts to accompany its implementation, while on one hand it had the effect of deskilling existing staff. Why deskilling? Since 75% of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire have indicated that they were taught Shona at university in the medium of English, they therefore needed in-service training to enhance transition readiness.

Clarity of Examination Requirements

According to Mkandla (1996:177-178), ideally, setting of examination questions should consider: what is being tested? Is it in the syllabus? Is it worth testing? Is the task clear? Does it have an answer and can be answered correctly by a properly prepared candidate? Teachers felt that paper 2 and paper 3 examination questions were not very clear as they tended to confuse pupils as to what their demands are. Of particular concern was the Practical Criticism segment whose expectations teachers felt were very vague. For instance, on Practical Criticism, a question such as, '*Unowirirana here nokuti zvidavado zvakashandiswa mundima iyi zvinokodzerana nenyaya irimo?*' (Do you agree that the devices used in this passage are appropriate to the theme in the passage?), would lend itself to a variety of interpretations. Candidates may think that they have the latitude to criticise and yet they are expected to be on the affirmative. A question of this nature is also silent on the need for students to write an introduction or preamble as part of the answer. A preamble only carries two marks out of thirty, yet if a candidate misses it, they miss everything as a correct response is premised on a correctly spelt out preamble (Zivenge, Mavesera and Magwa, 2012). Failure to identify the correct main theme of a given passage is an unforgivable offense since this will also affect the analysis of the devices they will give. In the absence of an elaborate syllabus to communicate this demand, students cannot be in a position to know what is expected of them. The examination questions should assess attainment and not ability to spot some mystery word or catchy phrase which in the words of Mnkandla (1996:119) is tantamount to 'ambushing' the candidate.

This is also reflected in Paper 3 examination questions where a candidate is not expected give two sides of an issue even if the question is asking for the candidate's opinion. For instance, a question like, "*Panyaya dzekuchemera jechetere, vanhukadzi vava kupinda nomwenje mudziva.*" *Unowirirana zvakadii nepfungwa iyi wakatarisa zviru kuitika mubhuku, Ndabva Zera?* ("On issues of equal rights, women are taking the issue of equality too far." How far do you agree with this statement? may mislead the candidate into thinking that they are supposed to give two sides of the issue while in fact they are expected to adhere to their chosen line of argument without

balancing. The 2007/3 chief examiner's report observes misinterpretation of Paper 3 questions as resulting in candidates failing to score high marks. If they are failing to interpret the question, one may ask; is the question clear or ambiguous?

On one hand, in Paper 1, in factual compositions they are expected to balance different points of views. A composition topic like "Jechetere" (Equality), would require candidates to critically explore the various perspectives from which this topic may be examined.

Table 7: Clarity of Examination Questions

| PAPER | CLARITY | | |
|-------|------------|-------|-----------|
| | Very clear | Clear | Not Clear |
| 1 | 3 | 12 | 9 |
| 2 | 0 | 2 | 22 |
| 3 | 4 | 5 | 15 |

These statistics reveal that the majority of teachers (77.1%) conceive Papers 2 and 3 as not clear. As for Paper 1, the general feeling is that the paper is clear as reflected by 62.5% of teachers. The overall picture points to teachers as saying papers 2 and 3 contribute to high failure rate in schools. This rhymes with the 2007/2 chief examiner's report which says that candidates' performances were mediocre. But interestingly, from the perspective of the examiner, this is attributable to inadequate preparation and tuition, carelessness and poor understanding of concepts.

ZIMSEC Feedback

It was the expression of 90% of the teachers that they rarely get feedback on candidates' performance from the examination body. Without feedback, it would be very difficult for teachers to locate areas which require urgent attention. It was the confession of all the interviewees that without feedback from ZIMSEC they cannot conjecture what is supposed to be in the examination. According to DeNisi and Kluger (2000:129) advance that, "performance feedback is an important part of many organisational interventions because providing it will lead to error correction and performance improvement." Feedback is very critical as it allows members to reflect on the performance and processes within their organisation. Feedback from ZIMSEC is very important as it gives examiners' question by question evaluation of students' performance in the examination. This feedback would help teachers identify areas that need intervention strategies to help students to perform better. However, though it is mandatory and even prudent for ZIMSEC to release examiner reports, this research found out that four teachers out five who were interviewed intimated that their schools last received feedback from ZIMSEC in 2005. Without this important feedback teachers and pupils are thrown into the deep end where they need to retrace their way back to the coast.

Seminars and Workshops

In this research, the need for workshops to upgrade teachers' marking competences was felt. It was the reflection of 80% of the teachers that they felt the need for in-service training to keep in

touch with ever changing examination requirements since most teachers had expressed that their universities had not sufficiently groomed them for 'A' level examination expectations. According to Mnkandhla, (1996: pp 88)

“The immense volume of subject knowledge which keeps on growing as a result of knowledge explosion creates a dilemma which calls for constant review and change in order to meet the variable demands of lifelong education.”

Only 20% of the teachers expressed that they had attended 'A' level teachers' seminars and workshops at district and cluster levels.

Of the 24 teachers who responded to questionnaires, only 3(13%) are ZIMSEC trained examiners. From the five chief examiners' reports studied for the three papers from 2004-2008, it was a general observation that, candidates reflect deficiency in applying the content they have to answer questions. This means that teachers require training in order to equip students with the relevant answering techniques. Moreover, for any organisation, the importance of training and continuous upgrading of staff competences to meet current and foreseeable challenges can never be overemphasized. Workshops are very critical for equipping staff with recent and relevant developments in any organisation. Hodgkinson, Johnson and Schwarz (2005), argue that workshops influence strategy development of organisations by equipping individuals with current information on running the affairs of their portfolios.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From this study a number of conclusions and recommendations can be noted as regards critical subject, pedagogic, resource and examination management issues.

- While it was accepted that attitudes are important in determining performance, they cannot solely account for the recent declining pass rate. However, schools and parents should try to cultivate a positive attitude in the student, the school and the community
- Realising the issue of subject breadth as too broad there is need for schools to afford the subject more space on the timetable.
- Since the syllabus was considered a crucial guide for instruction, the CDU should be encouraged to develop a more communicative syllabus that curriculum implementers can use in schools
- Universities are critical in preparing students for the classroom and beyond, they should continually remould their curricula to equip their student with relevant skills
- realising the importance of collaborative teaching in provision of specialist instruction, schools are encouraged to cultivate the culture of team teaching
- Resources are critical for equipping teachers with relevant material for teaching. This study recommends that schools constantly acquire teaching materials that are in tandem with changing subject requirements
- Teachers expressed the views that some examination questions are vague, unclear and confound students. This study recommends that those who set examinations be explicit and unambiguous in their demands

- Feedback affords curriculum implementation with corrective lenses and should therefore be availed regularly to schools, ideally as soon results are out
- Since many teachers have indicated that they do not have experience in marking, the need for seminars and workshop is very apparent and teachers need to regularly do these at cluster or district level.

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